

The State Must Respond to Legitimate Concerns



Women draw water from the bank of the Niger River near N'iafunké (Timbuktu), July 2020. ©photo : Malik Konaté / sahelien.com

An analysis of Mali's security crisis through the eyes of its main actors

Baba Dakono

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About sahélien.com

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About the Study



NOTE : The opinions expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect those of sahelien.com.

Executive Summary

Mali has experienced a multidimensional security crisis that began on January 17, 2012, with an armed rebellion, and resulted in the occupation of two-thirds of the territory by various armed groups, including terrorist groups in April of the same year. If the crisis in the north is largely due to the «delegitimization» of former president Amadou Toumani Touré, it must be said that the origins of the grievances go back much further: corruption, a deteriorating economic situation, and more. The violence that has gradually intensified since 2012 is the consequence of the fragility of the state, destabilized by the decomposition of Libya and the proliferation of fighters, arms and trafficking that it has engendered. The resulting Malian conflict of 2012 forced the departure of the administration from vast rural territories. Traditional chiefs, community militias and «terrorist» groups then fought over the place left by the state and the historic void it had left.

Left to their own devices, communities are struggling for survival on many fronts: economic, with the scarcity of natural resources aggravated by the vagaries of the climate; identity, as they are courted by governments and armed groups; and security, given the failings of a submerged state force. The pattern of alliances with one or another of the actors in the conflict has made

the communities themselves a political stake and, therefore, a privileged target. More fundamentally, these communities become aware of their marginalization and claim their place on the national political chessboard, but also become aware of the dividends of development efforts from which they are largely excluded. The vision of an opposing world between old and new, farmers and pastoralists, generates its share of tensions within the communities themselves.

The present work proposes a broader reflection beyond the circle of national and international public institutions. To illustrate this, we have chosen to include, throughout the study, selected passages and stories from Malians of diverse backgrounds. This approach not only enriches the analysis, but also gives people living thousands of kilometers from the Malian capital the opportunity to share their experiences, expectations and fears. There was no question here of aiming for completeness, nor of placing a median line between the different stories, but rather of recounting the difficulties and the most salient expectations raised among the populations encountered. This was done even though doing so might reveal considerable gaps between the top and the bottom (institutions-populations), the center and the periphery (decision-making power-recipients).

The various interviews highlight an evolution of the conflict that tends to be reduced to violent extremism. This violence originates both at the governance level and at the endogenous level (frustrations and grievances). Structurally, the nature and quality of governance has led to chronically strained relations between the state and citizens. The litany of unpunished and unresolved cases of corruption and human rights violations and the lack of protection and basic social services, particularly in rural communities, have slowly eroded confidence in the state and weakened the social contract between the state and the people. This has made the presence and authority of the state highly questionable and provided an environment for the emergence of alternative forces such as so-called terrorist groups and self-defense militias. Communities rely on these forces for justice and protection, and, in the case of terrorist groups, socio-economic interests. This is demonstrated by cases in which individuals in many localities confirmed that they were better placed under the control of extremist groups after being allowed to engage in certain economic activities such as hunting, gold mining, and others that had been restricted by the state. The state's failure to protect communities led to a proliferation of vigilante groups. A further proliferation is to be expected given the dependence of states on these groups. On the basis of this cross-analysis, a few recom-

mendations emerge, including the following:

- **Help the state find a credible governance model and focus on greater involvement of the population in the management of public affairs.** The current rule of the game of representation leads, to some extent, to the appointment of elected officials who do not represent. Appropriate means must be found to ensure that the opinions and perceptions of the populations are better taken into account in the decision-making process.
- **New strategies for the return of the state.** The restoration of the authority of the State in such a context is important, but it should not be envisaged in a framework of territorial occupation of the country. Long before the crisis, the presence of the state was perceived by many communities as a predatory presence that, without meeting the basic needs of the communities, exacerbated the cleavages within and between them.
- **Acting locally in the face of regional issues.** All partners' strategies recognize the transnational and regional nature of security and development issues in the Sahel. However, taking this into account in the formulation and implementation of humanitarian assistance or development programs and projects is complex.

• **Encourage programs to improve justice and end the cycle of impunity.** The ills of governance that caused or exacerbated the crises are primarily focused on justice issues. Improving governance undoubtedly requires improving the justice sector.

• **Supporting mediation processes with concrete actions.** For many interlocutors met during the analysis period, the agreements signed in the framework of conflict resolution are short-term solutions.

• **Addressing issues of underdevelopment and securing infrastructure.** During the study, it emerged that there is very little infrastructure linking the South to the North of the country. In addition, road infrastructure is dilapidated in places and non-existent in much of the north. There are no roads connecting the South to the North of the country.

• **Promote youth employment in conflict areas (creation of income-generating activities).** The issue of the creation of income-generating activities came up in all the discussions. In Mopti, many interlocutors felt that the city was the economic lung of the region, with agropastoral activities and tourism. Since the crisis, all the economic activities that revolved around tourism have been reduced to nothing, resulting in many young people joining criminal networks. The rest are instrumentalized by armed groups and left behind by the state.

INTRODUCTION

The rising violence and evolution of the crisis in Mali highlight the many security, logistical and humanitarian difficulties faced by those who search for solutions, and provide context for the population's low levels of confidence in the state and the peace process. The factors on which the crisis in Mali has thrived are multiple and complex: they are linked to the activities of isolated armed groups, movements that signed the peace agreement, and criminal networks, and have distorted inter- and intra-community ties. Finally, in many localities in the north and center of the country, communities, judging the institutional responses to be ineffective, have armed themselves, leading to unprecedented violence in the country.

Starting in 2015, the epicenter of violence shifted from the north to the central regions of the country (Segou, Mopti) with the rise in power in the Inner Delta (the Niger buckle) of a group called «Katiba Macina,» led by preacher Hamadou Kouffa. Kouffa is a close associate of Iyad Ag Ghali and became an important figure in the Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM), the main jihadist coalition active in the Sahel. Thus, the region of Mopti and gradually that of Ségou saw the birth and growth of locally active armed groups. One of the strengths of these groups is

their ability to establish themselves in rural areas.

These groups have claimed responsibility for several attacks against the national armies of the three countries and the partner forces of the United Nations Integrated Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), and Operation Barkhane. Local elected officials, traditional and religious leaders, and teachers are also victims of intimidation, threats, kidnappings, and even assassinations.

Insecurity in the country has thus entered into metastasis. Collectively or individually, the local actors in the conflict have almost all become armed actors. As a result of the deteriorating security situation, the emergence of militias is most often community-based. For example, in addition to Dan Ambassagou, interlocutors from the Tuareg Imghad Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) also present their groups as responses to insecurity in a logic of defending their communities, respectively the Tuareg Imghad and Daoussahaq.

In this bleak context, on March 25, 2020, the Malian government

confirmed the presence of the coronavirus pandemic in the country. Then, the situation rapidly evolved with an average contamination rate of 30%. By the end of April, the country had recorded more than 400 cases, including 20 deaths and a hundred people cured. Faced with this health threat, the government has taken several preventive measures since March 17. These measures ranged from closing borders (except for freight and transportation of goods) to banning public gatherings, closing schools, and establishing a curfew from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. This umpteenth crisis came on top of an already worrying security, economic and humanitarian situation.

Following the proclamation of the final results of the legislative elections, unrest broke out in many Malian cities. Often pointing the finger at curfews in the context of untimely power cuts or protesting against the results of the legislative elections¹, the month of May 2020 in Mali was also the month of incidents in Bamako, Kati, Kayes, Sikasso, and Ségou².

However, it is important to remember that the crisis, whether it is a security, political or health crisis, is both the result of structural factors of vulnerability, and of trig-

gering elements, which have been gradually put in place over the past decades. Growing insecurity, which increases the displacement and vulnerability of populations, contributes to fueling tensions between socio-professional groups. In addition to these tensions over access to natural resources, violence is linked to power struggles, attempts at political and social reconfiguration, and disagreements between the state and certain communities.

Based on these observations, it is useful to ask to what extent the local, national and supranational responses take into account the context (politics, specificities, will of actors), the current situation (the evolution of the crisis and conflict dynamics, particularly the signing of the peace agreement), as well as all the actors involved in the peace process.

