PHASE 2: Case Studies of Community-Based Armed Groups in West Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The RESOLVE Network research initiative on Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa, in partnership with USAID, aims to provide key stakeholders with contextual information on the composition, behaviors, and relationships of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) and different approaches to engage, manage, and transform them. The project seeks to understand the roles and impacts of CBAGs in conflict-affected societies across sub-Saharan Africa. The following two case studies carry out this investigation in Mali and Niger.

Community-based armed groups emerge across sub-Saharan Africa with varying degrees of popular support, often in contexts where state government presence lacks reach, confidence, or resources. The missions and goals of CBAGs vary, ranging from protecting or promoting an ideology or community identity, to defending territory or resources, to providing security for vulnerable populations. They are key actors in local peace and security, which can have both positive and negative implications. Their proliferation and enduring presence necessitate a deeper, empirical understanding of these groups and the contexts in which they emerge. This understanding is especially significant in Niger and Mali, where there is a confluence of weak governance, resource competition, and (in some cases) rising violent extremism.

In partnership with researchers, practitioners, and academics, the RESOLVE Network commissioned an in-depth analysis of these dynamics related to CBAGs in two locations. The first case study focused on areas of southwestern Niger, along its northern border with Mali and its western border with Burkina Faso. This border area is a site of endemic violence. It is punctuated by anti-state attacks, targeted killings of traditional chiefs, and attacks on markets and other community meeting points that normally preserve intercommunal relations. CBAGs of Fulani and Tuareg ethnicity have aligned themselves with external security actors operating in the region, including French and US counterterrorism operations as well as jihadist forces, out of choice, coercion, or both.[1] The RESOLVE Network supported field research focused on local perceptions of the influencing factors, mechanisms, and effects of armed mobilization to further understand the complexities of CBAGs to help provide resolutions to community conflicts.

The second case study focused on Central Mali, where the crisis made its way down from the north, where the volatile security and political situation and the advance of jihadist groups have triggered French counterterrorism interventions and solidified a new jihadist front. Jihadists exploited divisions between communities and grievances toward the state and rival armed groups to expand their influence into Central Mali, notably resonating with Fulani communities. This has fueled tensions with other ethnic groups and, together with the absence of government security forces, led to the creation of ethnic

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1   Rahmane Idrissa and Bethany McGann, *Mistrust and Imbalance: The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border.* Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021, 1. https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.2.

self-defense groups. The proliferation of nonstate groups and CBAGs threw Central Mali into a cycle of retributive violence and transformed it into a conflict epicenter.[2] Here, RESOLVE mapped the presence of armed groups and their constituencies and perceptions of state responses to security challenges to provide recommendations to curb the violence moving forward.

Through these two cases, the RESOLVE Network offers new perspectives on how historical and economic contexts, resource protection, and women's engagement interact and affect opportunities to engage, manage, and transform CBAGs.

Findings

To understand the escalatory environment characterized by a proliferation of armed groups—both state-backed and community-based—the studies examined the underlying contextual factors and histories of communal relations. Local research teams conducted in-depth discussions with conflict stakeholders in each area to understand the context and local perspectives. Both research projects sought to understand how the local communities perceived one another, and how they perceived the central government versus local governance administrations. A key limitation of both studies was the difficulty of collecting data under volatile conditions, including data on key events and timelines of armed-group formation.

In Niger, the primary data collection questions focused on how resident communities understand the rise of violence, how they explain its persistence, and how they see the future. Interviews in Mali focused on the history and dynamics of communal mobilization, engagement between the population and armed groups, social changes linked to the emergence of these groups, and recommendations to reduce violence. Researchers disseminated questionnaires to local elected officials, agents of the territorial administration, NGO activists, local leaders, chiefs, and community members. Researchers then contextualized the primary datasets through desk research.

The two research reports produced invaluable findings and unique data on CBAGs in Niger and Mali. Findings from the surveyed populations in study sites Ayorou and Abala, two communities in southwestern Niger, revealed two main factors that characterized the expansion of violence in Niger's border regions: a pervasive state of violence and mistrust, and intra-ethnic competition over formal and informal governance systems. Local communities expressed confusion, fear, and pessimism. The authors use the term "psychosis"[3]—signifying generalized fear, insecurity, and threat—to describe public response to the climate of violence. Discerning origination of the attacks, the perpetrators, or the reasoning has been impossible, thus outsiders are broadly viewed with suspicion and as potential attackers. This breeds mistrust, self-imposed restriction of movement among communities, and, absent protection for and by traditional chiefs, suspicion of the state.

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2   Rida Lyammouri, *Central Mali: Armed Community Mobilization in Crisis.* Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021, 5–6. https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.4.

3   Idrissa and McGann, *Mistrust and Imbalance,* 16.

Nevertheless, the study notes comparatively more hope for the future in Abala than in Ayorou, potentially because the exchange economy, as embodied in the market at Abala, was restarting, symbolizing the pragmatic mechanism that undergirds communal relationships and interdependence. Interdependence was strong between all communities, except the Tuareg and Fulani, and fractured along the caste status divide within the pastoral communities. These cleavages showcase failing interdependence, which in turn breeds conflict and grievances that drive radicalization. The narratives of the jihadist elements resonate with groups seeking to overcome historical caste interrelations. The Fulani may be the population with the least positive relations with all communities, possibly because of a popular perception that they are the main perpetrators of violence in the region. This perception has led to their greater marginalization, and therefore greater willingness to form alliances with militants that do not perceive them with enmity.[4]

Our research found that similar perceptions affect conflict dynamics in Central Mali. The local jihadist affiliate Katiba Macina exploited already tense conflict dynamics and the grievances of marginalized Fulani communities to increase its power and influence. The ethnic characterization of CBAGs proliferating in response to rising conflict has reinforced local stereotypes and resulted in an endless cycle of retributive violence between these ethnic-based groups. This, together with historical rivalries between farmers and pastoralists, fuels the polarization of identities and ultimately legitimizes the proliferation of CBAGs.[5]

While armed actors in Central Mali have different ideologies and motivations, they all benefit from ongoing conflicts and the absence of the state to legitimize their existence. At the same time, CBAGs share grievances of negligence by the central government and corrupt elites.[6] Identity-based conflict is only one driver of CBAG mobilization—economic hardship, ecological deprivation and resource competition, youth vulnerability, and the absence of reliable government protection compound insecurity. In the absence of the central government in local decision-making, most trust traditional authorities instead of government authorities. Allegations of abuse by security forces have disillusioned communities. The state's perceived failure has pushed many to join self-defense groups.[7]

Between these case studies in disparate regions of the two countries, there are clearly overlapping factors of armed community mobilization. Economic challenges, competition over sparse ecological resources, intergenerational dynamics between disillusioned youth and elder elites, on top of widespread disappointment in state security and justice provision, interact with ethnic- and religious-based identity shifts among competing and conflicting communities. However, each locale and community deserve close analysis to discern effective and locally sourced approaches to mitigate violence and meaningfully transform conflict.

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4   Idrissa and McGann, *Mistrust and Imbalance,* 18–22.

5   Lyammouri, *Central Mali.*

6   Ibid, 24.

7   Ibid, 23–29.

Conclusion

Both reports offer conflict-sensitive recommendations for local and international policymakers, development and security practitioners, and conflict analysts in similar veins.

First, it is important to bolster the protection of human rights and investigate alleged crimes with transparency to amend a security model undone by conflict and distrust. Any government strategy to improve community trust must respond to allegations of abuse by all parties to the conflict. To rebuild trust, government security forces must comply with accountability mechanisms and renounce discriminatory practices.[8]

Second, fixing a conflict-ridden economy goes hand in hand with fixing security models. A community faced with challenging economic prospects could result in greater risks of individuals joining armed groups. As Lyammouri argued, "Following a careful review process, governments and state security actors should conduct thorough assessments of interdictions, bans, and curfews before implementation that may cause economic harm by preventing individuals from accessing markets."[9]

Third, addressing the sociopolitical issues that motivate conflict actors is necessary to develop an approach to the conflicts that can effectively stem their spread. With a better understanding of an area's sociopolitical issues, working towards regaining the conditions of balance and taking into account the legitimacy of grievances of community groups are crucial steps.[10] For example, security approaches must acknowledge that tensions amongst ethnically heterogenous communities will not cease to exist if only the violent extremist threat is removed. Governments must empower all segments of society, including women, in reconciliation and counter-jihadist activities. Lastly, to fully map the potential roles women play in peacebuilding processes, further research is required to understand women's agency in conflict and incorporate their needs and aspirations into peace and security agendas.

The proliferation of armed groups and escalating intercommunal violence continues to rise. The research and work that the RESOLVE Network and USAID produce in partnership continue to assess solutions and methods of implementation. Missed opportunities amidst the ever-worsening security situation in southwest Niger and Central Mali necessitate fresh approaches to stabilization and peacebuilding. Further research to expand the evidence base of how local dynamics evolve and enable the formation and continuity of CBAGs and non-state armed groups—including violent extremist organizations—can help improve these approaches.

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8   Lyammouri, *Central Mali,* 31–33.

9   Ibid., 34.

10   Idrissa and McGann, *Mistrust and Imbalance,* 27.

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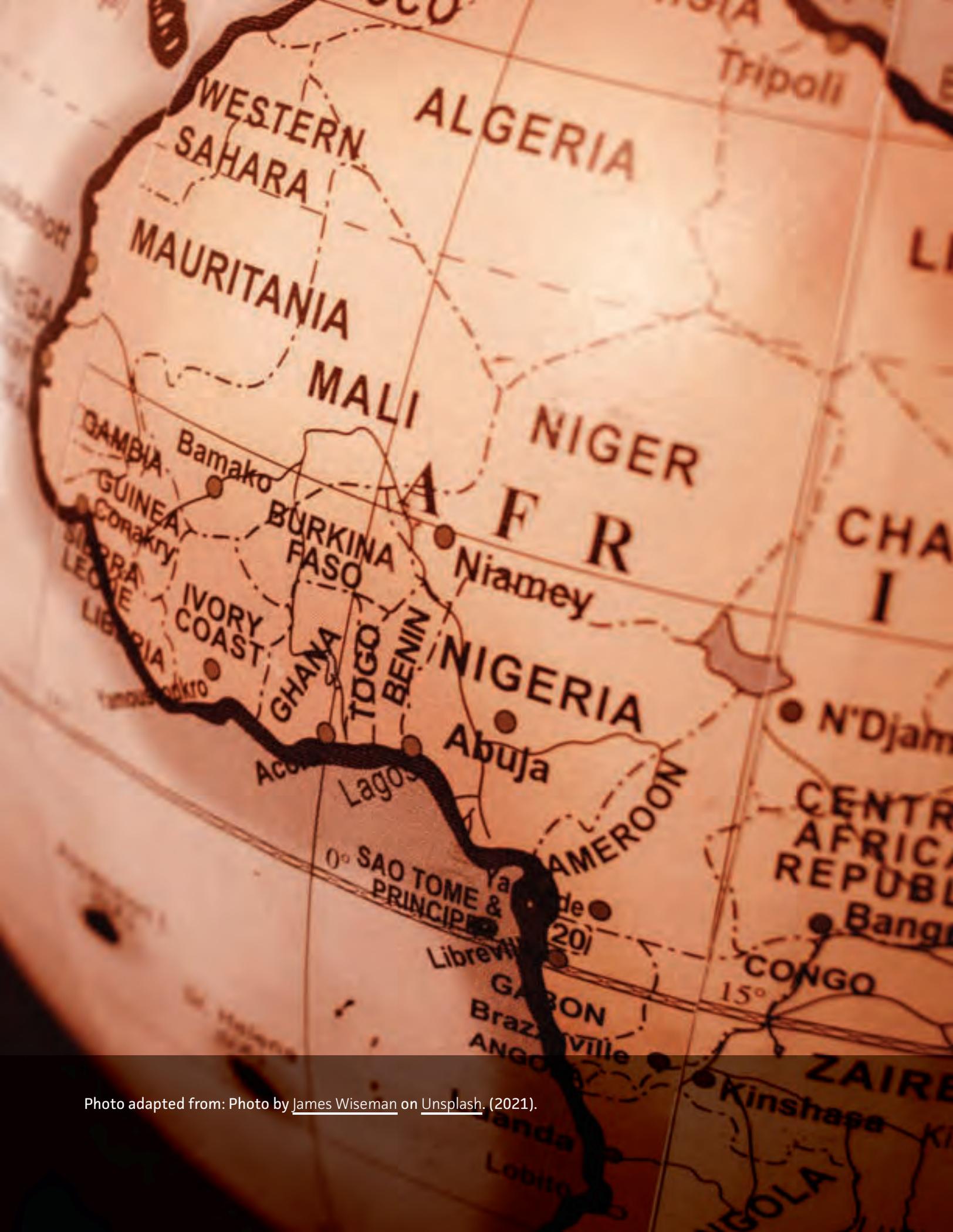
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N E T W O R K

MISTRUST AND IMBALANCE

The Collapse of Intercommunal Relations and the Rise of Armed Community Mobilization on the Niger-Mali Border

Dr. Rahmane Idrissa and Bethany McGann

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across much of the Sahel-Sahara,[1] where the footprint of regular administration and state presence is light, communities' relations and interrelations are key to resolving contentious issues and preserving peace. However, these relations are shaped and informed by histories and traditions which may breed conflict and grievance, especially when competition for space and resources is heightened by ecological stress, population pressure, and widespread insecurity, as in recent decades. Community relations form precarious balances through mechanisms such as traditional institutions or the exchange economy despite persistent pressure points and occasional crises. These balancing mechanisms operate at the nexus of formal and informal governance actors, implemented through complex political bargains and social norms managing low-level conflict both with and without state actor intervention. The contemporary shocks to the system presented by violent extremism and militant security threats have ruptured these relationships and resulted in a spiral of violence.[2]

Similar dynamics are evident in areas of southwestern Niger, along its northern border with Mali, and its western border with Burkina Faso. The border area of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso is a site of endemic violence. The area is punctuated by anti-state attacks, by both the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda's Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), the targeted killing of traditional chiefs, and attacks on markets and other socioeconomic convening locales that otherwise serve as central mechanisms for the preservation of normalized intercommunal interactions. In addition, foreign military interventions (especially France's Operation Barkhane) and asymmetric insurgent warfare pits multiple state and non-state actors equipped with heavy weaponry against one another, adding another level of insecurity and threat to local communities. 2019 and 2020 saw the worst spikes in violence against civilians since the internationalization of the conflict in 2013 (marking the start of the French operation). A significant number of deaths are attributed to state security forces, including state-backed militias.[3]

In this context, converging and diverging agendas of parties to the violence have further confused efforts to engender and restore peaceful relations. Among these parties, community-based armed groups (CBAGs)[4] of Fulani and Tuareg ethnicity have aligned themselves with outside actors carrying out operations in the region—including French and U.S. military forces carrying out operations under a counterterrorism framework and jihadist actors—out of choice, coercion, or in some cases both.[5] Generally, Fulani armed groups have allied with Salafist militants for tactical, but also ideological, reasons. Meanwhile,

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1   A West African region extending from Mauritania to Chad through northern Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and northern Niger.

2   Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane, "Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 118–132, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833567.

3   Human Rights Watch, "Sahel: End Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations," February 13, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/13/sahel-end-abuses-counterterrorism-operations.

4   Lauren Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3.

5   The issue of coercion is related to the relationship the communities have with groups operating around them, in some cases more of a hostage situation than mutually beneficial association.

Tuareg armed groups have generally allied with the French army for tactical advantage. These are alignments by choice. But some recruits are coerced, taken hostage by jihadist actors to ensure the loyalty of their home community. Such hostages are subjected to indoctrination and may embrace the cause of their abductors.[6] However, it is difficult to discern who among the community is participating in the violence, to what end, and why, which impedes efforts to address the cycle of escalation in the region.

Building on other research reports in RESOLVE's Community-Based Armed Groups Series[7], this report explores local perceptions regarding the nature and impact of the violence surrounding two communities in southwestern Niger: the *départements*[8] of Ayorou and Abala, two of the three main flash points of conflict in the area (the third being Banibangou). The analysis draws findings from desk research as well as data collected from interviews and questionnaires conducted in late 2019. The report provides a summary of understanding of ongoing conflict dynamics from the most impacted communities and an insight on the knowledge and attitudes around actors participating in the violence. It hopes to inform efforts to bring an end to the violence and increase understanding of participating actors.

The study is organized against a backdrop of missed opportunities and the ever-worsening security situation in western Niger and the broader Liptako-Gourma region[9]. The research carried out for this report did not directly focus on CBAGs due to safety considerations and confusion among local communities as to who exactly was involved in the violence. However, this study contributes to the broader evidence base of how **local dynamics shape and extend opportunity for CBAG formation and continuity and the tactics used by violent extremist organizations and other external actors to capitalize on these opportunities.** Following a discussion of the context, known actors, and research findings and data analysis, the report provides recommendations for those seeking to understand the conditions for the use of non-military options in restoring peace to the region, across three areas relevant to the ongoing violence: sociopolitical and economic dynamics, sociocultural dynamics, and resultant armed group mobilization dynamics.

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6   Author interview with High Authority for Peace Consolidation (HACP) official, Niamey, December 11, 2019.

7   Launched in partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development Africa Bureau, the RESOLVE Network Community-Based Armed Groups research initiative in Sub-Saharan Africa aims to provide key stakeholders with contextual information on the dynamics of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) and current, prospective, and past approaches to engage, manage, and transform them. The project grapples with a complicated series of questions and decisions negotiated by stakeholders operating in conflict-affected societies across Sub-Saharan Africa. For more, see: https://www.resolvenet.org/projects/community-based-armed-groups-sub-saharan-africa.

8   The regions of Niger are divided into ٦٣ departments, forming a level of subnational administrative governance.

9   The continuous areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

KEY FINDINGS

- The state of war in the region, waged through subterfuge, mass killings, and violence perceived by civilians as unregulated—both by the state and its enemies—has created an ambiance of mistrust and "psychosis" in the border regions. There is a broad sense of confusion within local populations regarding who the perpetrators of violence are and why they are perpetrating violence.

- This ambiance of general mistrust and "psychosis" negatively impacts the historic balancing mechanisms between and within local communities, their everyday lives, and freedom of movement. Lack of mobility is particularly challenging for pastoralist communities and further fosters contestation over sparse resources. The balancing mechanisms stem from the work of local chiefs and clerics (through intermediation), often backed up by the work of local authorities (enforcement, historically by prefects and sub-prefects who had control over gendarmerie forces, more recently by elected officials) and sustained by market relations (creating interdependence). Therefore, the mechanisms are intermediation, interdependence, and enforcement. The value of each one of those mechanisms varies in accordance with the district and the time. [10]

- Dissatisfaction with governance—especially from the central state—is prevalent. But the difference in outcomes between the two research sites suggests that government policy can make a difference in perceptions of the government's ability to be an effective actor in reducing intercommunal conflicts. However, government function in these rural settings is complex, where several formal and informal authorities are entangled.

- Collapse of the balancing mechanisms has removed the checks on limited violence and reprisals carried out by ethnic, caste, and identity-based militias. Without these checks, and few interlocutors who are able to safely intercede in intercommunal violence due to the presence of jihadists, score settling related to decades of resource competition and political reformation drive additional violence beneath the surface of the conflict taking place in the region.

- Relations between and within communities rest on economic interdependence, but this can be as much a source of moderation as of contestation and radicalization. When communal interdependence is premised on inequality and marginalization of one of the groups in the relationships, the potential gains of alliances with external actors to shift the balance of power in these relations might drive individual recruitment into violent extremist groups or realpolitik deal-making with violent extremist actors. In the case of "Black" Tuareg (given social and political inequality between castes) and some Fulani pastoralist groups this has resulted in their perception as a threat and perceived or actual marginalization. This threat perception is enhanced by the securitization measures implemented by state and allied forces casting suspicion on pastoralist/nomadic communities on assumptions of disloyalty due to transhumance-based livelihoods. Radicalization

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10   See: Rahmane Idrissa, "Traditional authorities in Niger: Politicization and under-representation," in *The Status Quo Defied. The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger, and Libya,* eds. Fransje Molenaar et al. (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2019), https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya/.

as well as opportunism resulted from sociopolitical inequality and marginalization *but* in the context of the actions of state and Jihadist forces.

- Armed groups operating in Niger have largely exhausted the recruitment drivers stemming from community-level crises. Current dynamics suggest more of a large-scale hostage-taking than active participation. Unlike Mali, CBAGs did not reach the same level of organization and establishment in Niger. Fulani self-defense militias were active before 2011, and most of the Tuareg groups, active during the rebellions, were operating on the Mali side of the border. Nevertheless, it is possible that the armed groups active in Niger post-2012 do not fit the CBAG typology and that there are likely limitations that frontier CBAGs will reach during the course of the ongoing conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In the areas surrounding the shared borders of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, limited and low-level violence has long been a pattern in social and economic relations between and within communities. This was largely non-state violence caused by competition over resources, even if people were also victims of abuses from state security agents, especially on the Mali side of the border.[11] This violence, and the perceptions of injustice and insecurity it was bound up with, spawned negative feelings against the state, as the place where the buck stopped, even in regions where the state has a "weak" or under-resourced presence.[12] That these grievances did not, for many years, lead to extremist violence means that balancing mechanisms were successful in maintaining the status quo of infrequent, limited violence with equally limited violent intercommunal reprisals.

Inherent to this context is competition over ecological resources between herders and farmers on the one hand, and among herders on the other. In recent years, population growth and climate change shaped this competition. Strategies of access to resources are evolving in ways that may intensify competition. Competition, while occasionally flares into open conflict, has been manageable through the balancing mechanism based on intermediation, interdependence, and enforcement of a rural law-and-order system that gives customary chiefs, territorial administrators (prefects), and the gendarmerie, a form of rural police, the function that allows communities to resolve low-level conflicts through mutually agreed customary formats, sometimes including acts of violence and reprisals.

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11   This area of Mali is far from the center of the state with which it is less integrated than the regions in the south-west.

12   The author put "weak" in quotation marks because it has become a trope in expert and media discourse, largely inspired by scholarly concepts such as "weak state" or "limited statehood." The concept of the state is empirically too complex to be reduced to this trope as this case study suggests. In this Nigerien story, for instance, the state includes not only the central government (which is implied in the trope) but also the territorial administration, including the prefects, the traditional chiefs who are a formal component (under the ministry of the interior) of the central government, and local elected authorities (mayors and councilors). In all these guises, the state is very much present in these locales, although not necessarily efficient in government work for a variety of political and economic reasons.

