Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix

BETWEEN DESTABILIZATION AND LOCAL EMBEDDEDNESS: JIHADIST GROUPS IN THE MALIAN CONFLICT SINCE 2015

A Stabilizing Mali Project Report
August 2018

Contents

Foreword

The following report is an analysis of the resilience of terrorist armed groups in Mali. Professor Aurélie Campana, an expert in the study of terrorism, first demonstrates how the actions of these groups can only be understood by examining their inclusion in local dynamics and power struggles. Their survival relies upon their groups' organizational fluidity, allowing them to insert themselves into local conflict dynamics, to reorganize their structures and adapt their strategies according to specific needs and contexts.

In the coming months, the Centre FrancoPaix will publish complementary reports and analyses that will cover different elements and dimensions of the situation in Mali. A final report will be available in the spring of 2018. The following is therefore part of a collective research effort.

Indeed, in September 2016, the Centre FrancoPaix launched a major research project on the Malian conflict and its international engagements. Entitled "Stabilizing Mali: the challenges of conflict resolution", the project aims to produce a rigorous scientific analysis of Malian conflict dynamics. Through multidisciplinary and multidimensional analyses of the situation and opportunities for action, through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and with a team of eight expert researchers, the initiative seeks to establish the connections and relationships between multiple variables, notably the links between conflict dynamics and those of international intervention. As such, the Mali Project will develop an enhanced and detailed understanding of the conflict and opportunities for peace.

The complexity of the situation in Mali is undeniable. The difficulties of the peace process are obvious. The limits of mediation and international interventions are important and, some will say, counterproductive. We do not pretend to know or to have discovered the solution to the Malian conflict, but we are confident that our approach and our team can identify and analyse the crucial links between various dimensions of the conflict, and thus shed new light on it.

Good reading.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Since 2015, Mali has been marked by growing instability. The multiplication of terrorist attacks, claimed by increasingly active jihadist groups, clearly illustrates an observable trend of security degradation through the 2016-17 period. While jihadists were heavily targeted by Franco-Malian security operations since 2013, we must ask, how do we explain these groups' resilience? This report demonstrates that the destabilization to which Mali falls prey is not only explained by the activities of jihadist groups, even if they play a leading role. The forms of violence that punctuate the Malian conflict are underpinned by various intersecting logics that express local power struggles, intra and inter-communal conflict, and tribal and clan-oriented discord, each combined against the backdrop of an increasingly withdrawn Malian state apparatus. Jihadist groups thus emerge as essential actors within Mali's 'armed politics', in so much as they are simultaneously inserted into and benefit from these dynamics. Beyond their high degree of fragmentation, jihadist groups in Mali are characterized by organizational fluidity which allows them to reorganize and to adapt their operational strategies when needed. These strategies are founded on the use of violence and acts of terrorism. They equally include attempts to establish themselves as alternative modes of governance and to augment local recruitment, accomplished with significant success in several zones. In so doing, jihadist groups contribute to the accentuating crisis of legitimacy which plagues the Malian state over large parts of its territory.

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Introduction

In December 2017, two rival jihadist groups, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Group to Support Muslims and Islam, announced their rapprochement (Samaké, 2017). This collaboration was meant to respond to the formation of the G-5 Sahel force, consisting of Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania, which is financed by several international donors including France, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Archer, 2017). More than simply a show of force or a public communication campaign directed at these Sahelian states connected by a common will to combat terrorism, the jihadist alliance seems to have been dictated by a need for its various components to reposition themselves as they had become targets of major military efforts on the ground. The alliance also reflects a high degree of activity (Tobie, 2017) and an ability to anticipate the potential evolution of the Malian conflict.

As a central actor of a war marked by constantly shifting dynamics, the Malian jihadist movement never ceases to restructure itself in response to the combined effects of strategies put in place by the conflict's main actors, political opportunities it has seized, relations it has established with groups which may or may not fall under its sphere of influence, its own internal tensions, and constraints exerted by counter-terrorist operations by the Malian, French and G5 Sahel forces. Thus, if the blows carried out by the French Serval intervention of 2013-2014, inter alia, led to a decline and the restructuring of some of these groups (Gros, Patry and Viboux, 2013: 3), the majority conducted a strategic retreat and have since reorganized. This has allowed them to recover their capacities, visibility, and for some, their legitimacy. Jihadist groups, similar to the other armed group participants of the conflict, have taken advantage of the context of instability and insecurity (to which they stoke by their actions) that has prevailed since the signing of the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers Process (hereafter 'the Bamako Accord'). While the signatories of the Accord, of which jihadist groups were excluded, compete in political and often military arenas amidst remaining tensions within and between the 'Anti' and 'Pro' Bamako armed coalitions, jihadist groups have gained territory and have imposed themselves as inescapable actors in Northern and Central Mali (ICG, 2016).

How do we explain their resilience? What mutual relations do they maintain? What roles do they play in the post-Bamako Accord configuration, and should we envision the inclusion of some of their leadership in political negotiations, if only indirect ones? Such lines of questioning outstrip simple security considerations, even while the Malian jihadist movement is often viewed in terms of an existential threat that permanently affects the states that it strikes. Although terrorism represents an undeniable marker of these groups, it is far from the only means of action that they mobilize. Much of their power to harm and destabilize results from their ability to challenge the states they attack either through their activism or direct violence. The proliferation of such groups also reflects social, societal, and political issues. It would thus be erroneous to consider Malian jihadist groups to have evolved in a vacuum apart from the society and communities they affect. On the contrary, they are solidly rooted into Malian sociopolitical realities. This is not to minimize these groups' exterior influences, but to examine how they have enmeshed with local and national political dynamics in the production of observable trajectories in Mali over the past several years.

This report is based on secondary sources (local and international media; the jihadist groups' own circulated publications via various Internet platforms they utilize; publications from Malian state authorities; reports of International Organizations operating on the ground; and reports from Non-Governmental Organizations and Think Tanks focusing on the Malian political and security situation). Documentary research allowed for the compilation of a catalogue of violent events that have occurred in Mali since 2012. It was not so much a question of measuring the conflict's intensity (a question to be examined later) than of identifying the main groups involved in acts of violence and their hold on more or less sizeable areas of Malian territory. It was also a question of distinguishing different types of violence and of demonstrating the ambiguity of a conflict in which an increasing number of non-state armed actors operate, whether they oppose Bamako, or conversely display their proximity to the Malian government. Such an exercise entails significant limitations, first and foremost of which are the sources' empirical validity and accessibility. It nevertheless allows one to draft the contours of the internal dynamics of the jihadist movement and the changing configurations in which it is inserted.

In so doing, the report first focuses on and discusses the situation of insecurity which prevails in Mali since the signing of the Bamako Accord. The multiple characteristics of the conflict will be examined in order to better understand the changing environment in which different conflict parties interact. The second section concentrates more specifically on the jihadist movement. After having traced its contours, the section investigates the relational dynamics which the movement experiences, and the resilience to which it attests. The section demonstrates that the groups which constitute the jihadist movement have integrated into their practices and ideological discourses a persistent critique of the Malian state. Such a strategy contributes in making jihadist groups some of the central opponents and contestants in and of the crises in Mali. They nonetheless remain, in the eyes of those who fight against them, illegitimate actors. Their frequent use of terrorism, and the organization and execution of several spectacular attacks, in Mali and neighbouring countries, validate their illegitimate status. Given this status, should such groups be included in a broadened political process in some way or another, as some Malians have suggested (Abba, 2017)? The final section of the report will examine the principal sociopolitical stakes that this delicate question raises.

