ODI

Report

Resist, negotiate, submit?

Civilian agency and jihadism in Central Mali

Natasja Rupesinghe

November 2023

Acknowledgements

About this publication
This paper is a joint output of the ODI and the Centre on Armed Groups. The Centre on Armed Groups supports efforts to analyse and engage with armed groups to reduce violence and end armed conflict. It does so through conducting innovative research, creating spaces for dialogue and providing advice.

About the authors
Natasja Rupesinghe is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at the University of Oxford. She researches civilian agency in civil war, insurgencies and stabilisation operations in the Sahel.

Contents

Display items

Acronyms and terminology

AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
Barkhane	French counter-terror operation (2014–2022)
Bourgoutières	nutritious pasture found in the Inner Niger Delta
Cercle	second-level administrative unit
Da Na Ambassagou	an armed group of *dozo* (traditional hunters). The name translates to 'hunters who trust in God'
Da Na Atem	an armed group of *dozo* (traditional hunters). The name translates to 'the return of hunters to tradition'
Dozos	traditional hunting societies with origins mainly in West Africa
EUCAP	European Union civilian crisis management mission in Mali
EUTM	European Union Training Mission in Mali
FAMA	the Malian Armed Forces
Griot	traditional storytellers, singers and musicians responsible for preserving family and community histories and oral traditions
Gris-gris	a type of amulet or charm
HD	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
Hijab	headscarf
IMADEL	Global initiative to support local development
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (Group for the Support of Muslims and Islam)
Jowros	customary authorities responsible for the management of pastures
Katiba Macina	Katiba means battalion in Arabic, while 'Macina' refers to a geographic area in the Inner Niger Delta
Marabout	an Islamic teacher, who also may engage in magico-religious practices such as healing, or providing amulets
Markaz	'centre' in Arabic, often used to describe jihadist training camps
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
Monobiem	a Dogon association which played a role in local mediation
MNLA	Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)

Operation Serval	French military operation in Mali (2013–2014)
PSIRC	Plan de sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre (Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions)
Qadi	Islamic judge
Zakat	obligatory alms in Islam

Executive summary

This report examines how communities respond to armed jihadist groups. It discusses three types of response within a range of possible options: submission, dialogue and violent resistance. Submission involves capitulating to conditions imposed by jihadist groups. Dialogue involves entering into verbal, non-violent negotiations. Violent resistance refers to the establishment of self-defence brigades or militias.

The main argument advanced in this report is that responses emerge because of social and political dynamics within the community, as well as evolving strategic factors during the war. These shape motivations of communities to devise different strategies to respond to armed groups.

Communities that immediately submitted often did not have existing capabilities to organise collective self-defence. For others, submitting to jihadists could help them achieve socio-political objectives, such as resolving existing rivalries often related to resources. Rarely were these linked to religious convictions. Strategic factors, such as counter-terror operations and the creation of militias, which collectively targeted communities accused of being complicit with the jihadists, also pushed those persecuted groups to submit to jihadist control for protection.

Communities that launched violent resistance sought to defend against threats of jihadist violence. Some eventually went on the offensive and partnered with the state in counter-terror operations. They were also driven by latent grievances around access to and ownership of land. Violent resistance could more easily be organised when communities had pre-existing defence capabilities, such as dozo hunting societies.

Communities in Central Mali were forced to devise their own solutions to jihadism, in the absence of protection from the state or international missions stationed in the country. These community responses had far-reaching consequences. Submission contributed to strengthening the insurgency, even if the social groups that submitted to their control did so for widely disparate reasons unconnected to the insurgency's objectives. Militias contributed to inflaming the conflict by drawing communities into violence and ethnicised the war. Dialogue helped lift jihadist-imposed embargos on villages, brought about a cessation in hostilities in many localities and helped facilitate a kind of 'negative peace'. However, critics argued they were mere instruments for jihadists to gain a tighter grip on communities and extend their control.

Granular research on grassroots civilian agency in jihadist conflicts can be harnessed to improve preventive strategies, long before violence breaks out and escalates. It can also help shape protection strategies once violence is under way. This is particularly the case where communities live under jihadist blockades. Understanding the motivations and capabilities of communities is vital for local mediation processes even when sustained peace is not possible immediately.

1   Introduction

How do communities in rural areas cope with and respond to jihadist insurgencies? Most research to date has focused on either jihadist groups or the various international stabilisation missions that have intervened in Mali to combat those groups. These international interventions have failed to stem the spread of the conflict and, critics would argue, have contributed to a deterioration in security. Far from urban centres and peacekeeping bases, most Malians affected by the crisis have had to devise their own solutions to cope with armed violence. Yet we know little about how communities in the rural areas most impacted by the war have responded.[1]

This report explores community responses to jihadist mobilisation in central Mali, which became the epicentre of the conflict from about 2015. The report focuses on three types in particular: submission, dialogue and violent resistance. It examines under what conditions communities opt to submit – capitulate to jihadist demands sometimes after attempted violent or non-violent resistance; negotiate – shape the conditions of jihadist demands through dialogue; and, finally, violently resist – by establishing or activating self-defence brigades or militias.[2] The report contributes to ongoing discussions on civilian agency in violent settings (Krause et al., 2023).

These categories of community responses are not static or fixed. But they can offer a useful lens through which to identify patterns in the vast range of community behaviours and reactions to jihadism. The report argues that community responses are dynamic behaviours which shift according to a variety of factors. These include structural factors like internal politics and existing social capital which translate into capabilities to exert agency. They are also influenced by changes in the strategic environment. Actions taken by state or non-state armed actors such as militias can induce civilians to update or change their responses over time (Jackson et al., 2022).

The first section provides a background to the regions of Central Mali and gives a brief overview of the conflict, as well as the origins and key practices of the Katiba Macina insurgency. The second section discusses community responses to jihadism, exploring in more detail submission, dialogue and violent resistance. The final section concludes and discusses the policy implications of this research.

---

1   A few important studies examine civilian resistance or agency in northern Mali, such as Svensson and Finnbogason, "Confronting the Caliphate?"; Bouhlel and Guichaoua, "Norms, Non-Combatants' Agency and Restraint in Jihadi Violence in Northern Mali". Bouhlel and Guichaoua examine central Mali and Niger, "Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger."

2   Militia in this context does not necessarily equate to being a 'pro-government' militia supported by the state; as observed by Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 'militias are often controlled or co-opted by government representatives, but they can shift their loyalties and may pursue agendas that are at odds with the interests of the state.' Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars," 756.

1.1 Methodology

This report draws on almost 290 interviews, including with individuals living in areas controlled by jihadists, self-defence groups or militias from central Mali. These interviews were conducted during research visits to Bamako and one to Sevaré between 2017 and 2022.[3] To ensure the safety of participants interviewed, names have been anonymised and details which could lead to the identification of research participants have been removed. Almost all interviews were conducted with the support of Malian researchers and interpreters. We developed close-knit networks of interviewees from each locality, which in turn helped us identify new participants to interview. Instead of interviewing as many people from the locality as possible, the author interviewed a select number of experts and individuals who had direct experiences of the war to share.

Interviewees came from a variety of districts across central Mali, including the *cercles* of Mopti, Youwarou, Tenénkou and Djenné in the Inner Niger Delta; the *cercles* of Koro, Bankass, Douentza, Bandiagara, Hairé and Mondoro in the dryzone, and the cercle of Niono in Ségou. Participants interviewed include customary authorities such as village chiefs and councillors, mayors and other state officials, religious leaders including imams and marabouts, koranic students, 'Griots' (traditional storytellers), farmers, herders, fishers, activists, NGO representatives, members of self-defence brigades and militias and women representatives. Individuals in the international community in Bamako were also interviewed, including the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, the EUTM, EUCAP Sahel, Joint Force of the G5 Sahel and diplomatic missions, as well as journalists, civil society and researchers.