This balance was ruptured following events that started in 2011, when a coalition led by Western militaries destroyed the regime of Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya.[13] This triggered a chain of events, beginning with the return to Mali of armed men from a Tuareg subgroup of the Kidal region (northern Mali) who (re)started a rebellion there. Northern Mali was then an area where Algerian Salafist militants had found refuge after the end of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, building a sanctuary from which, as early as the 2000s, they were able to organize the abduction of Western tourists or aid workers. Initially known under their Algerian civil-war-era names Islamic Armed Group (GIA, from the French acronym) or Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, from the French acronym), these groups shifted and coalesced into a variety of new vehicles, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and, of late, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[14] The adoption of violent extremist Islamic ideologies and radicalizing narratives was intensified by initial franchising efforts by, and later the collapse of, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the subsequent dispersal of fighters, arms, and logisticians to the Sahel and North Africa.[15]

The Tuareg Kidal rebels initially allied with these Algerian militants and routed Mali's armed forces in 2012, aided by combatants originating from other north African countries and Mauritania. However, soon the Kidal rebels fell out with the Salafists.[16] Moreover, Fulani pastoralists have traditionally engaged in transhumance at the border between Niger and Mali and often been in conflict with Tuareg groups from the Kidal and Gao region.[17] These Fulani dreaded the prospect of a Tuareg state in northern Mali and the potential impact on livelihoods and political arrangements on either side of the border.[18] They were drawn into the conflict on the side of the Salafist militants in early 2013. Later that year, the French interventions (Operation Serval, followed by Operation Barkhane) further entrenched the Fulani in their support for the armed Salafists by enlisting the Tuareg groups as on-the-ground allies for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and theatre access purposes and encouraging the Nigerien government to support this strategy.[19]

The change in resource endowment—in this case political and security opportunities garnered through engagements with international armed forces and militant groups—overrode the limited (or limiting) benefits of engaging in traditional balancing mechanisms. [20] Opportunity to pursue parochial agendas and score settling precipitated escalation of cycles of violence, further spurred by the parallel geopolitical

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13 Scott Stewart, "Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya," *Stratfor Worldview*, February 2, 2012, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/mali-besieged-fighters-fleeing-libya.

14 United Nations Security Council, "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/islamic-state-greater-sahara-isgs.

15 Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves, and Garrett Nada, "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Center*, The Islamists, 2016, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state.

16 See: Radio France Internationale, "AQMI, MUJAO, MNLA: un rapport de force complexe," July 5, 2012, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20120705-aqmi-mujao-mnla-rapport-force-complexe.

17 Gao region is predominantly of the ethnic-linguistic group Songhay and is adjacent to Kidal and borders north-western Niger.

18 See: Nicolas Normand, "Le Sahel peut-il retrouver la paix?," *Commentaire* 4, no. 164 (2018): 839-846.

19 See: Remi Cayarol, "À la frontière entre le Niger et le Mali, l'alliance coupable de l'armée française," *Mediapart*, November 25, 2018, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/291118/la-frontiere-entre-le-niger-et-le-mali-l-alliance-coupable-de-l-armee-francaise.

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

agendas promoted by external actors. On the one hand, Western actors engaged in counterterrorism and stabilization missions in the region.[21] On the other hand, jihadist elements engaged in a mission to defeat a neocolonialist enemy and free Africa of western influence (a narrative tailored to fit local contexts). Some were perhaps also driven by financial motivations related to access to the prolific trans-Saharan smuggling and trafficking shadow economies.[22] The impact of this series of events upset the fragile balance upon which inter- and intra-community peace and function rested in this part of the Sahel-Sahara. This research paper is an effort to understand that balance, what is left of it today, and where it is leaving communities in the border regions and the state of Niger, now facing the wrath of violent extremism.

The dynamics explored in this paper must be considered within the context of the history of the origins of the frustration and violence of elite Tuareg and of the fallout from the changes brought about by democratization and administrative decentralization in 1992[23], which will be discussed at length in subsequent sections of this report. The wider circumstantial factors related to the allied interventions of the French and Nigerien security forces operating in and around Liptako-Gorma were not part of this research.[24] It is implicitly recognized though that they have complicated, if not worsened, the regional situation through strategic bargain-making and operational alliances with regional ethnic groups and by developing rules of operation that resulted in the securitization of communities and frequent human rights abuses in eliciting intelligence.

The report is divided into four main sections: 1) an overview of the research methodology and limitations; (2) a review of the context, including the history of conflict and cooperation in the border regions and the armed groups known to have presence there; (3) a presentation and analysis of the research results as they relate to the situation in late 2019-early 2020;[25] and (4) a review of the study that positions the analysis within the larger historical and structural context. The report concludes with recommendations derived from findings on the communities about dynamics related to armed community mobilization for restoring moderation in inter- and intracommunal relations held hostage by violent extremists.

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21   Oxford Research Group, "The Military Intervention in Mali and Beyond: An Interview with Bruno Charbonneau," March 28, 2019, https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/blog/the-french-intervention-in-mali-an-interview-with-bruno-charbonneau.

22   IRIN News, "Briefing: The new Jihadist strategy in the Sahel," *Africa Renewal*, February 4, 2016, https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sahel/news/briefing-new-jihadist-strategy-sahel; International Crisis Group, "Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery," June 3, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/289-sidelining-islamic-state-nigers-tillabery.

23   Mahaman S. Tidjani Alou, "Decentralization in Niger: An Attempted Approach," *Columbia University*, 1999, https://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/decentralization/English/CaseStudies/Niger.pdf.

24   These interventions were responses to the activities of Salafist extremists ("terrorists" in the official Franco-Nigerien language) which also were not part of research for safety and security reasons.

25   The entirety of this research was conducted and completed before the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic and thus does not speak to any changes to the context influenced by the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

The methods applied for this research sought to respond to questions about the climate of violence from the viewpoint of communities and perceptions of community members regarding each other and the central government versus local governance administration. The research was carried out in the *départements* of Ayorou and Abala, two of the three districts most exposed to the current violence in Tillabéri Region (the third locality, Banibangou, was assessed as too dangerous for research). The peril for all three comes from proximity to northern Mali. Ayorou and Abala give an understanding of how platforms for social interaction contribute to normative balance in intercommunal interactions and feature the ethnic groups participating in armed conflict throughout the region. Ayorou is a small town with an important state administration presence and a big market, making it easier for researchers to meet respondents without having to travel in remote, isolated, and potentially dangerous places. Abala is a cluster of villages harboring both sedentary communities and semi-nomadic Tuareg, Fulani, and Arabs. It has shaped the development of conflict dynamics on the Niger side.

To understand the escalatory environment characterized by a proliferation of armed groups—both state-backed and community-based—it is critical to examine the underlying contextual factors and histories of communal relations. Information, especially data on key events and timelines of armed group formation, is still difficult or impossible to collect under present conditions. Therefore the research developed a partial empirical approach that relied on surveying attitudes and perceptions through interviews and questionnaires throughout the latter half of 2019 in Ayorou and Abala.[26] These primary datasets were then contextualized through desk research and interviews with resource persons, i.e. former militants, Niamey-based civil-society representatives of the local communities, and researchers.

In the primary data collection the questions focused on how resident communities understand the rise of violence, how they explain its persistence, and how they see the future. Given the nature of these questions, we developed an open-ended interview questionnaire to collect qualitative data. These questionnaires were disseminated to local elected officials, agents of the territorial administration, NGO activists, chiefs, and people close to traditional authorities in both localities. The research focused on the local communities not so much on the state and its actions (or inactions).

We conducted a small survey on inter-community relations and community perceptions of the state, applied to a total of 200 individuals in Ayorou and Abala, two of the three main flash points of the conflict area. Enumerators were hired in each of these two towns.[27] We did not probe opinions on security

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26 This study was enumerated during the second half of 2019, and thus the data from interviewees reflects conditions during that period of the evolving Sahelian conflict.

27 This was not easy because other projects were also conducting fieldwork—with larger resources—and the small number of individuals who could work as enumerators were all employed by them. This created a constraint which we solved by conducting all survey efforts on one day, the market day in each locality. A market day is a day in the week when a town or village is known to open its market to buyers and sellers from the surrounding district and thus an opportunity to engage a diverse selection of respondents. The advantage to this survey approach is applying the questionnaire to people from all parts of the districts. Although the exercise proved difficult since

forces due to the difficulty of framing questionnaires about that in the tense atmosphere that prevails in the region. We also avoided asking questions about insurgents, given the "psychosis" later described in the paper. Due to safety constraints (both for us and for our respondents), we did not collect data directly on the security forces and the insurgent groups. However, we did indirectly ask questions about the performance of the branch of the security state—the gendarmerie—that is operationally closest to local populations.

A third method was the organization of a post-fieldwork focus group of resource persons, i.e. people active in Niamey-based associations that represent and lobby for communities in the border regions, including Tuareg and Fulani, and the organization Timidria.[28] The objective of this focus group was to help develop the recommendations presented at the end of the paper.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In contextualizing the emergence and expansion of endemic intra- and intercommunal conflict in western Niger, it is critical to understand the historical underpinnings of the balancing mechanisms that served as a moderating force before violent extremist and jihadist-driven insecurity swept across the Sahel. Armed community mobilization and proliferation of armed groups occur against the backdrop of the role of traditional chiefs, hybridized governance and political arrangements, and resource-driven competition between ethnic groups manifest through political reforms and evolutions in localized governance. A precarious balance historically served to resolve conflict in the short term but laid the foundation for vulnerabilities that opportunistic non- and sub-state actors take advantage of. What follows is a review of the relationships between people, places (territorial and social), and power constructed to maintain balance, and agents of conflict.

A precarious balance: People, place, power

Niger is a landlocked country of West Africa, independent from France since 1960. It has one of the smallest economies of the region, largely dependent on commodities (uranium, groundnuts, onion, cattle) for revenue. Run by authoritarian governments in its first three decades of existence, Niger democratized in 1991. However, the authoritarian impulse remains strong in its political class, and democracy has had a troubled history in Niger. This has created political issues that have frustrated the aspirations of Nigerien citizens for efficient government work, including along the Niger-Mali border.[29]

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marketgoers have little time or patience for responding to strangers asking a list of questions. The questionnaire was relatively short and limited to "yes" or "no" questions as much as possible.

28   Timidria, *L'Association de Défense des Droits de L'Homme et de Développement* (Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Development) works to improve the socio-economic situation of victims of slavery by reintegrating them into society. Timidria strives to preserve social peace and promote national unity and promote human rights in Niger. For more, see: Peace Insight, "Timidria, L'Association de Défense des Droits de L'Homme et de Développement," https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/niger/peacebuilding-organisations/timidria/.

29   For a history of Niger's democracy troubles up to the early 2000s, see: Leonardo Villalón and Rahmane Idrissa, "A Decade of Experimentation. Institutional Choices and Unstable Democracy in Niger," in *The Fate of Africa Democratic Experiments. Elites and Institutions*, eds.

Figure 1 Administrative Map of Niger[30]
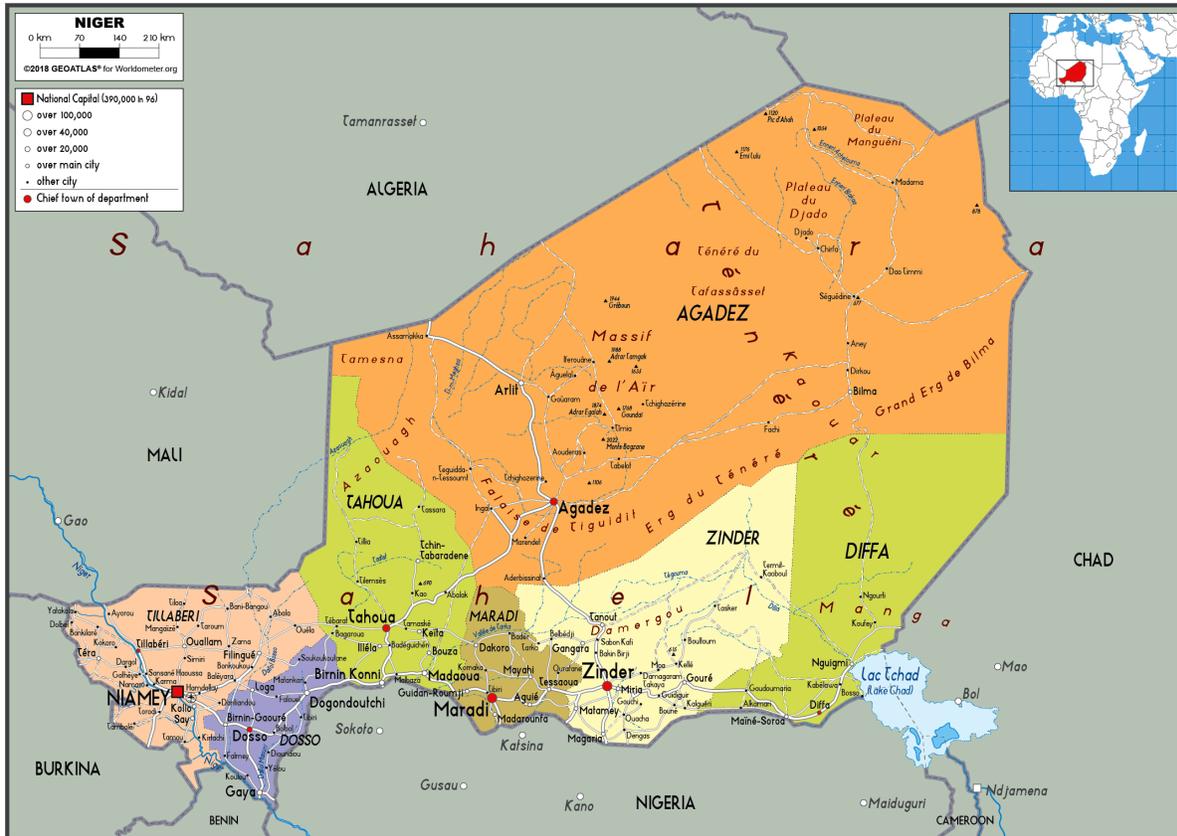
The Niger-Mali border has a complex social setting with a turbulent history. Ecologically, the region is part of the agropastoral zone of transition from the Sahel to the Sahara. The farming populations are Songhay in Ayorou, Zarma in Bani-Bangou, and Hausa in Abala. These three localities were chosen for the study because they are the administrative centers of the three districts that are most exposed to the conflicts that have their epicenter in nearby northern and central Mali. However, Bani-Bangou, which sits practically on the border with northern Mali, is so exposed to violence that fieldwork was not feasible.

Ayorou is an old settlement. It served as a retreat to the fleeing Songhay emperor Sonni Baru after his general Askia Muhammad removed him from power in 1493 and took over the Songhay state. Bani-Bangou and Abala are more recent settlements, both born of the 1930s colonial regime's project to expand landed agriculture.[31] Bani-Bangou means "the good pond" in Zarma, while Abala comes from a Tuareg way of saying "bubbling out" (of water), signifying the aquifers that farmers found favorable to agriculture in a dry environment. The two settlements became anchor points for the territorial government, which provided the safety and amenities needed for a market. The settlements attracted satellite com-

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Leonardo Villalón and Peter VonDoepp (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 27-48.

30 Public domain map from United Nations Cartographic Section. Ayorou is North of Niamey towards the border with Mali, while Abala is East and South of Bangi Bangou

31 M. O. Ijere, "Colonial Policy in Nigerian Agriculture and Its Implementation," *Agricultural History* 48, no. 2 (1974): 298-304, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3741237.

munities that were often, though not exclusively, settled by the pastoral transhumant communities,[32] the Tuareg and the Fulani.[33]

In 1964, four years after the country became independent from France, both Abala and Bani-Bangou rose to the status of administrative post (*poste administratif*), the lowest rung of the country's territorial administration. By 2011, they had both become *départements*, the second highest rung. In their state-supported drive to colonize land, the farming communities also installed community leaderships that would administer land use and ownership through customary rules. These leaders—village chiefs, at the least[34]—were integrated into state administration under the Ministry of the Interior and thus became the first mechanism for ensuring balance between the various communities in the districts. This integration was initially only semi-formal, until reforms in the early 2010s made traditional chiefs into formal agents of the territorial administration.[35]

Administration by way of traditional chiefs has been used to cope with the tensions that rapidly became apparent across the border region. Before colonialism, which started in Niger in 1899, the area was under the hegemony of Tuareg groups who had moved in during the late 18th and early 19th centuries and subjected farming communities to levies under the threat of violence. But in the colonial era and after, the central state became the agent of land colonization. A state hungry for taxes backed Zarma and Hausa land colonization for farming during colonialism and the First Republic (1960-74), while it was fixated on agricultural yields under the "food self-sufficiency" policy of the military regime (1974-91).[36]

To ease the tensions and conflicts that brewed in this process, the state intended to integrate traditional rulers from the pastoral groups in addition to farming community leadership structures. In this balancing act, the territories became an intricate web of canton and village chieftaincies (leaderships of the farming groups) enmeshed with *groupement* and *tribu* chieftaincies (leaderships of the pastoral groups), each with varying claims over different stretches of land and bases of legitimacy. These leaderships work in close collaboration with the local representatives of the territorial administration, the *préfets*, to defuse or manage conflicts.

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32 In Niger, where large-scale transhumance is practiced, sedentary livestock farmers develop localized strategies to move their herds between pastoral enclaves, whereas transhumant herders are driving their herds longer distances over the years. See: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "Information system on pastoralism in the Sahel: Atlas of trends in pastoral systems in the Sahel 1970-2012," 2012, http://www.fao.org/3/i2601e/i2601e.pdf.

33 E. K. Hahonou, *Les Pouvoirs locaux à Balleyara* (Niamey: LASDEL, 2002); Hamani Oumarou, *La Construction du 'local' et la gouvernance communale par le bas. L'exemple de la commune rurale de Banibangou (Niger)* (Niamey: LASDEL, 2011).

34 Village chiefs are part of leadership structures that also include Muslim clerics and sometimes the heads of traditional worship.

35 Mahaman Tidjani Alou, *La Chefferie au Niger et ses transformations* (Niamey: LASDEL, 2009); Fransje Molenaar et al., *The Status Quo Defied: The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya (*The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2019), https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya/.

36 Fransje Molenaar et al., "The historical trajectory of traditional authority structures in Mali, Niger and Libya," in *The Status Quo Defied: The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya,* eds. Fransje Molenaar et al. (*The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2019), 26-52, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya/2-the-historical-trajectory-of-traditional-authority-structures-in-mali-niger-and-libya/.

Corridors of Conflict

Deadly violence flares at times and remains an issue for the entire agropastoral area of Niger where space sharing between farming and herding is highly contentious. By the early 2010s, there were officially 943 transit corridors and pathways for pastoral cattle transhumance across the national territory.[37] Farmers do not accept the legitimacy of many of these routes, and state enforcement is weak or absent, especially as it would often depend on collaboration from local chiefs across ethnic groups. As a result, these routes sometimes turn into conflicts between armed men in the community.[38]

Before 1991, violence was limited, albeit not absent, and peaceful modes of conflict resolution prevailed. Retrospectively, the period, though not without its problems, is seen as a golden age by actors as different as traditional chiefs and Fulani militiamen. In the 1990s, the transition to democracy reshaped Nigerien politics. A series of governmental crises (including two coups d'état in 1996 and 1999) and submission to the demands of donors (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other development aid agencies) for austerity and privatization resulted in a general weakening of state authority.[39]

At the structural level, weak enforcement of the transhumance corridors by the territorial administration was also due to farming's expanding frontier as a result of population growth (particularly among farming or settled communities), extensive agriculture, and the failure of the policies aimed at transforming farming practices to manage resources equitably. Moreover, successive Nigerien governments have tended to treat pastoralism as a lesser sector in their rural development efforts, despite the central importance of livestock both in the domestic economy and for exports.[40]

For half of the 1990s, Tuareg groups rebelled on both sides of the Mali-Niger border, attacking the penurious state(s). In this parlous context, a violent rivalry grew between Fulani and Tuareg (Daoussahak) herders across the border in the later years of the decade. Both Nigerien and Malian governments neglected this conflict, seeing the Tuareg rebellions a more urgent and important matter, even as residents of the border region experienced the local violence as an epiphenomenon of those rebellions.

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37   Zakary Rhissa, *Revue du secteur de l'élevage au Niger*, FAO/SFW, 2010, https://reca-niger.org/IMG/pdf/Niger_Revue_national.pdf.

38   Community-based armed groups are entities embedded in communal structures that can be based on territorial or ethnic affiliations that contribute to order and disorder through exercise of structural, normative, or outright physical violence. In this case, the presence of arms in a community and use of those arms in limited reprisals is not enough to suggest a level of organization and chain of command to consider these conflicts between CBAGs. See: Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism.*

39   Abdoul W. Barry, B. Lynn Salinger, and Selina Pandolfi, "Sahelian West Africa: Impact of Structural Adjustment Programs on Agricultural Competitiveness and Regional Trade," African Economic Policy Discussion Paper Number 37, December 2000, http://hubrural.org/IMG/pdf/usaid_impact_structural_adjustments_on_ag_competitiviness.pdf.

40   Livestock is recurrently Niger's second or third export commodity after uranium and the key cash crop of the day (groundnuts in the 1960s, onion today). See: Claude Raynaut and Souleymane Abba, "Trente ans d'indépendances: repères et tendances," *Politique Africaine*, 38 (June 1990): 3, https://f-origin.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1629/files/2020/05/038003.pdf; Clara Jamart, "Niger's Rural Code and the Pastoralist Issue," AGTER, March 2011, https://www.agter.org/bdf/en/corpus_chemin/fiche-chemin-91.html.

After the rebellions ended (1996-98), the herders' intercommunal conflict was taken more seriously by state actors. Pastoralist groups had mobilized men into armed ethnic militia and created a dangerous demand for firearms.[41] In 1999, and again in the late 2000s, state authorities, especially in Niger, organized peace-brokering and de-escalation forums between the competing ethnic groups. Although these forums resulted in general agreements, they suffered in enforcement each time.

In the 2000s, across Niger local elected authorities emerged as a result of a decentralization process of state governance administration. In Niger's democratic scheme, these new authorities were thenceforth the only local political leaders (in theory), given that traditional authorities occupy a segment of the territorial administration, which is a service, not a political organization. But this apolitical concept of traditional authorities has always been fiction. To affirm their power and keep their privileges, traditional chiefs garner political legitimacy derived from the sociocultural authority of customs, traditions, and blood inheritance. This claim of representing and ruling local communities via tradition conflicts with the elected local officials' claim of doing the same via democracy.

