

# Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Fertile Ground: Escalating Armed Violence in Central Mali .....	2
III. Central Mali in Crisis (2012-2013).....	7
A. Recruitment to the Armed Groups .....	7
B. Renewed Tension with the Government .....	8
IV. Toward a New Insurrection? .....	10
A. Elusive Perpetrators .....	10
B. A Juxtaposition of Armed Groups .....	13
C. The Multiple Reasons for Violence.....	14
V. Make Central Mali Secure: Military Operations, Political Dialogue and Self-defence Groups .....	16
A. The Security Response and Its Limits .....	16
B. An Area Neglected by the Algiers Talks.....	17
C. The Temptation to Form Militias .....	18
VI. Looking Beyond the Security Challenge: A Test for Crisis Prevention and Management Policies .....	21
A. The Objective: A Government with Renewed Legitimacy in the Territories .....	21
B. A Realistic Approach in Accordance with Government Resources.....	22
VII. Conclusion .....	24
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Mali.....	25
B. Map of Central Mali.....	26
C. Chronology of the Main Attacks in Central Mali (Mopti and Ségou) .....	27
D. List of Acronyms .....	28

## *Executive Summary*

While attention has focused on northern Mali, armed violence is escalating at an alarming rate in the centre of the country, long neglected by the state. The management of natural resources has given rise to multiple conflicts that the government and local elites are unable to control. For the past several months, a jihadist uprising has capitalised on the state's lack of legitimacy and extended its influence. State representatives are being chased out of rural areas. Yet, violence also stems from settlings of scores, banditry and a growing number of self-defence militias. The peace agreement signed in Bamako in June 2015 applies primarily to northern regions and disregards the centre of the country. Mali's government and its principal partners should renew their efforts to restore the state's authority and legitimacy among all the communities of the area. Absent appropriate action, central Mali – an area more densely populated than the North and vital to the economy – risks becoming a source of protracted instability.

The centre has long not been involved in the armed rebellions of the North, but has suffered from its consequences: banditry has surged and weapons have become more readily available since the 2000s. Marginalised groups, in particular some nomadic herding communities, see taking up modern weapons as a way to challenge existing hierarchies, and to contest the privileges of urban elites and traditional local aristocracies. The state, plagued by corruption and discredited by acts of brutality by the security forces, is struggling to retain its ability to mediate between all sides. In the circumstances, ethnic communities are closing ranks, particularly the Fulanis, who see themselves as victims.

The 2012 crisis was a turning point for the central regions when it was partly occupied by armed groups. State authority weakened as civil servants fled, abandoning large swathes of territory. The insecurity made some of the population seek protection or justice from militias, including radical groups. The French military operation Serval chased out these groups in 2013, but when state security forces returned they committed abuses, particularly against nomadic Fulani and Tamasheq communities. Locals were also angered when corrupt civil servants regained posts. The state's return neither restored security nor improved relations between its representatives and the regions' inhabitants.

A radical group has thrived on this fertile ground, dubbed the Macina Liberation Front by the media and linked to the jihadist group Ansar Dine. Little is known about its exact nature and some even question whether it really exists, but it demonstrated its presence with deadly attacks against security forces in several places in the central regions since early 2015. The group's leader is reportedly Hamadoun Kouffa, a Fulani Muslim preacher famous for his strong criticism of the state and local elites. Since the group's emergence, state representatives have become targets of its actions and rhetoric, and have again abandoned their posts; violence has increased.

It is difficult to distinguish between banditry, local vendettas and the actions of radical groups in this area. The latter form a determined core, even though they are in the minority, less structured, less well armed, and with fewer links to trafficking than radical groups in the North. They are taking root in rural areas, profiting from the state's lack of credibility and from some inhabitants' frustrations and fears.

Until now the government has favoured a security-focused approach, which has yielded some results. But it has not allowed state authorities to regain control over the entire central territory and its brutality has widened the disconnection between the government and the local population. Political responses have lacked clarity and ambition. The area was largely absent from the Algiers peace talks that led to the signing of the Bamako peace agreement in June 2015. Most of Mali's international partners have had little involvement in the centre, are predominantly based in Bamako and more involved in the North.

Some authorities and local elites are tempted to try to improve security by supporting the creation of community-based self-defence militias. These militias cannot constitute a lasting solution to the real problem of local insecurity, and even less as a means to reverse the way the state has been discredited in the central regions. With inter- and intra-community tensions running high, militias have fuelled sporadic and worrying surges of violence, including between Bambara and Fulani armed groups in May 2016, which may have killed more than 40 people.