To respond to this, we propose a reflection that will discuss several elements, including the point of view of the actors, the evolution of the crisis, and the nature of the violence that has defined the conflict. The analysis is structured around the dynamics of the conflict, in particular its causes and driving forces. The approach was to conduct a «multi-situated» reflection, i.e. in different places and at different levels in the

scale of the conflict. This research was conducted in Bamako, Timbuktu, Gao, Mopti and Ménaka.

Our methodology makes it possible to highlight the perceptions and reflections of the different actors. Decentralization was a constant concern. On the one hand, the aim of decentralization was to move away from the state-centric format of public institutions, and on the other hand, it was to highlight the plurality of positions of the communities. In order to make better sense of this, we have chosen to include, throughout the study, stories and quotes from a diversity of subjects³. The quotes are not meant to be exhaustive, nor do they situate a median line between the different narratives, but rather they recount the difficulties and the most salient expectations raised among the populations encountered. This was done at the risk of sometimes discovering considerable gaps between the top and the bottom (institutions vs. populations), the center and the periphery (those with decision-making power vs. those without).

Based on the results, this report is structured around six (08) points. After a brief overview of the context (01) it presents the origins of the 2012 crisis (02), then the spread of the crisis towards the center of the country (03), then takes stock of the

resurgence of local conflicts (04) before noting the social changes that have taken place over the years (05) as well as the violence observed (06). Finally, after a conclusion, the main recommendations emerging from the study are presented

1. Overview of the context

With an area of 1,241,238 km² and shared borders with seven states, Mali has a very large territory, two-thirds of which is occupied by desert. The weakness of the country's resources and the unequal geographical distribution of basic social services and infrastructure are factors of vulnerability. This situation makes Mali a preferred location for various armed groups that take advantage of the absence of the state or its weak representation to establish themselves and recruit.

Disparities in development and involvement in local and national governance have led to frustration, rebellions and armed conflicts, and the mismanagement of these conflicts have a lasting impact. The various non-state armed groups take advantage of the vulnerability factors of the population, including illiteracy and poverty, to recruit combatants, especially in the northern and central regions.

Young people, who make up more than half of Mali's population, are exposed to unemployment, underem-

“...Humanitarian partners support actions for disease prevention and case management. In May, the first cases of COVID-19 were detected at a displacement site/host family in the Mopti region. The pandemic comes in a context of a security and humanitarian crisis already affecting more than four million people. It thus aggravates the challenges related to access to basic social services, food insecurity and highlights the vulnerability of households whose socio-economic opportunities are increasingly reduced... Insecurity coupled with the COVID-19 epidemic has resulted in a decrease in the attendance of centers for the management of cases of gender-based violence (GBV). As a reminder, more than 378,000 children are affected by the closure of schools in areas affected by insecurity. In addition, the economic crisis caused by restrictive measures will increase poverty...”

Bulletin OCHA Mali (MALI, Situation Report, update: June 17, 2020)
<https://reports.unocha.org/fr/country/mali...>

¹ Tv5 Monde : «Two young Malians were injured by bullets on Thursday 7 May on the sidelines of a demonstration in the south of Mali against the final results of the legislative elections won by the ruling party, local sources reported. «<https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/elections-legislatives-au-mali-deux-blesses-par-balles-en-marge-d-une-manifestation-358455>

² Deutch Wele: «Kayes, Kati, Sikasso, Ségou, Mopti and several neighborhoods in Bamako have been experiencing riotous nights for nearly a week. Barricaded streets, burnt tires, burned police kiosks: according to several sources, these acts of violence have caused three deaths throughout the country» <https://www.dw.com/fr/des-tensions-sociales-embrasent-le-mali/a-53375377>

³ The survey approach consisted of conducting qualitative interviews based on a semi-directive questionnaire. Most of the people cited were not named.

ployment, lack of prospects, and weak involvement in national and local governance. The resulting frustrations make them particularly vulnerable to radicalization and the rhetoric of terrorist organizations. As a result, they also turn very easily to a variety of illicit trafficking ranging from drugs to weapons, cigarettes, migrants, and protected animal and plant species, the proceeds of which are very often used to finance terrorist movements.

In 2014, the crisis took on a new dimension with the resurgence of insecurity in the regions of Mopti and Segou, in the center of the country. The economic and social fragility of these areas has served as fertile ground for the establishment of armed terro-

rist groups, which instrumentalize conflicts between different communities while posing as guarantors of social order. Insecurity generates inter-community conflicts, creating a growing social divide and the withdrawal of part of the administration from many areas. At the beginning of 2020, the health crisis added to an already worrisome security, economic and humanitarian situation. In addition, frustrations, grievances and discontent have increased, leading to social tensions and putting institutions under severe strain.

On the humanitarian front, many communities have been forced to move, some within the country and others outside, particularly to neigh-

boring countries. Indeed, since January 2019, there have been more than 50,000 internally displaced persons in the Mopti region, 58% of whom are children. By May 2019, the number of internally displaced persons in Mali had reached 120,067, including 49,426 in the Mopti region. According to the OCHA report published in June 2020, the number of internally displaced persons reached its highest level in the last six years, rising from 207,751 in December 2019 to 250,998 in April 2020, an increase of 43,247 people. The number of schools closed was 807 in 2018. This number decreased relatively in 2019 (750). At the health level, more than 66 health centers are closed due to insecurity.

2. In the beginning, armed rebellion in the north



A water source is seen in Arawane, 160 km north of Timbuktu. ©photo : Walid le berbère / sabelien.com

The origins of the security crisis in Mali are as remote as the birth of the Republic itself in 1960. Indeed, since then, some communities in the north of the country have rebelled against the backdrop of an armed insurgency against the newly established state in 1963. This insurrection, which was managed militarily by the authorities of the first Republic, laid the foundations for a cyclical armed rebellion in the country. Unsatisfied with the results of the investments made by the state and its partners, and driven by a spirit of revenge for the exactions of the first insurrection, a new rebellion was launched in June 1990 in northern Mali.

The armed groups behind the insurgency now claim direct involvement in public affairs. The actors at the time were mainly young people from nomadic communities who had been exiled in Libya since 1963 and during the drought years of the 1970s. This brief historical detour allows us to recall the cycle of violence present in the country and to understand what is at stake.

a) From armed rebellion to terrorist activism against the backdrop of a state crisis

The security crisis that Mali experienced in 2012 is the result of a process of disintegration of the state that goes deeper than it appears. The sanctuarization of northern Mali began in the late 1990s. Beginning in 2003, fighters of the terrorist group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) began to settle in northern Mali. The aim was to turn

this vast desert expanse, which is difficult for a poor state like Mali to control, into a rear base in the Sahel. Their presence, which intensified after the fall of former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, resulted in the occupation of all the northern regions of Mali in 2012. Distraught in the face of the threat, particularly the «terrorist» threat, the Malian army deserted the towns in the area and left the armed groups (independence fighters, terrorists, militias and traffickers) to rule the law.

It is in this multicultural context of northern Mali that the security crisis involving irredentist armed groups such as the MNLA, and also move-

ments labeled as terrorists, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ançar-Eddine (created by the Kel Tamasheq Iyad ag Ghali) began. The multiplication of armed actors can be understood through categorizations based on the groups' «stated claims» while recalling the connections that may exist between them.

Mali's half-century of independence has been marked by various political upheavals. The most recurring were the demands for independence in the north of the country, to which the central government in Bamako first responded by force before favoring political solutions. According to the Malian anthropologist, the resurgence of rebellions in the north appears to be «one of the major constants in Malian political life since the mid-1950s in what was then French Sudan».

In 1963, the first rebellion broke out, placing the north of the country in armed violence for several years. The Malian army's response left painful traces in hearts and minds. Once again, between 1990-1999, a new armed rebellion was born. The major demands of this rebellion did not contrast with those of the first, but also concerned the integration of the Tuaregs into the Malian army. The response was initially military before Algeria was chosen to act as mediator in the negotiations that gave rise to the Tamanrasset Agreement on 6 January 1991. This agreement gave special status to the nor-

“The relationships between these communities are historical, even if often in conflict. Long before Mali's independence, social and intercommunity violence already existed between them. Arab merchants and the Sonrhai blamed the Tuareg for the raids that raged in the region. In addition, clashes between nomadic populations, on the one hand, and between nomadic and sedentary populations, on the other, are recurrent and each community claims to be master of the land”.