Malian Conflict Dynamics since 2015

As a means of putting an end to the civil war that had torn apart Northern Mali since 2012, the Bamako Accord, signed in 2015 by the Malian government, pro-governmental forces assembled under the 'Platform', and the principal challenger rebel groups which form the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA), has not significantly contributed to ending violence and creating prospects for a lasting peace. On the contrary, tensions between groups have intensified, fuelling cycles of violence in the north and especially the centre of Mali. Although Mali's chief diplomat, Abdoulaye Diop, stated in October 2017 that 'remarkable' progress had been made on the ground, several indicators demonstrate how the conflict has taken root, with multiple long-term ramifications. The first of these is in regards to the multiplication of non-state armed groups, including jihadist groups, the latter having been the perpetrators of several attacks in Mali and neighbouring countries. The second is in respect to the persistence of acts of direct violence in the north and centre of the country. It is indeed the case that clashes between the CMA and Platform actors officially ceased after the signing of a definitive ceasefire on 20 September 2017 (RFI, 2017). This agreement, however, has not put an end to violent incidents. In fact, an upsurge in armed clashes between these groups occurred in the run-up to local and regional elections, initially scheduled for mid-December 2017, but subsequently postponed (Roger, 2017). While the majority of violent attacks can be attributed to terrorist groups, they nevertheless implicate diverse sets of actors, thus illustrating the difficulties faced

by Bamako to cope with the rise of inter-communal, intra-communal and clan-based tensions, against the backdrop of profound instability and political uncertainty (Sandor, 2017). Moreover, the Secretary General of the United Nations has repeatedly underlined his concern with the deteriorating security situation and the inability of the Malian state to establish control, authority, and above all else, legitimacy over large parts of its territory (UNSG, 2017). Thus, while French, regional, and international interventions may help to circumscribe the principal threat they qualify as 'terrorist', they nevertheless struggle to definitively alter the Malian conflict, marked by increasing complexity.

The Theoretical and Practical Difficulties of Categorizing the Malian Conflict

The state of the Malian conflict in 2015 follows from the country's civil war which opposed Tuareg, Arab, and jihadist groups against Bamako and its allies from the period of January 2012 and June 2015. Yet, several of these actors remain implicated in a 'differed' peace process or, more accurately, a resurgence of the war and its prolongation. Members of the CMA have not laid down their weapons, nor have they ceased their practices of pressure, intimidation, and obstruction. Groups within the Platform do not fare much better, since the majority continue to privilege their interests which run against the implementation of the peace process. If these two non-state armed coalitions and their organizations have been favoured with an increased legitimacy as political actors due to their involvement in negotiations, they nevertheless remain nothing more than armed groups whose agendas do not always dovetail with the political imperatives of creating stability, state reconstruction and national reconciliation. This is not to say that it is the groups' 'dual status' that hampers the implementation of the peace process so much as their pursuit of divergent interests within the context of an increasingly weakened Malian state.

It must be mentioned that categorizing the Malian conflict remains one of its underlying issues. Most governmental actors attribute the country's pervasive insecurity to jihadist groups, often described as 'Islamists' and 'terrorists', insisting upon the *terrorist* scourge that hit the country in 2012, which extends beyond 2015. The government's establishment of a State of Emergency in November 2015 following an attack on a hotel in Bamako, only to be prolonged for another year on 21 October 2017 (AFP, 2017), testifies to the state of crisis into which the country has plunged, a situation that would only be attributed to the activities of terrorist groups. Local, regional, and international interventions, operationally framed by the fight against terrorism, underpin this vision and narrative surrounding the conflict, thus reducing the conflict to an anti-terrorist operation.[1]

This normative and discursive framework nevertheless brings about significant distortions (see Shurkin, Pezard and Zimmerman 2017; Charbonneau 2017). The effects of such acts of categorization only serve to amplify the stereotyping of groups, and to nourish the logic of guilt by association, as seen with the Fulani community being associated with jihadists (*Jeune Afrique*, 2016). When identities are assigned and serve as a justification for response, they produce what Charles King describes as an "implicit teleology of ascriptive difference" (2004: 451). Such a reflex, found in numerous armed conflicts, contributes to the construction of a demonized 'Other.' It feeds tensions on the ground and creates a truncated vision of the conflict, which in large part guides those solutions recommended to solve it. A preferred approach to this framework places an emphasis on security-oriented responses,

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[1] MINUSMA is not directly involved in the fight against terrorism. Its mandate, renewed year after year since 2013, is adapted to the evolution of the situation on the ground. Generally speaking, this United Nations force is responsible for helping to stabilize the country and to support the Malian government, which is attempting, without any real success for the time being, to re-establish its authority over its entire territory (see https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mandate-0).

thereby establishing a stark boundary between the Signatories of the Accord, from those other parties involved in the conflict.[2] In this way, such a framework obscures the relational dynamics between the conflict's multiple actors. It also neglects violent dynamics like clashes that regularly occur within both the Pro and Anti-Bamako coalitions, inter and intra-communal violence, and the activities of criminal networks, which together combine to perpetuate the country's chronic instability. Certainly, jihadist groups remain responsible for several significant violent events; but all acts of violence are not of their making. If anything, political, criminal, and private forms of violence in the Malian conflict intertwine, and are not easily distinguishable, as is the case in many civil wars (for this point, see Kalyvas, 2006).

In a parallel manner, these issues of categorization impact the ways in which the conflict is analyzed. This is due to two principal reasons: a lack of consensus on what constitutes a civil war; and the difficulties in accessing the field itself and quality sources, which both tend to imprison researchers within such struggles over the definitive meaning of the conflict as mentioned above. Indeed, the scientific literature on civil wars shows us the difficulties in distinguishing civil wars from other violent configurations (Baev, 2007: 259), but also in establishing the beginning or an end of an armed conflict with any degree of certainty (Sambanis, 2004). Number of deaths per year and/or the intensity of a conflict often serve to identify and characterize a civil war. But as several studies demonstrate, the development of these two indicators remain tied to databases which draw on open-source information, the quality of which remains questionable (Kalyvas, 2007). More than simply a collection of violent incidents, it is the *a priori* categorizing of such events that poses a problem. The conflation of insurgent actions and terrorism, and similarly the conflation of terrorism and violence motivated by criminal interests, creates a distorted view that can easily lead to a biased reading of the conflict in question. Conflict databases equally lead researcher to put labels on non-state armed groups that will obscure in part the diverse types of activities in which they are involved. Thus, a so-called 'terrorist group' rarely resort only to this type of violence; on the contrary, these groups draw on a much broader repertoire of actions (Moghadem et. al., 2014).

Such a normative and political context can thereby put at risk any approach used to understand civil wars by only assessing its intensity of violence and the number of deaths incurred. These indicators do indeed signal emerging conflict trends, but they do not help us to understand the dynamics that are at work therein. Thus, the catalogue of events developed here shows an increase in violent incidents in 2016 and 2017, concentrated in Mopti and the 'Tri-border' regions.[3] The conflict has therefore increased in intensity since its initial decline observed in 2015, and has partly shifted. However, this finding alone is not sufficient to explain the consequences these events have shaped, nor to adequately analyze its evolution. Indeed, the level and types of violence at play can vary from one phase to another, from one region to another, without straying from a broader context of war. This seems all the more accurate for the conflict in Mali, as the undoubted impossibility of applying even the broad outlines of the Bamako Accord and its ensuring quarrels between signatory groups revealed new lines of fracture, all the while exposing existing cleavages. The conflict remains at low-intensity but referring to it as having entered a 'post-conflict' phase seems far from the reality.

As a means of moving away from such monolithic approaches, which have oriented some analyses, we borrow here Paul Staniland's useful concept "armed politics" (2017) in order to better qualify the Malian conflict which began in 2012. This concept acts as a counter-point to the above

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[2] At least two armed groups, both created from splits within the MNLA (but for the first mentioned, also from the HCUA and MAA) – the *Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad* (MSA), and the *Congrès pour la Justice de l'Azawad* (CJA) – in September and October 2016 respectively, have tried to gain an official political status to be integrated into the stabilization and reconciliation process. The MSA states that it wants "an effective inclusiveness in the agreement through the actors authorized for this purpose" (MSA-CJA, 2017).
[3] The regional borderland connecting Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

mentioned dominant approach which considers a civil war to have occurred when organized violence within the territory of a given state attains a level of between 500 and 1000 deaths per year (Sambanis, 2004: 829).[4] Not only does the latter definition seem overly restrictive, it is all the more inapplicable to the case of Mali since the various exercises in counting its battle-deaths are incongruent. As an example, the *War Report* lists more than 1000 battle-deaths in 2013, which was the year in which the most deaths occurred (Casey-Malsen, 2015), while the Uppsala Conflict Data Program lists only 808 battle-deaths.[5] Such variation renders conventional definitions impracticable. Above all, it introduces uncertainty and imprecision regarding the nature of the conflict. Yet to this day, Mali maintains all of the features of a civil war. Here we loosely define civil war as "an armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities" (Kalyvas, 2006: 17). Civil wars must be considered more than simply a violent binary confrontation between two parties, but as a "complex and ambiguous processes that foster an apparently massive, though variable, mix of identities and actions-to such a degree as to be defined by that mix. Put otherwise, the widely observed ambiguity is fundamental rather than incidental to civil wars, a matter of structure rather than noise" (Kalyvas, 2003: 475).