Central Mali has entered a volatile period, but heeding early warning signals and taking preventive action could still stop the growth of radical groups. As Crisis Group's report *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State* (14 March 2016) emphasised, preventing crises will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises.

The government's response should not focus exclusively on counter-terrorism operations, which contribute to a rejection of the state by the people, especially when accompanied by abuses. On the contrary, the government, in coordination with local elites, civil society and external partners, should demonstrate a greater ambition to reestablish public services in these long neglected regions. To do this, and to demonstrate its utility and impartiality, it should plan its actions carefully, rank its priorities and recognise that restoring its authority is not only a question of keeping order, but also rests on its capacity to deliver effective justice and education.

## *Recommendations*

*To prevent the security situation deteriorating further in the central regions and enable the state to reestablish its presence and regain legitimacy there*

### **To the Malian government:**

1. Develop a strategy to ensure the effective return of the state and the restoration of its legitimacy among all parts of the population. This should include:
  - a) Reform of the local police, taking a lead for instance from recent projects in Niger; in particular, security forces should recruit women and men from different ethnic groups to enable the effective carrying out of their duties, including in areas lived in by nomads.
  - b) A plan, developed through inclusive dialogue, to coordinate the state's efforts in the centre and to identify priority actions, specifically in the justice, education and natural resources management. Work on the latter should establish mechanisms to enable herders and farmers to live together more peacefully.
  - c) Naming a high representative for the central regions to embody the state's commitment to them, to work in consultation with local communities and civil society groups, and to ensure coordination with newly active donors.
2. Avoid using community self-defence groups, and strengthen the capacity of the security services while severely and publicly punishing security service abuses against civilians.

### **To elites representing local communities:**

3. Take on the crucial role of mediating between citizens and the state, and in doing so, set aside inter-communal divides and individual disputes in order to cooperate with new representatives of local peoples, notably nomad chiefs and religious leaders, even those who have sympathised with armed groups since 2012.
4. Avoid supporting armed movements and self-defence groups, which are only a short-term response to insecurity and could, in the long run, dangerously fuel inter-communal violence in the centre of the country.
5. Conversely, promote – in partnership with the state – the development of a local police force that serves local people and whose composition is representative of the central regions' diverse ethnic groups and both women and men.
6. Support local conflict resolution initiatives, specifically inclusive forums in which the local population's diverse age, ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender groups are sufficiently representative of the peoples of central Mali.

### **To Mali's main partners, in particular the European Union:**

7. Assist the state to redeploy at the local level through programs aimed at supporting the development of public services in the central regions.

8. Make the Mopti region a pilot site to test cooperative policies aimed at improving local security and specifically reforming the local police – lessons drawn from here could serve other regions of the Sahel and northern Mali in particular.

**To the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA):**

9. Extend the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program so that it benefits both the North and the central regions without straying from the stipulations of the peace accord, making sure to link DDR to local police reform and avoid fuelling the creation of self-defence groups that are not strictly regulated by the authorities.
10. Support the restoration of state authority over Mali's whole national territory according to MINUSMA's mandate and, in order to do so, prioritise an approach that aims to restore public services, including those of the police, as much as seeking to reinforce the international military deployment.

**Dakar/Bamako/Brussels, 6 July 2016**

# Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?

## I. Introduction

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While the Bamako peace agreement was signed in June 2015 and international forces have been deployed in the country for more than three years, the crisis in Mali is far from being resolved. Armed violence is escalating in some areas. Since the start of 2015, unidentified armed groups, some of which claim to be jihadist, have attacked several towns in the centre of the country. This was surprising, all the more since almost all armed incidents had until then been concentrated in the north. Following these attacks, many civil servants fled from their posts in several prefectures of the centre. Local communities feel that the Malian state has abandoned them to their fate. Radical groups are taking advantage of the situation to establish themselves and disseminate messages hostile to the government and Mali's foreign partners. As efforts are still focused on the north, the centre of the country remains largely neglected by the Bamako agreement that resulted from inter-Malian peace talks.

This report analyses the dynamics behind the extension of the areas of insecurity in central Mali and describes the groups that are responsible for this development. The centre of the country is dominated by the Inner Niger Delta, a territory subject to flooding which is particularly fertile and therefore coveted; the land is shared by farmers and herders. This report focuses on the areas most affected by armed violence, namely, the administrative region of Mopti, mainly the circles (administrative division) of Ténenkou, Youwarou and Douentza, and the north of the Ségou region, close to the border with Mauritania. It warns of the dangers that threaten this part of Mali and formulates practical proposals to stop the spread of armed violence. It is based on several series of interviews with the main political and military actors, diplomats, members of civil society and religious leaders in Bamako and the Mopti region in February and October 2015 and January and March 2016.