Qui est qui au Nord du Mali, ISS Africa, 2013

thern regions, allocated 47% of the next development program and provided for the demilitarization of the zone. It was rendered null and void following the popular revolution that led to the coup d'état of 26 March 1991 by a group of soldiers led by Lieutenant-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, known as «ATT».

The rebellion in the north, composed of Tuareg and Arabs, fragmented into four factions because of divergent aspirations, before forming together the Coordination of Unified Movements and Fronts of Azawad to negotiate with the Malian government, under pressure from Algeria. These negotiations led to the signing of the national pact on April 11, 1992 to seal unity in the country. In return, the rebel movements renounced the independence project. But tensions were far from eased because of the central government's inability to secure national adherence to the agreement and to bring together the tribes of the north.

In 2006, violence resumed and the rebels highlighted the fact that the north was lagging behind the south in terms of development. They accused the Malian government of not keeping the promises made in 1992, leading to a worsening situation. On July 4, 2006, under the mediation of Algeria's neighbor, a new Algiers Agreement is signed. It granted greater political autonomy and more funds allocated to development.

In January 2012, a new rebellion left Kidal, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad with the support of the returning Gaddafi Islamic Legion fighters, before declaring Azawad's independence on April 6, 2012. On January 17, 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA) launched the armed struggle that led to an unprecedented multidimensional crisis in the country. This armed group, formed by former combatants who returned from Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and deserters from the Malian army, launches an attack against Malian armed positions first in Ménaka and then Kidal and Aguelhok, in the north of the country. In order to carry out the military operations, the irredentists signed an alliance with armed terrorist groups present in the zone since 2003, such as AQIM as well as Ansar-Eddine and MUJAO.

The conflict entered a new dynamic with the coup d'état by military personnel in March 2012. The coup perpetrators accused the Malian government of laxity and incompetence in managing the conflict. Eventually, under international pressure, they returned power to a civilian-led transitional government. In the meantime, however, armed separatist and terrorist groups, in alliance, continued to advance and occupied the three northern regions of the country within a few months.

The entry into play of «terrorist» groups gave yet another dynamic to the crisis. Since 2003, the main terrorist group active in northern Mali has been Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Since 2006, the movement has claimed to be part of the Al-Qaeda network founded by Osama Bin Laden and since 2007 has had bases in the north of Mali, notably in the region of Kidal. Then came «Ançar-Eddine», an Islamist movement created by Iyad Ag Ghaly. Appearing at the beginning of 2012, the movement is part of those who were driven out of northern Mali by the Franco-African intervention in January 2013. The movement has led to some offshoots since 2014, notably the Katiba Macina of Hamadoun Kouffa. This group operates in central Mali (Segou, Mopti).

The complex nature of the alliance between the separatist armed groups and the terrorists overwhelmed the Malian army, which had abandoned its positions, often without fighting. On the one hand, the terrorists pursued the objective of creating an Islamist state in the north of Mali; and, on the other hand, the separatists wanted the independence of the north of the country under the term «Azawad» which they used to identify the party concerned. The alliance was formed against the backdrop of mounting bloody clashes by armed terrorist, separatist and criminal groups.

It is in this context that after a few weeks of hybrid management of the main cities in the occupied regions, the MNLA lost ground to the steamroller of terrorist groups with whom co-management was becoming difficult. Eventually, the separatists were chased away by armed terrorist groups from the main cities and took refuge in neighboring countries.

Between 2010 and 2011, I was a young high school student in Goundam (Timbuktu region). In 2012, with the arrival of an armed group called MNLA, I dropped out of school to join their movement and I was trained in weapons handling for a few days. We then attacked Camp de Léré and took hostages (Malian soldiers). In the aftermath, we recovered 6 combat vehicles and killed dozens of soldiers. We then attacked Timbuktu and occupied the city's airport. Two days later, we saw Islamist groups disembark in the city and I left the MNLA to join the group named Ançar Eddine. I was trained there too to specialize in P.K., in homemade bombs. I was appointed at the level of the Islamic police and they were in charge of applying the «Sharia». Ex-combatant of the Ançar-Eddine group.

Ex-combattant du groupe Ançar-Eddine

In Kidal, there is no doubt about the overlap between irredentist groups and certain «terrorists.» It would even seem that the attacks were jointly planned.

The two groups (Ançar-Eddine and the MNLA) signed this agreement in order to formalize their relations, as we drove the Malian army out of Azawad together; we coordinated even before January 17. The May 26th agreement was signed for our common interest and the security of Azawad. But we soon realized that some leaders did not understand it. The lack of communication led some cadres to believe that we had fallen into terrorism or Salafism. But the dialogue continues, and the agreement remains valid. The MNLA accepts Ançar Eddine at its side, not AQIM. And if Ançar Eddine appeals to AQIM, that's their problem. And it's also the problem of the people who let this group come here, who gave them money [in the form of ransoms for the release of hostages, editor's note]. This is how AQIM became powerful.

(words of Bilal Ag Achérif, President of the new Transitional Council of Azawad State (CTEA) in June 2012).

“Since March 2017, Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin, “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims,” (GNIM or GSIM), was born. It was born from the merger of Ançar Eddine, AQIM, Katiba Macina and Al-Mourabitoune. Iyad Ag Ghaly takes the lead. The merger of these groups would respond to a need to formalize a partnership that has existed since 2011. There is a willingness to coordinate actions, especially as AQIM seeks to expand its actions in the Sahel, and in Libya where its great rival, the Islamic state, operates and seeks to invest on the Sahel front. The two organizations are in a logic of regional competition”.

In Gao, in northern Mali, disagreements finally led to a breakdown in the alliance between the independence fighters and armed terrorist groups. At the same time, the occupation and the massive presence of weapons normalized violence in the city.

In Timbuktu, the situation was complex. After the fall of Kidal, the populations, particularly those who were sedentary in the city, understood the descent of the armed struggle of the MNLA as an attempt by the Tuaregs to establish hegemony in the North. Therefore, the arrival of terrorist groups a few days after the MNLA took the city was greeted with fervor before degenerating.

«When the crisis erupted, part of the population fled the city. But we stayed and we wanted to defend our city against the MNLA rebels. So we quickly set up a management body that later led to the establishment of patrol committees throughout the city. The MUJAO had its police, but we too wanted to ensure the peace of the inhabitants. Each neighborhood in Gao had about fifteen young volunteers who ensured the safety of the inhabitants. If someone seemed suspicious to them, they would arrest him, bring him to our base. We were not for the application of the Sharia, but we preferred to live with the Islamists rather than with the MNLA people».

(Former member of the crisis management committee and notable of Gao, 2012).

«In 2012, the Islamists arrived in Timbuktu. They were applauded by the Muslim population of Timbuktu. But when we began to see their application of «Sharia» with amputations of legs and hands, whipping, killings, rapes ..., we told them that the Muslim religion did not accept the application of «Sharia» like that on innocent people. Nevertheless, they continued to apply it. The situation was untenable until a Friday called «Black Friday» because it was hot between the jihadists and the inhabitants of the city of Timbuktu». That day, Islamists came across an «unveiled» woman carrying water on her head with her child on her back and began whipping her. When the youth leader was informed, he invited all the youth of the city to put an end to this torture. We went out in large numbers (men and women) and attacked them in front of the mosque at the time of Friday prayer. There were enough of us and they could not kill us all, so they fled. There was no prayer that day. The next day, they came back with reinforcements and martyred all the people they crossed that day. The village chief, neighborhood chiefs and traditional chiefs gathered the next day to begin discussions with them and asked that the youth return the weapons they had recovered that day».

Youth from Timbuktu

a) From fear to self-defense

Parallel to the rebel movements, 2012 also saw the birth and/or reactivation of self-defense groups. They mainly fell into two categories: the sedentary and nomadic self-defense groups; the Ganda-Izo and the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), respectively. The Ganda-Izo, which means “Son of the Land”, was born from the Songhai and Peulh self-defense group that existed during the rebellion of the 1990s, the Ganda-Koy. With the rebellion unleashed in January 2012, they set up, under the leadership of Ibrahim Abba Kantao, several militia groups in Sevaré and Gao. The National Front for the Liberation of Azawad (FNLA), created in April 2012, became the MAA in December 2012 under the leadership of Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed. This Arab self-defense movement has, since the beginning of the crisis, had important armed militias in the North which are composed of certain officers who have deserted from the Malian Army such as Colonel Houssein Ould Ghoulam, Colonel Sidi Amar Ould Mohamed and Commander Moulaye Abi. In view of the dialogues begun in 2014 by the Malian government, under the aegis of Algerian mediation, these groups created the Platform of Self-Defense Movements - which brings together the GATIA, the MAA-Bamako and the «sedentary» - often referred to as «loyalists».