Traditional chiefs ultimately owe their position to state sanction, since the state can sack them at will, but they also form a powerful interest group that has managed to keep control over the crucial issues of land ownership and exploitation.[42] To preserve this position, traditional chiefs must compete for influence with elected officials. At another level, they are vulnerable to manipulation from the central government and powerful politicians in the capital. Dependence on the state, the need to preserve their class interests, competition with elected officials, and manipulation from the center all combine to create political problems that call into question the value of chiefs as an institutional mechanism for keeping the balance of peace in rural Niger.[43]

In August 2013, when violence engulfed the neighboring regions of Mali to the north, a forum was convened at Bani-Bangou by a non-governmental organization, the Nigerien Network for the Non-Violent Management of Conflicts.[44] The organization took stock of the various unresolved issues contributing to violence escalation. The conventional drivers of tolerable sources of violence (within context of limited historical reprisals) and the main grievances of farmers and herders were duly pinpointed. So were newer and more ominous issues, e.g. the increasing prevalence of firearms and drug consumption. Moreover,

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41   Until the collapse of Libya and resumption of the Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali, availability of weapons was largely limited to small and light weapons. Prevalence of heavy military armaments have subsequently contributed to the escalation of violence and operational capacity of armed groups.

42   Christian Lund, "Precarious democratization and local dynamics in Niger: micro–politics in Zinder," *Development and Change* 32, no. 5 (2001): 845–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00229.

43   Abdoulaye Mohamadou, "Foncier, pouvoirs locaux et décentralisation dans le département de Dakoro (Niger)," *Bulletin de l'APAD*, 31–32 (2010): 105-136, https://doi.org/10.4000/apad.4052; Idrissa, "Traditional authorities in Niger: Politicization and under-representation."

44   Réseau nigérien pour la gestion non violente des conflits (RE-GENOVICO), Niger. See: https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/supporting-stability-and-countering-extremism-sahel-region-africa.

camps of Malian refugees were seen by many as harboring potential bad actors.[45] In other agropastoral regions of Niger, where the clashing grievances of farmers and herders were no less serious, these three new elements were almost (arms and drugs) or totally (Malian refugee camps) absent elsewhere. But by the time of the forum, the violence it wished to prevent was already becoming endemic, and the precarious balance faltered.

Agents of conflict: Armed actors and (once limited) violence

Assessing the extent of armed group activity and violence is a challenge due to the volatility of the region. Actors are multiple, their agendas differ, and their actions contribute to a degree of confusion that complicates any strategy of peace restoration. Major actors include

- community-based armed-groups (CBAGs) of Fulani and Tuareg ethnicity;

- Salafist armed groups led in many cases by outsiders (especially from North Africa) but attracting people from all resident communities in the Sahel-Sahara;

- criminals, outlaws, and marauders, including drug traffickers, arm smugglers, and cattle thieves, some of which may enjoy complicities both in the governments of Mali and Niger and with the Salafist armed groups; and,

- Western militaries and intervention missions, chiefly French and United Nations, with support from the US and other western powers.

- Some violence is non-state, though not anti-state (e.g. drug traffickers); some other violence is clearly anti-state, but not necessarily for the same reasons (e.g. Salafists, communalists). Divergent histories behind the violence depend on the national context, which, however, does not preclude some contamination effect.

Since 2013, violence has become endemic in the Niger-Mali border region in two ways. First, armed violent extremists target state security and governance actors and those perceived as its allies, especially local traditional chiefs. Violent extremist groups also engage in deadly punitive violence against those who refuse to follow their rules, including tax payments, and attempts to transform the local political order. Second, violent crime markedly increased in the form of armed cattle robbery and forcible removal of people from isolated camps and hamlets (sometimes resulting in fatalities), as opportunistic score-settling over access to natural resources and the political power that comes with land possession.

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45   Niger24.org, "Forum de Banibangou: Prévenir et gérer les conflits grâce au dialogue intercommunautaire," *Niamey.com*, August 14, 2013, http://news.aniamey.com/h/3757.html.

Although the balance in the region had become precarious by the early 2010s, it may not have collapsed without the Tuareg insurgent groups formed against the Malian government, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA in the French acronym), and jihadist wars of northern Mali.[46] These wars brought into the border region new patterns of violence that led to a sense of confusion, the "psychosis" described in the findings section. Armed community mobilization from marginalized ethnic groupings consigned to the lower rungs of traditional social hierarchy is a new phenomenon, and in part explains the events described by one interviewee as "chiefs hunting" ("*chasse aux chefs*"): the killing of traditional chiefs.[47] Once negotiated and limited reprisal-based violent events evolved into a coercive, unbounded effort to eliminate interdependent socioeconomic collaborators. Community-based armed groups in Niger thus must be considered symptomatic of the unraveling of the hybrid political order,[48] rather than a fixed actor as present in other Sahelian locales.

Armed violence in the name of jihad is also new,[49] although it often follows old patterns and familiar tactics, such as seizing people's cattle under pain of death and calling that a tax—this time *zakkat* (the Islamic tax) rather than *jangal* (a Fulani word for cattle tax).[50] New actors mobilize people with old grievances, using an ideological discourse that mixes Salafist rigorism with more traditional Islamic social criticism. Most who join in are young Fulani and "Black" Tuareg, but people from other communities, including the farming ones, are also attracted, if in much smaller numbers according to local observation or perceptions of interviewees. Moreover, opportunistic, marauding violence grows due to the increased availability of firearms, leading to more cattle theft and lawlessness. This creates conditions of disorder and anomie in which it is difficult to build a consistent policy response.

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46   Stewart, "Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya."

47   Radio France Internationale, "Niger: les jihadistes ciblent les chefs de village," November 24, 2019, http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20191124-niger-jihadistes-chefs-villages.

48   Bethany McGann, "Hybridity and Fragmentation: Implications for Regional Security Policy in the Sahel and Beyond," in *Extremisms in Africa Volume 3,* eds. Stephen Buchanan-Clarke et al. (284-313. Good Governance Africa, 2020), 284–313.

49   Prior conflicts were not predicated on a religious basis and rather used religious norms or practices to litigate resolution and reconciliation measures. See: Yvan Guichaoua, "Mali-Niger: une frontière entre conflits communautaires, rebellion et djihad," *Le Monde*, June 20, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/06/20/mali-niger-une-frontiere-entre-conflits-communautaires-rebellion-et-djihad_4954085_3212.html.

50   Zakkat is a religious obligation ordering Muslims who meet the necessary criteria to donate a certain portion of wealth each year to charitable causes. The reversal of terminology might speak to tightening bonds between Tuareg and militant Islamist groups versus collective relations based on land use and belonging.

Table 1 Armed Groups and Ethnic Affiliations in Niger

PROMINENT ETHNIC GROUPS IN AYOROU AND ABALA	ARMED GROUP TYPE	ARMED GROUP MANDATE/ORIENTATION	PRE-SAHEL CRISIS ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS (1991-2013)	POST-SAHEL CRISIS ALLIANCES AND RELATIONSHIPS (2013-2019)
BLACK TUAREG	SELF-DEFENSE RECRUITS TO THE JIHADIST ARMED GROUPS	SELF-DEFENSE AGAINST RED TUAREG AND JIHADISTS	NO ARMED GROUPS IN THE PERIOD	ABSORBED INTO JIHADIST GROUPS
RED TUAREG	REBEL GROUPS (MALI); COMMUNITY MILITIAS (MALI, CROSSING INTO NIGER)	CONTROL OF NORTHERN MALI (PRESENTED AS "INDEPENDENCE") OR OF THE AZAWAD VALLEY	TACTICAL SUPPORT FROM LIBYA ALSO ACTING AS PEACE BROKER; ALLIANCE WITH JIHADIST GROUPS (2011-2012); TACTICAL ALLIANCE WITH THE FRENCH (2012-2013)	ISOLATED
FULANI	COMMUNITY MILITIAS, THEN SELF-DEFENSE RECRUITS TO THE JIHADIST ARMED GROUPS	SELF-DEFENSE AGAINST RED TUAREG AND JIHADISTS	STRATEGIC ALLIANCE WITH JIHADIST GROUPS (2012-2013)	ABSORBED INTO JIHADIST GROUPS
ARABS	NO KNOWN ARMED GROUP	N/A	N/A	N/A
SONGHAY	NO KNOWN ARMED GROUP	N/A	N/A	N/A

In assessing the nature of the violent armed actors engaged in both anti-state and intercommunal violence, Van Metre's typology of community-based armed groups and the ways in which they exercise violence is a useful tool to both understand the function of armed community mobilization in Niger.[51] It also helps analyze how the breaking of intercommunal balancing mechanisms has contributed to the pervasive sense of "psychosis" (discussed in the findings) and escalation of retributory acts. The presence of traditional chiefs and their role in conflict resolution created constraints on the extent of violence and the levels of violence that would trigger escalation versus resolution. As a result, most, if not all, intercommunal violence was negotiated (before the breakdown in the Sahelian security environment) and within socially tolerable norms around violence. The trajectory of armed mobilization by communities was thus doubly constrained by the negotiated relationship of the chiefs with the state, rendering them in a similarly negotiated position with state security forces.

The role of traditional chiefs as interlocutor is important for jihadist or other militant groups encroaching on Nigerien territory or traversing the hundreds of trade corridors. Where some chiefs were murdered for non-compliance, others enter into negotiated relationships with the armed actors for numerous and rational reasons.[52] They may have sought protection of the community or from other jihadist groups or realized that if violent extremists hold territory and establish order, they would maintain intercommunal

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51   The framework explores links between the external operational environment of armed groups and their internal functions, especially their exercise of violence, linking CBAG organization and operation to environmental factors and CBAG transformations to shifts in these factors. The typology helps analyze a CBAG at a given point in light of its external and internal characteristics to identify potential points of leverage to engage, manage, or transform it. Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism,* 14–24.

52   International Crisis Group, "Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery."

balancing mechanisms through that order—a third party role once held by the state. Absent the chiefs as a primary point of negotiation, the political and physical distance between communities and state security actors and security policy dissolved the negotiated status that prevented or reduced anti-state violence and broad intercommunal conflict. The relationships between communities and jihadist, militant, and criminal forces can be interpreted as a coercive hostage taking, where the mutual benefits are quickly overtaken by leveraging communities via recruitment or propaganda to reinforce jihadist operational capabilities and perceived legitimacy as a governance alternative.

While tensions over natural resources (land, cattle, and demarcation between agricultural and pastoral areas) are factors of frustration that may lead to violence and conflict perpetrated by ethnically aligned groups, economic interdependence is a factor of moderation that historically facilitated non-violent resolution of tensions. However, a non-violent outcome depends to a decisive extent on initiatives and policies at the state level—like the decision to integrate chiefs into the formal state architecture led to a reduction in the pre-2012 violent contestation. The latest peace restoration meeting, arranged by Niger's prime minister Brigi Rafini in 2011, with disarmament attempts failed due to under-enforcement, as it was brokered just before war—first intrastate, then jihadist-driven—broke out in northern Mali.[53]

FINDINGS

If economic interdependence reduces outbreaks of extreme violence in the entire agropastoral zone of Niger, it is complicated in specific regions by sociopolitical issues. The following section discusses the findings from the surveyed populations in Ayorou and Abala, which revealed two main factors characterizing the collapse of moderating forces, and thus the expansion of violence, in Niger's border regions: (1) a pervasive state of violence and mistrust, and (2) intra-ethnic competition over formal and informal governance systems.

Violence and mistrust

The first and most notable finding from the research carried out in Ayorou and Abala in 2019 was the extent of confusion, fear, and pessimism that local communities expressed when asked about the state of violence. The dominant mood about the state of violence based on the interviews can be summarized by three patterns: psychosis, mistrust, and hope.

PSYCHOSIS

The word "psychosis" (French *psychose*) has become a locally developed shorthand for describing the public response to the climate of violence in the region. A popular version of the word signifies generalized fear, a feeling of insecurity, of being threatened in the fog. In Bani-Bangou, where the psychosis is

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53   Idrissa, "Traditional authorities in Niger: Politicization and under-representation," 70–73.

arguably the highest, even bona fide researchers in possession of the necessary research documentation are viewed with suspicion as outsiders and thus potential attackers. This is in part a product of the fact that no one can clearly discern where the attacks come from, who the perpetrators are, or why they carry them out.[54]

In previous episodes of violence, notably in the 1970s and 1980s, it was reasonably clear to violence-affected communities who had attacked whom, why, and when. For example, oral histories exist about local squabbles, often recounted by interviewees going back to the 1970s.[55] According to these accounts, previous episodes of violence were mostly due to violence by farmers defending their fields and gardens from the depredations of herders' cattle; herders defending their access to pasturelands; and groups from different—and sometimes the same—communities fighting over respective claims of land. A pattern of more gratuitous violence came from Tuareg groups raiding cattle belonging to members of all non-Tuareg communities. The awareness of patterns around the violence occurring in the area, which resulted from traditional tribal chiefs moderating confrontations and establishing norms of violence, has since evaporated.[56]

Current iterations of violence were noted as more mystifying by interviewees for this report in northern Tillabéry. One interviewee used the word "mystification" for what he considered an intentional effort to sow confusion, characterized by perpetrators who disguise themselves in Fulani clothing or speak Fulfulde (the language of the Fulani) to portend that they are Fulani when in reality they are not.[57]

Mistrust

Psychosis breeds all-out mistrust. The issue of the lack of trust recurred in all the interviews. To some extent interviewees correlate the rise of mistrust with the arrival of outsiders[58]—not only refugees from Mali ("people we do not know"[59]) but also itinerant Arab traders who are based in Mali and may be seen as sharing in the same culture as the Arabic-speaking North African leaders of jihadism. But the mistrust is generalized and shows no clear pattern. "There are too many unanswered questions," said a villager.[60]

A byproduct of the psychosis is the self-imposed restriction of movement among community members. In Ayorou, the local head of a human rights defense organization explained that while communities experience mass flight, attackers seem to enjoy great freedom of action unbound by concerns about mobil-

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54   This information came from strong advice from other researchers not to go to Bani Bangou. A month before our fieldwork, a team from the Niamey-based social science laboratory LASDEL—the institute that hosts EPGA, a think tank in political economy in Niger founded by the author—cut short a fieldwork in Bani Bangou after authorities there warned them that their safety and security could not be guaranteed.

55   Perhaps due to the traumatic times of the Great Sahel Drought in 1968–1985.

56   Focus groups in Niamey after the fieldwork, 2019.

57   Interview with local government official of Ayorou.

58   Interviews with local government officials of Ayorou.

59   Interview with local government official of Ayorou.

60   Interview with a local from Ayorou Goungoukoré, the old village of Ayorou.

ity and security and undeterred by the enhanced presence of security actors that limit mobility.[61] This contrast contributes to a climate of mistrust between communities and also between community and state. If people cannot know where and when attackers will strike, they move about as little possible. As one interviewee vividly indicated: "Before, in the 1980s, herders would march up to Tasara [over 400 km away] to give water to their cattle in the dead of the night. Today, one hesitates to go to Firgoun in broad daylight, even though it is only 8 km distant.[62]"

Many are convinced that "the bandits" (the word used in the region, rather than "terrorists," which is current in the capital[63]) have spies and accomplices in the central government itself. Absent protection for and by traditional chiefs, suspicion of the state is a rational outcome of the disruption in locally derived logics of normative violence and conflict resolution due to terrorist actors and counterterrorism efforts alike.

HOPE

There is a clear contrast between Ayorou and Abala. The pessimistic interview responses that stressed psychosis and mistrust were overwhelmingly from respondents in Ayorou. Respondents in Abala also presented a gloomy picture of the situation but they were comparatively more hopeful for the future. Their hopefulness came mainly from satisfaction that the exchange economy was restarting, giving credit to political initiatives from both the deputy mayor of Abala and the central government (e.g. the High Authority for Peace Consolidation, HACP in the French acronym).[64] The exchange economy, as embodied in the market at Abala, is the pragmatic mechanism undergirding interdependence.[65]

In Abala, we met a representative of the Movement for the Safety of Azawad (MSA)[66], a Malian Tuareg separatist group. He was a cattle trader who had come for business and insisted on the friendship between Tuareg Daoussahak and Fulani (the two main antagonists in the local armed conflict), even as he recognized that just a few months before he would not have felt safe coming to the market. All interviewees insisted that more needed to be done to prevent the crisis from waxing again. The work of HACP in particular was praised. The institution appears to have a working early warning system in the area, which helped to prevent a number of inter-community brawls. This system grew out of the relationships that

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61   Interview with senior official at the Nigerien Association for Human Rights Defense (ANDDH) in Ayorou.

62   Interview with local government official of Ayorou.

63   The state adopted the language of counter terrorism in its military action against the cross-border militant Salafist threat. Denoting these individuals as "terrorists" trades in the common discourse of othering those responsible for violence as "not Nigerien."

64   According to its official mission, placed under the supervision of the Nigerien presidency, HACP is responsible for cultivating peace, dialogue, and respect, and identifying solutions to the socioeconomic causes of insecurity, banditry, rebellion, and new sources of insecurity linked to terrorism and trafficking. It develops, implements, and monitors recovery programs for conflict-affected communities and works to identify actions to correct inequality, disparity, and exclusion in the development process, to promote national cohesion and unity. For more, see: "Mission de la HACP," Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP), accessed March 25, 2021, http://www.hacp-niger.org/.

65   Sites of intercommunal interaction have a positive impact on the reported psychosis, as regularized interactions between communities reduce the specter of other.

66   The group splintered from MNLA in September 2018.

HACP built with local chiefs and clerics, which are more permanent and continuous than the ones supposed to exist between them and local and regional territorial administration (prefects and governors). In addition, HACP can generally establish more informal and unobtrusive contacts with local informants than other state organizations.

Peacebuilding, dialogue, respect, identifying solution to the socioeconomic causes of insecurity, banditry, and rebellion, and new sources of insecurity linked to terrorism and trafficking. Program implementation and data collection, identify actions to correct inequality, disparity, and exclusion in the development process, national cohesion and unity, validating impact on the communities concerned.

However, these initiatives and efforts do not seem to be capable of placating a key demographic: the radicalized youth of the Fulani herding communities. The Salafist message that organizes the anger of Fulani youth is also attractive to youths from other communities. However, young Fulani (and "Black" Tuareg) are believed to be the bulk of the violent extremist recruits, and they have remained impervious to the attractions of peaceful interdependence. This is small wonder, since their discontent stems in large part from the difficulties of integrating the pastoralist-farmer economic system in the region. According to two individuals from the region of Tahoua[67] interviewed in the focus group held after the fieldwork, the initial cause of these difficulties in economic integration are the increasing restrictions to transhumance corridors due to security force operations and the lack of well-regulated demarcations between farmlands and pasturelands.[68] Moreover, the population growth rate is much higher among farmers than among pastoralists, further limiting access to available land and driving grievances among mobile communities.[69]

Interdependence and the state

The social setting in the research area is complex. Across the two sites, there are five ethnic groups, the Songhay-Zarma and the Hausa, who are farming communities, and the Fulani, the Tuareg, and the Arabs, who are mainly pastoralists. All communities possess some cattle and other animals and have a trading caste. Among the Fulani and Tuareg, the divide between "masters" and "slaves" is stark, even though slavery is illegal in Niger. It is also racialized as the local language speaks of "Red" and "Black" Tuareg (also known as Bella, from a Songhay word)[70], with the former being the purported masters, and the latter the purported slaves.

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67   The administrative region of Niger east of Tillabéry.

68   Though this research was conducted in advance of the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, the impact of COVID-related border closures on pastoralists had similar effect to the increased security operations and scrutiny of transhumant communities.

69   Rahmane Idrissa, "Political Economy of Fertility in Rural Niger: Exploring the Communes of Karma and Aguié," Study report, Sahel Resilience Learning (SAREL) and USAID, 2016.

70   The concept of "Black Tuareg" (*Touareg noir*) seems to be preferred in public discourse by those who identify as such, and I will use it in the main in this paper. However, in local parlance in the local communities, the term Bella prevails, and I will use it in this section. These words are confusing also because the word Bella, which is a Songhay word, is often used by Songhay speakers for all Tuareg, "Black" and "Red," despite the fact that the Songhay language actually has a word (Surgu) for "Red" Tuareg.

Table 2 In both research sites, Ayorou and Abala, members of all ethnic groups were surveyed.

Site	Arabs	Hausa	Fulani	Songhay-Zarma	Tuareg	Total
Ayorou	12	03	24	34	30	100
Abala	07	23	27	20	23	100
Total	19	26	50	51	53	200

The numbers that matter are those that distinguish communities with a pastoral and a farming heritage: 61 percent of respondents belong in pastoral, and 39 percent in farming groups. These proportions, though emerged randomly, and maybe precisely because of that, are indicative of the weight of the pastoral communities in the area. These communities are also the main actors in the state of violence.[71] Interdependence was assessed by querying respondents about intermarriage (both between communities and within, in pastoral communities across the status divide), relations in the fields, relations on the market, and languages spoken.[72]

The patterns that emerged from the survey indicate that interdependence is strong between all communities, except the Tuareg and Fulani, and tends to be weak or fractured along the caste status divide within the pastoral communities. This is showcased in conflicts that oppose "masters" and "slaves" among the Tuareg and the Fulani. These terms mirror the French language words used in public discourse in Niger ("*maîtres*" and "*esclaves*") to reflect not actual slavery but forms of traditional subordinations originated in times when Tuareg, Fulani, and other local societies lived under a regime where various forms of servitude, including slavery, were practiced.[73]

Today, descendants of "masters" strive to preserve some of the rights and authority that they derive from that ancient regime, whereas descendants of the subaltern and servile groups strive to resist this, leading to tensions that may erupt into conflicts under certain conditions. These conflicts showcase failing interdependence breeding conflict dynamics that drive radicalization, as groups increasingly interact and intersect with militant forces operating in the area in agitation against the state's failure to manage contestation. **The narratives of the jihadist elements resonate with groups seeking to overcome historical caste interrelations.**

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71   The pastoralist communities are politically disadvantaged in the state-supported efforts to expand farming and therefore commodity production.

72   This survey attempted to gain a sense of what the interdependence between resident communities entail, as well as how the state is perceived. This single-site market-day survey is not a scientific poll. However, if its results capture common opinions in a snapshot, it is useful when contextualized. Since this is not measurement, this research will not use the numbers to analyze the survey but will instead refer to the patterns indicated when set against contexts.

73   For Benedetta Rossi's work in the neighboring Ader region, see: Bendetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid. Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

A prime example can be found in Inates, a Tuareg settlement in the department of Ayorou where the Nigerien army suffered a deadly attach in mid-December 2019.[74] Inates has a chieftaincy held by high-status "Red" Tuareg. The majority of the local community are "Black" Tuareg (or Bella), who resent the domination tinged with condescension, racism, and violence of the "Reds."[75] The process of decentralization, which led to the emergence of local elected authorities (mayors and councilors) in the 2000s, saw the rise in power of Bella officials through the vote. Inates became a site where traditional power and democratic legitimacy clashed along the status line: while the chief is still a "Red" Tuareg, the mayor is a Bella. While the cause of the Bella is buoyed by democratic participation, the cause of the "Red" appears to be supported by the state, since chiefs are members of the territorial administration and derive power and influence from that position, allowing them to curtail the progress of local democracy.