'Armed politics' as a concept allows us to grasp this complexity and ambiguity while highlighting relational fluidity between different protagonists, and their oscillation between cooperation and confrontation whether informal or institutionalized. It therefore privileges an analytical entry regarding the actors involved and grants due attention to the relations that they weave. In this way, violence no longer remains the only variable by which one defines relations between a state and non-state armed groups, or amongst armed groups themselves, but directs analytical attention to the forms of governance that the various parties enact in territories under their control, and the part that violence plays therein (Kalyvas, 2008: 406).

As such, 'armed politics' opens up new perspectives by adopting a dynamic approach, and constitutes a perspective that deepens relational understandings of violence and war (McAdam and al. 2001; Della Porta et al., 2017). It is an approach that emphasizes inter-personal processes (Tilly, 2003: 20) and relations between larger collectives, all the while taking into account cultural and socio-political contexts in which they evolve, changes in the parties' social positions during the conflict, the cognitive frameworks that actors mobilize in conflict, and the fluid characteristics of identity. Thus, violence comes to be understood as a mode of communication and a contentious dialogue; it contributes to the reshaping of individual and collective preferences, strategies, values, and identities (Kalyvas, 2006: 389). This observation can be readily applied to the Malian case, in which violence has become a form of interaction that is increasingly favored by the conflict's various protagonists.

How the Conflict is Structured

A Conflict divided in Four Phases

Bencherif and Campana distinguish three phases marking the conflict between 2012 and 2015 (2017: 121), to which a fourth can be added, which began at the signing of the Bamako Accord. The first phase took place in 2012, when Tuareg armed groups, notably the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), in collaboration with jihadist groups *Ansar Dine*, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) conquered

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[4] This threshold varies according to the postulates defended by the authors who espouse this approach.
[5] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.BTL.DETH?locations=ML

northern Mali. These different groups established a pseudo-administration to control zones under their dominion and to impose upon local populations new standards and behaviors. Timbuktu, for many,[6] became a symbol for the violence which jihadist groups used to establish their domination and to cement their vision for a new social order (for practices enacted by jihadist groups after the conquest of several northern Malian cities, see Human Rights Watch 2012). The French Serval military intervention of 2013 entailed a reconfiguration of the forces involved amongst the conflict actors, opening up a new phase. During this period, jihadist groups that had not moved closer to secular-oriented groups, Tuaregs in particular, became marginalized and were largely forced to make a strategic retreat. At the same time, the more secular armed groups restructured their activities and forged alliances with one another: for many of them, the French intervention opened up an opportunity to reposition their activities and to acquire new forms of legitimacy. The MNLA reasserted its dominant position, which at the time was frequently challenged, inter alia, by Head of the Coalition of the People for Azawad (CPA), Mohammed Ag Assaleh (Jambot, 2014). During this period the number of parties admitted to the negotiating table increased, while some former challengers, initially tempted by the jihadist option (such as Alghabass Ag Intallah and Cheikh Ag Aoussa), sided with secular groups to defend their immediate interests and those of their clan or community.

The third phase is marked by an evolution in the conflict's dynamics. In this period, inter and intra-communal violence increased significantly, and extended into the center of the country. Since then, the conflict has taken on horizontal structural dynamics in place of its former vertical ones (Bencherif and Campana, 2017: 121). In other words, the third phase of the conflict is marked by a notable reduction in the importance of its initial central cleavage – the Tuareg rebellion against the Malian state – in favour of the emergence of micro-level conflicts within the larger war. This trend become increasingly accentuated throughout the difficult process of negotiations, which has yielded minimal progress, that led to the signing of the Bamako Accord. While it was meant to inaugurate a transitional phase leading to the conflict's stabilization, Mali has only witnessed an increase in the conflict's complexity. The fourth phase began in June 2015. It remains locked continuity with the previous phase but differs from the latter as a result of the stalled political process which was meant to lead the country to a lasting peace. Additionally, this phase accumulates four previously existing trends: the multiplication of inherently local violence; a more direct and overt role played by jihadist groups; a noticeable regionalization of the conflict; and a manifest retreat of the Malian central state.

These four phases are marked by the superimposed nature of two crises, which while may not find their origins in the conflict, nevertheless fuel it. The first could be described as a political and moral crisis that plagues the Malian state, particularly in the North. Most often either completely absent or only weakly present,[7] the state is frequently discredited for its inaction, the rampant impunity that favours its representatives (FIDH et AMDH, 2017), and its thinly-veiled (but often clumsy) instrumentalization of local tensions. By establishing rule through patron-client practices, Bamako is frequently unable to assume its role as arbiter, and has instead become an integral player fomenting instability and insecurity.

The Malian crisis does not oppose the North to the South (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017: 17), even if the economic gap between the two regions continually widens (Chauzal and Van Damme, 2015). Instead, the state is marked a crisis of legitimacy, firmly anchored in its historical relations. As

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[6] The northern city of Gao was one of the cities the most affected by jihadist governance following the 2012 conquest. Timbuktu, however, seems to have become a symbol of the violence of the occupation, especially after the trial of former *Ansar Dine* member Ahmed Al Mahdi at the International Criminal Court for 'war crimes'. He was accused and charged with the destruction of nine mausoleums and the door of the Sidi Yahia mosque (Maupas, 2016).

[7] Sandor (2017: 9) shows that the Malian state has never really been able to establish adequate governance infrastructures beyond the city of Ségou (located nearly halfway between Bamako and Mopti).

argued by Kalvyas, popular allegiances are "endogenous to the exercise of territorial control" (2007: 425). While state institutions are dysfunctional and the problems of corruption remain endemic (Craven-Matthews and Englebert, 2017), clan-based and community affiliations continue to prevail over the tendency to identify oneself with a state that is viewed as illusory at best, or predatory and repressive at worst.

At the same time, in this highly fragmented social context, traditional divisions that structure Malian society are frequently brought into question by contests between local elites, as well as by contention from those who consider themselves to be historically marginalized. Mali is undergoing a generational crisis, which may not constitute the prelude to the war, but nevertheless shapes the conditions in which the war has unfolded. The strength of traditional social orders, which operate Mali as they do in other Sahelian societies, impose "structural constraints" (Jourde, 2017: 442) that tend to combine with impediments that block upward social mobility, thereby creating strong tensions that have benefited non-state armed groups. Participation in armed political contests is seen by some youth as a way to renegotiate a social status they deem unfavorable (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017: 40). The conflict, therefore, exacerbates existing social frustrations and feeds on them. The arrival and establishment of foreign conceptions of Islam for the past three decades[8] has engendered multiple upheavals in the region (Campana and Jourde, 2017). These ultra-conservative visions of Islam have fueled the generational crisis, offering young people who find traditional structures to be out of touch, or that seek new sponsors, another way of challenging the established social orders. While this latter dynamic does not necessarily involve violence, jihadist groups, which played a important role in the spread of this ultra-conservative form of Islam, operated masterfully on these conditions (Chena and Tisseron, 2013).

Overlapping Cleavages

The developments that have characterized the conflict since June 2015 highlight an increased "tribalization" of armed groups, be they those that oppose the Malian state or groups which have joined the state or have claimed to do so. Such a trend has been observed in 2014, but has taken on an unprecedented scale in the context of the post-Bamako Accord period (Bencherif and Campana, 2017). In a game with multiple actors, the war and attempts to implement the specific conditions of the Accord constitute structures of opportunity for the involved actors who have made violence into a tool of contestation and socio-political repositioning. Hoped for and expected dividends have accentuated two trends that were previously visible in the second and third phases of the conflict, which are frequent markers of civil wars: fragmentation and factionalization (i.e. De Rouen and Bercovitch, 2008; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Cunningham, Bakke & Seymour, 2012; Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, 2012; Cunningham, 2013; Seymour, Bakke and Cunningham, 2015; Warren and Troy, 2014; Mosinger, 2017). Boutellis and Zahar go so far as to speak of a '*clanisation* of the peace process' (2017: 29). This context simultaneously constitutes a constraint, however, in the sense that the actors can become caught in political configurations that may overtake their strategies. As J. Soeters remind us, the more players enter the game, the more unpredictable the game becomes. Indeed, deep fragmentation reduces the potential to link actor preferences to observable results (Soeters, 2005: 31; Campana, 2014). Civil wars remain endogenous processes in which transformed identities and allegiances emerge frequently (Kalyvas, 2006: 3). Such transformations are not solely the result of strategic considerations; they alter the way that actors behave and their choices as try to hold onto configurations of violence that constitute 'armed politics'.