---

3   The research conducted between 2021-2023 obtained ethical approval from the University of Oxford, R76555/RE001.

2 Background

2.1 Central Mali

Figure 1 Five regions of Central Mali

Source: ODI, 2023

Central Mali consists of five regions: Ségou, San, Mopti, Bandiagara and Douentza.[4] The region is often described as a bridge uniting the south and the north. The area can be divided into distinct topographical zones: the Inner Niger Delta, characterised by a vast wetland supporting diverse livelihoods including pastoralism, fishing and farming, and the dryzone in eastern Mopti, where agro-pastoralism is more common.

The Delta is a diverse area comprising various ethnic groups including Fulani, Bozo, Bambara, Songhai and Tuareg. The Fulani are considered

---

4   Central Mali was formerly divided into two regions: Mopti and Ségou. These have now been divided into five regions which include: Ségou region, San region, Mopti region, Bandiagara region and Douentza region.

to be most populous. A Fulani theocracy ruled in the Delta between 1818 and 1864, established through a *jihad* and revolutionary uprising against the Bambara of Ségou, led by the Islamic scholar Sheku Ahmadu.[5] The system for governing access to pastureland established then is still in place today, and is one of several regimes governing access to resources (Turner, 1992). This is a strategic pastoral zone due to the presence of 'bourgoutières' – nutritious pasture highly coveted for grazing. The bourgoutières are owned and managed by customary authorities called Jowros (Vedeld, 1997). In the dry season, the Delta provides grazing pasture for about 50% of Mali's livestock and supports the livelihoods of some 300,000 people in rural areas, as well as urban groups who invest their savings in livestock (Cotula, 2007).

In the dryzone, the Dogon are considered to be most numerous, but the zone is also home to Fulani, Dafing and Songhai groups. The area is heavily affected by seasonal droughts; after the droughts of the 1960s and 1970s, many pastoralists migrated to the Delta in search of pasture. Communities diversified their livelihoods, adopting agro-pastoralism and cultivating crops such as millet.

Bambara are the most populous group in Ségou, and in Mali as a whole. Ségou is known for its agricultural yields, and is often referred to as Mali's 'rice bowl' thanks to a government-run irrigation scheme developed by French colonists in the 1930s. Family farmers settled there by the Malian state supply about 50% of the rice consumed in Mali (Adamczewski et al., 2015).

2.2 The conflict in Central Mali

Central Mali has been the epicentre of the country's grinding conflict since about 2015. The roots of the conflict trace back to MUJAO's occupation of parts of Douentza (Sangaré, 2016).[6] Fulani pastoralists from Hayré and Seno in Douentza joined MUJAO, allegedly to protect themselves from cattle-raiding and theft at the hands of Tuareg separatists. Fulani herders also joined MUJAO to defend themselves from Dogon militias and to gain an advantage in land conflicts with the Dogon (International Crisis Group, 2015). This contributed to the narrative that jihadist groups were mainly Fulani.

After the jihadist proto-state was dismantled in the North, with the help of French and Chadian troops, a UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, was deployed in 2013 to oversee implementation of a peace agreement between secular armed groups, Tuareg rebels and pro-government militias (Van der Lijn, 2019). The jihadists were to be crushed militarily.[7] For France, it was untenable to engage in dialogue with the very actors they were fighting militarily, and who had been responsible for killing French soldiers (International Crisis Group, 2021). Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen's (the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM) project was also considered too totalitarian, leaving no room for accommodation

---

5   Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith*. Recent literature refers to Sheku Amadu, which is spelled in a variety of ways (Seeku Aamadu), while historical sources such as Nobili (2020) refer to Aḥmad Lobbo.

6   Interview 76, Herder, cercle of Douentza, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 82, Herder, cercle of Douentza, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 175, Resident, cercle of Douentza, region of Mopti, April 2022.; Interview 178, Expert, cercle of Douentza, region of Mopti, April 2022.

7   Some were also forced to re-hat themselves into secular leaning groups which could be involved in the peace process.

(Pinault, 2020). President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, stated in an interview in 2020: 'With terrorists, we do not discuss. We fight' (Pinault, 2020). The Malian government and subsequent transitional authorities have also mainly been against dialogue.[8] No other international partner in Mali explicitly supported a dialogue process with jihadists, at least publicly (International Crisis Group, 2019b). At the same time, at various junctures there were indications of domestic support for dialogue with the Malian jihadists (International Crisis Group, 2019b, 2021). While international actors focused on stabilising the north, the jihadists regrouped in remote rural areas of central Mali.

From early 2015, a string of targeted attacks and kidnappings against state representatives and members of the Fulani nobility sent shockwaves across the country. Victims included mayors, prefects, sub-prefects, judges, village chiefs, imams and anyone accused of cooperating with the Malian state. An attack on a military base in Nampala in 2015 confirmed that the jihadists were back (BBC, 2015). Despite repeated warnings of a deterioration of the security situation, there was no resolute early response by the state or international actors in Mali. MINUSMA's mandate at the time only covered the north; stabilising central Mali was a second strategic priority only from 2019 onwards.[9] The French counter-terror operation, Barkhane, did not have a mandate to conduct operations in the centre of the country. Meanwhile, state representatives fled to urban centres such as Mopti and Bamako, creating a vacuum in state authority and allowing jihadists the freedom to conduct their activities and entrench their presence.

The Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) conducted counter-terror operations to neutralise remaining elements of the northern insurgency, (RFI, 2015) mainly targeting Tuareg, but also Fulani herders. Fulani were accused of participating in MUJAO. Abuses, torture, killings and ill-treatment of suspected jihadists during this period have been well-documented (Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, these counter-terror operations would have the opposite effect: many interlocutors argued abuses conducted by the Malian army swelled the ranks of the insurgency. These interlocutors maintained that the insurgency, which started out as relatively small, decentralised battalions, grew in strength because of the counter-terror operations and, later, militia violence.[10] This suggests that Fulani herders joined, not because of pre-existing grievances against the state – which were plentiful – but for protection and revenge.

Once firmly implanted in pockets of the Delta in central Mali, the jihadists also mobilised in more ethnically diverse areas, heavily populated by Bambara, Bozo and Dogon groups. Jihadists

---

8   Under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the government was anti-dialogue. In February 2020, Keita came under pressure after mass killings of civilians and soldiers and opened the possibility for dialogue with JNIM, which JNIM responded positively to. However, Keita was subsequently ousted by a coup. The transitional authorities since then did not develop a clear position on pursuing dialogue with JNIM.

9   Security Council, "Security Council Resolution 2480 (2019)." At the same time, the mission was never afforded the requisite resources to implement this second strategic aim.

10   Interview 51, Activist, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 55, Activist, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 33, Elite, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, October 2021; Interview 69, Activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 77, Activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 78, Professional, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.

were accused of killing important community members. Since the Fulani were broadly assumed to be accomplices of the jihadists at this point in the conflict, these groups began accusing Fulani within their own communities of hosting jihadists or helping them infiltrate their villages. This exacerbated existing tensions, such as resource conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and Bambara/Dogon farmers or Bozo fisherfolk. Equally, fears were raised about the prospect of renewed Fulani domination, linking back to the historical Fulani theocracy of the Dina.

In response, from 2014 onwards some communities in both the Delta and the dryzone created local self-defence brigades. Others joined the regional militia, Da Na Ambassagou, which means 'Hunters who trust in God', led by Youssouf Toloba.[11] Da Na Ambassagou became more organised from 2016 onwards. Its cooperation with the Malian state shifted over time, with periods of more and less direct collaboration. What started as clashes between jihadist combatants and militias gradually morphed into communal conflict, fuelling retaliatory attacks. Large-scale massacres were committed on both sides. Violence intensified in Ségou from about 2020 onwards (Croucher, 2021). Here, the Bambara also mobilised their *dozo* confederations. Communal conflict particularly affected Niono and Macina, severely disrupting cultivation and food security in the region.