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## II. Fertile Ground: Escalating Armed Violence in Central Mali

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Unlike the country's northern regions, there were no armed rebellions in central Mali in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the area has suffered the consequences. Banditry has increased and automatic weapons have become more readily available; meanwhile, cattle theft have been recurrent, especially in border areas; the Ntéréré, cattle thieves of Fulani origin, have become increasingly professional over the years.<sup>1</sup> These developments have affected all herding communities, which are mostly Fulani in the centre.<sup>2</sup>

Some of them, particularly the Fulanis, felt that successive peace agreements did not take their interests into account and compensated those who had stolen their herds.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after the signature of the National Pact in 1992, establishing special status for northern Mali, the president of an association of victims of the rebellion in the Mopti region, whose cattle had been stolen, asked the Malian state for compensation.<sup>4</sup> Many similar demands have been expressed but never fulfilled, strengthening among the Fulanis the sense of impunity, injustice, and animosity toward the Tamasheq nomadic communities with which they frequently compete for the control of the same territory.<sup>5</sup>

For some years now, central Mali has experienced a worrying increase in social and political tension, punctuated by repeated episodes of collective violence. It is a fertile agricultural area.<sup>6</sup> The exploitation of natural resources arouses envy and causes disputes, a situation aggravated by significant pressure on the land.<sup>7</sup> There are fre-

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes described as a rite of passage for young men, this phenomenon has taken on a new dimension with the growing insecurity and eased access to firearms.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group email correspondence, Tamasheq political leader from Goundam, April 2016. "All sides were responsible for raids", said a Fulani leader commenting on the competition between Fulani and Tamasheq communities for "saline lands", the best for livestock farming. Crisis Group interview, Fulani political leader, Bamako, October 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The Fulanis are a very diverse ethnic group distributed over the entire Malian territory. They are more numerous in the centre of the country. They feel a sense of injustice at the herding advantages obtained by Arab and Tamasheq communities following the rebellions of the 1990s. The development of these areas through, for example, the building of wells, has paradoxically increased tensions. Such government projects have allegedly benefited communities close to the rebels to the detriment of others who stayed away from them. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani political and religious leaders from the regions of Méma and Farimaké, Bamako, February and October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fulani civil servant, Bamako, February 2016. The records indicate that this request for compensation was as high as FCFA2.6 billion (about €4 million).

<sup>5</sup> Tamasheq or Kel Tamasheq (literally, those who speak the Tamasheq language) is another name for the Tuareg. They are not many in the Mopti region (about 30,000 native speakers out of a population of more than 1.5 million in 2009). More live on the Gourma plains and toward the border with Mauritania, in Méma and Farimaké. "Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat du Mali", National Institute of Statistics (known by its French acronym, INSTAT), November 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The Mopti region is the country's most important area for livestock farming – cattle, sheep and goats. It also produces 40 per cent of the country's rice and 20 per cent of its millet and sorghum. "Etude diagnostique des secteurs économiques porteurs", territorial administration and local communities ministry, March 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The area dedicated to crops has increased while the area covered by pasture has correspondingly decreased. Meanwhile, herds have increased in number and so there is greater pastoralist pressure on the land. Tensions have become more acute not because of poverty but because of increased and poorly regulated competition for natural resources. This dynamic is not new: in the 1970s, the area of arable land increased by 82 per cent while the area covered by pasture fell by 29 per cent. Olivier

quent clashes between herders and farmers in this area.<sup>8</sup> Herders, often Fulani, claim that agricultural land is expanding at the cost of land dedicated to herding.<sup>9</sup> Inversely, farmers accuse herders of not respecting agricultural cycles and of not using the cattle trails (*burti*) that protect fields from trampling by the herds.