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[8] On the lack of state regulation of the religious sphere and the stakes involved, see International Crisis Group, 2017a.

Non-state armed groups are organized around local notables, wielders of symbolic, political, and/or economic capital. They are structured by ethnic, community, tribal, and clan affiliation(s). The longer the conflict becomes embedded, the more that micro-conflicts (stemming above all from inter and intra-communal, and clan-based violence) take on increasing importance and contribute to paralyze what is left of the peace process. As a result, local power struggles have come to irreparably tinge the conflict, and have since become one of its principal sources. Historical disputes that are accentuated by local power struggles between local elites and exacerbated by the current conflict, the regional context,[9] competition over the control of trafficking in its various forms,[10] and interventions (or inaction) enacted by Bamako all are at the root of local power struggles in Mali. The country's fragile mechanisms of equilibrium which to a greater or lesser degree held together Malian society despite repeated violent shocks that had periodically destabilized the country for several decades appeared to have collapsed (Chena and Tisseron, 2013). In this optic, violence becomes instrumental in forging and recomposing socio-political orders. It is used to change the balance of power, challenge past agreements, assert new claims, obtain concessions, or to relaunch negotiations under new conditions.

Clashes that occurred from 2015 and the end of 2017 between the CMA and the Platform self-defense group, the *Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés* (GATIA), perfectly illustrate the enmeshed qualities of these dynamics. While the famous "Tuareg Question" is far from resolved, antagonisms spanning this community appear as expressions of historical tensions which have become transposed into more current struggles for power. Multiple logics are at play. The CMA is dominated by Tuaregs of the Ifoghas tribe which are considered the nobility, while the GATIA regroups Tuareg Imghad hold a vassal tributary status which continues to relegate them to a subordinate status in the collective imaginary of many Tuaregs. Disagreements between these two Tuareg communities date back to the period of colonization, which since independence has been fueled by political games – in which Bamako takes an active role via patronage networks – and competition for access to traditional resources, both licit and illicit, not to mention personal enmities that oppose the two groups' leaders. Since at least 2007, Imghad have been seen as allies of Bamako in the region (for more on the "Tuareg Question", see Bencherif, 2018).

Tensions between Ifoghas and Imghad crystalized in the 1990s in the Kidal region, in which each camp has sought to impose its influence and to cement its leadership (Bøås and Torheim, 2013: 1284). Tensions mounted throughout the current conflict, leading to violent clashes between the CMA and GATIA, even though both are Bamako Accord signatories. These tensions have equally been transposed to other northern cities like Ménaka[11] in 2017 (RFI, 2016b; K. Traoré, 2017). The stakes are threefold: that of claiming a prestigious position of power; becoming the intermediary between the Malian central state and local populations by holding the levers of redistribution for resources provided by Bamako (Bøäs and Torheim, 2013: 1285); and increased control over trafficking routes through the region of Kidal. The seemingly interminable struggles between the leaders of these two groups have risked to derail attempts to implement the Bamako Accord, in particular the instalment of the Interim Authorities in the various principal northern cities. If attacks and counter-attacks have been more or less stifled, mistrust nevertheless remains the guiding principle for relations between

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[9] Of particular note is the war in Libya. The fall of Gaddafi and the return of several Tuaregs fighters to northern Mali were important triggers for the conflict. We also suggest that the strength of regionalized criminal networks that operate in the region have a serious impact, in which local elites, community leaders, clan leaders and armed groups frequently participate.

[10] Battles over territory also obscure contests to control key routes and strategic crossing points for drug trafficking, and other forms of smuggling (Jublin, 2015).

[11] The city of Ménaka is held by the MSA, created after a schism within the MNLA, and has been considered to be close to GATIA in 2017 (RFI, 2017b).

different Tuareg participants implicated in the process of political and security stabilization. This observation could be extended to all relations connecting Mali's protagonists who are meant to endeavor for the long-term stabilization of the country. Groups constituting the jihadist movement act within this tension-driven context. Far from being isolated from the dynamics evoked thus far, they equally participate in their development, and know how to benefit therefrom.

Jihadist Groups: Central Actors within Mali's 'Armed Politics'

The central place taken by jihadist groups since 2015 could lead us to believe that a new master cleavage structuring the Malian conflict has emerged, thereby supplanting what was viewed as the conflict's former central master narrative – the Tuaregs vs. the Malian state – since the outbreak of the civil war in 2012. However, as the previous section has demonstrated, the existing dynamics at work prove to be much more complex. If jihadism was put forward as the principal characteristic of the conflict since 2012, this factor alone cannot account for the latter's complexity. Jihadist groups have certainly become actors that cannot be circumvented, but their central role can only be understood through the prism of the evolution of the conflict, its regionalization[12] and a more or less manifest disenchantment towards a weakened Malian state. Thus, for the purposes of analysis, jihadist elements should be considered as conflict actors to the same degree as any other within Mali's 'armed politics'.[13] This is not to say that their use of violence should be minimized, but to put their strategies, practices and behaviors in a wider relational context.

In order to capture the dynamics that traverse the multi-faceted nature of the jihadist movement, we distinguish between three levels of analysis. First, we must consider the Malian jihadist movement as a social movement, defined by Mario Diani as "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (1992: 1). Their sharing of common values, dictated by an adherence to an ultra-conservative vision of Islam, and a revolutionary agenda that justifies the use of violence (Amghar, 2011), constitute some of the central identity markers of the groups that compose this movement, even if the contours of this wider political project do not always overlap. Here we focus on the Malian jihadist movement, without ignoring those regional dimensions from which it is shaped. In other words, while some of the groups that form this movement are drawn from the specific Malian context, others were created and developed outside the borders of Mali. Their physical presence and activism on Malian territory, as well as their relations with Malian groups, make them this movement's central actors. The Malian jihadist movement is indeed marked by an elevated degree of fragmentation, with the groups' relational dynamics tending to oscillate between collaboration, competition, and confrontation. These groups also bring together individuals and factions, which compose the third level of analysis. These groups' high degree of personification around their individual leaders puts group leaders in prominent positions that allow them to define their group's orientation, its ideology, and the strategies it will adopt.

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[12] The extended duration of the civil war in Libya and its embedded qualities create conditions that allow non-state armed groups, and especially jihadist groups, to regain resources required for their activities. Libya has thus once again become a rear base and a space in which to socialize with groups that may or may not share ideological orientations and similar activities. The Malian conflict is also spreading towards Burkina Faso and Niger.

[13] This view dovetails with Charles Tilly's admonition (2004), among others, that calls for de-exceptionalizing the study of terrorist groups in order to better understand their roots in specific targeted societies, their insertion into the political field whose rules and temporality they challenge through terrorist action.

A Multi-faceted and Evolving Movement

Three principal jihadist groups participated in the takeover of northern Mali in 2012: AQIM, Ansar Dine, a Tuareg group, and MUJAO. Although weakened and forced to reorganize, the first two survived French operations Serval and Barkhane. AQIM was most likely the most affected group, having lost several of their Sahelian leaders, including Abou Zeid, the Emir of the Sahara, killed in February 2013 in northern Mali (Le Monde with AFP, 2013). By late-December 2017, AQIM consisted of three active *katibats*[14] in the Sahel: Tarik ibn Ziyad, led by Algerian Said Abu Mughatil since the death of Abu Zeid; Al-Fourqan, whose current leader is of Mauritanian origin; and Youssef Ibn Tachfin, a *katibat* that was formed in 2012 and composed mainly of Tuaregs. The *Katibat* Al-Ansar, created in 2010, did not seem to have survived the death of its leader, the Tuareg Hama Ag Hamada.