2.3 The Katiba Macina insurgency

The Katiba Macina is an affiliate of JNIM, known locally as 'men of the bush' or 'Kouffa's men'. Katiba means battalion, while Macina refers to the geographical area of central Mali that was home to the Fulani theocracy of the nineteenth century. JNIM's rhetoric indicates that it seeks to replace Mali's current political system and introduce practices in line with a stringent interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). It rejects the Malian constitution and deems secularism as illegitimate (International Crisis Group, 2021). Leaders of the Katiba Macina also refer to themselves as 'jihadists' in audio recorded messages shared on WhatsApp.[12] Many Malians reject the label of 'jihadist' because they believe this tarnishes Islam. Some religious leaders argued that the ongoing 'jihad' was legitimate and aligned with Islam.[13] Some elites, however, prefer to label them as bandits or terrorists. In the national discourse, the label 'jihadist' is politicised and often used interchangeably with terrorism. The label 'jihadist' has been used to justify targeting of collective groups accused of being accomplices. Since 'jihadist' is the term most commonly used to describe these actors, it is used in the report, but readers should take note of the above caveats.

The group is led by Hamadoun Kouffa, an influential Fulani preacher who had a large following in Mopti prior to taking up arms. He is known to be an impressive orator, poet and singer, erudite in the Hadith and Quran (Cissé, 2018).

---

11   For studies on the Da Na Ambassagou see Quidelleur, "Chasing the State and hunting down jihadists"; Quidelleur, "The Dividends of the 'War on Terror'"; Poudiougou and Zanoletti, "Identity-Making at Gunpoint."

12   Audio recording by Hamadoun Kouffa on the new conditions for jihadist governance in the Delta, on file with the author. Unknown date.

13   Interview 8, Fulani marabout, region of Mopti, October 2021.

Kouffa travelled across the Delta with the Da'wa, a religious movement that claims to unite all under one Islam.[14] Kouffa criticised not only the state, but also oppressive figures within the Fulani nobility, such as customary chiefs and Jowros.

The core membership of the insurgency, initially at least, were a sub-group of Fulani herders from the dryzone of Mopti, who gradually settled in the Delta following the droughts of the 1960s and 1970s.[15] They joined the insurgency to gain better access to pasture – Kouffa promised to make access free, claiming the land belonged only to God (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). These herders were frustrated about paying access fees to the Jowros, who no longer accepted in-kind, symbolic payments, but were accused of charging extortionate rates for grazing. Over time, herders native to the Delta also joined the insurgency to safeguard their privileged access rights.[16] The Katiba Macina seeks to appeal to different ethnicities; many other ethnic groups have joined, and members even occupy positions as local chiefs. But the overriding perception among Malians is that the insurgency is mainly Fulani. It is the Fulani who have been most heavily affected by the counter-terror operations of the state.

The insurgency has evolved from decentralised battalions with some level of autonomy to an organisation seeking to become more centralised and institutionalised. It resembles a kind of shadow governance (Jackson, 2018), exerting control from the safety of its bush enclaves. Its combatants may be present in villages if they do not expect the army to appear, but they largely monitor and sanction people's behaviour through a network of informants.[17] The chiefs, combatants and Qadis (religious judges) reside in training camps called 'markaz'.[18] These are located in the bush – remote forested areas far from urban centres and some distance from villages (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2021). Local chiefs are selected to oversee the training camps and have responsibility for specific zones of influence and local governance (Baldaro and Diall, 2020). These local chiefs are surrounded by Qadis, who provide religious teaching for combatants and adjudicate more complex disputes that cannot be resolved by village imams. [19]

Across diverse localities, interviewees describe the early mobilisation practices of the jihadists as involving preaching, often with an anti-state message; the imposition of dress codes (the veil for women, short trousers and beards for men) and the implementation of a parallel

---

14   Interview 20, Dawa member, region of Kayes, October 2021.; Interview 49, Dawa member, region of Sikasso, November 2021.; Interview 89, Dawa member, cercle of Ténenkou, region of Mopti, December 2021.

15   For instance, Interview 51, Activist, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 166, customary authority, region of Mopti, April 2022.; Interview 5, Elite, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, September 2021.

16   Interview 27, Griot, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 56, Griot, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 5, Teacher, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, September 2021.; Interview 51, Activist, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 5, Teacher, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, September 2021.; Interview 137, Koranic student, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, March 2022.

17   Interview 101, Youth, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, December 2021.; Interview 137, Koranic student, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, March 2022.

18   In Arabic, markaz means 'centre'.

19   Interview 137, Koranic student, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, March 2022.; Interview 101, Youth, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, December 2021.

justice system. In fact, the cornerstone of their governance and local appeal became the development of an alternative system of justice, much like the Taliban in Afghanistan (Baczko, 2023). People often describe central Mali as being rife with disputes, feuds and conflicts over resources. These range from long-standing rivalries between clans around village politics to control of the chieftaincy, crop damage from herders' passage and ownership of and access to pasture (Vedeld, 1997).

A significant frustration has been that these disputes were poorly managed. Interlocutors often explained that, if conflicts could not be resolved by the village chief and his councillors 'à l'amiable', they would be resolved by the state, which could often take years and where each side would have to pay for justice. One interlocutor explained it as 'justice of the highest bidder', and people had the impression that state officials enriched themselves in these processes.[20] This provided ample space for the jihadists to present an appealing alternative, predicated on principles of *sharia*, that promised to be free, fair and efficient.[21]

Jihadist relations with the community are dynamic and complex. In different areas of the country, communities initially tolerated their presence when this was limited to preaching, developing social relations with the community or providing justice. Jihadists sought the submission of the community through a combination of incentives and coercion. In terms of incentives, jihadists offered to help groups settle scores, adjudicate resource disputes and, in some localities, distributed *zakat* to the poor. In some localities in the Delta, where the jihadists are deeply embedded, they have become involved in the management of pasture.[22] Beyond this, however, the jihadists offered limited public services. Rather, in the communities which submitted, jihadists co-opted existing village authority structures, coercing them to conform to their rule.

The Katiba Macina initially deployed coercion in a targeted manner, but later attacks grew more indiscriminate. Jihadists policed obedience to dress codes and physically struck women who did not wear the veil, prompting growing anger. Targeted assassinations of important figures instigated waves of violent resistance. The jihadists also used collective punishment in the form of embargos to stamp out signs of resistance. These have become characteristic of the jihadist repertoire in the Central Sahel. In response, villages could agree to dialogue and submit to jihadist demands or, if they had the capability, they could resist, though at a high cost. The Katiba Macina was also blamed for large-scale, indiscriminate attacks, involving burning of huts and granaries and cattle theft. Notable examples include massacres in three villages in the *cercle* of Bankass in June 2022, which left more than 132 people dead (Al Jazeera News, 2022).

---

20   Interview 5, Elite, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, September 2021.
21   Interview 124, Marabout, cercle of Niono, region of Ségou, February 2022.; Interview 137, Koranic student, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, March 2022.; Interview 101, Youth, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, December 2021.; Interview 51, Activist, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 123, NGO representative, region of Mopti, February 2022.
22   Interview 101, Youth, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, December 2021.; Interview 137, Koranic student, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, March 2022.; Interview 127, Elite, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, February 2022.