In the current climate of violence, two chiefs of Inates—a father and a son—were murdered successively (in April and July 2019). The entire cattle of the mayor (over 800 heads)—and in this context cattle are capital—was stolen by an armed band at the cost of several fatalities. These events signal that the fight between "Reds" and Bella has turned deadly. Inates has since become a recruiting ground for violent extremist actors, with many individuals receptive to the radical criticism against traditional forms of domination, which are seen as vetted by the state. In this area, HACP, perceived to be "on the side of the chiefs (and "masters"),"[76] is not welcome and performs much less well than in Abala, for instance.

In Inates, there is an economic interdependence between Bella and "Red" Tuaregs, but the case suggests that interdependence leads to moderation when it is based on equality, not on a culture of inequality.[77] In the case of intercommunal relations in the fields and at the market with pragmatic exchange-based equality, the general pattern is also strong interdependence. This is marked at one end of a spectrum by the Hausa, the population that seem to have most positive relations with all communities, and on the other the Fulani, the population with least positive relations with all communities.

The case of the Hausa may be explained by certain aspects of their community, including stronger engagement in trade and services and less status hierarchy in their society (though it is hierarchical in a different way) and less taboos than others. Unlike the Songhay-Zarma, the other farming community in the region, the Hausa practice the trade of the butcher and meat seller, for instance, an important trade with cross-cutting economic relationships in an agropastoral region.

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74   Hannah Armstrong, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inates," *International Crisis Group*, December 13, 2019, https://www.crisis-group.org/africa/sahel/niger/behind-jihadist-attack-inates.

75   In an interview, an elected official of Inates, a "Black" Tuareg, said of the "Reds": "These are people who used to kill and plunder as they liked and did not think that the same could happen to them." The record of this violence belongs in oral history and has not been researched by academics or journalists. It is thus unverified but not unbelievable.

76   Interview with local government official of Inates.

77   Elites, in this culture, believe that slavery is God-ordained. When a French airstrike killed "Black" Tuareg insurgents, they saw in that event not the result of an "anti-terrorist action," as the French thought it was, but God's punishment for the "slaves' treason." (Interview with local government official of Inates.)

The case of the Fulani may point to two divergent elements of explanation. On the one hand, it might mean that the Fulani are marginalized, which would then contribute to their radicalization. On the other hand, it might mean that the perception that they are the main perpetrators of violence in the region today has led to their greater marginalization and therefore greater willingness to form alliances with militants that do not perceive them as a sociopolitical adversary. The Fulani seem to have the poorest relations with the Tuareg, especially the "Red" Tuareg. Yet, interview data also indicate that in some of the violence groups of Fulani are allied with groups of Tuareg, including Daoussahak.[78]

The Fulani in this area are not a homogeneous group, despite their generalization in political discourse and regional security policy.[79] They are divided in several communities named after the places of origin they claim and that are sometimes far from the border region. For instance, the Gandakobé Jaalgobé hail from the district of Téra, at the Burkina Faso border, over a hundred kilometers westward; the Adrawa Gorgabé from Ader, a region several hundreds of kilometers to the east; the Doubankobé Gobirankobé from Gobir, even farther than Adar, south-eastward.[80] These groups do not see eye to eye with each other on all issues and may have different interests and alliances with other communities. The group seen as most committed to violent extremism, the Tolébé, attack other Fulani groups to forcibly levy a *zakkat*, the Islamic impost.[81]

The contrast between Ayorou and Abala bears out the hypothesis that weak or fractured interdependence creates less moderation and higher risks of violence. This is also shaped by perceptions of the economy and of the state, i.e. the power that may offset the risks by developing and implementing helpful policies—especially around resource governance. On both scores, the contrast between the two sites remains. To the question whether the economy was going well in their districts, Abala's respondents were much more sanguine than Ayorou's.

Table 3 Responses to the question whether the economy is going well in the district, by research site.

State of the Economy	Ayorou	Abala	Total
Rather Good	12	49	61
Rather Bad	79	39	118
No response	9	12	21
Total	100	100	200

Most respondents in Ayorou (above 80 percent) are dissatisfied with government work in Education, Health, and Justice, whereas in Abala most (around 60 percent) are satisfied. In Ayorou, respondents complained most about Justice (43 percent), whereas in Abala about Education (40 percent). These two

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78   The researcher was not able to disentangle this situation for want of the right research tools and time. This appears to relate to the overall complexities of the Fulani population in the region.

79   Madeline Vellturo, "Fulani and Jihad in West Africa: a complex relationship," *Good Governance Africa*, October 13, 2020, https://gga.org/fulani-and-jihad-in-west-africa-a-complex-relationship/.

80   Several other groups of Fulani call Niger home. This list is not exhaustive, but relevant to the research sites and direct conflict dynamics.

81   According to one interviewee, in local capital, i.e. animals, this amounts to one bull, one two-year old male calf, and two rams.

sectors strongly correlate with closeness to the state: education fosters state personnel, while justice is the key sector where state intervention is needed to sort out the conflict-nurturing issues. In Niger, the state speaks French, thus a career in state organizations requires school education in French. Therefore, this type of education is strongly associated with the state. A well-functioning justice system—especially according to local criteria—is the frontline prevention for conflict escalation.[82]

On the question of state/public governance, the governor ranks lowest, perhaps predictably as a more remote authority. Imams rank highest in Ayorou, and village chiefs in Abala. A telling contrast is the one about the gendarmerie, the central figure of the security state in the countryside and in small towns, which is significantly more appreciated in Abala (22 positive responses) than in Ayorou (8 positive responses). Mayors and the HACP also fare comparatively well. Overall, as of the time of this research no authority has reached a rate of positive responses of 50 (the highest rate, with 33 positive responses, was for imams in Ayorou). This suggests that **there is more frustration than satisfaction regarding state/ public governance.**

These numbers are not conclusive. They are reflective of a reality that is not limited to this part of Niger and that gains special salience only due to the conflicts that rage here. Large-scale surveys conducted by Afrobarometer record similar rates of frustration and satisfaction with government work across the country, though much lower feelings and incidence of physical insecurity.[83] In that regard, the differences between Ayorou and Abala are consistent enough—and also consistent with interview data—to warrant a conclusion that policies from the state and local authorities can have a positive impact. But to under-stand the conditions and meaning of any positive change, we need to take a broader view, revisiting the concept of balance and diving into the historical interethnic relations beneath the surface of the state.

REVISITING BALANCE: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL TRENDLINES

In the broader view, balance in the relations between the resident communities has long been limited by tensions and conflicts that reach deep in history and were precipitated by the political changes around democratization and decentralization in the 1990s–2000s. However, even these changes would not have led to the current conflicts without the war in Mali. Given the salience of these changes in local percep-tions, the author has reconstructed them in this section by revisiting the relevant episodes in Niger's colonial and recent history.

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82   See previous RESOLVE research report on dynamics in Chad related to language and secularism. Remadji Hoinathy and Daniel Eizenga, *The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education: Testing Perceived Ties to Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://doi.org/10.37805/lcb2019.2.

83   Afrobarometer, "Résumé des résultats. Sixième série de l'enquête Afrobaromtère au Niger, 2015," LASDEL, April 2015, http://afrobaro-meter.org/sites/default/files/publications/Summary%20of%20results/ngr-r6-sor.pdf.

Historical change

Change in the border area occurred in two great waves. The first wave dates back to the colonial era, the second to the 1990s (see next subsection). A romantic view of African history often faults artificial colonial borders for tensions and conflicts on the continent. This is assuming that what went on before was devoid of conflicts, a thinking that leads dangerously close to the racist notion that Africa had no history before the arrival of the White man. History *is* conflicts and struggles.

Colonialism broke a unified system that stretched from south of Timbuktu to the districts of Ayorou, Abala, and Bani-Bangou, down to areas just south of these towns, across the current border between Mali and Niger. This was the hegemony of the Tuareg Williminden nobility that developed in the late 18th and early 19th century. The Williminden hegemony did not build a state—it had no administration and did not render the services expected from a state—but rather provided a protection racket, enforced thanks to the warlike mobility of the Tuareg elite, cowing farmers for tributes.[84] The first French military explorer of the region, Émile Hourst, was impressed and called the area "Tuareg country" ("*pays des Touareg*"). The first French book on the colony of Niger, also written by an army man, presented the main farming people of the area, the Songhay, as deserving to be run roughshod over.[85]

However, French colonialism needed labor and taxes, which were more forthcoming from farmers than from roving warlords. The power of the latter was therefore broken, and in the 1930s the farming communities started to expand northward. This is the period when the Zarma founded Bani-Bangou, and the Hausa founded Abala. Many of the disputes about land ownership around Ayorou also run back to this period. Tuareg chiefs claim that land was given to them by the forefathers of the (Songhay) chiefs of Ayorou, who rebuke the claim by implying that the land was actually extorted and must be restored to its rightful owners.[86]

This first wave of change is at the root of much Tuareg violence, which without context looks gratuitous. Many in the Tuareg elite remember this period as a time when the French substituted the Tuareg protection racket for theirs and eventually elevated the "inferior races" of the Zarma and Hausa, who had been ordained to be slaves, to a position of command. This subversion of the "natural order" was intolerable in their eye.[87]

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84   Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *Les Sociétés songhay-zarma, Niger-Mali: chefs, guerriers, esclaves, paysans* (Paris: Karthala, 1984); Bendetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid. Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

85   Émile Hourst, *La Mission Hourst sur le Niger et au pays des Touareg* (Paris: Plon, 1898); Maurice Abadie, *La Colonie du Niger. Afrique centrale* (Paris: Société d'éditions géographiques, maritimes et colonials, 1927); Olivier de Sardan, *Les Sociétés songhay-zarma, Niger-Mali*.

86   See Xavier Bernier, "Les consequences des sécheresses récentes sur le développement agropastoral au nord de Filingué (Niger)," (Thesis, Université Joseph Fourie, Grenoble, 1988); and interview data from the Niamey focus group and interview with interview with local government official of Ayorou.

87   This information is from a *The New York Times* reporter who was working on a story on the rebellion ongoing in the region of Agadez in 2007. The Tuareg men interviewed by the reporter supported the rebellion but were from the Niger-Mali border region, not from Agadez. Lidya Polgreen, personal correspondence with author. See also elsewhere in the region (northern Mali): Pierre Boilley, *Les Touareg*

This history surfaces in the interviews conducted for this study. When plundering cattle, Tuareg marauders would refer to this as a tax, in reference to the notion that the country belonged to them. The word used is *jangal* (a Fulani word for cattle tax), not *zakkat*.[88] According to one interviewee, this behavior became more egregious during the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s that claimed the region as part of "Tuareg country.[89]"

A former Fulani militiaman the author interviewed for another research effort in June 2019 said that back in the 1980s cattle raiding occurred only within Malian territory, partly because Niger's strongman of the period, Gal. Seyni Kountché, was willing and able to protect the border. This interviewee also offered a "material" explanation for what he saw as banditry: Mali's security personnel at a remote outpost from Bamako felt free to assist in the plundering, because stolen Nigerien cattle fetched good prices in markets in southern Mali.[90] He also stressed that the Fulani engaged in similar behavior too, initially by way of retaliation and afterward because some took a taste for it.

The rebellion of the MNLA, the Malian Tuareg separatist movement that started the wars in 2012, was seen as a direct threat by the Fulani local elite. Its stated objective was to revive the old "Tuareg country," which could happen only at the expense of other groups in the area. Its initial successes alarmed especially the border-residing Fulani communities, leading them to align with the Fulani-dominated jihadist outfit, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), which saw a very large influx of Fulani combatants from the Mali-Niger border in 2012-13. Later, open French military support for some of the separatist Tuareg militia (MSA and the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA)),[91] especially as it was not seen to be counterpoised by governments in Niamey and Bamako, further entrenched the Fulani in their alliance with jihadists.

Political change

The second wave of central change occurred in the 1990s. In the colonial and post-colonial eras, governments relied on a reinvented chieftaincy system to keep the peace across the rural areas. This was less true for the First Republic (1960-74) that ruled Niger in the era of modernization theories and consequently sought to unseat "feudalism," as the chieftaincy system was then labelled. The military regime (1974-91) returned to supporting the chiefs for pragmatic reasons, primarily as assistants in its rural

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Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 292-293; André Bourgeot, *Les Sociétés touarègues. Nomadisme, identité, résistances* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), 356; Normand, "Le Sahel peut-il retrouver la paix?."

88   The sociolinguistic distinction is important in identifying why and how Tuareg groups became rhetorically aligned with Islamist militants, from the perspective of their ethnic competitors.

89   From a collective interview with chiefs of Booni Fulani, Daya Peul, and Ayorou Haoussa.

90   Interview with a gentleman from Gao conducted in Bamako in July 2019 for a different project (research on migration networks funded by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) confirmed this. See: Rahmane Idrissa, *Un dialogue sur fond de divergence: L'impact de la politique migratoire européenne sur l'integration Ouest-Africaine. Les cas du Nigeria, du Mali et du Niger* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Section Afrique, 2019), http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/15340.pdf.

91   The history reported above suggests that the favorable impressions that the French military had about Tuareg military valor from their first entry in the region still hold or were holding in the early 2010s.

development policy. Democratization in 1991 reopened the case against the chiefs, this time in the name of liberalism (freedom and human rights). It was thought that authority should come from the consent of the people, not from "tradition." The impact of this change became strong for chiefs when decentralization (i.e. democratization at local levels) was launched in the early 2000s, with the first local elections held in 1999. While in many parts of the country the outcome of this change was chiefs learning to live with elected officials who might not be beholden to them, in the agropastoral areas it resulted in the revolt of those suffering from the stigma and, in some cases, the realities of a servile condition.

As soon as Niger adopted democracy, a national association, Timidria ("solidarity" in Tamashaq, the Tuareg language), founded in 1991 by the traditional bonded classes, rapidly scored successes that threatened the position of the traditional master classes, especially among the Tuareg. For instance, in the agropastoral districts of Tahoua, "Black" Tuareg turned the chieftaincy system to their advantage by petitioning for the creation of new, "Black"-run chieftaincies that depleted the older ones of their *administrés* ("governed"). We have seen that in Inates, the *timidria* between "Black" Tuareg gave them control of the municipality, i.e. in the democratic context the real local authority. The social-revolutionary character of this change stoked bile among the Tuareg elite and might have invited violence.

However, in the early 2010s, Niger's government under President Mahamadou Issoufou threw the doors of the state wide open for elite Tuareg, thus creating reassurances to them. Since 2011, the prime minister has been a Tuareg politician from the traditional establishment of the region of Agadez, and many higher echelons of the state were populated by people with a similar background. This created the aggrieved perception among "Black" Tuareg that the central government would still tend to side with the "masters'" class. A similar perception grew in local settings with more satisfaction among elite Tuareg. In this way, polarization along the status divide hardened across the agropastoral regions.[92]

These cleavages set the stage for the current context—the underlying vulnerability hidden by the systems of moderation that limited violence—but failed to address deep-rooted grievances against the advancing democratization of state power, imbalanced economic power between pastoralists and farmers, and legacy enmities based as much on class and social function as ethnic background. As the state is receding as a legitimate actor in border communities and suffers further damage during the ongoing military action against insurgents, with accompanying human rights abuses of civilians by state security actors, it is losing its ability to serve the role of a third-party interlocutor between communities. This vacuum was filled by insurgents, imposing their rule through hostage taking, targeted killings, and periodic outrages following mass killings—these last could be interpreted as punishing communities for intransigence as well as competing for notoriety with other militant actors.

These developments—especially the clash between local democracy and traditional hierarchies—may not necessarily lead to violence, in fact they did not in other parts of Niger's Sahel-Sahara.[93] In the border

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92   These deductions come from local primary data and observations of the author.

93   It is likely, however, that the early defeat of the MNLA at the hands of Jihadist groups in Mali helped stem the expansion of violence into Niger. Conceivably, an MNLA success in northern Mali would have led to copycat movements in parts of Niger's Sahel-Saharan regions.

region, however, the urgencies created by the tangle of conflicts that had plunged northern Mali into insurrectionary warfare engulfed the resident Nigerien communities. In the more polarized, Tuareg and Fulani communities people had to choose a camp, and many among the "Black" Tuareg turned toward ethnicity-based allegiances across the border and against the state of Niger that appeared to be siding with their oppressors. It is unclear how the state will be able to reprise its moderating role in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The contrast observed between Ayorou and Abala demonstrates that local contextual understanding is key. The following recommendations provide considerations for Nigerien state actors, central and local, and external partners to restore the balance and alleviate exacerbating conflict dynamics in the Tillabéry region.

First, a better understanding of the sociopolitical issues may lead the central government to develop an approach to the conflicts that may stem their spread. The reality of economic interdependence means that the conflicts are damaging for all communities. In Abala, it has proved possible to work a policy through that reality and improve the situation to the extent that enemies are now trading on the marketplace. In Ayorou, the grievances of "Black" Tuareg need to be considered for any process of deradicalization to become possible. In particular, interdependence based on legacy master-slave relationship hierarchies needs to be eradicated. This requires contextually specific local political economy analysis to unravel the threads of interdependence, negotiation, and cooperation over resources. Given that inter- and intracommunal relations are complex and sensitive yet vital to peacekeeping, state agents, especially those working in the security sector, should be trained to learn and understand the culture and histories of the locales where they are posted—in addition to addressing corruption and abuses.

To step up crisis prevention, conflict analysis, and peacebuilding efforts already in place one route might be to expand the capacity of HACP or support the establishment of an HACP-like agency that does not focus only on emergency but also looks into caste- and class-related political issues. Any expansion of HACP mandates must be sensitive to pre-existing perceptions that the HACP is more attuned to elite concerns.

Second, to work toward regaining the conditions of balance, the interplay of institutional mechanisms need to improve. In Abala, the state of violence comparatively decreased because the two key institutional mechanisms for keeping the balance in the rural areas, the local elected officials—the deputy mayor in particular—and the traditional authorities were on the same page, and the gendarmerie were perceived to perform better and provide greater support. From the research it is unclear if there was a systemic basis for this effective cooperation. More research, perhaps social network analysis, could tease out the precise nature of the interactions between personal relationships at the local level and their feedback into formal governance structures.

This better performance of the gendarmerie in Abala may derive from the topography of institutions compared to Ayorou. In Abala, the gendarmerie precinct is in the central area of the town, close to the town hall and other public buildings. In Ayorou, the gendarmerie precinct is for all practical purposes outside of the town. The physical distance appears to have resulted in a psychological barrier, which may contribute to the dimmer views of people in Ayorou on the gendarmerie in contrast with Abala. In Inates, the local elected officials and the traditional authorities are at loggerheads. Therefore, while there is evidence of institutional cooperation in Abala, the perception in Ayorou is that institutions are rather a source of conflict.

The resolution of the issues that perpetuate war in the border region is a political matter. It will depend on the political vision and abilities of the national leadership. It is easier to make recommendations on what would make implementation of such a vision simpler. The recommendations fall under two broad categories: (1) mending the institutional mechanisms to keeping or restore a peace-supporting balance (chiefs, rural security personnel, elected officials); and (2) developing a campaign of persuasion targeting the radicalized or those belonging into groups most susceptible to radicalization. The recommendations are summarized from insights collected from interviews and a focus group.

On the first score, the Nigerien government should professionalize the traditional chiefs. 2008 and 2010 laws already gave a formal status to chiefs as agents of the territorial administration. While chiefs may resist further formalization as destructive of their informal privileges—while accepting the formal perquisites provided in their legal status—the real resistance comes from the central government, partly because further formalization will imbue the chieftaincy with the kind of institutional autonomy that would reduce their current vulnerability to politicization and manipulations. [94] Professionalization of the chieftaincy is a demand from the governed, as often expressed in focus groups. High professional standards would increase the trust that chiefs need to act in complex social settings and not be suspected of being beholden to sectional interests or of being mouthpieces of the rulers of the day. This should be the case especially of proximity chiefs (village, *tribu*), who are the least professional and the least integrated in the administrative scheme.

To establish that local elected officials are the real local authorities in an era of democracy,[95] their mandate should be extended to land issues. Land issues are still a preserve of chiefs, after they have managed to get ahold of them at the eleventh hour in the democratization debates in 1993. At the time, this was more easily done because Niger had not yet embarked on decentralization. Land issues, including access to natural resources, i.e. demarcation between pasturelands and farmlands, would become less of a source of conflict if they were subjected to local democracy with the norms of accountability, transparency, and publicity that govern rules of decision in that dispensation.

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94 Chiefs are under the ministry of the interior and are often seen as strategic assets during electoral campaigns. Ruling parties use powers of incumbency to remove or promote chiefs and sometimes create new chieftaincies. Other politicians—deputies from both majority and opposition—interfere in chieftaincy affairs for patronage in a rural constituency.

95 They are the local equivalents of the national government and the national assembly, which do not have to contend with a traditional king or emperor. The professionalization of traditional chiefs would make such a clarification easier.

On the second score, people interviewed for this study all insisted on the importance of developing and communicating a message of peace. The national leadership should develop its vision in that regard and launch and maintain a sustainable campaign of persuasion. Events can include recurrent forums of the kind that had resulted in an agreement in Abala in September 2019 and was held in the form of a cultural festival. The emotional appeal of culture is key in this context, especially as a response to the Salafist message. Messaging through social networks[96] and other informational techniques adapted to the context will strengthen the strategy.

Given the enduring grievances between and within ethnic groups, and how these grievances can motivate youths from across ethnic groups to join or support militancy and jihadism, policymakers may be inclined to attempt ethnic-specific interventions. However, from the perspective of interviewees, the main barriers they perceive to inter- and intracommunal conflict resolution stem from their perceived inability to participate in the public square (due to inequities in democratic processes or safety concerns) and their lack of access to decisionmakers (due to absence or distance from the capital where macro security policy is made). Policymakers should be cautious of assumptions of how individual radicalization does and does not correlate to community motivations for violence or peace and instead support platforms allowing local communities to articulate their needs, frustrations, and potential solutions.

Lastly, and crucially, any vision informing policy from the government and outside intervenors must take account of the legitimacy of the grievances of "Black" Tuareg and Fulani pastoralists. This is not the case at present, since both the state of Niger and its Western allies—France especially—view these groups as "terrorists" and treat them with a hostility that further solidifies their alliance with Salafist militants. Recent events such as a documented massacre of 102 "Black" Tuareg and Fulani pastoralists by the Niger army late March 2020 around Inates and Ayorou[97] only underscore the urgency of a policy turn supported by the Nigerien state and its geopolitical allies and partners on the basis of these recommendations.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of armed groups and escalating intercommunal violence exposes how external actors exploit long-term sites of contestation and governance failure and other fissures that developed over time as populations expanded and livelihoods changed. The proliferation of groups also exposes how the mechanisms communities rely on at the local levels to limit violence and conflict are deeply reliant on the presence of a third party (in this case the state) to provide additional conflict management support where these mechanisms fail. Competition over resources (both within pastoralist communities and between pastoralists and farmers), demographic growth, and environmental degradation and mismanagement created an intractable situation that the government failed to address and armed groups took advantage of. These armed groups were able to mobilize communities against each other on the basis of initial grievances. As the conflict continued, the focus of the groups changed to subsistence, largely through

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96   Social networks are used by violent extremists for their own campaigns.