Faced with advancing French and Malian troops, MUJAO partially retreated towards Niger. Some of its factions[15] took the decision in August 2013 to join the ranks of 'Those who Sign with Blood', giving birth to the armed organization *Al-Mourabitoun*. The Those who Sign with Blood brigade, who, among other actions, conducted the attack and hostage situation at the Algerian gas complex at In Amenas in January 2013, are led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a 'hardcore' Sahelian jihadi (Salem, 2014: 45). Until December 2012, Belmokhtar was the leader of an AQIM *katibat* called 'The Veiled Brigade'. While Belmokhtar's leadership was sidelined by the organization due to his rivalry with its high-ranking emir, Droukdel Abdelmalek, and other commanders (Bencherif, 2012; *Le Monde.fr*, 2013), he nevertheless continued with his activities. He refuses to deny his adherence to central al-Qaeda, to which he continues to pledge loyalty, but has distanced himself from AQIM. The Veiled Brigade became Those who Sign with Blood before having experienced a shift in its trajectory by way of securing an alliance with Ahmed al-Tilemsi, the latter considered to be one of the main financiers of MUJAO (Thomson, 2014). Belmokhtar, however, finds himself alone at the head of *Al-Mourabitoun* following the death of this acolyte in December 2014.

Throughout 2015, *Al-Mourabitoun*, which finances itself through various revenue streams,[16] progressively maneuvered itself as one of the primary actors of the Malian jihadist movement. Having conducted several attacks in Bamako in 2015, but also in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and at Grand Bassam (Côte d'Ivoire) in 2016, undeniably advanced its position to assert power over other jihadist groups that had been weakened by Franco-Malian military operations. Droukdel, who had not completely cut ties with Belmokhtar, proposed that the latter reintegrate with AQIM, which Belmokhtar completed in December 2015. Even though *Al-Mourabitoun* essentially became an AQIM *katibat*, Belmokhtar nevertheless seemed to have preserved a near total degree of autonomy (Mémier, 2017: 39). Such an alliance allows AQIM to assure its own survival as an organization while simultaneously acting as a counter-weight against the rise of the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) (Ibid.: 41-45). As for Belmokhtar, the rapprochement allows him to assert himself as a central, if not indispensable, figure of the Sahelian jihad. Rejoining the ranks of AQIM equally allowed him to secure his adherence to the al-Qaeda movement, while internal tensions, followed by a subsequent schism, had blurred the privileged orientations of *Al-Mourabitoun* for several weeks.

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[14] A term roughly translated as battalion, fighting unit, or brigade.

[15] MUJAO has not completely disappeared from Mali (Roger, 2014), and several operations there and in Niger have been attributed to the group (AFP, 2016). Largely participating in various criminal activities, MUJAO lost several of its members to other organizations that have more recently been organized.

[16] In particular, *Al-Mourabitoun* is said to be increasingly involved in protection services offered to protect oil infrastructures in Libya, and to groups transiting drugs and migrants through the Sahel. It is also likely that it draws on various monetary donations (Mémier, 2017).

In fact, in May 2015, one of Belmokhtar's lieutenants and former MUJAO spokesperson, Adnan Abu Walid Saharaoui, announced that *Al-Mourabitoun* had joined the ranks of IS (France 24 with AFP, 2015a). Competition between the two dominant players of the global jihadist movement thus became transposed to the Sahel by means of alliance positioning at a distance. As a result, Belmokhtar denied al-Mourabitoune's affiliation with IS, intending to remain loyal to al-Qaeda (France 24 avec AFP, 2015b). The schism is consolidated following al-Saharaoui's move to create a separate organization, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Many former MUJAO combatants follow al-Saharaoui. In an uncharacteristic way, the head Islamic State organization took nearly a year and a half to accept al-Saharaoui's pledge of loyalty. The most likely hypothesis explaining this discrepancy points to the absence of attacks by ISGS in the first several months following its creation. It is only after ISGS had claimed two attacks, one in Burkina Faso and the other in Niger, that it received its recognition of allegiance (RFI, 2016b).

Despite the introduction of an organization claiming IS membership, AQIM continues to dominate the Sahelian and Malian jihadist landscape. This is in large part due to its proximity to several jihadist groups of specifically Malian origin, but which have nevertheless acquired a more regional stature. Ansar Dine, "The Defenders of the Religion", created in December 2011, constitutes the most important amongst these groups (AllAfrica, 2011). The group is led by Tuareg notable of the Ifoghas tribe, Iyad ag Ghali. Ag Ghali, a veteran of several Tuareg rebellions, who became a dissident after having been dismissed by the newly-formed leadership of the MNLA, an organization for which he sought to be the leader, in addition to having been refused the position of successor to the *Amenokal*[17] of the Ifoghas instead of the son the spiritual leader of that time, Alghabass Ag Intallah (ICG, 2012: 12-13). The latter, moreover, became a chief ally of Ag Ghali, acting as Ansar Dine's spokesperson for the first several months of the conflict, before splitting from Ansar Dine and heading his own movement (Duhem, 2013).

Weakened by several defections and by military pressure exerted by Serval and then Barkhane, Ansar Dine was forced to define for itself a new strategy following 2013. Its military victories, the strength of the networks in which its leader holds a central position (Walther and Christopolous, 2015), being anchored in the Tuareg community, and its alliances with AQIM – and to a lesser extent with MUJAO – had made Ansar Dine a preponderant actor of the 2012 conflict. In 2013, however, Ag Ghali had no other choice than to opt for the organization's strategic retreat – allegedly finding refuge in southern Algeria, and/or Libya (AFP, 2015a) – but without necessarily deserting northern Mali. Fine grained knowledge of the terrain helped Ansar Dine combatants to escape from French soldiers hunting them down, permitting the organization to reorganize and to recruit new fighters. An attack in December 2014 against the MINUSMA camp in Tessalit marked its full return to the 'armed politics' of Mali (*Jeune Afrique*, 2014). Ansar Dine only increased in power and in operational initiatives throughout 2015. It initially concentrated its activities around its former stronghold of Kidal (Weiss, 2015) before once again transforming its strategies.

Iyad Ag Ghali reactivated links he had established with actors in central Mali in 2012, if not before,[18] and offered a significant degree of support to two groups created in 2015, which many analysts considered to be *Katibats* of Ansar Dine (AFP, 2015b). First, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), led by the Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa, was created in January 2015. Composed primarily of Fulani and former elements of MUJAO that were close to Ag Ghali (Diarra, 2015), the FLM became very active in the Mopti region. Communicating infrequently and only rarely making claims of its actions from the group's inception (Carayol, 2015a), in May 2016 the FLM published a video in which it affirmed its adherence to Ansar Dine (RFI, 2016c). It has since been considered as an important

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[17] Spiritual Head
[18] I thank Adam Sandor for this precision.

actor of the Sahelian jihad and constitutes a dominant position in the creation of instability in Mali's centre.

The second group, *katibat* Khaled Ibn al-Walid, is led by another Fulani, Souleymane Keïta. The group brings together Fulani, southern Malians, Ivoirians, and Burkinabes (*L'Indicateur du Renouveau*, 2016). It allegedly has close links to the FLM, and has conducted several attacks in collaboration with Koufa's fighters (Carayol, 2015b). *Katibat* Khaled Ibn al-Walid, also dubbed 'Ansar Dine South', suffered a severe loss, however, when its leader was arrested by Malian security forces in March 2016 (Ahmed, 2016). Since then, few have spoken about the group. Nevertheless, Ansar Dine still relies on its operational alliance with the *katibat* of Al-Mansour Ag Alkassoum, sometimes presented as the "Ansar Dine franchise south of Gao" (MaliActu.net, 2016). This *katibat* serves as one of the primary security threats of the 'Tri-Border area', a region linking the borderlands of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In 2017, the region has become one of the most targeted for attacks by several Malian jihadist groups, as well as by a new Burkinabe arrival, Ansarul Islam, created in December 2016. Although created in Burkina Faso, this group nevertheless has close relations with actors of the Malian jihadist scene. It also takes advantage of this borderland's intense porosity in order to circulate between Malian rear-bases of Douna and Selba and the North of Burkina, from where it operates most often (International Crisis Group, 2017b).

This quick survey highlights the high degree of fragmentation in the Malian jihadist scene. Rivalries are numerous; but acts of cooperation are equally so. Two major evolutions to these groups occurred in 2017. In a video posted on 1 March 2017, Iyad Ag Ghali announced the creation of a jihadist coalition under his leadership, the 'Group to Support Islam and Muslims' or *Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin* (JNIM), bringing together Ansar Dine, Sahelian elements of AQIM, the *Al-Mourabitoun* brigade,[19] and the Macina Liberation Front (Crétois, 2017). The group's creation formalizes an already existing and effective collaboration between its component parts. This is akin to a public service announcement, all the while allowing these organizations to pool their resources in a context of mounting pressure against jihadist groups. The creation of this coalition also constitutes a means of projecting an image of unity behind the ideological bulwark of an ultra-conservative Islam and the threat of violence, in a context of severe fragmentation that accentuates existing lines of fracture that pervade Malian society (Sandor, 2017: 15).