«There are many armed groups operating in the region: Ganda Koy, Ganda Izo and other small movements. All of these movements commit abuses against the civilian population when they are in need. Weapons are the means of combat today for all the armed groups present on the ground. The means of warfare are found through the sale of arms and also the sale of stolen animals».

Fighting member of a self-defense group in Gao.

3. Finally, the crisis reaches the center of the country



Men cook on the banks of the Niger River near Mopti/January 2019. ©photo : Osman Sam / sabelien.com

In April 2012, the MNLA rebels entered Douentza without encountering any armed resistance (the reasons, particularly structural, will be explained in the third section). This descent of the armed insurgency into

the locality consecrates the entry of the Mopti region into the conflict, always with a mix between violence for independence purposes and the armed struggle led by armed terrorist groups, with the MUJAO in the

lead. This duplicity in the conflict will also amplify its complexity, including the involvement of actors established in the center.

⁴ Who does not wear the Hijab (full veil).

“I was born in Gandamia in a polygamous family about 40 km from Douentza. In Gandamia, there was only the Koranic school. When the armed groups came, at that time the authorities were absent. Those who call themselves Muslims came to see me so that I could interpret for them. So when there was a problem between the MUJAO members and the population, they came to see me and I would interpret. I would convey information to the people in Arabic and Peulh. This lasted a few months. When there was the military intervention in 2013, some people said that I was in the MUJAO. Those who said I was in the MUJAO denounced me to the Malian army and they came to arrest me at my home. Before 2012, there was no problem between us. But today we don't understand each other”.

Young citizen from Douentza

«In the localities of Boni - Mondoro - Hombori, there are interpersonal and intercommunity problems that are exacerbated by the presence of radical religious groups. There are rivalries between the Peulhs of Hombori and those of Mondoro. In the last two years, the Dogon and Bamanan have been driven out of the most important arable localities. These communities, mostly farmers, are driven out by armed Peulh groups with clan and ethnic claims».

Ambroise Dakouo, ARGA Mali

Also in the center, the MNLA has forged alliances, including with local traditional leaders. Using the frustrations and grievances of the communities, the strategy had been to turn people against the state. But again, the temporary alliance between herders (Fulani and Touareg) against the «sedentary» (Dogon and Bamanan) quickly fell apart, and old tensions between herder groups resurfaced. This led to a new polarization, notably between the Fulani and the Tuareg. The sudden adherence of certain Fulani elites to the MNLA's political project, although sometimes only passive, worried Fulani herders from vassal clans. In the end, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) exploited a sense of betrayal by the elites to establish its legitimacy.

“I am the son of a traditional chief. I can't go 10km beyond my village. If the Peulhs, now armed, find me, they will systematically attack me”.

Son of a Fulani leader from central Mali

The Mopti region is composed of two zones: a flooded zone, towards Youwarou and Gatjiloumou, impassable in the winter season and poorly controlled by the State, and a flooded zone, which extends to the Dogon Plateau. It is in these areas that conflicts are stirring up in the central regions. In this part of Mali, the demography is diverse. For centuries, Fulani (herders, forced to practice agriculture as a supplementary activity), Dogon (farmers) and Sonrhais (farmers) have lived side by side. They (the Fulani) ensure the care and exploitation of livestock (including the livestock of the Dogons). These ethnic groups alternate periods of understanding and conflicts with distant and complex roots.

While the North was the focus of attention, insecurity characterized mainly by the persistence of the terrorist threat and local conflicts spread to the center of the country. Today described as the epicenter of the crisis, the localities of the center are in a socio-economic and geopolitical context as fragile as it is complex. Identity retrenchment and competition over natural resources, which are limited in the area, have become sources of division and violence within the communities.

«I am a close relative of a Dogon hunter who belongs to a self-defense group whose objective is the protection and security of the various threatened villages of the circle. The Dogon hunters or commonly called the militia «DAN NA AMBASA-GOU», constitute a self-defense group from all over the Dogon country. The first reason is that our community and that of the Peulhs are in conflict in and around several areas of the circle. This conflict requires the commitment of the populations facing this situation, but especially the volunteers. The conflict exists in several localities of the Koro circle between the communities (Dogon and Fulani) linked to the competition over resources (agricultural, animal, forest). The manifestations of this conflict are physical clashes, targeted attacks, and abductions of men and livestock. It must be said that jihadist groups play a role alongside our Fulani adversaries (combat support, supply of weapons and ammunition, training in the use of weapons)».

Notable from Bandiagara

This crisis revealed the fragility of the country's governance and security systems. Already vulnerable due to its extreme poverty (23rd poorest country in the world according to the World Bank), Mali is experiencing a confluence of security threats, including historical conflicts between and within communities and the emergence of other types of violence. This complex violence is perpetrated by various isolated armed groups, movements that are signatories to

the Peace and National Reconciliation Agreement, and armed terrorist groups. With direct repercussions on the population, these armed actors maintain a spiral of violence and a sense of injustice that is driving away the prospects for dialogue and peace.

Since 2012, clashes based on settling scores and attempts to overthrow social order have been recurring in the Peulh community in the Douentza circle (Mopti region). Starting in 2016, the situation deteriorated with the transformation of historical conflicts between farmers and herders, between communities that lived together, and an instrumentalization by terrorist groups of the communities' frustrations and grievances against the state.

In the Seno (Dogon Plateau), the intensification of violence has led to the formation, or crystallization, of self-proclaimed self-defense militias, including DANNA AMBA SAGOU, affiliated with the traditional Dozo hunters, and claiming to protect the Dogon community. More recently, the armed group Alliance for Salvation in the Sahel (ASS) was formed by Fulani personalities from the region with the objective of protecting their communities from abuses committed by Dogon self-defense militias and the FDS⁵.

«You can't trust anyone because they all have the same goals. What we understood was that it was better for us to have our child among the armed groups to defend the interests of the family. Currently, all the communities have a militia or a group of people who are responsible for their protection and that of their property. Today, to have a weapon of war is a question of money because there are people who sell only that. Even if the Peulhs are the most numerous, all communities present in the Mopti region are represented in the extremist groups».

Village chief in the Boulikessi area

“The informal use of community militias by the respective governments, as well as numerous arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment, indiscriminate raids, and extrajudicial executions of Fulani civilians, usually young men, were reported during the period under review, further contributing to the «ethnicization» of the conflict. The rallying of Fulani youth to violent extremist groups was therefore seen as a result of the inaction and, more importantly, the bias of the FDS in these rivalries. Such perceptions are fueled by the low representation of Fulani in the

⁵ «Mali: two new self-defense groups are born in the Center», RFI, May 24, 2018. Available online.

FDS of the countries concerned. In order to counter these abuses, Fulani associations and the political and military cadres of the ethnic group have appealed to the authorities, apparently in vain at the time of writing this analysis. As a result, the quest for protection is coupled with a sense of victimization and stigmatization of Fulani people that fuels the lure of violent extremism”.

«We are targeted because we are Tuaregs or Arabs or Fulani. Even if we have nothing to do with it; for some, we are guilty in advance because of our community membership. In Douentza, every Arab or Peulh is suspected of being close to AQIM, there was even a time when when when we saw one, people would say “here is a jihadist!” It resurfaces as soon as there is the slightest problem. They use terrorism as a scarecrow to have the right to kill us, to diminish our struggle».

Young Arab from Douentza

Security operations carried out over the past three years in the fight against terrorism, which have intensified since the taking of hostages and the killing of the Radisson Hotel in Bamako in November 2015, have resulted in hundreds of arrests (or nearly 2,000 according to official information). Presented as «the rise in power of the Malian forces»,⁷ these muscular operations have led to the arrest of several presumed terrorists, some of whom have allegedly participated in attacks. But these operations were also accompanied by abuses: arbitrary arrests and violence.

7 According to General Dakouo, former Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, during the year 2015 «Nearly 70 terrorists and armed bandits were neutralized, 268 arrested, 175 weapons, 9 vehicles, 40 motorcycles recovered, more than 50 improvised explosive devices neutralized». <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-50451871>.