97   Mondafrique, "Niger, cent deux civils massacrés puis ensevelis dans des fosses communes," April 22, 2020, https://mondafrique.com/niger-cent-deux-hommes-massacres-puis-ensevelis-dans-des-fosses/.

adopting coercive criminal organizational methods and tactics. Extortion, theft, tax, and targeted killings (reminiscent of mafia tactics) demonstrate how jihadists were able to coopt CBAG-like groups away from community protection or score settling into criminal groups and terrorist affiliates.

Armed community mobilization and ethnically affiliated community-based armed groups in Niger in their current form must be viewed as a result of the breakdown in hybrid sociopolitical mechanisms that maintained a precarious balance across several Tuareg rebellions and reformations of local governance processes. The shifting role of traditional chiefs in a process of democratization and decentralization; changing demographics increasing the representative power of farmers versus herders; and the short-term alliances between both western military forces and militant groups are all part and parcel to the complicated security environment in the Nigerien-Malian borderlands. In seeking solutions to escalating insecurity, it is imperative that policymakers and practitioners heed the fruits of historic interdependent economic and political relations and beware inflaming equally historic grievances between and within the diverse populations that call Niger home.

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CENTRAL MALI

Armed Community
Mobilization in Crisis

Rida Lyammouri

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

This report untangles the legitimacy of armed groups, mobilizing factors, and the multi-level impact of violence implicating CBAGs. It further explores the relations amongst different actors, including the state, armed groups, and communities. The field research team conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with populations affected by violence at key locations in Mopti and Ségou Regions.[3] The interviews, conducted between February and April 2020, focused on local perspectives about the factors, mechanisms, and dynamics of armed mobilization in the interviewees' communities. As a complement to the interviews, and to provide a co 202

mprehensive overview, the report maps and analyzes the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) to visualize and assess CBAG activities, trends of violence, and hyper-localized dynamics.[4] The findings provide relevant insight for context-specific policy design toward conflict resolution and hybrid security governance.

INTRODUCTION

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

Background

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

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

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

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

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

Community mobilization

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

Communities affected by inter-communal violence accepted armed groups as security providers. These local conflicts have diverse drivers, including stresses on natural resources, climate shocks, competing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13   Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

economic lifestyles, nepotis}\tic and exclusionary resource management practices, and transforming ethnic identities. The creation of CBAGs continues to cause more harm than the protection they purport to provide, as the number of civilian casualties is on the rise.[14] Communities that once lived together in peace, despite their differences, continue to grow apart. Social cohesion that once brought unity is rapidly vanishing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

18 Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance*.

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

and redeploying the state; however, it provides no action plan.[20]

However salient, this "weak state" analysis[21] alone cannot explain the creation and proliferation of CBAGs in Central Mali. State presence and governance provision in rural areas, including in Central Mali, have always been inadequate and insufficient.[22] It is a parochial analysis and an insufficient approach in understanding and responding to the crisis. Such a limited analysis could undermine security efforts by negating the agency of local non-governmental actors in establishing security and could weaken the government's ability to play a role in local security and governance.[24]

Figure 1 Regions of Mali[23]
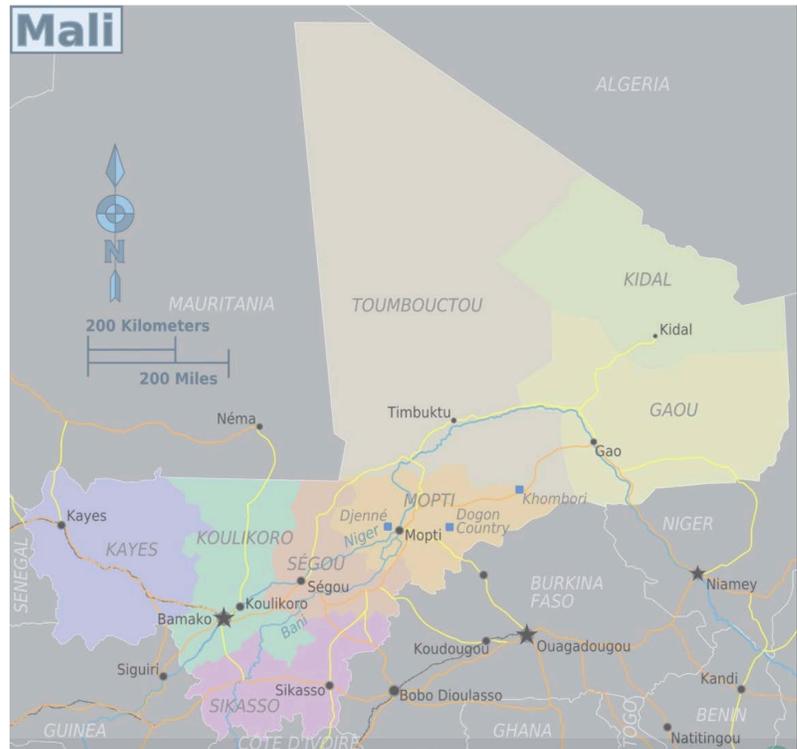
Daniel Agbiboa explains that hybrid security governance emerges where the recognition and support of CBAGs are necessary in security and justice provision to bolster a weak state's presence and ability to govern.[25] The argument stems from the historical dynamics in colonial and post-colonial Africa and the disconnect they created between political institutions both under colonial rule and post-independence for policing the communities they claim to secure. This disconnect spurs the need for communities to access political resources locally.

CBAGs are difficult to define because of their diverse behaviors, tactics, and motivations. CBAGs are fluid, and though in Central Mali they initially intended to protect their communities, their political objectives might change over time and become threats to their communities. Lauren Van Metre offers a typological framework for understanding potential shifts in CBAG identities.[26] Van Metre positions state-community relations, resources, norms, threats, and international actors as external factors that feed into an armed

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

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

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

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

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

25   Ibid.

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

group's internal structure to give it a specific identity and assume the likelihood and nature of violence. Given the fluid nature of these group identities and their importance in drafting successful stabilization policies toward CBAGs, this report focuses on understanding relationships amongst CBAGs, affected communities, and the central government, as well as clarifying group influence.

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

METHODOLOGY

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

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

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

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

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

The data collection was based on in-depth individual interviews, structured and unstructured, with stakeholders relevant to the Central Mali crisis. To adequately investigate relationships with local populations, the sampling process for the interviews attempted to capture different perspectives representative of all of society, including gender, age, and occupations to include administrative agents, traditional authorities, local social actors, and religious leaders. The 35 interviewees were participants living and working in Central Mali. The researchers conducted preliminary screening to select only participants known to be aware and knowledgeable of this important and complex topic. The 35 participants included men and women from Dogon and Fulani communities (Table 1). After validation of the data collection tool and guide, interview questions were translated into local languages, Bamanakan and Fulfulde.

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

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

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

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

Table 1 Interview participants

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

The focus of all interviews was the presence of armed groups and their constituencies, the history of communal mobilization and its legitimacy among the population, mobilizing factors and dynamics of engagement between the population and armed groups, social changes linked to the emergence of these groups, perceptions of state responses to security challenges, and recommendations by the population

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

to reduce violence. In addition, data related to violent incidents involving both jihadist groups and CBAGs between 2015-2020 in Mopti and Ségou Regions are drawn from the ACLED dataset.[28]

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

CONTEXT: CENTRAL MALI'S VIOLENT CONFLICT

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

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

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

Unprecedented violence

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

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

Figure 2 Violence trends in Ségou and Mopti Regions, Mali, by armed groups
(January 1, 2015–December 12, 2020).[33]
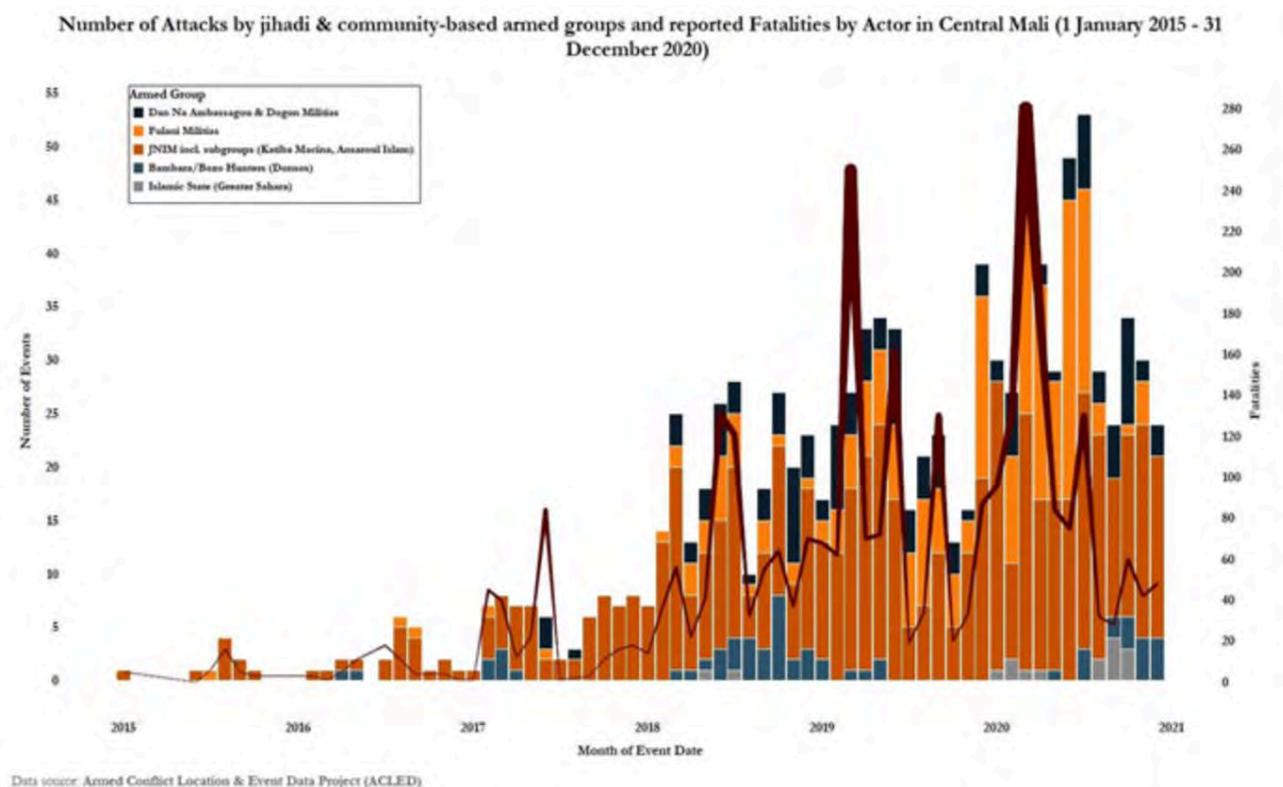
Number of Attacks by jihadi & community-based armed groups and reported Fatalities by Actor in Central Mali (1 January 2015 - 31 December 2020)

Data source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

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

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

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

33 Source: ACLED

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

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

The role of the state

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Access to natural resources

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shifting identities

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

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47   Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

51   Ibid.

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

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

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

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

ing of their political positions. This dynamic construction of ethnoreligious identities, alongside Central Mali's security and economic challenges, thus became the dominating paradigm in the mobilization of CBAGs.

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

OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL MALI'S ARMED GROUPS

Table 2 Organized armed groups in Central Mali

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

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

57   Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

Katiba Macina

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

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

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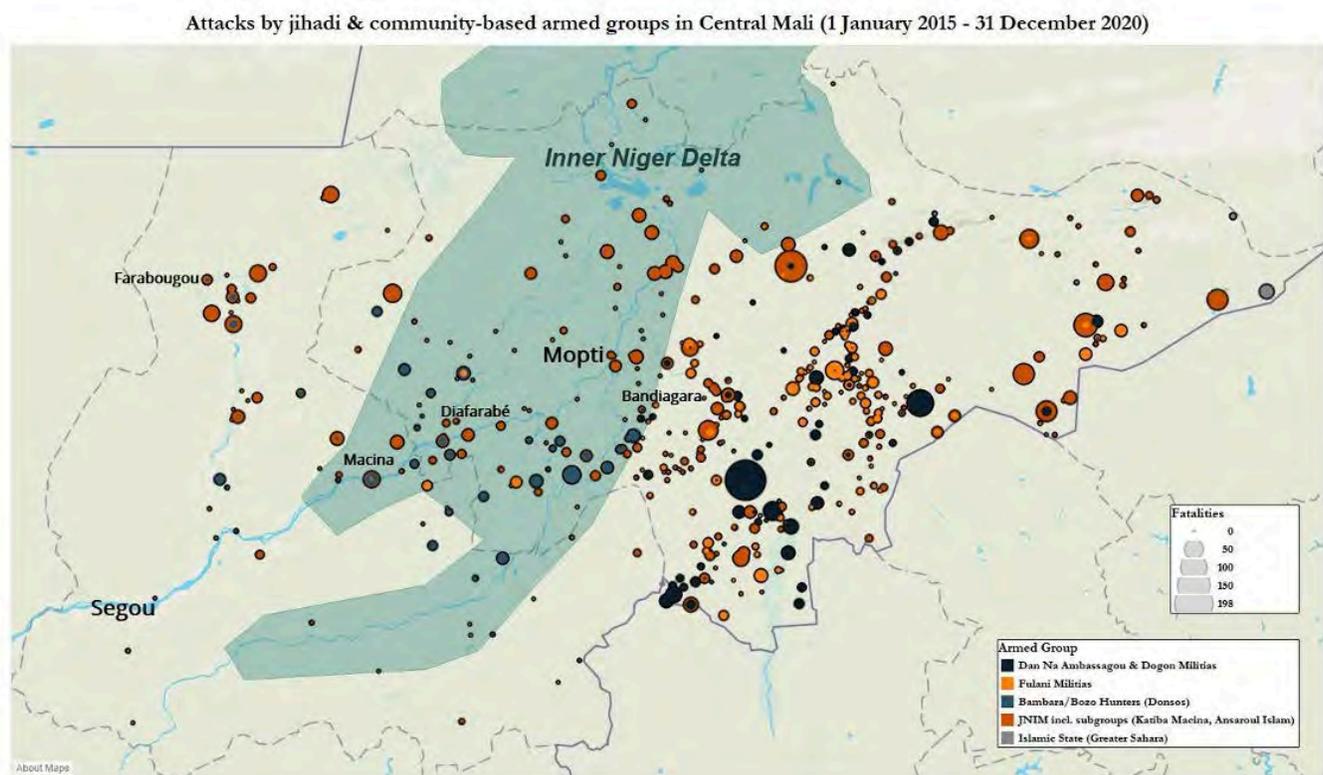
58   For example, Hamadou Koufa's leadership of the Fulani-majority Katiba Macina. Aurélien Tobie and Boukary Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali," *SIPRI*, October 2019, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/other-publications/impact-armed-groups-populations-central-and-northern-mali.

59   Source: ACLED.

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

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

While primarily portraying itself as a jihadist group, the discourse and actions of Katiba Macina oscillate between a jihadist and a Fulani identity. This overlap could be described as a hybrid of a jihadist insurgent group and a self-defense militia.[68] Katiba Macina's leader Amadou Kouffa occasionally refutes claims that Katiba Macina is a Fulani armed group, even though his Fulani brethren do comprise the bulk of the group's fighting force. The group has often portrayed itself as a defender of the Fulani community by publicly "ethnicizing" local conflicts in its propaganda.[69]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fulani self-defense groups

Several CBAGs emerged alongside Katiba Macina. As persecution by government security forces and reprisals by rival communities increased, young Fulani formed self-defense groups to protect their villages from the abuses of security forces and hunter-style militias such as the Donsos, or Dozos. Although they formed as a self-defense mechanism, Fulani militias themselves often perpetrate attacks and are suspected of mass atrocities, notably the 2019 Sobane-Da massacre.[76] Fulani communities are not always accepting of these CBAGs, questioning their claims of protection in Macina and Ténénkou Cercles for instance, where some consider CBAGs opportunists taking advantage of disorder and chaos for profit.

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

71   Ibid.

72   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

73   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

74   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

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

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

Dan Na Ambassagou

The Dogon-majority Dan Na Ambassagou emerged in eastern Mopti Region and frames itself as a protector of the Dogon Country, a perception shared by many Dogon.[82] An interviewee claimed that Dan Na Ambassagou is "present where the army is absent . . . securing national roads."[83] Its support and legitimacy hinge on a sense of insecurity in the face of a jihadist threat. This affects the multifaceted relationship between Dan Na Ambassagou, who must provide justification for their actions as protection, and

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

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

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

80   Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

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

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

83   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

the Dogon community it claims to protect. The group has slowly become Katiba Macina's archenemy, and both groups contest territorial control and influence over local populations.

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

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

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

During the first months of its existence, Dan Na Ambassagou enjoyed close, strategically established ties with the Malian government and its security forces under the pretext of fighting jihadists connected to Fulani communities.[89] However, this relationship between Dan Na Ambassagou and the Malian government suffered a major setback following the March 2019 Ogossagou massacre, where suspected Dan Na Ambassagou fighters killed at least 153 Fulani civilians, which signaled the revival of intercommunal vio-

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84   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

87   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

lence.[90] Following the massacre, the Malian government was criticized for supporting a non-state actor who is committing atrocities. Even though Dan Na Ambassagou has suffered from the subsequent fallout with the central government, as Malian security forces targeted its bases, the group continued to enjoy popularity among Dogon communities in the area and Dogon diaspora.[91] Repeated attacks by Fulani and jihadist groups against Dogon villages justify popular support and Dan Na Ambassagou's continuous existence despite pressure from international and national human rights organizations.[92]

Donso or Dozo hunters

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

Competition and contention between the Bozo and Fulani have resulted in violent confrontations between Bozo hunters and Katiba Macina. Nouhoun-Bozo, a village famous for its boat-builders, was the focal point of the fighting between the two armed groups in 2018[93] and 2019.[94] Katiba Macina militants further imposed protracted embargoes on Bozo-majority villages such as Toguéré-Coumbé and Kouakourou, Mopti Region.[95] Initially, small conflicts related to the application of Sharia law triggered these embargoes. In Niono, Katiba Macina militants accused the Bambara Donso hunters of abuses against the Fulani community and since early October 2020 imposed an embargo on the village of Farabougou and its surroundings (Figure 3).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ARMED COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

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

Cycles of retributive violence

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

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

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

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

99   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

their actions. Simultaneously, all groups might have similar grievances and sentiment of negligence by the central government and corrupt elites.

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

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

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

Historical tensions

The underlying conflict between farmers and pastoralists in the region and the cycle of reprisals fueling the growing polarization of identities are linked and ultimately legitimize the proliferation of CBAGs.[106] The relationship between Fulani and Dogon communities is strained due to ancestral rivalries over influence. These relations are increasingly stressed by worsening ecological conditions straining livelihood resources and by the struggle of the central government and traditional and local authorities to address natural resource management effectively, all putting the populations in competition over access to land, water, and natural resources.[107]

Due to a lack of resources and priorities, state presence in these rural areas is limited. When the state is present, it is usually through security forces. Without a sufficient presence of local authorities to address this level of conflict, jihadists and self-defense groups have taken advantage of the power vacuum by

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100 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

103 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

105 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

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

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

incorporating the ecological conflict into a broader discourse: they pose as necessary for protecting against the other, or enemy, relying on a narrative of Fulani herders versus the Dogon farmers in Central Mali.[108]

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

Youth vulnerability

Central Mali youth are considered the most marginalized and vulnerable, alongside rural and nomadic pastoralist groups. Interviewees repeatedly cited insufficient job opportunities, poverty, poor access to education, social pressures to marry and start a family, and poor access to vocational and skills training to improve job prospects as factors contributing to youth associations with CBAGs.[109,110] Female youth have also engaged in supporting or fighting in CBAGs. Religion is considered a driver of female direct participation in armed groups and jihadist groups, however, reasons remain unclear.[111] Female youth might be participating in CBAG activities acting as informants providing information about opponent locations, recruiters, and transporters of goods and weapons through checkpoints.[112] While there has been overwhelming evidence of women being forced into jihadist groups in the Lake Chad Basin, the role of women among jihadist groups and other armed groups in Central Mali remains understudied and unclear.[113]

The support from marginalized, disenfranchised youth is furthered through discourses of identity and communitarianism, alongside promises of weapons and profit amid conditions of poverty.[114] While the idea to create CBAGs often comes from elders, youth are mobilized to be in the frontline. One interviewee in Macina said, "The impact of youth on the birth of armed groups is minimal; the idea of cre-

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108 Ibid.

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

110 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

114 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

ating militias does not come from the youth. They were incited, encouraged, and then recruited."[115] A Ségou interviewee said that youth are often led into vengeful cycles of violence they barely understand and find themselves conducting violent acts against unarmed civilians, including women and children.[116] Youth-perpetrated violence appears less tactical and politically referential and thus decreases the likelihood of peaceful resolution, whereas elder-led violence and reprisals tend to be limited by intercommunal norms that are fast becoming outdated.

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

Economic and ecological deprivation

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

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115 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

116 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

120 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

121 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

123 Interview in Macina, Ségou region, March 2020.

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

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

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

State absence

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

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125 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

126 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

127 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

128 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

129 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

130 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

132 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

133 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

Most Fulanis, except the elites profiting from their relationships with the government, view the state's absence as a root cause of the current crisis. "The state has failed," was a common sentiment across interviews.[139] "The state needs to take on its responsibilities," a Fulani interviewee said. "It is only present in Bandiagara city . . . It has only helped us escape when we were subject to executions . . . We, Fulani, need to act nicely toward the Dan Na Ambassagou, since the state is unable to provide us with security."[140]

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

It is perceptions of the state's absence that pushed many to join self-defense groups. The shift in local governance mechanisms put justice, security, and governance decision-making at the heart of each com-

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

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

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

137 Ibid.

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

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

140 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

141 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

142 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

143 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

Discourses of legitimacy

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

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

CBAGs are also credited for their efforts to reach a peace agreement between jihadist groups, Donsos, and Dogon to support economic recovery.[151,152] An accord signed on August 1, 2019, successfully curbed

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144 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
145 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
146 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
147 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
148 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
149 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
150 All interviewees deemed this to be the most important element in armed groups' continued existence and operation in the region.
151 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
152 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

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

CONCLUSION

The scale of violent incidents and the ethnic dimensions of the conflict, specifically in Mopti and Ségou Regions, is alarming. 2020 was the most violent year, putting the area on a trajectory of further escalation.[156] In Central Mali, the conflict's rural nature makes it more prone to protraction and casualties. The recurrent village massacres are a source of traumatization and moral outrage. The government's historical inability to intervene neutrally disqualifies it from leading any de-escalation efforts. The consistent increases in killings and availability of weapons heightens the likelihood of more large-scale violence, and the legitimization of CBAGs as security providers positions them to maintain at least partial community support. Current dynamics between the different communities foresee an ascendant trend in violence if no de-escalation initiatives are undertaken. This research mapped current local perceptions and hopes to point to some pathways forward.