This does not erase existing tensions with its ISGS competitor. On the contrary, rumours of Ansarul Islam's adherence to the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara circulated repeatedly throughout 2017 (Alakhbar, 2017). With the loss of ground of the 'Islamic State' in Syria and Iraq, and the renewed power of AQIM, however, competition between the two rival groups has tended to fade. ISGS and JNIM thus decided to embark on closer relations, while still maintaining their organizational identities intact. Such a collaboration is not entirely surprising. In essence, this action responds to strategic imperatives. It first increases pressure on local and national authorities as the G5 Sahel launches its first operations in the 'Tri-Border area' (Menastream, 2017). Secondly, it parses out Malian territorial zones without excluding the possibility of coordinated actions (RFI, 2017c). Finally, it allows each group to increase its strategic effectiveness by pooling resources and by sharing intelligence.

The proliferation of jihadist groups and the alliances that some have concluded creates a paradoxical situation where the impression of change dominates, but where the elements of continuity remain strong. Throughout 2015-2016, Mali witnessed the creation of new players, but each was created by militants with long histories of action in well-established jihadist groups. Thus, Amadou Koufa is a close ally of Iyad Ag Ghali, having fought by his side in the ranks of Ansar Dine in 2012 (RFI, 2015). Dicko, the founder of Ansarul Islam who died in 2017 (Abba, 2017b), was a former

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[19] Although officially an AQIM member, *Al-Mourabitoun* has an independent voice in this alliance, thus demonstrating its degree of autonomy.

member of MUJAO (Menastream, 2017). Thus, the novel character of these groups must be relativized, while not denying the inherent dynamism that the formation of new groups tends to convey. In addition, 'historical' leaders of the jihadist movement continue to retain a domination status: Belmokhtar, until his probable death in November 2016 (Fourt, 2016; Sandor, 2017: 15); Iyad Ag Ghali, who without a doubt benefits from the announcement of Belmokhtar's death which solidifies the former's authority over the JNIM (Migaux dans Nilor, 2017).

The Malian Jihadist Movement Between Resilience and Renewed Strength

The Sahelian Jihadist Movement's trajectory features nearly incessant reconfigurations. It is also marked by the resilience of the various groups of which it is composed. Many authors have emphasized AQIM's pragmatism since its inception (Pham, 2011; Bencherif, 2012), which allowed it, like other groups in the region, to overcome constraints imposed by changing circumstances, increased military pressure on jihadist groups, and the high degree of fragmentation of the jihadist movement. Such resilience is also due to the way that jihadist groups are structured, which shares similar features to other non-state armed groups that operate in the region. Nonetheless, it can be seen that the high degree of fragmentation and both the temporary or long lasting punctuated tensions that shape the movement fail to deter their ability to remodulate (Bencherif, 2017), no more than the loss of leadership or a large number of fighters. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine their insertion into local and regional networks, and the strategic adjustments they make in this deteriorated political context.

Organizational Fluidity as a Factor of Resilience

More than its high degree of fragmentation, it is their fluidity which characterizes Malian jihadist groups, and which surely provides a possible answer as to their resilience since 2013, and even more so since 2015. It allows for an absorption of instability created by the conflict's context and the enduring tensions that mar the Malian jihadist movement. This fluidity involves, first of all, the way that the jihadist groups are structured, which for the most part are alliances formed around influential figures that personify the armed opposition to Bamako, France, the G5 Sahel and the MINUSMA. As the overview of the previous section has shown, such alliances are made and unmade, without necessarily causing long-term damage to the groups that compose them. This can be explained by the high degree of autonomy that alliance members maintain, as well as the level of informality that characterizes them. In reality, such alliances are most often based on interpersonal relationships and built on informal links, themselves based on tribal, clan or religious solidarities. Interpersonal relations, and shared experiences and beliefs also serve to forge relationships that may be more or less sturdy (Bencherif and Campana, 2017). Ideology, however, only plays a secondary role in the trajectory of alliances: it can contribute to rapprochement, without necessarily acting as powerfully a motivator as other more strategic considerations (Byman, 2014). Alliances act primarily as a mechanism to meet short and medium-term needs, even if the context and the contests between actors can make alliances less sustainable. Alliances are vehicles by which various groups participate to maximize resources, expand networks, and at critical moments, to ensure their survival. Their founding principles make them fragile and unstable instruments, even more so in an increasingly palpable volatility and an advanced social fragmentation that informs the Malian context. They are nonetheless factors that instil resilience as they allow groups that use them to build their capacities at crucial historical junctures.

Such is the case for the two types of alliance that constitute the jihadist movement. On the one hand, intra-group alliances bring together factions, or individuals with a position of authority and their combatants. At its inception, Ansar Dine can be seen as an intra-group alliance between Iyad Ag Ghali, leaders of three Tuareg tribes (Ifoghas, Idnan, and Taghat-Mallet), a Kidal notable Alghabass Ag Intallah, defectors from the Malian Armed Forces, and former fighters of the 'Alliance for Change of 23 May', an armed group founded in 2006 by Ag Ghali himself (Takiou, 2011). On the other hand, inter-group alliances develop according to strategies chosen and circumstances experienced. Ansar Dine has more or less evolved towards this path by forging connections with the FLM and *katibat* Al Mansour Ag Alkassoum. The JNIM also embodies this type of alliance.

Intergroup alliances can also transcend ideological boundaries. In 2012, the MNLA and Ansar Dine unsuccessfully attempted to forge their two movements (Ahmed, 2012). Since then, no *visible* alliance has associated jihadist groups with armed group signatories to the Accord. The credibility of the latter, as guarantors of the peace process, is at stake. Family and tribal ties, however, can overcome claimed allegiances. They erase boundaries created during the negotiation process, and serve to blur efforts made on the ground. Contact allegedly exist, for example, between Iyad Ag Ghali and the leadership of High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), a member of the CMA (Maiga, 2016: 3). This latter group, created in May 2013, is constituted in part by former members of Ansar Dine (AFP, 2014). Although we cannot confirm the existence of an open alliance between these groups, the example still shows the degree to which allegiances overlap without clashing, giving groups and their leaders an opportunity to inscribe themselves into a multi-layered political game.

In this way, faction and group leaders play an instrumental role in forming these alliances and in the constitution of informal networks. They marshal relational resources that allow them to operate in different ways depending on the situations and objectives they pursue. The capacity of the leaders of jihadist groups to evade being caught by those that have been tracking them for several years is largely explained by their insertion into local and regional networks. Iyad Ag Ghali embodies the resource diversity and hybridity that can be mobilized by most key figures of the Sahelian jihadist movement. He has strong roots in the Tuareg community, particularly in the Kidal region, because of his origins and role in the rebellions of the 1990s. He also acts as a moral authority, which his closeness to the Dawa only serves to reinforce for many (Harmon, 2016: 159).[20] He also maintained several contacts in Libya, where he fought in the 1980s in Gaddafi's Green Legion (Diarra, 2016). His proximity to Libyan networks that engage in smuggling facilitates Ansar Dine's supply of weapons and other goods, and offered Ag Ghali conditions for his withdrawal following the launch of Serval. Finally, Iyad Ag Ghali has maintained many contacts with representatives of the Malian government, and according to some, with the Algerian security services (Abba, 2016; Migaux dans Nilor, 2017). Participation in these different networks makes him a powerful figure, and multiplies the resources he can mobilize depending on the circumstances. With significant resources at his disposal and with great flexibility, he contributed to the Malian jihadist movement with a cadence that allowed it to increase in power and visibility.

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[20] His conversion to a more rigorous vision of Islam dates back to the 1990s; the process seemed to have peaked when he came into contact with Pakistani missionaries of the Jama'at al-Tabligh, as this more rigorous vision of Islam began to penetrate the Sahelo-Saharan space (International Crisis Group, 2012: 13). His time in Saudi Arabia, while serving as a diplomat seems to have strengthened his beliefs (Vogl, 2012), as well as the relations he developed with jihadist groups during the early to mid-2000s while acting as an intermediary for the release of Western hostages held by the latter (Hofnung, 2013). Moreover, Dawa is an Islamic sect that became implanted in Mali, whose creation was influenced by Jama'at al-Tagligh Pakistani preachers, in which Iyad Ag Ghali and Koufa allegedly played an important role (Harmon, 2016: 159).