3   Civilian responses to jihadism

This section explores in more depth the collective responses of submission, dialogue and violent resistance between 2015–2022. These responses exist within a range of possible options groups can adopt. As such, the report does not examine responses of individuals. Other examples included flight, neutrality or denunciation. People directly threatened by jihadists fled to urban centres such as Mopti or Bamako. These were people accused of being state collaborators, or who did not align with jihadist religious ideology, including marabouts, sheiks and teachers. Another response some communities adopted was neutrality, refusing to submit to both jihadist and militia demands, but this was less common. Communities could also engage in defence, forming protective barriers to defend threatened village leaders. They could denounce jihadists to the military,[23] which could lead to arrests or killings. Finally, they could form self-defence brigades and militias – which was always justified as a necessity in the absence of adequate state protection.

The responses of submission, dialogue and violent resistance were selected for further study for several reasons. First, they were collective, group-level responses which recurred across many localities and were characteristic of the dynamics of war in Central Mali. Second, they had far-reaching consequences for how the war evolved: submission strengthened the insurgency, or at least the perception of insurgent control.

Dialogue helped quell communal violence and contributed to weakening the militias, but may have further entrenched jihadist control. Violent resistance inflamed the conflict, but also created splinters within ethnic groups, notably among the Dogon. In sum: these particular responses shaped the strategic dynamics of the conflict in important ways.

3.1   Submission

Submission was most often described as capitulating to jihadist demands.[24] However, this did not entail active support for the insurgency, in terms of supporting their goals. In some localities, some sub-groups did join the insurgency, but this did not translate into the whole community following suit. The most basic and non-negotiable demand was to cease cooperation with the Malian state and stop passing on information about the insurgents' whereabouts. The jihadists broadly prohibit state representatives from operating in their areas and insist that schools remain shut. The most common demands were the imposition of dress-codes, the veil for women and short trousers and beards for men. Other typical demands were to allow the jihadists to preach in the mosque, the payment of *zakat*, Islamic alms usually distributed to the poor, the obligatory use of a sharia-based justice system and changing certain public religious practices, such as the call to prayer, or how to pray.[25]

---

23   For examples of denunciation by civilians in other civil war contexts see Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; Balcells, "Rivalry and Revenge."

24   2018, *Négociation Pour La Levée d'embargo Pour Le Village de* [*village name*]. Audio recording on file with the author; Baché, "Accord dozos-jihadistes à Niono, au Mali"; Interview 6, Activist, cercle of Niono, region of Ségou, September 2021.

25   Interview 45, Focus group, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 153, Focus group, region of Mopti, March 2022.

Interviews suggested that communities opted to submit to the insurgency early on as a survival strategy and as a response to internal, political dynamics or strategic factors. Interlocutors argued that it was the Fulani community that mainly submitted. Integral to the macro-narrative of the conflict were accusations that it was mainly the Fulani who had joined. However, the dynamics were more nuanced than this. In some localities internal divides within the Fulani community induced some sub-groups of herders to join the insurgency, but not all of them did so. Social, cultural and ethnic ties may have facilitated their expansion in some Fulani areas, but several other ethnic groups, including Dogon, Bambara, Somono and Bozo, also submitted to jihadist demands. This underscores that ethnicity alone is not sufficient to understand these dynamics.

Following communal violence and attacks by militias such as Da Na Ambassagou and counter-terror operations by the state, there was a need for civilian protection, which induced Fulani submission to jihadist conditions. They claimed that they could not rely on protection from the military, which deployed to certain hotspot areas across central Mali through an integrated government-led plan to stabilise the centre, known as the PSIRC (Plan de Sécurisation Integrée des regions du centre), nor did they have existing self-defence capabilities to draw on. As one Fulani customary leader noted, 'When

they came, their enemies were us – the great Fulani chiefs and the marabouts. He who has the weapon, he ends up ruling'.[26]

Villages also submitted after attempts at violent resistance faltered. A good example of this is a village in the *cercle* of Mopti, where youth protested the confiscation of their music, resulting in a fight with the jihadists. As punishment, the jihadists imposed a month-long blockade, which aimed to prevent the circulation of people and goods in and out of the village.[27] Broadly, these were conceived as strategies to supress resistance and force the village to pursue dialogue and capitulate to the jihadists' demands.[28] This case sent a strong signal about the costs of resistance to other communities.[29]

Submission often happened because of internal, political dynamics. For example, in some localities Fulani herders or rival clans entered into alliances with the jihadists to oust their rivals or pursue other interests, usually related to access to or ownership of pasture. Many such cases emerged in villages in the Delta. In one village in the cercle of Mopti, clans made an alliance with the jihadists to settle a long-standing dispute around the title of Jowro and ownership of pasture.[30] Another example involved adjudicating a dispute between two Fulani clans in the villages of Soosoobé and Salsalbé in the *cercle* of Ténenkou (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019).[31] These alliances forced other

---

26   Interview 166, Customary authority, region of Mopti, April 2022.
27   Interview 42, Driver, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 17, Interlocutor, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.
28   Interview 42, Driver, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 17, Interlocutor, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.
29   Interview 17, Interlocutor, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 42, Driver, cercle of Mopti, region of Report, October 2021.
30   Interview 8, Marabout, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 27, Griot, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 56, Griot, cercle of Mopti, region of Mopti, November 2021.
31   Interview 52, Professional, cercle of Ténenkou, region of Mopti, November 2021

social groups to submit, flee or try to resist through cooperating with the FAMA. This type of submission was also evidenced in Dogon-dominated areas, suggesting that submission is not only linked to ethnic, social or cultural affinities. In the *cercle* of Koro, a Dogon clan allied with jihadists to oust a competitor over a long-standing dispute over the chieftaincy.[32]

Third, communities submitted in response to strategic dynamics. In counter-terror operations by the Malian army, the Fulani community were accused of being jihadists or accomplices, and heavily targeted. The jihadists afforded them some level of protection from state-led and militia violence. This dynamic was particularly acute in the *cercle* of Koro and Bankass. In 2017, the Dogon organised themselves into militias and began conducting attacks against Fulani hamlets they suspected as 'jihadist', in retaliation for assassinations of important Dogon community members.[33] Fulani communities did not have pre-existing hunting societies to mobilise for self-defence, as Bambara, Dogon and Bozo communities did. While the creation of a Fulani militia to fight the jihadists was considered by Fulani elites, this never materialised because of a lack of state support and internal divisions within Fulani society (International Crisis Group, 2016). [34] Consequently, the Fulani, persecuted by the state and militias, claimed they had no other alternative but to turn to the jihadists for protection.[35]

Living in an area where communities have submitted, or accepted jihadist demands, does not translate into allegiance to the insurgency. The realities are more complex. For most, submission is a survival strategy. Equally, fleeing may not be a viable option. For others, the safest and least costly option could be to stay and quietly acquiesce to jihadist demands. Submitting to jihadist control can become the only way to ensure the community's protection.

3.2 Dialogue

Dialogue was a key tool and response used by communities to manage the presence of jihadist insurgents (Kleinfied and Tapily, 2022ab).[36] While negotiation and dialogue were used by most communities confronting jihadists, here we analyse the local accords that developed in central Mali from about 2015 onwards. These often emerged after attempts at resistance and jihadist-imposed embargos, or in the context of intensifying communal violence. What started as a war between jihadists and militias morphed into a communal conflict pitting the Fulani against Dogon, Bambara and Bozo neighbours. Violence escalated dramatically, involving pillage, destruction of homes and livelihoods and large-scale livestock theft (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The jihadists imposed embargos, restricting the mobility of villagers and preventing people from cultivating and fishing, while militias imposed boycotts on the Fulani community, preventing

---

32 Interview 165, Researcher, cercle of Bankass, region of Mopti, April 2022.; Interview 78, Professional, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.

33 Interview 33, Elite, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 69, Activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 78, Professional, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.

34 Interview 172, Focus group, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, April 2022.; Interview 99, Retired official, January 2022.