Many locals perceive the current crisis as temporary and look forward to the return to a stable life where "Mali stays one and indivisible, secular, and open to the world."[157] As no single group has gained majority acceptance amongst the diverse populations settled in Central Mali, there is an opening for the new transitional government[158] to present themselves as a neutral party to mediate a sustainable peace agreement amongst the various CBAGs, spur economic growth that considers youth employment needs, and support reintegration programs for jihadists and other armed group members.[159] The

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

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

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

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

157 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

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

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

transitional government's roadmap for Central Mali highlights the importance of disarming self-defense militias, promoting communal and armed group dialogues and redeploying the state—all improvements in considering the multidimensional, intercommunal drivers of instability.[160] However, without a clear action plan, this model could fall back on the previously unsuccessful approach of solely focusing on jihadist threats.

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

Just in the past three years, the allegations of abuse by security forces have disillusioned communities. In February 2018, in response to the government's Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (PSIRC),[165] the military reinforced its presence in Koro, Bankass, and Douentza cercles.[166] By July 2019, 3,500 security forces were deployed in the area, but these forces were repeatedly accused of extra-judicial abuses against civilians, especially the Fulani who were accused of collaboration with Katiba Macina.[167] Allegations against domestic and international security forces have received little attention from the central government or the international community, leaving local human rights organizations in a difficult position to investigate and bring to light potential human rights violations. For instance, in January 2021, Fulani local organizations and villagers alleged that a French air strike had killed 20 civilians and described other incidents of killing women and children. These allegations have been dismissed as false by the French and Malian governments, further eroding the trust between Fulani communities in Central Mali and the central government.[168]

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

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

162 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

163 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

164 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

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

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

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

168 Associated Press, "French minister insists troops didn't bomb Mali wedding fete," *AP*, January 10, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/weddings-mali-france-393f1b822dac7c5cc03aaa15667c95b0.

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

Recommendations

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

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

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

» Lessons learned from French alignment with Tuareg groups in northern Mali for counterterrorism efforts must be applied to avoid any national, international, or multilateral security effort aligning with CBAGs. Rumors of French alignment with Dan Na Ambassagou are likely to intensify already existing social and ethnic tensions by more clearly pitting Fulanis and Dogons against one another—namely through reinforcing the Fulani-jihadist connection by creating Dogon-French linkages. The potential for an evolving mission or a set of principles of CBAGs in their fight to

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169 International Crisis Group, "Enrayer La Communautarisation de La Violence au Centre du Mali."

170 International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence"; Camillo Casola, ed., *Unraveling the Sahel: State, Politics and Armed Violence* (Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2021), https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/sahel_march_2021.pdf.

maintain power could entangle external actors into siding with certain ethnic communities over others, further harming to social cohesion and government trust-building.

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

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

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

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

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

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About the Author

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About the Report

ADDRESSING THE DOZO
IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

JESSICA MOODY

COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

"The dozo's connection to many senior politicians and members of the armed forces has boosted their political gravitas."

FAST FACTS

» The importance of the dozo to the government's handle on power has made them difficult to disarm or hold accountable in the post-war period.

» One of the reasons behind the dozo existence and proliferation in remote areas is an absence of regular security and police forces, which allows the dozo to undertake government security roles with impunity.

» Encouraging cohesion and communication between communities in northern and western Côte d'Ivoire, where the dozo are omnipresent, would assist with reconciliation.

CONTEXT

Côte d'Ivoire is home to around 200,000 traditional hunters known as the dozo.[1] These traditional hunters are common throughout West Africa and have often filled gaps in state security provision in remote areas by settling local disputes and protecting residents from banditry and theft. In Côte d'Ivoire, the dozo traditionally hail from the north and are predominantly of Dioula ethnicity. They were heavily repressed under previous non-northern-led administrations who feared the power of the dozo as a pro-northern militia.[2] However, after supporting the

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1   Youenn Gourlay, "Les Chasseurs Dozos, Gardiens Sacrés et Encombrants du Nord Ivoirien," *Le Monde Afrique* November 14, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/11/14/les-chasseurs-dozos-gardiens-sacres-et-encombrants-du-nord-ivoirien_6019188_3212.html.

2   Rodrigue Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs Traditionnels Dozo en Côte d'Ivoire : Enjeux Socioculturels et Dynamiques Sécuritaires," *Centre Franco Paix* (June 2018): 30.

Civil War

The nine-year civil war stemmed from longstanding tensions over access to land, national identity, and ethnic rivalries. Under the country's first President Felix Houphouet Boigny, northern people, including the dozo, had been encouraged to migrate to the southwest of the country to farm an abundance of cocoa plantations. But as the cocoa price plummeted in the 1980s and jobs became scarce, southwestern ethnic groups grew angry at the presence of foreigners on their land and sought to push them out. This sentiment was galvanized by numerous politicians in the years after Houphouet Boigny's death in 1993. Ethnic tensions mounted and eventually led to an attempted coup against President Laurent Gbagbo in 2002, triggering a civil war. When the mutinous troops failed to seize control of the presidency, they took control of the northern part of Cote d'Ivoire, dividing the country in half. The rebels, who became known as the Forces Nouvelles (FN) and were strongly supported by the dozo, claimed that northern populations had been heavily marginalized for decades and sought greater equality for northern people. The UN established a ceasefire line in the center of the country, reducing the propensity for violence and preventing the FN from marching on the capital. From 2002 onwards, the international community sought to mediate a peace agreement to end the conflict with little success. In 2010, Gbagbo finally agreed to hold a presidential election, long demanded by the FN. The poll pitted northern politician Alassane Ouattara and central former President Henri Konan Bedie against then-President Gbagbo, who hailed from the southwest. The electoral commission announced Ouattara the winner of the poll, though Gbagbo refused to step down, sparking some of the worst violence of the conflict in which more than 3,000 people died. Ouattara was eventually installed in the presidency with the assistance of UN and French troops, as well as the assistance of the FN.

current government during a 2002–2011 war, which pitted the north against the south and ultimately saw northern leaders come to power, the dozo have grown in political status and strength.

The failure to fully disarm or demobilize the dozo after the end of the conflict and the government's decision not to hold them accountable for abuses they committed during or since the war have imbued them with impunity. Moreover, many senior dozo, who were accused of committing crimes during the war, have been promoted to positions in the armed forces and the government since 2011.[3] The dozo's connection to many senior politicians and members of the armed forces has boosted their political gravitas.[4] Further, because of their close ethnic ties to the current administration, their support for the president during the 2002–2011 conflict, and the government's lack of action to demobilize them, the dozo have been accused of acting almost as a parallel militia in favor of President Alassane Ouattara.[5]

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3   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 43.

4   Many of those rebels who fought with the dozo during the 2002–2011 conflict are now in power, providing the dozo with extensive connections to politicians and members of the armed forces. Notably, Zakaria Kone and Ousmane Cherif, senior dozos who were both rebel commanders during the conflict, took up high-level positions in the armed forces after the conflict ended.

5   Richard Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit': Violence et Politique en Côte d'Ivoire," *Les dossiers du CERI* (October 2012): 6.

Amid longstanding tensions over land ownership that remain unresolved in the aftermath of the 2002–2011 conflict, northern and central populations have increasingly joined dozo self-defense forces in an effort to protect their land from seizures by southwestern ethnic groups.[6] This has bolstered the dozo's strength in numbers; they are now significantly more numerous than the Ivoirian police force and military, respectively.[7] In addition to their traditional base in the north, the dozo are now present in Abidjan and have become stronger in the west. The dozo migrated to that part of the country as part of a mass migration of northerners to the arable farmlands in the 1960s-1970s but since the 1990s had been repressed by non-northern-led governments, who protected the southwestern ethnic groups.[8] However, they have been allowed to operate relatively uninhibited in the west since Ouattara's accession to power in 2011.

Since the end of the conflict in 2011, external policy advisors have encouraged Côte d'Ivoire to depoliticize, demobilize, and disarm the dozo once embroiled in the 2002–2011 conflict and urge them to return to their traditional hunter roles.[9] In 2012, the Ivoirian government seemingly complied, introducing several laws forbidding the dozo from establishing roadblocks or carrying unauthorized weaponry or munitions.[10] That year, the defense minister also arranged a meeting of clarification with the dozo, thanking them for their support during the conflict and urging them to scale back their role in security provision.[11]

These moves rarely had much of an impact. Law enforcement does not arrest the dozo for violating the laws, and the number of traditional hunters has continued to grow in the years since the conflict ended.[12] The dozo continue to play security roles without a mandate. They persistently mount roadblocks, especially in the southwestern part of the country, underscoring the significant strength of the community-based armed group outside of their traditional northern strongholds. Moreover, many dozos allege that they still work closely with the security forces. The government strongly denies this claim, though reinserting several senior dozo into the military at the end of the conflict suggests that at least some connections remain between the community-based armed group and the security forces.[13]

Banegas argues that the government's reluctance to eliminate the dozo as a parallel security force may be a result of its fear of another conflict. Should this conflict occur, the government may decide to utilize the dozo again if the Ivoirian military choose to side with prominent politicians against the administration.[14] The new regime relied on the dozo following the 2002–2011 conflict to maintain power during an unstable political transition and continued to depend on them to bolster security in a heavily politicized post-conflict period. Moreover, the traditional hunters have often claimed that they deserve compen-

6   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34.

7   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34. ; Gourlay, "Les Chasseurs Dozos."

8   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 26.

9   United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), "Rapport Sur les Abus des Droits de l'Homme Commis par des Dozos en République de Côte d'Ivoire," *United Nations* (June 2013): 1–28.

10   UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 23–25.

11   UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 24.

12   Gourlay, "Les Chasseurs Dozos;" UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 26.

13   UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus", 24.

14   Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit'," 6.

sation for their support to the government during the civil war and therefore cannot be demobilized.[15] Marginalizing the dozo from the formal security system, therefore, may be a security risk in itself.[16]

RELEVANCE TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

At least partly because of the impunity they have been granted, much of the population in Côte d'Ivoire fear and mistrust the dozo, particularly in the west of the country where the Guere and Bete people have often clashed with the dozo, who generally do not belong to these local ethnic groups.[17] Civilians in the west have accused the traditional hunters of involvement in massacres during the civil war, as well as land seizures and persistent banditry, executions, and extortion after it ended.[18] Despite this, and the few efforts the government claims it has made to disarm them and prevent them playing a security role for which they do not have the mandate, it continues to enable them.[19]

This persistent tension between the Guere and Bete ethnic groups and the dozo, particularly in the southwest, is problematic. This dynamic prevents reconciliation between the government and traditionally pro-government northern populations and western ethnic groups, who perceive the ongoing strength of the dozo as an existential threat and an indication of the government's pro-northern, or even pro-Dioula, stance.[20] Moreover, the longstanding friction between the dozo and other communities, especially the Guere and the Bete, poses a risk in the context of a potential incursion by Islamist extremist groups, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Neighboring countries, notably Mali and Burkina Faso, who are already struggling with vast insurgencies by both JNIM and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have found that tensions between citizens and community-based-armed groups like the dozo can exacerbate the militant threat.[21] In those countries, jihadist insurgents have mobilized long-standing grievances against dozo-like organizations to facilitate recruitment and encourage violence.[22]

In turn, vigilante groups in Burkina Faso and Mali have sought to tackle the expansion of violent extremists themselves—sometimes with the backing of the government, which lacks resources and reach in more remote areas of their country.[23] Côte d'Ivoire may be tempted to mobilize and arm its dozo in a similar fashion, should it have to deal with sustained extremist violence. The Ivoirian government has

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15 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 13.

16 Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 47.

17 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 11; Author interviews with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Blolequin, Guiglo, October 2017–October 2018.

18 Author interview with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Blolequin, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018; UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," 16–23.

19 UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus", 23–25.

20 Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit'," 6 ; The New Humanitarian, "Dozo as Protector, Dozo as Assailant," August 1, 2011, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/259696 ; UNOCI, "Rapport Sur les Abus," ٢٣–١٦.

21 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation of Communal Violence in Mali," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 17, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/analysis-jihadist-exploitation-of-communal-violence-in-mali.php; Laurence-Aida Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups Exploit Intercommunal Conflicts in the Sahel," *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies*, February 26, 2020, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/how-violent-extremist-groups-exploit-intercommunal-conflicts-in-the-sahel/

22 Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation."; Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups."

23 Reuters, "Burkina Faso Approves State Backing," January 22, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-security/burkina-faso-approves-state-backing-for-vigilantes-fighting-jihadists-idUSKBN1ZL1UT

allegedly already used the dozo in a similar manner in 2016, deploying the dozo to assist with the aftermath of the Grand Bassam attack by al-Mourabitoun.[24]

Government cooptation can boost the availability of fighters and provide invaluable local intelligence in the short term. However, these efforts are misguided. Poorly trained and ill-equipped traditional hunters often end up targeting entire communities thought to be associated with Islamist insurgents and massacring and torturing civilians.[25] Such actions are rarely brought to justice and drive wedges between communities, exacerbating local grievances and thus furthering a potent recruitment tool for extremists. Neither in Mali, nor in Burkina Faso has the cooptation of community-based armed groups been effective in halting the expansion of Islamist extremist violence. An alternative approach to the militia is therefore necessary in Côte d'Ivoire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Among many Ivoirian communities, particularly in the west, the dozo are unpopular, opening the prospect for Islamist extremist groups to use them in the same way as in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali to encourage intercommunal violence and facilitate recruitment. What can be done to encourage the government to address this challenge, given the government's close alliance with the dozo?

Reframe the challenge of the proliferation of the dozo as a counter-terrorism issue

The importance of the dozo to the government's handle on power has made them difficult to disarm or hold accountable in the post-war period. However, reframing this challenge as a key factor in the government's counter-terrorism response would change the dynamic of the dozo predicament and assist in depoliticizing the issue. The dozo's role in the country becomes a question of national security rather than party politics. Reframing also makes the problem more pertinent and urgent to the government, which has been preoccupied with the danger posed by the expansion of Islamist extremism from the Sahel into coastal West Africa. Côte d'Ivoire witnessed an Islamist extremist attack in 2016 and foiled a series of further planned assaults in Abidjan in 2019.[26] The government must see that unless an appropriate security strategy is adopted vis-à-vis the traditional hunters, the group will potentially exacerbate jihadist violence, as evidenced in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali.

Workshops or strategy meetings focusing on counterterrorism responses with senior government officials in advisory roles or overseeing security sector reform initiatives could be a tool for reframing the

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24   On 13 March 2016 al-Mourabitoun militants from Mali attacked the beach resort of Grand Bassam, around 40 km from Abidjan. The attack left at least 16 people dead.; Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 45.

25   Ammour, "How Violent Extremist Groups."

26   Africa Intelligence, "Alassane Ouattara Does Battle with Katiba Macina in Abidjan," June 12, 2019, https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_politics/2019/06/12/alassane-ouattara-does-battle-with-katiba-macina-in-abidjan,108361003-art

issue. These meetings could raise the role of the dozo in the security response to the growing Islamist extremist threat, while also highlighting the problems this has posed in neighboring countries and the need for a different approach. The case studies of Burkina Faso and Mali could be a springboard for alternative ideas to address the intersectional threat posed by community-based armed groups and Islamist extremists while reducing the security role of the dozo.

Respond to security shortfalls incorporating the dozo and civil society where possible

One of the reasons behind the dozo existence and proliferation in remote areas is an absence of regular security and police forces, which allows the dozo to undertake government security roles with impunity. The most obvious way to combat this security gap is to expand statutory security forces into these rural areas, correcting the security shortfalls the dozo respond to. The government should make a concerted effort to increase troops and police in these more remote reaches of the country, particularly in the north, where the dozo are prominent and Islamist extremists are most likely to enter the country.

This does not mean that the dozo should be entirely dismantled, nor that they should no longer play any security roles. As security forces expand their presence into rural areas, they should seek to formalize links with select senior dozos and encourage them to play a role in intelligence provision while discouraging their role as armed security providers. Regulating the relationship between the dozo and security forces would help hold the dozo accountable for their actions and enable the government to monitor them more carefully. Unlike in Burkina Faso, this should not involve the provision of weaponry or training that emboldens these community-based armed groups to continue to behave like a militia.

The expansion of security forces in the north and the incorporation of the dozo would be a delicate change in the security dynamic, which would need to be handled carefully. It would be necessary to consult community members and dozo groups in the north before slowly moving statutory forces into the area. To a certain extent, such conversations could be facilitated by the continued presence of senior dozo in the armed forces, who should be able to establish and oversee the discussions between the state and the self-defense groups. The dozo would likely be willing to cooperate on some level, given their patriotism and desire to protect Cote d'Ivoire from Islamist insurgents.[27]

Such a dialogue would be incredibly useful not just to ensure security forces were not immediately rejected by the local population and the dozo, but also for fomenting better longer-term relationships between the dozo, civil society, and the armed forces: three parts of society that are vital for generating an appropriate security response and that have traditionally turbulent relations. Such conversations would be beneficial exercises in and of themselves, providing security services with much needed access to local intelligence and building their currently weak relationships with civilians.

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27   Author interviews with dozo Man, Bouake, Duekoue, Blolequin, Guiglo, Korhogo, October 2017–October 2018.

Local forums would also go some way to uniting communities against the jihadist threat. Ivoirians are typically highly patriotic and, in the north in particular, are deeply concerned about Islamist extremists encroaching over the northern Ivoirian border from Burkina Faso or Mali.[28] Working together to prevent this threat could bring these divergent groups closer. Both the dozo and security forces have poor reputations among civilians in parts of the north, but more notably the west.[29] Thus, they should work to be regarded by communities as less of a threat and more of a partner in tackling an emerging danger.

Regular meetings between these groups would also allow for the emergence of locally owned strategies to preventing the encroachment of Islamist extremists onto Ivoirian territory. Strategizing meetings would be a platform that empowers the dozo to continue to play a role in community protection and security in a way they long sought to do but without the use of force. Civil society could also be emboldened through such a dialogue. In particular, civil society actors who are already engaged in local resource governance, the expansion of women's or young people's rights and political participation could be mobilized. This would likely contribute to creating a more cohesive civil society, thereby generating positive externalities for development projects as well.

Finally, this dialogue could establish an appropriate means of incentivizing the dozo in their collaborative role, which would likely require some payment, possibly in the form of development projects, such as schools or medical facilities in the communities of the dozo who collaborate effectively in intelligence provision. This type of exchange has been attempted for disarmament programs already in Cote d'Ivoire.[30] Regular and external evaluations would be needed to assess the distribution of these projects and the effectiveness of collaboration to reduce the potential for corruption.

Mitigate grievances between communities and the dozo

One of the most significant challenges that community-based armed groups faced in Burkina Faso and Mali is Islamist extremist organizations' ability to mobilize grievances against traditional hunters to intensify violence and facilitate recruitment.[31] Improving relations between the dozo and communities in Côte d'Ivoire could preempt this, should Islamist insurgent groups gain a foothold. Encouraging cohesion and communication between communities in northern and western Côte d'Ivoire, where the dozo are omnipresent, would assist with reconciliation. Focus groups involving objective arbiters, wherein communities could raise concerns with the dozo's security role in the area, would enable both sides to air grievances, many of which have not been addressed since the conflict. There is little precedent for such pre-emptive intercommunal dialogue in the region. Involving legitimate mediators from civil society and customary chiefs who tend to be responsible for local cohesion would probably be vital pre-requisites for success.

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28   Author interviews with civilians and ex-combatants, Korhogo, October 2017-October 2018.

29   Author interview with civilians, Man, Duekoue, Blolequin, Guiglo, Korhogo, October 2017–October 2018.

30   Author interviews with COMNAT employees Duekoue, Guiglo, October 2017–October 2018; COMNAT ALPC, "Poursuite des actions de sécurisation communautaire," *Ivoirian Government*, accessed April 28, 2020, http://comnat-alpc.org/zoom/article.php?ID_ACTUZ=167

31   Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation."

Additionally, more concerted government attempts to tackle obvious causes of tension, including pervasive roadblocks and land seizures by the dozo would be beneficial, particularly in the west e.g. in Duekoue, Gagnoa, Man, and Tai, and in northern towns such as Ouangolo and Ferkessedougou. Reducing the dozo roadblocks in these areas and clearly delineating land ownership could significantly diminish tensions between western communities and the dozo. The government's efforts to address the land question to-date involve the expensive and time-consuming acquisition of land titles.[32] Programs that made acquiring a land title much simpler and affordable for communities in the west, such as easily accessible sites in rural areas where titles could be acquired in a matter of hours, would go some way to resolving this issue.

CONCLUSION

Côte d'Ivoire does not yet have a serious problem with Islamist insurgents. It does, however, have an enormous dozo population. Constructing a more strategic way of mobilizing traditional hunters in the fight against Islamist extremists is essential for prevention and preparedness for a potential violent extremist incursion. There is a need to frame the dozo issue in terms of counterterrorism to encourage the government to take action, while urging more effective efforts to rebuild poor relationships between the dozo and local communities to facilitate a more robust local security response, should extremists gain a foothold in Côte d'Ivoire.

Difficulties persist, however, and will require further research. The depoliticization of the dozo and the armed forces requires greater understanding, especially in the context of countering violent extremism. Given that the threat of Islamist extremism is imminent and there is scant possibility of totally disarming and demobilizing the dozo, the strategies suggested here involve closer cooperation between the government, state security forces, and the dozo in counterterrorism efforts.

Yet, in building stronger ties with state officials, the dozo might grow closer to former warlords and politicians they fought with in the civil war and who are already in the armed forces. Should a political crisis occur during the October presidential election, a strengthened relationship between state actors and traditional hunters might allow pro-government actors to more rapidly remobilize the dozo for their own ends. Strategies aimed at depoliticizing the dozo, while simultaneously encouraging greater cooperation with the government and political figures, will be important to consider in future research.

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32   Human Rights Watch, "That land is my family's wealth," October 9, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/10/09/land-my-familys-wealth/addressin0g-land-dispossession-after-cote-divoires-post; Author interviews with civilians Toulepleu, Blolequin, Duekoue, Guiglo, October 2017-October 2018.