Between Acts of Violence and Local Embeddedness

Jihadist groups have become the primary actors propelling conditions of insecurity and are responsible for numerous attacks against representatives of the state, traditional leaders and local notables, and against local communities. Although very present, violence is not the only strategy they mobilize. Instead, violence is linked to a strategy of local implantation, which goes hand in hand with setting up expansive means of recruitment. Of course, finding recourse in various strategies is not new; precedents are even found from the beginning of the conflict. Nevertheless, Serval's launch forced these different groups to revisit their grand strategy, and to concentrate on anchoring themselves in rural zones. It is from there that these different groups seek, each at their own scale, to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the Malian state in the North and in remote areas of the Centre, all the while undermining the stabilization process. In parallel, they contribute to the promotion of an alternative social and political order, which they try to impose by force and persuasion, a strategy they direct at youth in particular. In doing so, they have become primary actors of Mali's 'armed politics'.

Jihadist Groups at the centre of Mali's chaos

Jihadist groups draw on a varied repertoire of violent action, including terrorism. Like in other civil war contexts, the logics that inform them fuse attrition, provocation, intimidation, a willingness to sabotage peace efforts, and at times outcompeting or outbidding groups that follow similar principles and ideologies (Kydd and Walter, 2006).[21] However, in a context as fluid as that of Mali's, some actions may be motivated by personal revenge, or also linked to organized crime (control over trafficking operations or their routes, redistribution of dividends made from illicit transactions or the circulation of illicit goods…). Several Malian and French officials believe that that the growth of drug trafficking in the Sahelo-Saharan region facilitates jihadist groups to finance the type of asymmetrical war in which they are engaged (MaliActu.net, 2015; Thiolay, 2015). While jihadist groups are deemed to be either directly or indirectly involved in trafficking, they do not seem to be the only armed groups in the region to benefit from this economic windfall, since both members of the CMA and Platform are allegedly also deeply involved (Diop, 2015). Some have even claimed that Malian officials equally participate in these illicit activities. This refers to the interpenetration of insurgent groups, jihadists/terrorists, criminals and representatives of the State at all levels of governance, as is observed in not dissimilar cases elsewhere (Baev, 2006: 81; Campana, 2014: 48).

As such, jihadist groups become part of a contest in which the motivations of the different actors involved intersect, a dynamic that is only accentuated by the intense degree of social fragmentation of the conflict actors, and Malian society more broadly. Even if the purpose of specific attacks tends to be unclear, jihadist groups are mainly attempting to derail an already off-balanced peace process, while simultaneously fomenting doubt in the capabilities of the Malian government and international forces (MINUSMA, G5 Sahel and Barkhane) to bring peace and restore a weakened

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[21] Kydd and Walter (2006: 51) have provided a definition of these different strategies: "In an attrition strategy, terrorists seek to persuade the enemy that the terrorists are strong enough to impose considerable costs if the enemy continues a particular policy. Terrorists using intimidation try to convince the population that the terrorists are strong enough to punish disobedience and that the government is too weak to stop them, so that people behave as the terrorists wish. A provocation strategy is an attempt to induce the enemy to respond to terrorism with indiscriminate violence, which radicalizes the population and moves them to support the terrorists. Spoilers attack in an effort to persuade the enemy that moderates on the terrorists' side are weak and untrustworthy, thus undermining attempts to reach a peace settlement. Groups engaged in outbidding use violence to convince the public that the terrorists have greater resolve to fight the enemy than rival groups, and therefore are worthy of support."

Malian state. Although the scope of the attacks varies, there are four visible trends throughout 2016 and 2017, all of which reflect an increase of power for jihadist groups. First, their pressure on the Malian military and members of international troops has intensified. This is revealed by regular attacks on military camps and convoys (i.e. RFI, 2017f).[22] The regularized use of improvised explosive devices (IED) increases uncertainty and reinforces the feeling that the Malian state and its allies are unable to stem the jihadist groups' advance, thus demonstrating their capacity to occupy the field for large segments of northern and Central Mali.

Secondly, they tend to prioritize their attacks at pivotal, politically charged moments. 18 January 2017's suicide attack on the military barracks in Gao, bringing together soldiers of the Malian army and members of the signatory armed groups, in accordance with stipulations outlined in the Accord, delayed the establishment of mixed security patrols (RFI, 2017d). Certainly, the attack heightened suspicions between Accord signatories, fomenting the existing mistrust and rekindling tensions that led to new clashes between the CMA and GATIA, who themselves were supposed to conduct joint patrols (Studio Tamani, 2017). Similarly, the intensification of attacks in the run-up to Mali's regional elections, initially scheduled for December 2017, postponed until April 2018, then postponed again, increases the climate of insecurity in the north and centre of Mali (Roger, 2017). Without being solely responsible for this chaotic situation, jihadist groups have largely contributed to its accentuation, which obliges the government to retreat and thus to implicitly recognize its helplessness. Sabotaging peace, therefore, occurs through the pursuit of any action against each political and military initiative meant to provide it with any sort of robustness.

The multiplication of targeted killings of traditional authorities, which like mayors, embody a sort of medium for the implementation of central state functions, occurs under these circumstances (i.e., the assassination of the mayor of Mondoro in the city of Douentza, Diaké, 2017, i.e., the assassination of the Mayor Boni, Keita, 2017). Even if the sole variable of 'challenging the state' does not constitute a sufficient argument to explain these targeted killings, and all of such are not claimed, they are nevertheless attributed to jihadist groups. Be that as it may, jihadists have made state officials prime targets. They have concentrated their attacks in the regions of Mopti[23] and Gao, and the 'Tri-Border' area, without sparing those territories in which they are present in the north and centre of the country. The collaborations they have established between them ensure a more or less simultaneous presence in several strategic points of Malian territory. In so doing, they successfully drain whatever confidence remains of Bamako, and contributes to the destruction of the state's institutional spread, which is already noticeably deficient in some parts of the territory, if not totally absent. As a result, local populations become either direct or indirect targets. They are notably the victims of improvised explosive device explosions that hit passenger buses (i.e. the bus that exploded in February 2017 in Gossi, RFI, 2017e). Seeking to undermine the state and to demonstrate its inability to act and prevent any surge in violence, jihadist groups no longer hesitate to attack the civilian population. They maintain a climate a terror in this way, which has led to the closure of schools in the Mopti, Kidal, Segou, Gao, Timbuktu, and Ménaka regions… (A. Traoré, 2017). As a result, they are pushing entire communities to withdraw, widening existing fault lines in some areas and strengthening their grip on the territories in which they are located (Sandor, 2017).

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[22] MINUSMA and Malian Armed Forces camps are particularly targeted. Attacks are not always claimed, but they are most often attributed to terrorist groups.
[23] Sylla (2017) lists attacks against state officials solely in the Mopti region.

Jihadist Groups as Local Actors of the Malian Crises

The 2013 French intervention forced Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM to abandon the towns under their control. Those that remained of the three groups retreated to more remote areas (International Crisis Group, 2017c). By possessing a fine-grained knowledge of the field and contacts in several communities, they blended into local communities. Thus, 2013 and 2014 became a time for reorganization and to implement their revised strategy of folding themselves into the local population. As McAdam argues, "episodes of contention almost always develop within established social settings" (2003: 288). Most non-state armed groups result from alliances – strategic or circumstantial – between local elites, communities, factions and individuals, as argued above. The degree to which they could anchor into pre-existing social networks largely determines the range of strategies they were able to mobilize. In fact, relations between these groups and the social base they claim to represent to a significant degree condition their political weight, and the resources they have at their disposal (Staniland, 2014; Sarbahi, 2014; Mosinger, 2017). Operation Serval certainly constituted a major obstacle to the implementation of their agenda, but in the end, it was only able to destabilize most of the groups in question. This is especially the case for Ansar Dine, which took advantage of its ability to solidly insert itself into its existing social networks. While the jihadist movement was previously dominated by AQIM and *Al-Mourabitoun*, the creation of Fulani jihadist and other groups which rallied to Iyad Ag Ghali's network has only increased the influence of Malian actors.[24]

Rural areas have thus served as nodes of support in a conquest that is no longer directed only at territorial control as it is towards conquering hearts and minds. In 2012, the jihadists' emphasis was on those territories under their control, to regulate individual behaviours through the establishment of a diffuse fear, which itself was premised on the repression of prohibited practices[25] (Human Right Watch, 2012; Amnesty International, 2013). Their imposition of this new social order, based on Sharia law, relied on maintaining a visible presence, which the introduction of international military forces no longer permits to be exercised in the same way. If they still pursue the same objective, they have nevertheless adjusted their strategies. They no longer only pursue acts that induce the fears of local populations, but work to increase their appeal and legitimacy. In a context marked by significant uncertainty and the rise of an ultra-conservative Islam, they do not solely seek to discredit the state, but also offer an alternative to it.