35 Interview 33, Elite, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 69, Activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 77, Activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.

36 For an excellent overview of dialogue processes between civilians and the Taliban in Afghanistan see Jackson, *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan.*

them from buying food supplies and accessing markets to sell their products. In 2019, the violence peaked with three deadly massacres in Koulogon-Peul,[37] Ogossagou [38] and Sobane-Da. [39] More would follow.[40]

Two main types of dialogue took place. The first was grassroots dialogue between the community and jihadists. These tended to be verbal agreements (Kleinfield and Tapily, 2022a). The second was third party-led dialogues, facilitated by NGOs such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), IMADEL, Monobiem (a Dogon association), the High Islamic Council and MINUSMA. HD facilitated agreements in the *cercle* of Koro between Fulani and Dogon (2018, 2020), in Bankass, between Fulani, Dafing and Dogon (2021), in Djenné between Fulani, Bambara and Bozo (2019) and in Tominian, between Bwa (Bobo), Dafing, Dogon and Fulani (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2018, 2021a). The accords aimed to restore the free movement of people, goods and livestock, pardon past actions, enable market visits and the return of displaced people and increase security (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2021b). Accords mediated by third parties like HD involved state representatives, and consisted of written agreements and a monitoring committee. In one case, negotiations went on for several months before agreement was reached.[41] The third-party dialogues did not officially involve 'jihadists', though there was broad recognition that they were involved directly or indirectly as parties to the conflict.

To provide one example, in a village in the commune of Kéwa the first accord was signed on 19 January 2019. This was facilitated by HD (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019). State representatives were involved in the agreement. After negotiations, it was agreed that the blockade on the village in place since August 2017 would be lifted, the market would reopen and people would be allowed to move about freely (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2021b). A monitoring committee consisting of Fulani and Bozo was put in place to ensure parties adhered to the agreement (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2021b). This accord broke down two years later. One elite explained that the village came under pressure to support the militia operating in that locality. According to interlocutors, the jihadists consequently accused the community of violating the accord and reimposed the blockade. A new

---

37   In Koulogon, 39 civilians were killed, while a number of houses and granaries were burned down in January 2019. See MINUSMA and OHCHR, "Rapport Sur Les Abus Des Droits de l'homme Commis Dans Le Village de Koulogon-Peul, Commune de Koulogon-Habé, Cercle de Bankass, Région de Mopti, Le 1ére Janvier 2019."

38   In Ogossagou, 157 Fulani civilians were killed in March 2019. See MINUSMA, "Communiqué de presse : Conclusions préliminaires de la mission d'enquête spéciale sur les graves atteintes aux droits de l'homme commis à Ogossagou le 23 mars 2019."

39   In Sobane-Da, 35 Dogon civilians were killed in June 2019. See MINUSMA and OHCHR, "Rapport Sur Les Atteintes Sérieuses Aux Droits de l'homme Commises Lors de l'attaque Du Village de Sobane Da (Région de Mopti) Le 9 Juin 2019."

40   These included a second attack on the village of Ogossagou, where 35 Fulani civilians were killed. See MINUSMA, "Communiqué de Presse: Conclusions de La Mission d'enquête Spéciale Sur Les Graves Atteintes Aux Droits de l'homme Commises à Ogossagou Le 14 Février 2020." The deadliest massacre occurred in Moura, where the UN concluded that more than 500 people were killed, see MINUSMA and OHCHR, "Rapport Sur Les Évènements de Moura Du 27 Au 31 Mars 2022."

41   Interview 21, Local elite, region of Mopti, October 2021.

round of dialogue was pursued, and after a few months the jihadists agreed to lift the blockade once again.[42]

Under what circumstances did communities pursue dialogue? Interviews in localities across central Mali suggest that these occurred once a 'mutually hurting stalemate' was reached. In this scenario, actors find themselves in a deadlock and neither side can reach a decisive victory (Zartman, 2001). The embargos and ongoing violence hurt both sides. The embargos became a strategy to impose punishments on civilians the jihadists accused of collaborating with the state, enabling jihadists to coerce civilians into submission. Communities could not cultivate, which impacted the harvest, nor could they fish or attend to their livestock. Those who remained in villages under embargo often had to depend on existing food stocks. Some could organise the delivery of food and other supplies with the help of army escorts, or the dozos (traditional hunters), who were in charge of the village defence in localities where traditional hunting societies existed. People started to suffer from the lack of available healthcare, lack of food and generalised insecurity. Villages under embargo were difficult to reach by NGOs because they were impacted directly by armed violence. [43] But with time, the jihadists were also impacted by the embargo in some localities. Since markets had shut down they could not restock their supplies, so there was a mutual interest in restarting the local economy, which created favourable conditions to enter into dialogue.

While these accords often involved jihadists imposing their conditions through force, local leaders could in some cases shape the conditions of jihadist control in their villages. The communities which had more leverage were those which had military deployments. A good example of this is a village in the commune of Kéwa, in the *cercle* of Djenné. The village was placed under embargo in August 2017, following the arrival of the army, which deployed to secure and protect the locality. Villagers were prohibited from leaving or entering the village, which brought livelihood activities to a halt. The army adopted a largely defensive posture, but was accused of committing abuses against suspected jihadists.[44] During negotiations, villagers had to agree to cease any cooperation with the army and eventually had to pay *zakat*, but due to the army presence jihadists did not have access to the village and people were exempt from complying with jihadist dress codes.

In sum, dialogue has been a crucial community response from the early stages of the conflict to situations where violence and insecurity were at their worst. Some suggest that third party-facilitated agreements contributed to reducing violence in some of the most war-ravaged districts, such as Koro.[45] Importantly, these dialogues illustrated that jihadists were more pragmatic than previously assumed and could be engaged in negotiation. Community leaders had some leverage and agency to negotiate with jihadists. The 'red lines' imposed by France against negotiation with the jihadists were thus not only misplaced, but also deeply misaligned with local realities and practices.

42   Interview 21, Local elite, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 123, NGO representative, region of Mopti, February 2022.

43   Interview 87, Senior International Official, December 2021.

44   Interview 16, Professional, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 45, Focus group, region of Mopti, October 2021.

45   Interview 87, Senior International Official, December 2021.

Local accords also had problems and involved significant trade-offs. First, critics, particularly those in the camp of the Da Na Ambassagou militia, labelled these 'accords of submission'. Community leaders sometimes referred to them as 'survival pacts' (Kleinfield and Tapily, 2022a). Dialogue with jihadists, especially those without third-party mediation, took place in a coercive environment and did not represent peace agreements mediated between equal partners within a mutually agreed framework. Second, while some local dialogues achieved a modicum of stability by halting violence in the short term, critics argue that they empowered jihadist groups in the medium to long term. There were several cases where communities who had entered dialogue with jihadists were later coerced into conceding more than was initially agreed in the accord, such as paying *zakat*. Post-dialogue, many people said, 'mistrust reigns' because cohesion between social groups who had once coexisted side by side had broken down during the conflict. Farmers were reluctant to go to the fields because they did not trust the jihadists or the accords. Villagers opted for 'negative peace', which involved accepting some or all jihadist demands, instead of living in continued insecurity and violence. Finally, dialogues created schisms among the Dogon and a splinter in the Da Na Ambassagou militia. Those who were pro-dialogue were painted as jihadist accomplices or traitors by those in favour of the militias and an army-led, military solution to the conflict.[46] Entering into dialogue is thus highly sensitive and can entail serious risks for community leaders.