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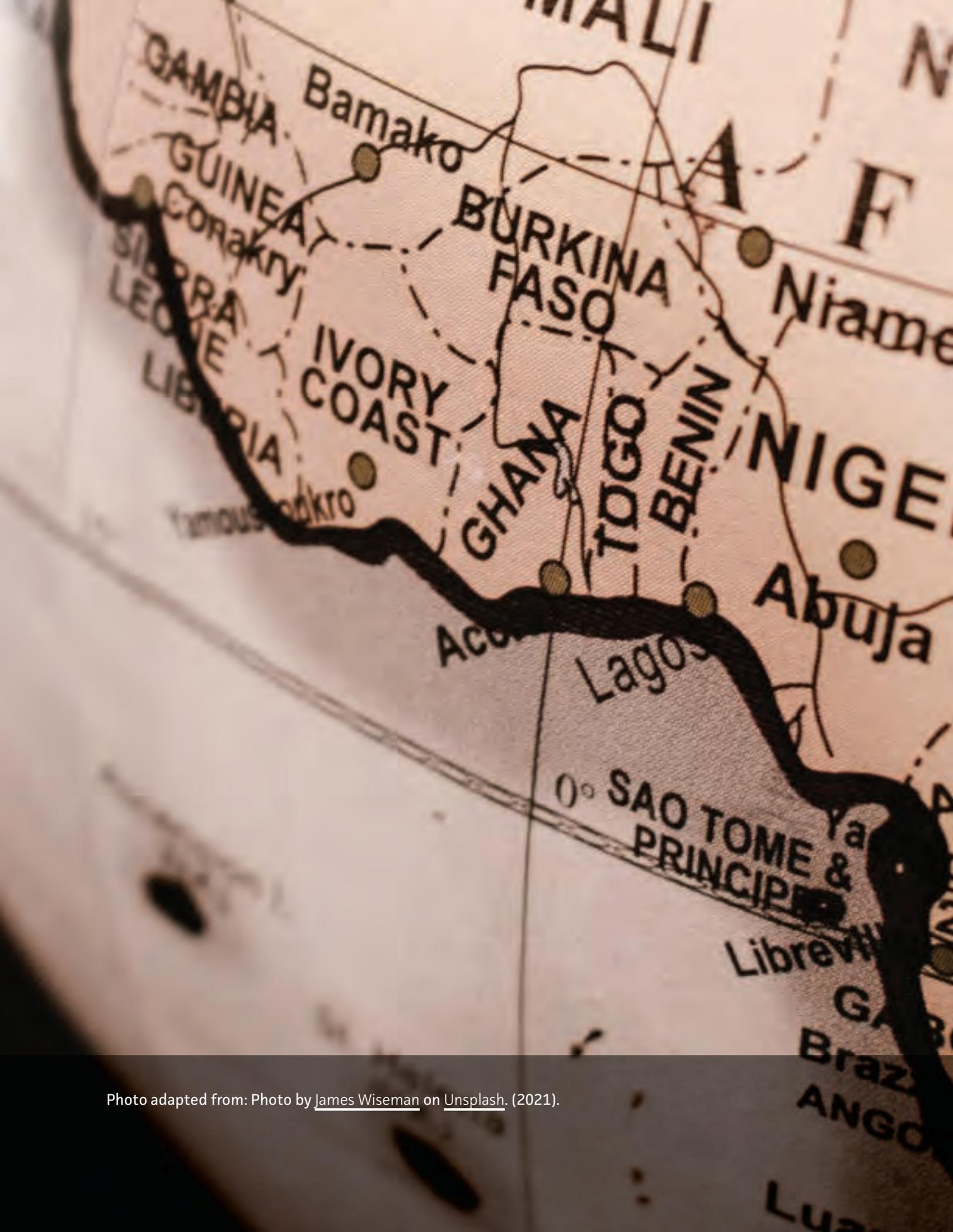
Photo adapted from: Photo by James Wiseman on Unsplash. (2021).

THE ROLE OF CBAGS
IN COMBATTING THE EXPANSION OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND BENIN

JESSICA MOODY

COMMUNITY BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

"*As experiences from the Sahel demonstrate, the appropriate use of CBAGs in the government response is essential to preventing a rapid escalation of violence.*"

FAST FACTS

» The failure of Malian, regional, and international forces to contain the violence has led to an exponential expansion of [Islamist] extremist groups into central Mali, as well as neighboring states.

» The increasing scope and sophistication of jihadist attacks in coastal states is concerning. Extremist groups are not simply launching hit-and-run assaults from bases in Burkina Faso, but are recruiting from and working more closely with local communities. In such a scenario, the role of CBAGs is crucial.

» The vast local knowledge and connections that CBAGs have provide an opportunity for them to assist in state responses to violent extremism without deploying them militarily.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

While Islamist extremist groups had been present and involved in criminal activities in northern Mali since the early 2000s, they began to gain ground in the Sahel around 2012, when small, local insurgencies connected with al-Qaeda began launching attacks in northern Mali. The situation was exacerbated by the fall of Colonel Khadafi's regime in nearby Libya in 2011 and that country's destabilization, gradually leading to an influx of radicalized Sahelian nationals and large amounts of weaponry into Mali. The failure of Malian, regional, and international forces to contain the violence has led to an exponential expansion of extremist groups—now mainly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)—into central Mali, as well as neighboring states. In particular, in Burkina Faso, the north-

ern regions of Soum and Oudalan have faced growing pressure, while groups have also expanded to the south and the east and have posed a threat to Ouagadougou.[1] Niger has also been targeted frequently and the regions of Tillabéry, Diffa, and Tahoua have been particularly badly affected.[2] In turn, this expansion now poses a growing threat to coastal West Africa as well.

Now, both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire find themselves periodically targeted by these groups. Benin has witnessed at least five attacks since the start of the year, and Côte d'Ivoire experienced 13 assaults over the course of 2020 and 2021.[3] The attacks have involved the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including at least four successful and two failed in Côte d'Ivoire, and indicate the intent, particularly of JNIM, which has been more frequently linked to these attacks than ISSP, to target both of these countries in a more sustained manner than has hitherto been the case.[4] Recurrent attacks in these coastal countries underscore a strategy that French intelligence services drew attention to in 2020: the desire by groups such as ISSP and JNIM to expand from their strongholds in the Sahel towards the coast of West Africa, from where valuable access to ports would allow them to expand their involvement in trafficking routes considerably.[5] An uptick in attacks in the first half of 2021 in Côte d'Ivoire and more recently in Benin and Togo—exemplified by the first successful attack on Togo occurring on May 10-11—suggests that the armed groups are making moves towards this objective.

The role of community based armed groups (CBAGs) within this evolving threat is extremely important. As JNIM and ISSP have expanded, governments lacking military resources in Burkina Faso and Mali have mobilized CBAGs, typically in the form of traditional hunters such as the dozo and the Koglweogo, to combat the insurgents.[6] While this has assisted these governments in targeting insurgents, especially in areas where the military has a limited footprint, the use of CBAGs to combat the expansion of jihadist groups has also raised a number of challenges. These armed groups are not trained or equipped to target sophisticated insurgencies. They have

1   Adele Orosz, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel is Strengthening its Grip in West Africa", *LSE Blogs,* February 15, 2022, https://blogs.lse. ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/02/15/violent-extremism-in-the-sahel-strengthening-grip-west-africa-mali-burkina-faso-niger-jihadi/.

2   Ibid.

3   Caleb Weiss, "Jihadist Attacks Flow Into Littoral West Africa," *Long War Journal,* December 3, 2021, https://www. longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/12/jihadist-attacks-flow-into-littoral-west-africa.php; Francois Mazet, "Attaque Dans l'Extrême-Nord du Bénin: «Cet Incident n'est pas un Incident Isolé," *RFI,* February 2, 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/ 20220210-attaque-dans-l-extr%C3%AAme-nord-du-b%C3%A9nin-cet-incident-n-est-pas-un-incident-isol%C3%A9.

4   Weiss, "Jihadist Attacks"; "Trois Attaques Ont Fait au Moins 9 Morts Dont un Français Dans le Nord du Bénin," *France 24,* February 11, 2022, https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20220211-trois-attaques-ont-fait-au-moins-9-morts-dont-un-fran%C3%A7ais-dans-le-nord-du-b%C3%A9nin.

5   Aneliese Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading to the Gulf of Guinea Littoral States, and a New Approach to Countering it is Needed," *Modern War Institute,* September 9, 2021, https://mwi.usma.edu/jihadism-is-spreading-to-the-gulf-of-guinea-littoral-states-and-a-new-approach-to-countering-it-is-needed/; Daniel Finnan, "Sahel Jihadists Eye Expansion into Côte d'Ivoire and Benin Says French Spy Boss," *RFI,* February 3, 2021, https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20210203-sahel-jihadists-eye-expansion-into-Côte-d-ivoire-and-benin-says-french-spy-boss-africa-attacks-military-aqim.

6   Koglweogo are a CBAG, which emerged in 2014–2015, largely comprising Mossi and Gourmantché communities. Koglweogo have become increasingly involved in efforts to tackle jihadist expansion with state support.

also been prone to human rights abuses and have extensively targeted herding communities, perceived to be associated with jihadist groups, such as the Peuhl, from which ISSP and JNIM have recruited considerably, without evidence that they have committed crimes.[7] This kind of violence has undermined the state's response by marginalizing some communities, in turn facilitating jihadist recruitment.[8] The relationship between the state, local communities, and CBAGs is therefore crucial for coastal West African states to manage effectively, as JNIM and ISGS expand into the littorals. This is not least because CBAGs' local knowledge and connections make them, if mobilized well, potentially valuable resources in combatting the proliferation of jihadist violence in coastal states.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

The main response to the expansion of extremist violence in Côte d'Ivoire and Benin thus far has been military. Both countries have significantly expanded their military presence in the northern border regions. In July 2019, Côte d'Ivoire launched an operation called Frontière étanche along its northern borders, before declaring a militarized zone in the northern region and deploying an additional 3,000 troops to the border in November 2021.[9] In Benin, military and police reinforcements have been sent to the north, and mobile positions have been set up.[10] Additionally, in April 2020, Benin further expanded its security force presence along the borders of Burkina Faso, Niger, and the north-western quarter of Nigeria, and further special forces are due to be posted to the region by 2025.[11]

This prioritization of a military response raises many problems. While reinforcing security is required, neither Côte d'Ivoire nor Benin has a particularly effective military.[12] Côte d'Ivoire's armed forces are prone to mutinies and have been undergoing extensive, though often inef-

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7   Peuhl communities are traditionally nomadic herders, which has generated varying levels of conflict in coastal and Sahel states in West Africa. This has periodically resulted in attacks on Peuhl communities by farmers who perceive the herders to have trampled their land or stolen their livestock. Protection and dispute resolution in these disagreements has been minimal and the Peuhl have often perceived themselves to be unfairly attacked for being herders. Jihadist groups have mobilised this feeling of marginalisation to recruit widely in Peuhl communities, which has exacerbated local negative sentiment towards Peuhl people, who are now perceived negatively for being herders as well as because of the perception that they are all involved with jihadist groups. In turn this has led to further attacks on Peuhl communities by self-defense groups seeking to eradicate jihadist forces, spurring still more recruitment of Peuhl people to jihadist groups. "The New Frontier for Jihadist Groups?," *KAS* (2021): 42; "A Vicious Cycle: The Reactionary Nature of Militant Attacks in Burkina Faso and Mali," *ACLED,* May 31, 2019, https://acleddata.com/2019/05/31/a-vicious-cycle-the-reactionary-nature-of-militant-attacks-in-burkina-faso-and-mali/.

8   "The New Frontier," 42; *ACLED*, "A Vicious Cycle."

9   Georges Ibrahim Tounkara, "Lutte Contre le Terrorisme: l'Armée Ivoirienne Recrute," *DW,* November 23, 2021, https://www.dw.com/fr/c%C3%B4te-divoire-arm%C3%A9e-recrutement-terrorisme/a-59912946; "The New Frontier," 14.

10   "The New Frontier," 43.

11   "The New Frontier," 43; "Le Bénin Renforce la Coopération Sécuritaire Avec ses Voisins Face à la Recrudescence d'Attaques," *RFI*, February 14, 2022, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220214-le-b%C3%A9nin-renforce-la-coop%C3%A9ration-s%C3%A9curitaire-avec-ses-voisins-face-%C3%A0-la-recrudescence-d-attaques.

12   "The New Frontier," 44; Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

fective, security sector reform since the end of the civil war in 2011.[13] Equally, Benin's President Patrice Talon is widely believed to fear a coup against his presidency and has therefore starved his armed forces of resources, making sustained operations in the north much harder.[14] In the Sahel, a lack of resources combined with poorly trained armed forces has resulted in poor military outcomes. In Burkina Faso, for example, the military has often struggled to retain territory it has taken during offensives.[15] Additionally, security forces have often resorted to brutal methods, largely because they are poorly trained and struggle to differentiate between civilians and jihadist forces, leading to mass extrajudicial killings of communities thought to be involved with jihadists. According to Human Rights Watch, this approach has resulted in the extrajudicial execution of several hundred men, and contributed to a loss of trust in the security services among the local population and to an increasing spiral of violence in the region.[16] There are already signs that a similar situation is occurring in the littoral states, where Peuhl people in Côte d'Ivoire have complained that they are being arbitrarily arrested and mistreated for their alleged role in jihadist activities.[17]

The role of CBAGs in the military response of both Côte d'Ivoire and Benin is also of concern. In Côte d'Ivoire, CBAGs such as the dozo traditional hunter groups are prominent, particularly in the north and the west, and have often been used as a parallel army by the government.[18] As yet there are few indications that the dozo are being systematically used to target jihadist forces in the north. There are signs, however, that the government is considering using them in such a manner, having already deployed them to assist with the aftermath of the al-Mouribatoun attack in Grand Bassam in 2016.[19] Given the human rights violations that appear to be committed by security personnel in the north, the way that the government intends to operationalize the dozo in its response to rising insecurity is of concern, particularly given the precedent set in the Sahel. The situation in Benin is slightly different because traditional hunters there are not as closely tied to the government, although the challenge that CBAGs pose to the government's response to increasing Islamist extremist violence remains. This is not least because in northern Benin, traditional hunters have been marginalized by recent regulations against hunting in the northern national parks, reducing their ability to make a living.[20] This raises the risk that these traditional hunters could be recruited by jihadists and their potentially valuable assistance—given their vast local knowledge and connections—in combating the expansion of Islamist extremist groups will be lost.[21]

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13   The temperament of the Ivoirian armed forces has improved somewhat since former rebel leader and head of the national assembly Guillaume Soro went into exile in 2019. Soro had been heavily implicated in numerous mutinies in Côte d'Ivoire, which have since dissipated – the last one occurring in 2017. However, following years of reshuffles and reorganisation of the military, the level of discipline and the extent to which the forces are well organised remains highly questionable. Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

14   Kars de Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction: Northern Benin and Risk of Violent Extremist Spillover," *Clingendael CRU Report*, June 2021: 39.

15   "The New Frontier," 45.

16   Ibid.

17   Henry Wilkins & Nanythe Talani, "Dans le Nord Ivoirien, les Groupes Jihadistes Exploitent les Fractures Sociales," *VOA,* April 11, 2022, https://www.voaafrique.com/a/dans-le-nord-ivoirien-les-groupes-jihadistes-exploitent-les-fractures-sociales-/6523091.html.

18   Richard Banegas, "Reconstruction 'Post-Conflit': Violence et Politique en Côte d'Ivoire," *Les dossiers du CERI*, October 2012: 6.

19   Rodrigue Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs Traditionnels Dozo en Côte d'Ivoire: Enjeux Socioculturels et Dynamiques Sécuritaires," *Centre Franco Paix*, June 2018: 45.

20   "The New Frontier," 42.

21   Ibid.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenge 1: Operationalization of CBAGs in combating jihadist violence is uncertain and relationship between military and CBAGs is unclear

While the Ivoirian government has a better relationship with the dozo in northern Côte d'Ivoire than the Beninese government has with traditional hunters in the north of that country, the way that CBAGs are to be used in combating the expansion of jihadist violence has yet to be defined in either country. This raises questions over the training of the traditional hunter groups and what rules of engagement they are following. This is particularly problematic if the military is being accused of human rights abuses already, as in Côte d'Ivoire, and if CBAGs are mobilized with the support of the state, as in Burkina Faso and as has often been perceived as the case in Côte d'Ivoire historically. In such scenarios, popular perceptions will likely conflate the actions of the military with those of CBAGs, and human rights abuses committed by one will likely affect the reputation of both. Moreover, given CBAGs' limited training for conflict with jihadist groups and widespread stereotypes about the affiliation of Peuhl communities with jihadist groups, the potential for CBAGs to engage in human rights abuses is high, as has been witnessed in Burkina Faso and Mali. For example, in Burkina Faso, Koglweogo self-defense militias help the government in security crackdowns by identifying members of the Peuhl community involved in militant activities, a behavior that has led to human rights abuses and can provoke retribution against the perceived constituency of the Koglweogo – the Mossi and the Gourmantche.[22]

Challenge 2: Communities are more likely to escalate violence or join jihadist groups in response to perceived prejudices and abuses of power by military or CBAGs

One of the major problems in countering Islamist extremism that has occurred in the Sahel is the lack of trust that local populations have for the government and the armed forces, as well as CBAGs who have committed human rights abuses while working with the state.[23] This can result in a tendency to cooperate more closely with the jihadist groups. In cases where jihadist groups offer security and basic services, local communities can rapidly develop a more trusting relationship with them. That the Peuhl community in northern Côte d'Ivoire is already claiming discrimination at the hands of the military and dozens have left the northern town of Kafolo, fearing reprisals for jihadist violence, suggests that this challenge could escalate rapidly in the northern border regions.[24] Equally, the Beninese state's implementation of

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22   ACLED, "A Vicious Cycle."

23   Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

24   AFP, "Jihadist Threat Stirs Anti-Fulani Hostility in Ivory Coast," *Africa News,* January 26, 2021, https://www.africanews.com/2022/01/26/jihadist-threat-stirs-anti-fulani-hostility-in-ivory-coast/.

strict regulations around herding and farming within its northern national parks has marginal-ized many northern communities, which may facilitate their recruitment by jihadist groups.[25]

Opportunity 1: Governments can build more trust with local communities through improving land management and development policies

There is a considerable opportunity to address latent tensions between Peuhl communities, tra-ditional hunters, and armed forces in northern parts of Benin and Côte d'Ivoire by enhancing understanding of land access and acquisition and providing more accessible legal means to dis-pute land access. This is crucial because if these tensions, which occur predominantly over land, are left unaddressed, they are likely to facilitate recruitment among communities which perceive themselves to be marginalized in the north of both Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, both states struggle with populations disputing and claiming land access, leading to regular conflict between different communities.[26] This can relate to disputes involving the nomadic Peuhl herders, tra-ditional hunters, and more settled farming communities, as in the Sahel, but can also be prob-lematic among other ethnic communities, and is largely due to a lack of recognized land titles. In Benin, in the northern provinces of Alibori and Atakora, more than 80 percent of households do not have land titles, even though the overwhelming majority of the population (between 80 and 90 percent) live on agriculture, hunting, or fishing.[27] In Côte d'Ivoire, longstanding tensions over land acquisition and access, complicated by the influx, over the past 100 years, of large numbers of 'non-autochthonous' populations, predominantly from Burkina Faso, lead to regular outbreaks of violence.[28] The government can do more to address these problems. Currently in Côte d'Ivoire, to demarcate land and gain a land title is prohibitively expensive for most farming communities.[29] The government could expedite this process by decreasing the cost significantly and making it much easier for communities to acquire titles by establishing one-stop shops in rural areas. Establishing a clear process for disputing land access with local government and sub-sequently initiating sensitization campaigns surrounding this process would also help to reduce tensions and violent clashes over land in both countries.

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25   Matthieu Millecamps, "Benin : Has Talon's Government Underestimated the Jihadist Risk?," *The Africa Report,* June 18, 2021, https://www.theafricareport.com/98859/benin-has-talons-government-underestimated-the-jihadist-risk/; "The New Fron-tier," 49.

26   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34; Matthew Mitchell, "Land Reform and Peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire: Navigating the Minefield," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (December 2021): 1–20; "The New Frontier," 29; De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 8.

27   "The New Frontier," 28.

28   Koné, "La Confrérie des Chasseurs," 34; Matthew Mitchell, "Land Reform and Peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire: Navigating the Minefield," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (December 2021): 1–20.

29   Matthew Mitchell, "Land Tenure Reform and Politics in Post-Conflict Côte d'Ivoire: A Precarious Peace in the Western Cocoa Regions," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (August 2014): 203–221; Author interviews with civilians, farmers and govern-ment officials in Toulepleu, Duekoue, Guiglo October 2017 – October 2018.

Expanding development programs would also reduce competition for minimal resources and increase opportunities for civilians to make a living in northern Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. This in turn would reduce community tensions over land access. Côte d'Ivoire has already made a good start on significantly expanding its development programs for the north of the country, which is a crucial part of building trust with local communities and convincing them that the state will support them. For example, Côte d'Ivoire has begun developing a dry port at Ferkessedougou and an integrated agro-industrial center in the far north.[30] The project is part of a series of large investments that will boost local processing of cotton and cashews.[31] Meanwhile, in Benin, the government set up the Beninese Agency for the Integrated Management of Border Areas (ABeGIEF) in 2012.[32] The agency is intended to foster a sense of belonging among the Beninese people by building infrastructure and implementing poverty-reduction policies.[33] Since its creation, ABeGIEF has built 50 wells, 150 classrooms, markets, processing units, and police stations.[34] The expansion of and the addition of more similar programs, particularly surrounding education, health, and infrastructure, would be a highly effective and cost-efficient way of reducing the potential for civilians to join armed groups in the northern parts of these countries.

Opportunity 2: In contributing to countering violent extremism, CBAGs should be mobilized in local community trust-building exercises instead of military functions

The vast local knowledge and connections that CBAGs have provide an opportunity for them to assist in state responses to violent extremism without deploying them militarily. Indeed, CBAGs could be incorporated into dialogue and sensitization campaigns with local communities, acting as focal points in the community, along with civil society representatives such as youth and women's groups, for coordinating these kinds of meetings.[35] These forms of dialogue should be as inclusive as possible, involving heads of farmers associations, leaders of CBAGs in the area, and other actors that are regularly coming into conflict with others in the region, such as the African Parks Network (APN) NGO in Benin.[36] Programs already in action could be expanded: as a leading example, the ABeGIEF is actively developing relationships with civil society networks and

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30   Ange Aboa, "Ivory Coast Says it Will Invest in North to Counter Jihadism," *Reuters,* November 8, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ivory-coast-says-it-will-invest-north-counter-jihadism-2021-11-08/.