In so doing, they have made use of strategies and discourses they had previously mobilized at the inception of the conflict. The latter, nevertheless, seem to have a stronger resonance in the current context of security degradation and political stalemate which characterizes Mali since 2015. They thus display themselves as local governance actors. In particular, they focus on providing security where the state demonstrates its inability to mediate in local conflicts (Dowd, 2015: 521-522; International Crisis Group, 2016). In the eyes of many, they have become credible political actors due to their mastery of the social environment and its associated codes, and position themselves as a vector of renewal.[26] They use this opportunity in attempts to impose a normative framework that dovetails with their political and religious agenda. Jihadist groups operating in central Mali, particularly in the Macina, instrumentalize local tensions between Fulani and Dogon and Bambara on the one hand, and Fulani

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[24] The former two groups appear to have lost ground in Mali, and more broadly in the Sahel. *Al-Mourabitoun* has been much less active since the presumed death of its leader, while the central leadership of AQIM, having withdrawn to Algeria and Tunisia, seems disconnected from what is occurring in Mali.

[25] These behaviors include but were not limited to: listening to music, smoking, drinking alcohol, etc. Women were also forbidden to leave their homes without being veiled.

[26] The dynamics at work are not dissimilar from what is happening in parts of Afghanistan, which have witness the return of the Taliban. For more on this subject, see (Baczko, 2013).

and Tamacheq on the other, in order to entice Fulani youth to join their ranks (Fulton and Nickels, 2017). In so doing, they implicate themselves into the complex patchwork of inter and intra-communal power relations in attempts to alter its equilibrium from within and to impose themselves as the solution to the marginalization that many Fulani youth experience.

Furthermore, the role that they attempt to play as social arbiters is superimposed by their attempts to represent the establishment of a new social order which seeks to overcome the lasting effects of social stratification, and the ethnic, tribal, and clan-based divisions that structure much of Malian society. Jihadists are thus attempting to brand themselves as advocates of 'social justice' and make Islam, or at least the ultra-conservative version that they propagate, into a unifying vector that overcomes ethnic, clan, tribal and family affiliations, thereby becoming a dominant identity marker for individuals. This argument is particularly popular with young people who are in need of direction and that find their attempts at social advancement constantly blocked. Propaganda messages, disseminated through various missionary-like actions including holding sermons in the public squares of villages (RFI, 2017g), operate as discursive spring-boards that defy the state, criticize the West, and threaten those that will not rally to 'the cause'. While jihadist groups continue to offer financial incentives that prove to be critically important, or promise to pull disadvantaged individuals out of poverty (Dembélé, 2015), they also act as advocates for marginalized communities and/or those regularly targeted by Malian Armed Forces operations who scapegoat them as terrorists (Sangaré, 2016). Their plan is to establish themselves as the only reliable option that opposes the Malian state and its politics.

Above all, jihadist groups continue to cut through spaces deserted by the state, in which they seem to have durably (re)implanted themselves. Their influence is evident in several domains and practices (Le Mondafrique, 2017). Unspoken collaboration with local populations facilitate their initiatives, since the former primarily seek to avoid being targeted during attacks on military camps or MINUSMA bases (Piccinin da Patra, 2017). Their patterns of action indicate a locally-established character, supported by an increasingly rooted ultra-conservative form of Islam, the robustness of family and clan ties, and the actions of former members of these groups that have been arrested and subsequently released, who thereafter return to their village and continue to act as a relay for communication or support. Finally, jihadist group activism, by maintaining a buffer against the Malian state, may benefit many individuals and groups that seek to capitalize on this situation to continue their business activities without paying taxes or bribes, mingling licit and illicit transactions, in which all present non-state armed groups participate regardless of their ideological orientation (Piccinin da Patra, 2017). Situations of individualized opportunism serve to outweigh longer-term considerations, which contributes to Mali's chaotic context. Jihadist groups, however, demonstrate their capacities to exploit such current, overlapping crises, and use them to prevail as the unavoidable actors that they have become in northern and central Mali.

Concluding Remarks: Is it necessary to Negotiate with particular Jihadist Leaders?

As implied in the introduction of the report, the answer to this question is incredibly delicate due to its politically charged character. In general, the inevitable response that governments oppose such a course of action remains negative. The stigma accompanied an accusation of terrorism never ends. Since negotiations, or even mere discussions, serve as acts of legitimation, few wish to engage in such processes. However, jihadist groups that pursue acts of terrorism are more than simply terrorist groups, which presents the dilemma. They constitute central actors in Mali's 'armed politics', a role that serves to amplify the chaotic context the country has undergone since 2015 due to their insertion

into interpersonal networks that connects them to members of signatory armed groups, government representatives, other armed groups that do not directly participate in the peace process but which nevertheless claim their place, and criminal actors. While 2018 promises to be a pivotal moment in which at least two elections need to be organized, their presence will inevitably become more visible. Elections, if they are held, and any redistribution of positions of power that are likely to follow suit, will open up a period of profound instability, which could act as a windfall for any Malian jihadist movement that has regained its power, social trust, to solidify its hold over northern and central Mali.

In a context in which tensions overlap and feed off of each other, it becomes difficult to leave room for dialogue that some groups nevertheless hope for. It is certainly not in question to talk with each jihadist leader, but instead to reach out to those who are the most locally embedded and who are therefore the most likely to exercise a degree of dominance over their supporters and sympathizers. It is in this way that Amadou Koufa was approached by the former President of the National Assembly, a moral authority in the country, even though Bamako viewed the initiative with a degree of indignation (Abba, 2017a). The discussions do not seem to have brought about any concrete measures, but still demonstrate that communication back-channels are not completely closed off. This latter observation reminds us of the allegeproximity that some Bamako officials maintain with jihadist leaders.[27]

As such, the question may not be: Should we negotiate with terrorists, so much as how do we unravel the skein in which they are but only one part of the larger tangle? The dismantling of an armed group can occur, as was the recent case of the National Alliance for the Protection of Fulani Identity and Restoration of Justice (ANSIPRJ) demonstrates (RFI, 2016d). However, the conflict's entrenchment in the long-term and the violent orientation that several jihadist leaders have taken on one hand, and Bamako and its allies on the other, seem to render this process infinitely complex, if not to say impossible in its present state. Concealed local power dynamics and the enduring place of power struggles within the conflict that were exacerbated by the Bamako Accord have created durable obstructions to the implementation of the peace process. The same can be said of societal and political issues that have not yet been raised. One of these concerns the place of Islam and how it is to be regulated, even if such an eventuality involves significant risks (International Crisis Group, 2017a). Nevertheless, the most central issue remains the question of the legitimacy of a state that is constantly losing ground and has become completely discredited over entire portions of its territory. This issue remained, nevertheless, the insufficiently explored dimension, while nevertheless constituting the space into which many armed groups, many of them jihadist groups, have rushed.

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[27] For example, many still believe that links between the president of the interim authorities of the city of Kidal, Hassan Ag Fagaga and Iyad ag Ghali remain active (RFI, 2017h).

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Following the 15th Francophonie Summit and the Resolution on crisis situations, crisis resolution and peacebuilding in the French-speaking world, the Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies set up the Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix (in conflict resolution and peace missions) in order to support the strategic objectives of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) in conflict prevention and management.

Inaugurated in January 2016 with the financial support of the OIF, the mission of the Centre FrancoPaix includes:

• The promotion of scientific research and university training in French in the field of peace and conflict studies, in particular conflict resolution, conflict management and peace missions;

• The promotion of scientific research and university training about conflict resolution and conflict management in French-speaking countries, particularly in Africa;

• The production and diffusion of scientific research that focuses on conflict resolution and peace operations, particularly through knowledge production activities with policymakers and practitioners in the field;

• Enabling intellectual exchanges and the flow of knowledge by promoting mobility, innovation and collaboration between institutions, university researchers and students from the "Global North" and the "Global South".

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