This climate contributes to the revival of a cycle of violence in which every abuse and lack of respect for the freedoms and lives of civilian populations increases the sense of injustice and weakens the march towards peace and the fight against violence; violence which, for some, is presented as the last resort of defense, in the absence of rights, consideration and alternative through genuine political dialogue. This cycle of violence undoubtedly contributes to the fabrication of radicalization. These traumas maintain the cycle of fragility, amalgamation and fear and thus new displacements.

«We are not considered, we’ve been under arrest and killing for a year now, it’s not just today. But no one speaks up to defend us or to say that it’s unfair, it’s as if we don’t exist. Even the encounters they make in our area, we are not in it. What do we have to do to make it stop? Take up arms? I don’t want to, but that’s exactly what they’re doing, getting people who have nothing to do with these problems to go to war. And if this continues, that’s what’s going to happen».

Young Fulani breeder⁸

8 Originally from the Nampala area, this young Fulani farmer was arrested and put in prison for four months. He was allegedly beaten and released for the sum of 300,000 CFA francs.

“Since January 2015, the Malian army has been under attack from the Katiba Macina, in the Nampala area, then in Dioura and Tenenkou. The army retaliated with an operation and arrests, particularly in the Gourma and Nampala zones, which caused people to flee. At the same time, tens of thousands of people were displaced, mostly Fulani, women and children from the Bouar community in the Tenenkou and Nampala cercle. Several testimonies report executions of innocent civilians, arrests of people associated with «terrorists» by their community origin, and cases of torture”.

«They came to us, they said there are rebels among us. We said we don’t know the rebels. The second time, they took two people and me and took us to prison in Bamako. They came back again to take some people, 4 people including our village chief X. While we were in prison, they all beat us up, many of us even... They tied us up with a rope. They also branded us with hot irons (he shows me Y’s arms and feet). They beat us with their feet, with their fists, with army belts». To get out of prison, we all paid 500,000 CFA francs.

Member of the Peul Bouar community, from the Nampala area

In 2018, an intensification of violence in the Dioura-Nampala-Karéri area led hundreds of families into exile again. In February 2018, the circle of Bankass, according to the mayor of the commune, received 11,000 new displaced persons. In January 2019, about 20 Fulani families arrived in Bamako, and more than 800 internally displaced persons fled their villages to take refuge in the bush.

«There have always been arrests. Last Friday, they arrested seven people in the department of Sokolo and killed four people. They dumped the bodies. People are afraid, they are killing us everywhere. People are hiding in the bush».

Peul, originally from Dioura

Several testimonies and associations of Peulhs deny the only explanation of the inter-community conflict put forward by the media and official authorities and denounce the amalgams nourished by the police-media campaign on the issue.

4. The resurgence of local conflicts and new dynamics

The security crisis in Mali has taken on new dimensions with the advance of armed terrorist groups in the Mopti and Segou regions in the center of the country. The economic and social fragility of these areas has served as fertile ground for the establishment of these armed terrorist groups, which exploit conflicts between different communities while posing as guarantors of social order. Insecurity

generates inter-community conflicts, creating a growing social divide and the withdrawal of part of the administration from many areas.

“Attack on Sobane-Da. Sobane Da, a Dogon village located in the commune of Sangha, Bandiagara circle in Mali, was the object of an attack that left 35 people dead, all from the Christian community, and burned attics, houses, animals, etc. The attack was carried out in the village of Sobane Da. This attack, committed during the night of June 9 to 10, 2019 by a dozen armed men, took place in a context of armed violence against a backdrop of growing community tensions in the area. No social class was spared: women, men, young people, children and the elderly. One of its peculiarities has been its infanticidal nature, since 24 of the 35 dead were children”.

It is in this context that there has been a resurgence of violence related to local conflicts in the country, mainly in the Mopti region. The attacks in Koulogon on January¹, 2019, with more than 20 dead, followed by the attack in Ogossagou on March 23, 2019, which killed more than 160 people, were the peak in this violence. On June 9, the attack that targeted the village of Sobane-Da in central Mali killed 35 people. In all

⁹ Figures provided by UNHCR.

of these localities, in addition to burned huts and granaries, the attackers, who were not identified according to official government reports, spared neither women nor children. During 2019 and the first half of 2020, the violence intensified considerably, with more than 300 civilians killed in at least 73 incidents.

Dan Ambassagou. With the spread of insecurity in the center of the country, the first reaction of the communities was to set up militias and self-defense groups to deal with the threat. It is in this order that «DANNA AMBA SAGOU» (we are entrusted to God), was militarized. At the base, it was a simple association of hunters that came into being in 2012. It was transformed into a militia around 2015. It claims to be part of the Dogon community and carries out attacks against the Fulani in central Mali.

These conflicts, which fall into at least three categories, including power struggles at the local level and competition over resources, have increased. Games of alliance and rivalry for control of power and space have led to clashes whose consequences continue to effect the local population. Fear and suspicion are anchored in the daily life of the inhabitants since 2014. The bonds of collaboration, alliances and dynamics that are gradually being created and strengthened between the various

radical armed groups and the local population bear the seeds of a particularly dangerous and difficult threat to combat. In their modus operandi, these movements, playing on the

«psychology of situations» and political emotions, have been able to forge strong links with local actors in order to maintain and consolidate their base.



Displaced residents of Mopti region of the crisis build huts outside Mopti.
©photo : Abdoul Salam Hama / sabelien.com

The conflict between Dogon and Fulani in the Seno Mango (Mopti region, Mali). *The conflict between members of the Peul and Dogon communities in the Seno Mango (an exodus zone in the center of the country) is characterized by a multitude of hotbeds of tension. These tensions, mainly related to the exploitation of land and agro-pastoral resources, govern the cohabitation between Fulani and Dogon in this zone. This cohabitation varies between periods of conflict and peace. The conflict between Dogon and Fulani in Seno Mango has experienced numerous episodes of violence. Legal action has not been able to resolve the dispute, and the assassination of a farmer at the end of 2016 was the trigger for the conflict. The Dogon, suspecting the Fulani of being the perpetrators, attacked them, creating a cycle of reprisals. Several dynamics, some of which are interrelated, contribute to the exacerbation of tensions between the actors, against a backdrop of rivalries for control and management of resources. The arrival of the «jihadists,» notably the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in 2012, followed by the KatibaMacina in 2015, as well as the Malian army's military campaigns (particularly Operation Seno in October 2015), exacerbate the conflict. The cycle reached its climax with the creation of self-defense groups and militias on a community basis. In addition, as was the case in Operation Seno, the army's informal use of Dozo scouts, as well as the numerous arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions of Fulani civilians, contribute to a heightened sense of victimization and stigmatization of this community.*

These phenomena induce competition for access to resources on the basis of the law of the strongest and migratory phenomena that generate concentrations of populations in the underprivileged areas of cities and the rare viable spaces. International migration is added to this. Thus, the increase in the population of underprivileged neighborhoods and the scarcity of vital resources can be sources of radicalization and community and inter-community conflicts.

As a result of conflicts, relationships are formed, unraveled and renewed according to the circumstances and the interests of the moment. Relationships become increasingly strained between actors from different community groups, while they become more consolidated between members of the same ethnic composition. Thus, the new dynamics of relationships that are taking shape at the community level tend to group actors together on an ethnic basis.

The new dynamics of conflict in the region were seen as an opportunity for revenge to address the consequences of past defeats within the local social structure. To this end, some are joining the «jihadists» and others are joining the community armed groups in order to benefit from adequate means of reinforcement (provision of training and materials). Thus, we are witnessing unprecedented cycles of retaliation, sometimes based on historical precedents.

Attack of Ogossagou. *On March 23, 2019, about 100 armed men on motorcycles, dressed in hunters' uniforms, attacked Ogossagou, a Fulani village located a few kilometers east of the town of Bankass in Mali, near the border with Burkina Faso. The death toll was 160, all from the Fulani community, granaries, houses, and animals burned. The perpetrators spared no social strata: women, men, young people, children and the elderly. Ogossagou's attack remains by far the most publicized by far and the one that provoked the most popular indignation both inside and outside Mali.*

Suspicious quickly turned to a self-defense militia of hunters claiming to be from the Dogon community, called Dan Nan Ambassagou, who denied any involvement. While the Malian government did not explicitly affirm the responsibility of this militia, its official dissolution at an extraordinary session of the Council of Ministers on March 24, the day after the attack, is sufficient proof that it shares the suspicions against Dan Nan Ambassagou.