31   Aboa, "Ivory Coast Says."

32   "The New Frontier," 27.

33   Ibid.

34   Ibid.

35   Bernard, "Jihadism is Spreading."

36   APN provides armed rangers in northern Benin and is deployed to protect the northern nature reserves. However, APN's role in northern Benin has been contentious because it has cracked down heavily on hunting and herding in national parks, which had been a key form of livelihood for many members of northern Beninese communities, leading to recurrent outbreaks of small-scale violence between APN and communities in the north.

supporting border communities that have peaceful relationships with their neighbors.[37] Regular dialogue of this kind would improve the level of trust between CBAGs and local communities, reducing the scope for members of communities like the Peuhl to feel marginalized, thereby disrupting jihadist recruitment strategies.

CONCLUSION

The increasing scope and sophistication of jihadist attacks in coastal states is concerning. The challenge is made more pertinent by the fact that extremist groups are not simply launching hit-and-run assaults from bases in Burkina Faso, but are recruiting from and working more closely with local communities.[38] In such a scenario, the role of CBAGs is crucial. As experiences from the Sahel demonstrate, the appropriate use of CBAGs in the government response is essential to preventing a rapid escalation of violence. To this end, several steps can be taken. The governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Benin can do more to delineate the way that they intend to operationalize CBAGs in the response to extremist violence and place the emphasis on their role in community trust-building rather than in heavy-handed violent attacks on communities allegedly affiliated with jihadists, as has been witnessed in the Sahel. The government can also, with the assistance of international donors, expand existing development initiatives and land management programs that would serve to reduce communal tensions which, if left unaddressed, are likely to facilitate jihadist expansion.

37   De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 9.
38   De Bruijne, "Laws of Attraction," 1.

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THE CHALLENGE OF STATE-BACKED INTERNAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA: CONSIDERATIONS FOR AMOTEKUN

JENNIFER OBADO-JOEL

COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

> "*Accountability mechanisms and the design of a transition program are required to support the success of Amotekun in responding to security threats in the Nigerian Southwest.*"

FAST FACTS

» To address tensions, and the potential for conflict or further security challenges resulting from them, a coherent framework of engagement across different levels of governments and stakeholders is necessary.

» The inclusion of civil society in the training of recruits and members of all participating CBAGs and CBAs is the first step in building social accountability mechanisms in the implementation of Amotekun.

» Including CDAs and Joint CDAs in the monitoring and engagement framework for the Amotekun corps will support trust-building with local communities.

CONTEXT

Nigeria faces immense internal security challenges, including the Boko-Haram crisis in the northeast and violent farmer-herder conflicts in the southwest and north-central states. Across the Nigerian federation, pockets of violent clashes have sprung and escalated in new locales in the last decade. Community responses to these violent crises have been diverse and included the establishment of armed groups to supplement or act in parallel to the security efforts of the Nigerian state—in some cases with backing from federal or local governments.

In the Northeast, for example, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was launched by Maiduguri's youth in 2013 as a community-led response to counter violent attacks by Boko-Haram insurgents in Borno state, the main theatre of the Boko Haram insurgency. The CJTF

has since grown into a community-based armed group (CBAG) backed by the federal government to complement the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) of the Nigerian Army, to some degree of success.[1] The group continues to exist as a Counter Insurgency (COIN) mechanism by the Nigerian government, with the opportunity for its members to become regularized as members of the Nigerian armed forces.[2]

Nigerian CBAGs recognized by the state, including the CJTF, vary in their composition, mandate, and relative success. This Policy Note focuses on the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of Amotekun, a recently formed CBAG in Southwest Nigeria. Drawing from the experiences of similar groups, the Note details recommendations that may facilitate greater success and lessen potential risk associated with Amotekun's formation.

Amotekun: Origins, composition, and controversy

In 2019, with increasing incidents of violence and attacks on farmers and travelers, the governors of Southwestern Nigerian states initiated a campaign to establish Amotekun ("Leopard" in the Yoruba language), or the Western Nigeria Security Network (WSN). Citing concerns about the capacity of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) to provide security to rural and urban residents in the region,[3] Amotekun was to complement the operations of national security forces, such as the NPF.[4] In March 2020, Amotekun was established by an act of law, making state governments responsible for its funding and administration. Certain characteristics of Amotekun, however, distinguish it from other similar security providers, such as the CJTF.

First, unlike the CJTF, which functions as a singular body, in its design Amotekun is intended to function as a paramilitary force comprised of an aggregation of existing CBAGs, such as:

- » the "hunters association"

- » "Agbekoya farmers association,"

- » "Oodua People's Congress" (OPC) in Southwest Nigeria,

- » socio-political groups such as the Pan-Yoruba socio-political group "Afenifere," as well as units of newly recruited corps members.[5]

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1   Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Armed Community Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington D.C.: Resolve Network, 2019). https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2.

2   John Campbell, "Buhari Discusses the Future of the Civilian Joint Task Force," *Africa In Transition,* May 20, 2016, https://www.cfr.org/blog/buhari-discusses-future-civilian-joint-task-force.

3   Henry Ojelu, "Constitutional implication of Operation Amotekun," *Vanguard*, January 10, 2020, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/01/constitutional-implication-of-operation-amotekun/.

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5   "Operation Amotekun: South-West to train OPC, hunters, Others," *Punch,* January 7, 2020, https://punchng.com/operation-amotekun-south-west-to-train-opc-hunters-others/.

Given this distinction, for the purposes of this policy note, Amotekun will be referred to as a **state-backed supra-CBAG (SBSC)**. Defining Amotekun as an SBSC underlines its unique character as part of an aggregation of cross-regional CBAGs and community-based associations (CBAs) responsible for the security of rural and urban communities in Southwest Nigeria.

The groups party to Amotekun have a long history of security mobilization in the Nigerian Southwest. These groups, initially formed as a response to political contestation, eventually expanded their mandate into security operations. The Agbekoya Farmers Group launched a successful violent revolt in response to a new tax regime on peasant farmers between 1968 to 1969 against the military administration in Western Nigeria.[6] Similarly, the Yoruba Council of Leaders formed Afenifere, a powerful socio-cultural and political group in advance of the Fourth Republic in 1999.[7] Leaders of Afenifere are considered custodians of the socio-cultural and political agenda of the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.[8]

The Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) is also a socio-cultural group with a militia corps committed to the protection and furtherance of the Yoruba ethnic group's political interest.[9] Although OPC had similar ideals to Afenifere, the leadership or membership does not necessarily overlap. Given their history, the groups' involvement in Amotekun raises questions as to what its political aspirations or objectives may be or evolve into, if not limited by federal, state, or community mechanisms for security provision objectives.

Second, although with a similar mandate, Amotekun has no focal adversary, in contrast to the CJTF's central mission against Boko Haram insurgents. A critical factor in the community acceptance and success of the CJTF is the clarity of its mission and target opposition. The mandate of Amotekun, however, is vaguely described as supporting internal security forces. This vagueness in mandate lends to fears of the potential for operational overreach and resultant abuses, especially targeting particular ethnic groups such as the Fulani.[10]

Third, unlike other state-backed CBAGs and paramilitary corps that predate it across Nigeria, Amotekun is the first regional SBSC in the country. Additionally, unlike the CJTF, Amotekun is backed by the governors of Nigerian states, not the federal government of Nigeria or the NPF. There is, as of yet, no framework that delineates operational and administrative jurisdictions related to Amotekun between the NPF and state governments.

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6   Tunde Adeniran, "The Dynamics of Peasant Revolt: A Conceptual Analysis of the Agbekoya Parapo Uprising in the Western State of Nigeria," *Journal of Black Studies* 4, no. 4. (1974): 363-375.

7   Mahmud Jega, "A Reflection on 20 Years of Democracy in Nigeria," *Africa Portal*, August 5, 2019, https://www.africaportal.org/publications/reflection-20-years-democracy-nigeria/

8   Charles Kumolu, "Amotekun is tokenism, struggle for real solution continues," *Vanguard*, January 13, 2020, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/01/amotekun-is-tokenism-struggle-for-real-solution-continues-odumakin-afenifere-spokesman/.

9   "The O'odua People's Congress (OPC): Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch*, January 2003, https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/02/28/oodua-peoples-congress-opc/fighting-violence-violence.

10   The Fulani are a pastoralist ethnic group present across West African countries.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Concerns about the institutional character of Amotekun provoked reactions from the Inspector General of the NPF. The federal Attorney General issued a letter citing the illegality of Amotekun a few days after its launch.[11] On August 25, 2020, the Nigerian Office of the President issued a statement asserting that the NPF will determine the operational structure of Amotekun.[12] In a television interview on August 27, 2020, the governor of Ondo state (one of several supporting Amoetekun operatives) denied claims that Amotekun would be institutionalized as part of the Ondo state police infrastructure.[13] In reality, the Amotekun Law situates administrative jurisdiction for its operation with state governments and not the Inspector General of Police.

Pro-Amoetekun legal practitioners justified the constitutionality of Amotekun by comparing it to the establishment of the Kano State Hisbah Corps (*hisbah)* through legal statute in Kano (Northwestern Nigeria), citing the operationalization of the *hisbah* as setting precedent for Amotekun.[14] Although nominally established as a religious organization in 2003, *hisbah* evolved to include policing activities and direct reporting to the state police in Kano. Supporters of Amotekun also reference the existence of state-backed CBAGs such as the "Kaduna State Neighborhood service" and the Ebonyi State "Neighborhood Watch Group" in Northwestern and Southeastern Nigeria, respectively. The ongoing debates over the jurisdiction and governance of Amotekun highlights the oft-contested boundaries of administrative powers between the national and sub-national governments. The controversy and disparate rulings from the federal judiciary lend to additional concern that intergroup competition will increase over access to security resources and further accentuate pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions.

The creation of Amotekun has also accelerated calls by other ethnic socio-political groups for the formation of their own security forces. Ethnic socio-political groups, such as the Myetti-Allah (based in the north) and the Pan Niger Delta Forum, have agitated for the right to have their own security forces.[15] Myetti-Allah have raised concurrent concerns that Amotekun could become a paramilitary force deployed for private purposes by state governments and politicians in the Southwest.[16]

Concerns about Amotekun's negative potentials are not far-fetched. Amotekun appears more as an armed social movement backed by sub-national governments than a hyper-locally generated and supported

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11   Remi Feyisopo and Iwok Iniobong, "Controversy trails attorney-general's pronouncement of 'Amotekun' as illegal," *Business Day*, January 16, 2020, https://businessday.ng/politics/article/controversy-trails-attorney-generals-pronouncement-of-amotekun-as-illegal/.

12   Eniola Akinkuotu, "IG will determine Amotekun's structure, says Presidency," *Punch Newspapers Nigeria*, August 25, 2020, https://punchng. com/ig-will-determine-amotekuns-structure-says-presidency/?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1598364364.

13   Dawn Commission, "Interview with Rotimi Akeredolu (SAN)," Channels Television video on Facebook, August 27, 2020, https://www. facebook.com/dawncommission/videos/758006591714802/?extid=ridqXo5mEeonpyYl.

14   Femi Falana, "On Volte Face of Attorney-General on Amotekun by Femi Falana," *Sahara Reporters*, January 23, 2020. http://sahara reporters.com/2020/01/23/volte-face-attorney-general-amotekun-femi-falana.

15   "23 States Run Local Security Outfits as Groups Demand Decentralised Policing," *This Day*, January 13, 2020, https://www.thisdaylive. com/index.php/2020/01/13/23-states-run-local-security-outfits-as-groups-demand-decentralised-policing/.

16   Channels Television, "'We are Afraid of Amotekun', Miyetti Allah's Alhassan Disagrees with Olasupo Ojo over Initiative, *Youtube video*, January 21, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekWAQSR9gjc.

CBAG. Opponents to the establishment of Amotekun consider it a social movement due to aggregation of recruits from preexisting CBAGs and CBAs. Furthermore, the strength of Amotekun is perhaps its main weakness. Amotekun's power derives from the strong collective cultural identity between states in the Southwest and the shared grievance over the alleged attacks and killings committed by the nomadic herdsmen from Northern Nigeria.[17] The strength of the collective identity underpinning Amotekun could be a force for good or destruction.

To address these issues, it is important to implement appropriate organizing and administrative frameworks and to draw on lessons learned from the operations and transformations of other state-backed CBAGs, including the CJTF and OPC (the latter of which is Included within Amotekun) in the ongoing implementation of Amotekun.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accountability mechanisms and the design of a transition program are required to support the success of Amotekun in responding to security threats in the Nigerian Southwest. The launch of Amotekun has created concern about the possibility of ethnic-based attacks by non-indigenous residents—ostensibly in reaction to the asymmetry in representative security actors—and proposals of similar groups by other ethnic groups. Given the relative absence of successfully implemented accountability and transition programs in the CBAGs context, the success of the Amotekun as a positive contributor in community security rests on the delicate balance of protecting rural and urban communities in the Nigerian Southwest without simultaneously escalating already heightened ethnic tensions in Nigeria, and managing the competition between federal and state administrative bodies.

The recommendations below detail strategies to ensure Amoetekun's effectiveness, legitimacy, and accountability to citizens, state governments, and the Inspector General of Police. Ensuring Amotekun remains a positive actor in local security provision will require a comprehensive engagement process by the Nigerian federal government, state governments, and civil society actors such as the media and advocacy groups.

Codify a coherent, operational, and administrative framework for Amotekun

As noted earlier, unlike the CJTF, Amotekun is administered by the governments of Southwestern Nigerian states, not the federal government of Nigeria or the NPF. Operation by state governments has already led to tensions on the convergence of the operational and administrative jurisdictions between the NPF and state governments. To address these tensions, and the potential for conflict or further security chal-

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17   Dayo Johnson and Dapo Akinrefon, "HERDSMEN: Tension, anger in South West," *Vanguard*, May 31, 2019, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/05/herdsmen-tension-anger-in-south-west/.

lenges resulting from them, a coherent framework of engagement across different levels of governments and stakeholders is necessary.

The transformation of the Oodua People' Congress (OPC) provides a cautionary tale on the importance of designing a coherent operational and administrative framework for Amotekun. The OPC was a socio-political group formed in 1993, towards the end of Nigeria's military dictatorship. However, with the re-emergence of democracy in 1999 and a change in the political environment, the OPC's youth arm launched a vigilante corps to provide security for rural and urban communities in response to rising crime rates in the Southwest.

With minimal operational and administrative oversight, some OPC members undertook arrests, prosecution, and extra-judicial killings of suspected criminals.[18] OPC members would arrest suspected criminals, take them to their homes, and burn them in the presence of their families.[19] While residents and the Lagos state government in Southwest Nigeria first hailed their efforts at controlling crime, their activities soon escalated to indiscriminate acts of violence targeting locals, especially traders from other ethnic groups in major markets.[20] Increases in violent attacks on citizens culminated in the announcement of a ban of the OPC by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002. However, the OPC led by Ganiyu Adams still exists in some form today.

Devise a merit-based recruitment process for Amotekun corps members

The recruitment calls by state governments for Amotekun corps members are already available online.[21] Required qualifications include a minimum of primary school education and documentation submission to prove the applicant's indigeneity.[22] By its indigeneity requirement, applicants for the Amotekun corps must show documentation proving their ethnicity to the Yoruba tribe or other ethnic groups in the Southwest. Therefore, non-ethnic residents or migrants will not qualify as a recruit, creating a polarization potential between the Amotekun corps and non-ethnic residents in the Nigerian Southwest. The indigeneity requirement will likely escalate preexisting ethnic tensions in southwestern states.

The question of indigeneity vis-a-vis citizenship is a challenging discussion in the Nigerian context, as it focuses on the ethnic group of the applicant rather than Nigerian citizenship. Therefore, a focus on merit-based rather than an ethnic-based recruitment process will likely alleviate concerns of Amotekun

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18 Insa Nolte, "Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People's Congress in South-Western Nigeria," *International Relations* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 2007): 217-235, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0047117807077005

19 "The O'odua People's Congress (OPC): Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch*, January 2003, https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/02/28/oodua-peoples-congress-opc/fighting-violence-violence.

20 Ibid.

21 "Amotekun Recruitment 2020/2021—Application Form & Portal," Hotjobsng, September 8, 2020, https://hotjobsng.com/amotekun-corps-recruitment/

22 Tosan Olajide, "Amotekun Ekiti recruitment form portal," *Financial Watch Nigeria*, July 11, 2020, https://www.financialwatchngr.com/2020/07/11/amotekun-ekiti-recruitment-form-portal-www-amotekun-ekitistate-gov-ng/.

becoming a tribe-based armed group. Furthermore, selected applicants should show strong ties to the local communities they are assigned to. Examples of strong community ties may include applicants' birth in the neighborhood and/or a minimum of 10 years of residence in the community, rather than their membership of an ethnic group in the Nigerian Southwest.

The Nigerian senate is already proposing a law that confers indigeneity on Nigerian citizens who have resided in a locality for at least ten years.[23] By reframing what it means to be "indigenous" to a local community, the law will support a decrease in restrictions on non-indigenes to purchase lands, qualification for local government and state government elections, bursaries, and scholarships for students among other benefits. The new law may also incite fresh inter-ethnic clashes due to fears of economic or demographic domination. Therefore, within the design and implementation of Amotekun are possible instigators of internal security challenges, as well as potential solutions to sources of localized contestation.

Build social accountability mechanisms

State governments serving as civilian principals of Amotekun must monitor its recruits' actions and activities and participating CBAGs and CBAs. Monitoring activities and operations of the Amotekun corps will require mechanisms that allow state governments and civil society groups to observe the group directly. The inclusion of civil society in the training of recruits and members of all participating CBAGs and CBAs is the first step in building social accountability mechanisms in the implementation of Amotekun. Effective monitoring mechanisms for Amotekun should include early warning signals that indicate when Amotekun operatives are neglecting their duties or undertaking activities beyond their institutional mandates. To counteract opportunities of elected officials for using Amotekun to villainize political opponents or victimize an ethnic group, civil society groups should establish monitoring programs for Amotekun.

Civil society groups should partner with landlord associations and community development associations (CDAs) in local areas to monitor and report incidences of victimization by Amotekun recruits. An example of such monitoring programs by civil society organizations is the "Follow the Money" champions campaign by Connected Development (CODE), a civil society group empowering residents of local communities to track the implementation of public projects in their neighborhoods.[24] Furthermore, public engagement in the fiscal administration of Amotekun will foster trust between the Amotekun operation and the public. An example of such participation in budget administration is Budg.IT, a tech-based civil society group that monitors and tracks national and sub-national public spending in Nigeria.[25] Moreover, civic engagement in the budgetary process will clarify funding sources for Amotekun, which might prevent its capture by political entrepreneurs for private gains.

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23   Sunday Aborishade, "Resident of a state for 10 years should become indigene –Senate," *Punch*, March 8, 2020, https://punchng.com/resident-of-a-state-for-10-years-should-become-indigene-senate/.

24   Connected Development (CODE), accessed August 27, 2020, https://www.connecteddevelopment.org/.

25   Budg.IT Nigeria, accessed August 27, 2020, https://yourbudgit.com/.

Amotekun should use social media platforms for engagement and public accountability, similar to the Nigerian Police Force. Similarly, advocacy coalitions and groups can also leverage social network platforms' extensive usage for non-violent accountability campaigns. One such movement is the #EndSars campaign on Twitter, through which citizens report human rights abuses of citizens by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force.[26] The active role of Twitter in mobilizing citizens and groups to protest against police brutality, social media platforms can also serve as a feedback mechanism for Amotekun as a means of gauging public perceptions of the efficacy and legitimacy of its operations. However, to avoid competition with the NPF, federal and sub-national coordination frameworks for the implementation of Amotekun should include modalities on public engagements for all collaborating security agencies. Media reportage on the activities of Amotekun could also serve as another form of checks and balances on Amotekun.

Include Community Development Associations (CDAs) in the monitoring and engagement framework for Amotekun

Another strategy for checks and balances is the inclusion of Community Development Associations (CDAs) and Joint Community Development Associations in the monitoring framework for Amotekun. The membership of CDAs consists of all adult residents of a given community, who meet regularly to discuss and collaborate to address challenges and development projects. Likewise, the Joint CDA membership includes the leadership of all CDAs in a Local Government Area (LGA) within a state. Often, CDAs and Joint CDAs represent the voice of the communities they serve.

Already, CDAs monitor activities of local vigilantes and also support LGA administrators in enforcing movement restrictions during the monthly sanitation exercises in many states. Therefore, including CDAs and Joint CDAs in the monitoring and engagement framework for the Amotekun corps will support trust-building with local communities, which could also serve as sources of security information.

Strengthen responsiveness to changing threat environments

The institutionalization of Amotekun would support the legitimacy of its mandate. However, changes in the threat environment may necessitate the demobilization of Amotekun or transition to an informal group supporting the maintenance of law and order in communities. Moreover, the availability of transition plans will reduce the likelihood of the emergence of Amotekun corps members' grievances who will face job loss if the threat environment changes. This recommendation is similar to the proposed integration of the CJTF into the Nigerian armed forces and police force at the end of the Boko-Haram COIN operations.

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26   At the time of writing this policy note, the nationwide #EndSARs protests had not kicked off.

Any framework accounting for the possibility that Amotekun will at some point need to be adapted or dismantled should take into consideration similar challenges facing the CJTF. The CJTF, in this regard, should also serve as a caution to state governments on the implementation of Amotekun. Even with its success, policy analysts are concerned about the demobilization, disarmament, settlement, and reintegration of CJTF post the Boko-Haram crisis.[27] With their military training and access to weaponry, the CJTF may become a new security threat to the local populace after their primary adversary is defeated.

Concerns about the possibility of future predation on local communities by the CJTF resonate with current worries of the NPF and other ethnic socio-political groups about the proposed access of Amotekun recruits to weaponry. As Amotekun begins its operations, it is important that governors in the Nigerian Southwest work with the Nigerian Police Force to design an exit strategy for Amotekun. Such exit strategy may include their absorption into the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), a gradual phaseout of Amotekun corps within a stipulated number of years supported by a re-orientation of its recruits into civilian life.

CONCLUSION

The rapid proliferation of community-based, state supported hybrid security forces shows no sign of slowing as conflict and insecurity continue to wreak havoc across West Africa. It is imperative that state security and governance strategies around these groups take into account the local politics that shape these groups, include transparent social accountability mechanisms, and acknowledge that efforts to increase capacity in the short term must be married with plans for eventual off-ramps in the long term. Operation Amotekun presents the Nigerian state an opportunity to lay the foundation to transform community security provision and the relationships between civilians and security actors, for better or for worse.

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27   Chitra Nagarajan, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria* (Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 22, 2018) https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/research/cjtf-yan-gora/.

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