The role of the state in some of these dialogue processes was complex and was often a double-edged sword. On the one hand, military deployments precipitated embargos which created a dire humanitarian situation for civilians. People criticised the military for the arrest and killing of Fulani, but they also complained that the state remained bunkered in villages, with a defensive rather than offensive posture. Ultimately, the state could not prevent the jihadist embargos or limit their humanitarian impact, illustrating the weakness of the state in discharging its role and duty to protect. On the other hand, the military presence prevented jihadists imposing the full scope of conditions on communities and restricted their access. This suggests that a more permanent military presence can serve as a security guarantee and does not necessarily impinge on a dialogue process between communities and jihadists. It also suggests that this type of security guarantee could have enhanced the bargaining power of communities that did enter into dialogue with the jihadists. However, with the resurgence of the FAMA, who have since 2021 engaged in more intense counter-terror operations alongside Wagner (Roger and Olivier, 2018),some interlocutors are concerned that already fragile accords may unravel. Ultimately, the state and the military are a core component in any durable, sustainable solution to the conflict.

3.3 Violent resistance

Violent resistance took two main forms: village-level self-defence brigades and militias spearheaded by Da Na Ambassagou, active at a regional level. As the jihadists started making inroads into more ethnically diverse areas, they met with violent resistance from Bozo, Bambara and Dogon ethnic groups. The jihadists continued their campaign of violence, assassinating community leaders. The killing of Théodore

---

46   This is consistent with Kleinfield and Tapily (2022a).

Soumbounou, the leader of the Dogon *dozo* hunting society, in October 2016 galvanised the hunters to take up arms. They blamed the Fulani for hosting jihadists, enabling them to infiltrate their communities. They also blamed the state for not protecting their villages (Human Rights Watch, 2018).[47] From about 2016 onwards, the dozos, a confederation of traditional hunters spanning West Africa, started to mobilise with the aim of defending their villages and countering the expansion of the insurgency (United Nations, 2020b). The main group was the Da Na Ambassagou, established in 2016 'to protect the Dogon country' (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Da Na Ambassagou consisted of several village-based self-defence brigades, which became more organised from 2016. Camps were set up in villages across central Mali, as well as checkpoints to control people's movements. The group claimed to have some 1,000 fighters (United Nations, 2020a). Da Na Ambassagou collaborated with the state at various points in the conflict, and were accused of perpetrating the Ogossagou massacre alongside the military (MINUSMA, 2019, 2020; United Nations, 2020a). Eventually Da Na Ambassagou splintered: a breakaway group was created, called Da Na Atem, which in Dogon means 'Hunters who return to tradition'.[48] The split was due in part to disagreements within the Dogon community about whether to enter local accords with jihadists.[49]

Why and how did communities engage in violent resistance? Resistance occurred when villages could draw on pre-existing self-defence capabilities through hunting confederations, or because they had youth ready to be enlisted in village defence. Bambara, Dogon and Bozo leaders perceived the jihadist threat as coming from their Fulani neighbours, and were concerned that their real motivations were to take over their land or other resources such as fishing points. In one village in the *cercle* of Djenné, traditional *dozo* hunters launched resistance mainly autonomously, they claimed, without military assistance or reinforcements, enlisting the youth to take up arms to defend communities. They also cited their spiritual powers, 'gris-gris' and village secrets of protection.[50] In several villages, such as in the *cercle* of Bankass, it was primarily the youth who enlisted and sought to defend their communities.[51]

Some of these violent resistance efforts faltered early on or after sustained battles amidst embargos. Hunters explained that their attempts to violently resist failed due to a lack equipment, as they were forced to fight the jihadists with traditional hunting rifles.[52] In regard to militia resistance, Da Na Ambassagou significantly weakened for several reasons. First, after the massacre of Ogossagou, the state officially dissolved Da Na Ambassagou (BBC, 2019).

---

47 Interview 135, Dogon hunter, cercle of Bandiagara, region of Mopti, March 2022.
48 Interview 179, Dogon leader, region of Mopti, April 2022.
49 Conversation with Journalist, March 2022; Interview 136, Ex-combatant, region of Mopti, March 2022.
50 Interview 153, Focus group, region of Mopti, March 2022.; Interview 96, Marabout and hunter, region of Mopti, January 2022.; Interview 156, Focus group, region of Mopti, March 2022.
51 Interview 181, Ex-combatant, region of Mopti, April 2022.
52 Interview 180, Focus group with residents, region of Mopti, April 2022.; Interview 145, Focus group with residents, region of Mopti, March 2022.; Interview 154, Focus group with hunter and ex-combatant, region of Mopti, March 2022.

They continued to operate, albeit with reduced capacity. Fulani interlocutors argued that Da Na Ambassagou had been weakened following communal conflicts, where Fulani youth joined the jihadists to protect themselves.[53] This, they argued, helped them gain the upper hand over the militias. Local dialogues were also considered to have weakened the Da Na Ambassagou militia. One journalist reflected: 'the accords destroyed the resistance. It demoralized hundreds of fighters who felt they were sacrificing for their people. Many demobilized after that'.[54] Da Na Ambassagou today remains mainly confined to the region of Bandiagara, where confrontations with jihadists became more acute from August 2023 onwards (Africa News, 2023). The junta have sought to emphasise the increased power of the military and are recruiting heavily to increase the size of the army, rather than encouraging or supporting militias (Jeune Afrique, 2023).

While the formation of self-defence groups and militias can be seen as examples of civilian agency in the absence of military protection, they had far-reaching consequences and inflamed the conflict in several ways. First, militia violence fuelled participation and submission to jihadists groups, primarily for protection or revenge. Collective labelling of communities as complicit gave broad latitude for militias to target those communities. It was this collective targeting that drove many Fulani youth into the ranks of the jihadists. Second, the Da Na Ambassagou became involved in perpetrating massacres, intensifying communal violence. Self-defence groups evolved from being defensive to offensive in nature, where they engaged in collective targeting which some referred to as 'ethnic cleansing' (International

Crisis Group, 2019a). Third, like the jihadist insurgency, militias become conduits to pursue other objectives, often related to land, creating new incentives for growth and survival as armed groups. What happened in Central Mali serves as a cautionary example around the use of militias and their role in fighting jihadist groups. This approach has been adopted in other contexts, such as Burkina Faso, with similar consequences.

---

53   Interview 33, Fulani elite, region of Mopti, October 2021.; Interview 69, Fulani activist, cercle of Koro, region of Mopti, November 2021.; Interview 78, Fulani professional, region of Mopti, November 2021.
54   Conversation with Journalist, Bamako, April 2022.

4 Conclusion

This report has explored community responses to jihadism, focusing on submission, dialogue and violent resistance. To briefly summarise: submission to jihadism happened across the board for all communities. For Fulani communities it was often in response to the dynamics of war, such as counter-terror operations or militia violence, or a means of settling internal rivalries. Other communities submitted after attempts at resistance, to survive and resume their livelihood activities. Second, all communities relied on dialogue throughout the war. Dialogue with jihadists often occurred in dire circumstances – such as mutually damaging stalemates following attempts at resistance, and embargos. In these situations, communities were pushed to the brink, left with little choice other than to negotiate. When communities resisted with militias or received military deployments, they did not usually have to capitulate to every jihadist demand. Violent resistance was not an option for all villages – and emerged usually when communities could draw on existing self-defence capabilities, notably hunting societies. However, some groups established for self-defence in a context marked by the absence of state protection, eventually morphed into offensive armed militias, operating alongside the army and intensifying the war.

There are at least three important implications for civilian agency in the context of jihadist conflicts. First, local actors – village chiefs, village councillors, imams, mayors, prefects, sub-prefects and others – have important bargaining power, legitimacy and negotiation skills vis-à-vis jihadist groups. They wield important influence in their communities and contribute to village- and commune-level positioning in the conflict.