In addition, Mali's main environmental challenges are the decline and increased variability of rainfall and water resources, the continuous increase in temperatures and the resurgence of extreme weather events (droughts, floods, heat waves). These changes are accentuated by climate change and make agricultural planning increasingly difficult. The continuous reduction of arable land with the high population growth and the extension of cities, the reduction in the level of the water table, the silting of rivers, the drop in soil producti-

ty, the degradation of plant cover and biodiversity, today constitute a worrying threat to the social and economic well-being of populations.

5. Social changes, between breakdowns and permanence

Conflicts have distant and complex roots. Before being a problem of territorial boundaries and self-determination, it is above all a problem of identity and cohabitation between ethnic groups. On the one hand, the logic of a traditional society charac-

terized by particularisms where loyalties are expressed across borders and where peoples identify themselves through ethnic or clan feelings, and on the other hand, the logic of the modern state characterized by its concern for one authority.

In spite of their great diversity, the social organizations of the communities in northern and central Mali have some core similarities: caste system, strong hierarchy, and chieftaincy authority based on Islam. But these similarities, instead of fostering

their social and political cohesion, are on the contrary the source of numerous internal tensions and conflicts and endless rivalries in the form of a revolt against a sclerotic social elite.

of Islamic movements, both non-violent and violent. Indeed, militant groups have had less difficulty in recruiting unemployed youth who cannot imagine a future for themselves.

This crisis, although not the cause of the disruptions, has amplified inter-ethnic conflicts over land management and access to natural resources such as water and pasture. The modes of settlement (most conflict localities are centers of enslavement and vassalage, with dominated families serving other dominant families) and cohabitation have long led the inhabitants to adapt.

“There is an internal revolt within the communities against the privileges of the former customary chiefs. These privileges are considered abused by the communities, and the crisis has provided an opportunity to question the chieftaincies. There were significant abuses by traditional chiefs before the crisis. After 2012, there is an attempt to overthrow traditional chiefdoms and settle scores. Before, the chiefs were listened to. They had the last word in disputes. Over time, things have changed; took advantage of the resolution of disputes to extract money from the people”.

Ali Ould Sidi, a sociologist based in Timbuktu

“The origin of these tensions goes back to before the 2012 crisis. The Dogon stigmatized and mistreated the Peulh community, which had no defenders at the local level. They denied the Peulhs the possibility of digging wells with the complicity of the Malian authorities because it was the justice of the rich. The Dogon quickly understood that if the Peulhs succeeded in digging their own wells, they would no longer be dependent on them (the Dogon) and they would no longer control them. That is why, despite the fact that they (the Peulhs) had the means to do so and despite the water crisis in the

area (because the Dogon were charging them money so that they could have water for family and animal needs), the Peulhs were never able to have wells in the localities. Even for communal ponds, the Peulhs had to pay for water for their animals. At the same time, the Dogon used the water to make banco bricks. These tensions persisted long before the crisis, but the weakness of the state was the trigger for the situation we know today”.

Peulh farmer in the Mondoro area

In the center of the country, which became the epicenter of the crisis in 2015, one of the solutions to overcome ethnic divisions was inter-ethnic marriages. The Dogon and the Peulhs were led to form matrimonial alliances in order to avoid conflicts (access to pastures and water points, tensions around animal corridors) by practicing clan endogamy between them, giving rise to a form of assimilation of the Dogon to the Peulhs. The Dogons now speak Fulfulde, marry Fulani, and the disappearance of the ethnic border limits conflicts.

This system, which integrates all social and cultural activities, has vacillated in Douentza under the regulated control of armed radical groups (the different ethnic groups accusing each other of criminal acts and collaboration with the occupier) and the lack of material/financial means due to the precariousness.

6. Continuing violence

“On the social level, changes are observable through the creation of a climate of acute suspicion and mistrust between populations. The mistrust is such that the different forms of inter and/or intra-community solidarity and the traditional mechanisms of mediation, within the framework of conflict management, have been seriously mortgaged and are even dysfunctional”.

Veterinary technician of Douentza

Suspicion and fear are therefore de rigueur in Douentza, even though the community still sets the pace and modalities of everyone’s existence, from baptism to marriage (funeral rites were not addressed during the survey).

“Traditional conflict management mechanisms are saturated, but modern justice does not fill the void. The erosion of customary authority in favor of modern administrative or judicial authority does not inspire confidence because it is courted by people who have significant financial means and are willing to corrupt it”.

Local elected official in Timbuktu

While the Peace and National Reconciliation Agreement has put an end to fighting between armed independence groups and the Malian government, peace and stabilization appears as a mirage. In the absence of progress and concrete results in the implementation of the peace agreement (and particularly on the security front), many people fear a relapse into conflict, recalling that in the 1990s, it was after the signing of the national pact that the greatest number of summary executions of civilians took place.

“The security situation is of concern to the local population. Cattle theft, carjacking on transit roads, armed robberies and assassinations characterize our daily lives. The perpetrators of these acts are from the area; they take advantage of the absence of the state to attack the population. Our movement, Ganda Izo, is a self-defense group, it is not an armed terrorist group. The objectives of the group are, among others, the protection of the populations, their property and the defense of the zone they belong to. There are several other movements in the region, Ganda Koy,

MNLA, GATIA and MSA, which are all self-defense movements. There is a close relationship between these groups, the protection of populations, their property and the defense of the lands they belong to. It is important to know that everyone is armed in the zone, even the shepherd you meet in the bush, the children, the women. We are all armed”.

A member of the self-defense group Ganda Izo from Gao

The rekindling of inter-community conflicts is a direct impact of these tensions. Between April-May 2015, the CMA attacked Léré, Gatielimou, Rharous, Djenné carrefour, Mis-séni, Bambara-Maoudé, Boulikessi, Intillit, Segue, Timbuktu, Niono, and Bamba, in response to army and platform violence in Ménaka, Gourma, and the Kidal region¹⁰. These conflicts lasted until the end of 2018 and resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries, as well as hundreds of new refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). As an example: the Idawsahak-Peulh conflict in the region of Ménaka, which resulted in the death of more than 200 people, 50 people reported missing, more

¹⁰ During this fighting, 30 FAMA soldiers were killed: <http://maliactu.net/mali-les-attaques-des-rebelles-de-la-cma-ont-coute-la-vie-a-30-soldats-maliens-en-quat-se-maines/>.

than 12,000 new departures of populations, particularly to Niger and Burkina (source: UNHCR) and significant material damage.¹¹

The various inter-community agreements, established in the wake of the Anefif process, have allowed for a certain lull but do not durably resolve the fundamental problems that originate on a larger (national) scale, or old and complex conflicts over land, pastoral resources or the sharing of local political power¹². The establishment of transitional authorities and what it implies in terms of the distribution of local power is undeniably likely to rekindle these tensions. However, the main lever remains the means by which the state articulates the pro-government militias, which have been called upon on several occasions to combat the armed movements of the CMA. The militarization of small, armed groups that steal livestock and goods¹³, the circulation of arms, trafficking, and the settling of scores, together with abuses against the civilian population, contribute greatly to a growing climate of insecurity and an unprecedented arms race in the country.

11 Elements provided in the Ménaka commune's multisectoral rapid assessment report, March 2016. Mossa Ag

Acharatoumane, a representative of the Idawsahak community and a member of the CMA, confirmed these figures; according to him, among

Of the 70 people killed, nearly 50 were from his community.

12 For example, the military encirclement of the city of Kidal by the GATIA in June 2016 clearly shows the limits of the commitments taken during the Anefif process.

13 For example, according to humanitarian observers, coupeurs de route carry out flights almost regularly on the Timbuktu-Goundam axis.

Despite the ceasefire, a number of violent acts against the civilians were recorded. These led to many returnees to the return to the camps, and also hindered the possible return of refugees. For example, the Malian army's serious abuse events in Zen-Zen and Farach in January and July 2015, led to new displacements of people who had repatriated to Mali in 2014.

"I belong to the self-defense movement MSA (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad). It is a self-defense group of the people of the region that works with the regular army to track down small groups of armed bandits in the region. It has no ties to extremist groups operating in the area. The security situation in the Ansongo circle is untenable. Insecurity reigns here and is a major burden on the population, including violence related to the conflict between the Imghad, Daoussahak, and Peulh communities. In the area from Ansongo to the Ménaka region, things are not going well, the populations are worried, and movements are limited for fear of being targeted. Socio-economic life is disrupted and almost all the activities (social, economic, professional) of the populations are blocked".

Fighter of the self-defense group MSA

Several other interrelated dynamics have also contributed to the persistence of armed violence in the country, including state responses to an insidious threat. For example, returning defense and security forces (FDS) in the Mopti region have tended to confuse ethnicity with ideological alignment, suspecting the Peulh community as a whole of complicity with the MUJAO Islamists.

Two months after Operation Serval, the Malian army began patrolling to arrest people. We could no longer go to the well to get water, we went there at night and hid in the forests. There was also a lot of cattle theft. That's when we left with our animals, donkeys and camels, and on May 1, 2013, we returned to the refugee camp. We stayed there for two years... After the attack on the military camp of Goundam, in January 2015, when the army returned, it passed through the village of Zen-Zen. The army realized that the people had gone to hide in the water. The army began to shoot people who were in the water, but no one was killed. They left and took one young and one old man. When they arrived in Goundam, we didn't know who was dead and who was alive. In the end, there were two dead, and others were arrested. Thanks to pressure, they were released. After that, part of the family returned to the camps. It scared us so much that we didn't go back (to Zen Zen).

Those who remained in Zen-Zen hid at dawn and returned at night. They have lived like that since then for fear of reprisals".

Testimony of two family members of those killed

For the people of the commune of Doukouria, the capital of the village of Zen-Zen, who have remained in the area or who will return to their commune in 2014, efforts have been made to avoid escalation, despite which insecurity remains:

"In relation to the acts committed by the army in the village of Zen-Zen, the authorities were affected and the state helped to bring calm. The army officials came to present their forgiveness to the community. Extensive sensitization was carried out to prevent the situation from taking another more serious turn. But so far, the army continues to maintain tight control thinking that everyone is jihadist".

Notable Tuareg

The use of violence subsequently led to a questioning of the Peulh social structure, which was traditionally very hierarchical: conflicts and settling of scores arose between the shepherds, who had taken up arms to protect themselves, and the customary chiefdoms, who were anxious to reaffirm their authority within the communities in revolt, and at the same time to recreate a bond of trust with the Malian state.

"Terrorist groups use motorcycles and transmit information through satellite phones. I joined the MUJAO to be able to protect my relatives and my property. Indeed, before they came, I was defenseless and this group offered me a way out by arming me. The government is primarily responsible for this situation and we remain confident and are ready to drop everything for a government job".

Former MUJAO combatant in Ménaka

The impunity of the militias that emerged from the insurgency in northern Mali and the inability of the Peulhs to access the peace dividend exacerbated the sense of abandonment and the need for self-protection among the Peulhs in central Mali. Communities in the Mopti region reported countless cases of ill-treatment, abusive violence, arbitrary arrests, extortion, and extrajudicial executions allegedly committed by the FDS.

"I was coming back from the fair with a few brothers when the Malian army stopped us. I was able to flee into the bush but the army arrested my companions. They

were tied up hand and foot with their eyes blindfolded like animals. A few days later, we found the bodies of some of them lifeless. The others were said to be in Bamako prison. The worst thing is that this is not the first time. Even in the middle of the day, they kill the shepherds in front of everyone. They treat us all like jihadists here. We can't even go into public places anymore without risking being arrested or worse, killed".

Peulh farmer in Mopti

In June 2017, in Boni, after alleged jihadists who were racketeering carnival-goers attacked a gendarme, the FAMA retaliated with abuses against civilians. In May 2018, at the Boulikessi cattle market, Malian military members of the G5 Sahel joint force murdered at least twelve civilians after the death of a soldier. Following the discovery of 25 corpses in June 2018, the Ministry of Defense announced that «a mission dispatched to the field confirms the existence of mass graves implicating certain FAMA personnel in serious violations resulting in the deaths of men at Nantaka and Kobaka in the Mopti region».



Collective fishing in Mopti - January 2019. ©photo : Osman Sam / sahelien.com

According to the communities, armed bandits rob and rob communities in the presence of the military, who do not act and justify themselves by explaining that they do not have sufficient manpower and equipment

to deal with the armed groups. In the face of these repeated abuses and frequent breaches, the population feels abandoned by ineffective DSFs that even contribute to insecurity.

«We are serene. We were able to expose their way of doing things. It is not that we reject what's being said, but we feel that the way of conducting these investigations is not in conformity. I have never received anyone who has come to ask me questions to be able to confront the information received in the field. When you don't go to the field and take the version of the decision-makers to find out what they ordered, I think the result can be biased. We even read the last report (HRW report, editor's note), I admit that we don't find ourselves in what it says. We don't need to hide the truth, nor do we need to add to it. Where there is no problem, there is no problem. I don't see what the framework is for gratuitous killings, since there are no ethnic problems within Mali's defense and security forces. So I do not understand how one can say that the defense forces are in a state of revenge against this or that ethnic group for the simple reason that, in some of the places mentioned, the security posts are commanded by people from those backgrounds. We don't need to make it more complicated». said

Major General Salif Traoré, former Minister of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness

In June 2018, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' report on the security situation in Mali indicated jihadist attacks effect the Malian army more than anyone else, particularly in the Mopti region. At the same time, the civilian population keeps pointing an accusing finger at the Malian army. Young people from the Peulh cultural association Tabital Pulaaku, quoted by AFP, accused the FAMA of the death of the 25 people whose bodies were discovered in three mass graves near Mopti. Despite the denial of the military hierarchy in Mopti, the Minister of Defense confirmed the existence of mass graves in the localities of Nantaka and Kobaka, near Mopti.

The Malian authorities deny these allegations and believe that such accusations would complicate their task in securing and pacifying the country.

7. A widespread governance crisis

More than five years after the signing of the peace agreement, the Malian context is characterized by a deteriorating security climate and a tense political scene. The various non-state armed groups take advantage of the population's vulnerability factors and try to occupy the ground left vacant by the absence of the state, making the population understand that they are «left out» of the state system. At the same time, local and administrative governance is faced with the problems of insufficient resources and reduced competencies, with the result that decentralized local authorities have weak capacities to plan and manage local development in harmony with national orientations. The regionalization process is struggling to get off the ground amidst insecurity and the postponement of elections. All of this is a source of frustration and tension, which can degenerate into armed conflict and fuel extremism.

Concessions made to the armed groups during the signing of the peace accords are not always shared by a large part of the population, who find it difficult to accept certain actions. Interlocutors met during the analysis recalled that the security threats in the country are essentially nourished by poverty, unemployment, ignorance and exclusion. The unequal territorial distribution

of infrastructure and basic social services generates a feeling of disinterest on the part of leaders and negatively affects the sense of belonging to the same nation. It may explain the emergence of irredentist groups that can quickly slide into violent extremism.

Demonstrations in Mali, protests against the state of emergency, cutbacks, and the results of legislative elections.

Following the proclamation of the final results of the legislative elections, unrest broke out in many Malian cities. Protesters were angry curfews in the context of untimely power cuts and didn't accept the results of the May, 2020 legislative elections. Protests broke out in Bamako, Kati, Kayes, Sikasso, and Ségou¹⁴. These incidents remain symptomatic of the profound social malaise that the country is experiencing. They reached their peak in June and July 2020. On July 10, 2020 in Bamako, according to the website Sahelien.com, the June 5 Movement, which was at its 3rd demonstration at Independence Square, called for «civil disobedience». Roads were blocked, tires were burned, demonstrators stormed the public television station, the National Assembly premises were ransacked, and demonstrators were dispersed in places with tear gas¹⁵.

By early June 2020, the political, security and health situation in the country remained tense. In addition to insecurity, Mali, like other countries in the world, is confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic linked. Faced with this protean crisis and the outcome of legislative elections, organized under difficult conditions, part of the public, particularly political and religious leaders, demanded the resignation of the President of the Republic. This demand, variously appreciated within national public opinion, came in a tense political-social context that tested for the public authorities.

First, structurally, over the years, the nature and quality of governance has led to chronically strained relations between the state and citizens. The litany of suspected cases of corruption, rightly or wrongly left in the collective memory, unpunished and unresolved, and the lack of protection and basic social services have slowly eroded confidence in the state and weakened the social contract between the state and the people. This has made the presence and authority of the state highly questionable and created an environment conducive to the emergence of protest movements.