However, they also face pressures and exigencies which make decision-making challenging. These include ensuring community protection, access to resources and the health of the local economy, retaining political positions or maintaining ethnic, social, cultural and clan solidarity with their group. At the same time, they face a highly coercive, fluid and uncertain environment. Armed groups, including jihadists and militias, seek to shape and coerce communities into accepting their conditions. How communities and the groups within them respond has an impact on how the war evolves. Therefore, community responses should not be considered as peripheral, but integral to any long-term stabilisation or peacebuilding strategy.

Second, developing a more granular, systematic understanding of the politics and divisions within rural communities and their capacity to respond to armed violence is vital to any strategy for prevention or protection. Signs of jihadist mobilisation are visible to community members long before violence manifests. Such information could be harnessed more systematically in early warning response mechanisms, which connect the village level to commune and district levels. This could help policy-makers shift from reactionary solutions that put out fires to more preventive ones. In practice, this type of monitoring and early response happened in many localities. Sometimes this resulted in dialogues where local actors struck accords with jihadists, to ensure the security of their community, evade violence and avoid embargos which would inhibit cultivation and damage the harvest. It is clear from the conflict in Central Mali that, once violence breaks out and intensifies, it can be difficult to stop, as new motivations to engage

in violence are created. Early, dialogue-oriented responses could help prevent bloodshed, but also the diffusion of violence. Research on civilian agency could also assist in devising better protection strategies once violence has broken out, especially for communities living in difficult environments with coercive pressure from armed groups, such as embargos – which have become a key feature of the jihadist conflicts in the Central Sahel.

Third, the state plays a fundamental role in shaping the options available to communities confronting armed violence. On the one hand, state action can be harmful and fuel conflict: counter-terror operations which target groups accused of being jihadist accomplices fuel participation of the persecuted in the ranks of jihadists. Policy-makers should therefore be wary of the use of collective labelling of communities as 'jihadist', which gives wide latitude to target suspects. It also gives targeted communities few options for partnering with the state to stem jihadist mobilisation.

On the other hand, people often appealed for the state to take seriously its responsibilities to provide security and protection for all communities. It was in the absence of state protection that the *dozo* traditional hunters initially claimed to take security into their own hands and mobilise for self-defence. Despite valid criticism of the Malian army's conduct during the war, evidence also suggests that a more permanent presence did curtail jihadist activities and did not preclude grassroots dialogues between village leaders and jihadists. Perhaps this is one example of how parallel tracks of military pressure and dialogue can be pursued, albeit with significant trade-offs.

In the current context, community agency in the form of local dialogues has been sidelined. In central Mali, opportunities to capitalise on the momentum of local dialogues were lost. Some analysts at the time considered that local dialogues could have been scaled up to regional or national levels. However, a dialogue-oriented, political solution involving jihadists was never firmly on the table for the international community. It also illustrates the importance of timing: windows of opportunity to seize dialogue-oriented, political solutions may be brief. The Malian government eventually opted to pursue new partnerships with Wagner, intensifying military operations with the aim of regaining territory and crushing the jihadists militarily. Malian communities are bearing the brunt of this approach, as violence has increased since the junta came to power (Nsaibia, 2023).[55]

As jihadists gain ground, not only in Mali but also in other parts of West Africa, developing an improved understanding of how communities respond to jihadism, at various stages of mobilisation, can help policy-makers develop a better understanding of the possible costs and benefits of supporting and facilitating certain types of response, as opposed to others. Improving our knowledge of civilian agency in such contexts, could also hold the key to a more preventive, people-centred approach to peacebuilding, in a context which to date has been marked by military solutions.

---

55   According to ACLED, violent targeting of civilians are reported to have increased by 38% this year.

References

Adamczewski, A., Hertzog, T., Jean-Yves, J. and Tonneau, JP. (2015) "Competition for Irrigated Land: Inequitable Land Management in the Office Du Niger (Mali)." *International Journal of Sustainable Development* 18(3): 161–79.

AfricaNews. (2023) 'Mali : au moins 17 morts dans 2 attaques 'terroristes' dans le centre'. Africanews, 8 August (https://fr.africanews.com/2023/08/08/mali-au-moins-17-morts-dans-2-attaques-terroristes-dans-le-centre/)

Al Jazeera News. (2022) 'More than 100 Civilians Killed in Mali Attacks: Gov't'. Al Jazeera, 20 June (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/20/132-civilians-killed-in-mali-by-al-qaeda-affiliated-group)

Baché, D. (2021) 'Accord dozos-jihadistes à Niono, au Mali: «On peut y croire».' RFI, 17 March (https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210317-accord-dozos-jihadistes-%C3%A0-niono-au-mali-on-peut-y-croire)

Baczko, A. (2023) *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan: Waging War by Law*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Balcells, L. (2010) 'Rivalry and Revenge: Violence against Civilians in Conventional Civil Wars1.' *International Studies Quarterly* 54(2):291–313.

Baldaro, E. and Diall, Y.S. (2020) 'The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali.' *The International Spectator* 55(4): 69–83. (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566)

BBC. (2019) 'Au Mali, le gouvernement dissout la milice Dana Amassagou', BBC News Afrique, 24 March (https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-47687454)

BBC. (2015) 'Malian Town of Nampala Attacked by Islamist Militants.' BBC News, 5 January (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-30681908)

Benjaminsen, T. A., and Ba, B. (2019) 'Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation.' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(1):1-20 (https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457)

Bouhlel, F. and Guichaoua, Y. (2023) Interactions between Civilians and Jihadists in Mali and Niger. Project Report. University of Kent.

Bouhlel, F. and Guichaoua, Y. (2021) 'Norms, Non-Combatants' Agency and Restraint in Jihadi Violence in Northern Mali.' *International Interactions*, 47(5):855-872 (https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2021.1898954)

Carayol, Rémi. (2016) 'Mali : dans le Macina, un jihad sur fond de révolte sociale.' Jeune Afrique, 20 June (https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/332806/politique/reportage-mali-macina-tombait-aux-mains-jihadistes/)

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. (2018) 'Commitments for the Prevention of Conflicts between Farmers and Breeders in the Tominian Circle of the Ségou Region'.

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. (2019) 'Agreement between the Peulh and Bozo Communities of Kewa for Lifting the Blockade on Kouakourou (Mopti Region)'. Peace Agreement, January (https://www.peaceagreements.org/lview/2298/Agreement%20between%20the%20Peul%20and%20Bozon%20communities%20of%20Kewa%20commune%20for%20the%20lifting%20of%20the%20blockade%20on%20Kouakourou%20(Mopti%20region)).

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. (2021a) 'Three Peace Agreements Signed between the Fulani and Dogon of the Area ('Circle') of Koro in Central Mali'. Press Release, 26 January (https://www.hdcentre.org/updates/three-peace-agreements-signed-between-the-fulani-and-dogon-of-the-area-circle-of-koro-in-central-mali/)

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. (2021b) 'Peace Agreement Signed between the Fulani, Dafing and Dogon Communities of the Area ('Circle') of Bankass in Central Mali'. Press Release, 9 February (https://www.hdcentre.org/updates/peace-agreement-signed-between-the-fulani-dafing-and-dogon-communities-of-the-area-circle-of-bankass-in-central-mali/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=peace-agreement-signed-between-the-fulani-dafing-and-dogon-communities-of-the-area-circle-of-bankass-in-central-mali)

Cissé, M. G. (2019) 'Hamadoun Koufa: Spearhead of Radicalism in Central Mali' in M. de Bruijn (ed.) *Biographies of Radicalization: Hidden Messages of Social Change*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, pp. 153-75

Cotula, L. (2007), *Changes in Customary Land Tenure Systems in Africa*. Hertfordshire: IIED, 2007.