At the same time, despite the great mobilization and commitment of the international community for the country, there has been very little progress in terms of development. The limited impact of development programs is largely due to their unscrupulous management. Embezzlement, fraudulent behavior and corruption are considered widespread. People interviewed for this study pointed to the bankruptcy of political elites and their involvement in an opaque governance

¹⁴ Source: <https://sahelien.com/manifestation-du-mouvement-du-5-juin-situation-tendue-a-bamako/>

¹⁵ Source: <https://sahelien.com/manifestation-du-mouvement-du-5-juin-situation-tendue-a-bamako/>

system, allowing them to appropriate some humanitarian aid funding and bribes. With respect to justice, many recognize that widespread impunity and limited access to justice are among the root causes of the crisis taking root in the country.

«Endemic corruption is widely blamed for the loss of state legitimacy, contributing to the 2012 crisis. Non-state apparatuses of proximity, including criminal providers of basic services and religiously inspired millenarian movements, quickly filled the void. The current rise in instability in the center of the country suggests a direct link between radicalization and a sense of injustice. However, even though confidence in public institutions remains low in Mali, the Malian population seems to be largely unaware of the role that trafficking plays in reinforcing corruption, injustice, and insecurity. For the time being, the peace process has not found adequate solutions to this problem. Because of its ambiguous place between SSR and rule of law programming, justice reform is not considered a priority, as evidenced by the limited number of financial pledges made by donors in this sector. Moreover, even though they had been provided for in the Peace Agreement, truth-seeking mechanisms have been indefinitely postponed, and the need for reconciliation has not been adequately compensated for by the obligation to deliver justice. The tendency to resort to compromises and amnesties in favor of alleged drug traffickers with links to armed groups is seen as a worrisome sign of this lack of willingness to fight impunity¹⁶».

Luca Raineri, Researcher

Secondly, the deterioration of the security situation in recent years has led to a steady increase in the budgets allocated to security and defense to the detriment of certain sensitive sectors such as youth employment, health, and education. As a result, costly counter-terrorism operations weigh heavily on social cohesion as the government faces resource constraints and its ability to address socio-economic priorities is reduced. This situation, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, puts further pressure on the state and reinforces the sense of incapacity that some people feel towards the government.

Finally, political or social actors divert the legitimate discontent and frustrations in order to obtain positions in public affairs management. Between March and May 2020, starting with the proclamation of the final results of the legislative elections, unrest broke out in many Malian cities. These incidents remain symptomatic of a deeper malaise than the demands put forward. In reality, they are the expression of an anger that has been present in the country for several years. This anger is based on feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and frustration.

CONCLUSION

Even before the crisis, Mali was probably the weakest link in the sub-Saharan zone because of its security situation. The state had to contend with the strong presence of the AQIM movement and armed radical groups on its territory. Various

traffickers of drugs, cigarettes, and human beings also used the country for business. Poor governance of and endemic corruption further weakened the country.

In the north and center of the country, armed movements, including those labeled «terrorists» (MNLA, Ançar-Eddine, MUJAO), settled in, taking advantage of the persistent vacancy of power, all the more so since they were already present in these areas and had a certain base. Rivalry for control of the North led to clashes that continue to affect the local population.

The transnational nature of the actors, porous borders, and poverty seem to favor the spread of radicalization/extremism in Douentza/Mali. The Malian state has limited control over the situation (poor conflict management and lack of resources). The study found that the country is vulnerable to the threat of extremism and all forms of insecurity, which can be based on armed insurgency as a means of protest. These include political factors such as endemic corruption and elite impunity; social factors related to frustration with expectations, relative deprivation, and unmet social (access to education) and economic needs (youth unemployment and gross inequalities); and cultural factors, including religious factors.

The bonds of collaboration, alliances and dynamics that are gradually being established and strengthened between the various radical armed groups and the local populations

bear the seeds of a particularly dangerous and difficult threat to combat. In their modus operandi, these movements, playing on the «psychology of situations» and political emotions, have been able to forge strong links with local ethnic groups, to develop economic activities and illicit trafficking of all kinds in order to maintain and consolidate their rear base.

It is essential to take into account these ideological (return to the origins/source of religion and to a purified Islam) and sociological (social injustice, lack of access to infrastructure and basic services) dimensions of a multifaceted phenomenon that is most often grafted onto poor social indicators.

The various interviews highlight an evolution of the conflict with a tendency to reduce to violent extremism all the conflict dynamics that nevertheless originate both at the governance level and at the endogenous level (frustrations and grievances). With the trivialization of violence and its normalization, the tendency is to make an already difficult situation more complex.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Bring back the state in localities from which it was absent and focus on renewed governance and local communities' needs.

Mali and its partners, including UNAMID, are focusing efforts on the return of the state and its authority throughout the country. The restoration of state authority is important, but it should not be seen in the

context of territorial occupation of the country. Long before the crisis, many communities perceived the presence of the state as a predatory state presence that, without meeting the basic needs of the communities, exacerbated the cleavages within and between them.

“In order to better respond to these phenomena, the state must stop being partial in defending communities against others and must invite all those Peulhs and Dogons who have taken up arms at the negotiating table as it did with the MNLA bandits”.

Mopti national

Mali's partners, primarily UNMISAM, and those involved in security support must encourage the state in its efforts to improve governance and its usefulness to all Malian communities.

2) Restore trust between local actors

The crisis of 2012 and the violence that followed with the thousands of deaths ended up creating significant societal chasms: first between socio-professional groups and then between certain communities that had a secular and historical practice of living together even if it brought conflict at times.

“At the moment, there is no conflict resolution between these communities. They can't do it because they hurt each other too much and they don't trust each other”.

Dogon farmer of the Bandiagara zone

3) Support mediation processes with concrete actions.

For many interlocutors met during the analysis period, the conflict resolution agreements are short-term solutions.

On August 28, 2018, 34 Fulani and Dogon village chiefs signed an inter-community peace agreement in Sivaré to end conflicts in Koro, which were exacerbated by the self-defense militias and violent extremist groups in the area. This agreement, facilitated by an NGO (Henry-Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue) engaged in government-mandated mediation, came after a unilateral cease-fire in early July that was denounced within the Dogon militia, DAN NA AMBASAGOU, an organization that itself is divided. Although the actions of mediation are salutary, it is important to note that they only allow for the management of the immediate situation, to calm tensions and save time. It would therefore be a mistake to give them a mission they do not have.

¹⁶ Organized crime in Mali: its impact on a peaceful way out of the conflict - Luca Raineri, July 2016

4) Provide sustainable and multi-faceted responses to local conflicts.

It is crucial to take into account the sociological dimensions (social injustice) that accompany poor socio-economic indicators. Areas affected by local violence are also affected by the reduction of grazing areas due to the exploitation of agricultural land and the scarcity of water and fodder. Growing insecurity, which increases the displacement and vulnerability of populations, contributes to fueling tensions between socio-professional groups. In addition to these tensions over access to natural resources, violence results from local power struggles, attempts at political and social reconfiguration, and disagreements between the state and certain communities.

5) Addressing issues of underdevelopment and securing infrastructure.

Our study highlighted how little infrastructure exists linking the south to the north of the country. Road infrastructure is dilapidated in places and non-existent in much of the north. There are no roads connecting the south to the north of the country. Moreover, the frequency of attacks on the few roads contributes to exacerbate frustration and concern.

“As long as people’s living conditions do not change, we will not lay down our arms. Even if we lay down our arms, others will take them as long as things do not change. That’s why we fought for our territory”.

Young Tuareg fighter, member of the former armed rebellion in the North

6) Accompany the Malian State in strengthening dialogue between communities and between communities and the public authorities.

On August 28, 2018, 34 Fulani and Dogon village chiefs signed an inter-community peace agreement in Sevaré to end the conflicts in Koro, which were exacerbated by self-defense militias and violent extremist groups. While this and previous agreements have not led to a definitive resolution of the crisis in the center, efforts toward dialogue must continue and be supported by a commitment by the Malian state to respond to the many demands.

7) Face the terrorist threat within a framework of regional cooperation.

Recent developments confirm the allegations of many observers about the persistence of the terrorist threat and its spread. To address the security issue in its entirety, Mali, with the support of external partners, should build on existing cooperation on security matters with countries in the subregion. The development of a regional cooperation component remains central to confronting Mali’s security crisis.

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