Croucher, A. (2021) 'Civilians in Mali's Ségou Region at Risk.' Human Rights Watch, 1 November (https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/01/civilians-malis-segou-region-risk)

France 24. (2022) 'Suspected Jihadists Kill More than 130 Civilians in Central Mali, Officials Say'. France 24, 20 June (https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220620-suspected-jihadist-kills-more-than-100-civilians-in-central-mali-official-says)

Human Rights Watch (2022) 'Mali: Coordinated Massacres by Islamist Armed Groups.' Human Rights Watch, 27 October (https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/27/mali-coordinated-massacres-islamist-armed-groups)

Human Rights Watch. (2018) *'We Used to Be Brothers': Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch. (2016) "Mali: Abuses Spread South." New York: Human Rights Watch, 19 February (https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south)

International Crisis Group. (2021) *Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM*. Africa Report. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

International Crisis Group (2019a) 'Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing', 25 March (https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/centre-du-mali-enrayer-le-nettoyage-ethnique)

International Crisis Group. (2019b) *Speaking with the 'Bad Guys': Towards Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*. Africa Report. Brussels: International Crisis Group.

International Crisis Group. (2016) *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?* Brussels: International Crisis Group.

Jackson, A. (2021) *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst.

Jackson, A. (2018) *Life under the Taliban Shadow Government*. ODI Report. London: Overseas Development Institute (https://odi.org/en/publications/life-under-the-taliban-shadow-government/)

Jackson, A., Florian W. and Tindall. T. (2022) *Understanding Agency in Civilian-Armed Group Interactions*. ODI Policy brief. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/understanding-agency-in-civilian-armed-group-interactions/)

Jentzsch, C., Kalyvas, S.N. and Schubiger, L.I. (2015) 'Militias in Civil Wars.' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(5): 755–69 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576753)

Jeune Afrique. (2023) "Assimi Goïta et son armée peuvent-ils gagner la guerre contre les jihadistes ? – Jeune Afrique." *JeuneAfrique.com*, 6 March.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kleinfeld, P, and Tapily, M. (2022a) 'We Accept to Save Our Lives': How Local Dialogues with Jihadists Took Root in Mali' The New Humanitarian, 4 May (https://www.thenewhumanitarian. org/2022/05/04/we-accept-save-our-lives-how-local-dialogues-jihadists-took-root-mali)

Kleinfeld, P, and Tapily, M. (2022b) 'Stories of Survival and Self-Sacrifice from Mali's Local Jihadist Dialogues.' The New Humanitarian, 4 August (https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/08/04/Mali-dialogue-jihadists-snapshots)

Krause, J., Masullo, J. and Rhoads, E. P. (2023) 'Civilian Protective Agency: An Introduction' in *Civilian Protective Agency in Violent Settings: A Comparative Perspective*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Ladd, S., Nsaibia, H., Vincenzo, C. and Lay, T. (2022) 'Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali.' *ACLED*, 30 August (https://acleddata. com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/)

MINUSMA. (2020) 'Communiqué de Presse: Conclusions de La Mission d'enquête Spéciale Sur Les Graves Atteintes Aux Droits de l'homme Commises à Ogossagou Le 14 Février 2020.' Communiqué de presse, 18 March (https://www.ohchr.org/fr/documents/country-reports/conclusions-de-la-mission-denquete-speciale-sur-les-graves-atteintes-aux)

MINUSMA (2019) 'Communiqué de presse : Conclusions préliminaires de la mission d'enquête spéciale sur les graves atteintes aux droits de l'homme commis à Ogossagou le 23 mars 2019.' MINUSMA, 2 May. (https://minusma.unmissions.org/communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse-conclusions-pr%C3%A9liminaires-de-la-mission-d%E2%80%99enqu%C3%AAte-sp%C3%A9ciale-sur-les-graves)

MINUSMA and OHCHR. (2019) 'Rapport Sur Les Abus Des Droits de l'homme Commis Dans Le Village de Koulogon-Peul, Commune de Koulogon-Habe, Cercle de Bankass, Région de Mopti, Le 1ére Janvier 2019.' United Nations.

MINUSMA and OHCHR. (2019) 'Rapport Sur Les Atteintes Sérieuses Aux Droits de l'homme Commises Lors de l'attaque Du Village de Sobane Da (Région de Mopti) Le 9 Juin 2019.' United Nations, 10 July.

MINUSMA and OHCHR. (2023) 'Rapport Sur Les Évènements de Moura Du 27 Au 31 Mars 2022.' United Nations. (https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/malian-troops-foreign-military-personnel-killed-over-500-people-during)

Nobili, M. (2020) *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-Fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nsaibia, Héni. (2023) 'Fact Sheet: Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates Across the Sahel.' *ACLED*, 21 September (https://acleddata.com/2023/09/21/fact-sheet-attacks-on-civilians-spike-in-mali-as-security-deteriorates-across-the-sahel/)

Pinault, N. (2020) 'France at Odds with Mali Plan to Dialogue with Jihadists.' *VOA*, 23 November (https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_france-odds-mali-plan-dialogue-jihadists/6198713.html)

Poudiougou, I. and Zanoletti, G. (2022) 'Identity-Making at Gunpoint.' *Revue Internationale Des Études Du Développement*, 250:107–30 (https://doi.org/10.4000/ried.2082)

Quidelleur, T. (2022) 'Chasing the State and hunting down jihadists: Mobilisation, dissidence, and the politics of Dogon hunter-militiamen in Mali.' *Critique internationale* 94(1):53-75.

Quidelleur, T. (2022) 'The Dividends of the 'War on Terror': Milicianization, States, and International Intervention in Mali and Burkina Faso.' *Cultures Conflits* 125(1): 115–38.

RFI. (2015) 'Mali: début d'une opération militaire anti-jihadiste en pays Dogon.' RFI, 27 October, sec. afrique (https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20151027-mali-operation-militaire-seno-jihadistes-pays-dogon-bandiagara-koro-mopti)

Roger, B. and Olivier, M. (2022) "Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine." JeuneAfrique.com, 18 February (https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1314123/politique/wagner-au-mali-enquete-exclusive-sur-les-mercenaires-de-poutine/)

Rupesinghe, N. and Bøås, M. (2019) 'Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali'. UNDP Policy Brief, Addis Ababa: UNDP.

Sangaré, B. (2016) *Le Centre du Mali : épicentre du djihadisme ?*. Brussels: GRIP (https://grip.org/le-centre-du-mali-epicentre-du-djihadisme/)

Security Council. (2019) 'Security Council Resolution 2480 (2019)' New York: United Nations, 28 June.

Studio T. (2015) 'Operation 'Seno' in Mopti: 5 Jihadists Killed, 15 Suspects Arrested.' Studio Tamani, 8 November.

Svensson, I. and Finnbogason, D. (2020) 'Confronting the Caliphate? Explaining Civil Resistance in Jihadist Proto-States', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16 December, 1–24 (https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120976790)

Toulmin, C. (2020) *Land, Investment, and Migration: Thirty-Five Years of Village Life in Mali*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198852766.003.0002)

Turner, M. (1992) *Living on the Edge: Fulbe Herding Practices and the Relationship between Economy and Ecology in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali*. Berkeley: University of California.

United Nations. (2020a) *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry for Mali*. S/2020/1332. New York: United Nations.

United Nations. (2020b) 'UN Chief Appeals for Urgent Action to Reverse 'Downward Spiral' in Central Sahel.' UN News, 20 October.

Van der Lijn, J., Abouelnasr, N. Ahmed, T. Darkwa, L. von Gienanth, T., Edu-Afful, F., Karlsrud, J. and Rupesinghe, N. (2019) *Assessing the Effectiveness of the United Nations Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)*. EPON. Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Vedeld, T. (1997) *Village Politics: Heterogeneity, Leadership, and Collective Action among Fulani of Mali*. Norges Landbrukshogskole: Doctor Scientarium Thesis.

Zartman, W. (2001) 'The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments.' *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1(1):8-18.