Most of these disputes are resolved peacefully.<sup>10</sup> However, some of them cause a worrying level of violence that the security forces, either absent or ineffective, are unable to contain. For example, in May 2012, a land dispute led to the massacre of sixteen Fulani herders by Dogon farmers in Sari (Koro circle), where no police officer was stationed. This violent episode, which has remained unpunished, has played a direct role in the decision by nomad Fulani groups to arm themselves; that same year, some of them joined the radical movements that were occupying Gao.<sup>11</sup>

In the Inner Niger Delta, Fulani herders sometimes clash among themselves over access to pastures.<sup>12</sup> The conflict between herders from the villages of Sosobe and Salsalbe, which has been going on since at least the colonial period, resurfaced in the 1990s, causing 29 deaths on 8 December 1993.<sup>13</sup> As a local security expert said, “people still get killed in disputes over access to the *bourgoutières*”.<sup>14</sup> These disputes are aggravated by the lack of legal clarity regarding land rights and by the diminishing capacity of traditional authorities to settle disagreements.<sup>15</sup> They have become considerably more lethal following the increased availability of weapons since the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Quarrels are now resolved with Kalashnikovs rather than with clubs or knives.<sup>17</sup> This has encouraged an arms race and the hiring of professional armed men who can help gain the upper hand in disputes.<sup>18</sup>

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and Catherine Barrière, *Un droit à inventer. Foncier et environnement dans le delta intérieur du Niger (Mali)* (Paris, 2002), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Un droit à inventer*, op. cit. Mirjam De Bruijn and Han Van Dijk, *Arid Ways. Cultural Understandings of Insecurity in Fulbe Society, Central Mali* (Amsterdam, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> However, not all Fulanis are nomadic herders. In 2009, the Mopti region had 400,000 Fula (the Fulanis’ language) speakers, or 27 per cent of the population. The Dogons, mainly farmers, form the largest ethnic group in the region, with more than 636,000 native speakers, or 42 per cent of the population. “Recensement général de la population et de l’habitat au Mali”, op. cit., p. 443.

<sup>10</sup> Community dialogues are organised by local associations in the presence of local authority representatives to peacefully resolve disputes related to transhumance, as in Dioura in June 2014. *Journal de l’Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Mali*, 26 June 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interview, nomadic leader from the Douentza region, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>12</sup> The Inner Niger Delta is a particularly fertile area after the annual floods.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, former mayor of the Ténenkou circle, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, local security expert, Mopti, March 2016. The *bourgoutières* are plains subject to flooding and are particularly fertile after the floods.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, former mayor of the Ténenkou circle, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to the rebellions that took place in the 1990s and 2000s, some people mention the war in Liberia as a turning point in terms of availability of firearms. One of the Ntérééré leaders in central Mali is a veteran of that war. However, access to weapons of war remains less important in central Mali than in the north. Crisis Group interviews, specialist on conflicts in the Sahel, Dakar, April 2016; member of an international NGO originally from Douentza, Mopti, March 2016.

<sup>17</sup> “In recent years, everybody armed themselves to defend their livestock. We do not feel that the authorities care about cattle theft. This development may have led to cases of misconduct”. Crisis Group interview, member of the elite of Fulani origin, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Armed groups, including former Ntérééré and jihadist movements like MOJWA, offer their support to Fulani herders to facilitate and protect the transhumance from attacks. Crisis Group interview, regional security expert, Dakar, April 2016.

Some of the current violence, hastily attributed to jihadist groups, is in fact the result of land disputes, including when the victims are state officials.<sup>19</sup> These episodes of local violence increase against the backdrop of a profound crisis of confidence in the state, whose representatives are often accused of corruption and predatory behaviour toward local communities, particularly herders.<sup>20</sup> The latter have mobile capital in the form of cattle, which is easier to cash in than the land on which peasants work.

Some groups, in particular nomadic herders, also criticise the government for being manipulated by local urban elites, which allegedly use public administration resources to retain their disputed privileges. At a forum organised in Mopti in January 2016 under the supervision of the national reconciliation ministry, participants, mostly local prominent figures and civil society activists, pressed the authorities “to respect the principles of impartiality and neutrality [of the state]” and enjoined them “to avoid acts of violence against the populations”.<sup>21</sup>

In Mopti, all the people Crisis Group interviewed criticised the government for its inadequate performance and the corruption of state officials: “If the government does nothing for us, it might as well leave us alone”.<sup>22</sup> A growing minority see the government as a nuisance that they would like to get rid of. This is especially true in some communities, for example, nomadic Fulanis or slave descendants, who feel particularly underrepresented in the government and its administration.<sup>23</sup> They welcomed the departure of state officials following attacks on towns at the beginning of 2015.

Finally, the climate of tension in central Mali also results from a growing sense of ethnic victimisation among the Fulanis.<sup>24</sup> Some of them feel stigmatised and attempt to organise and defend their interests along ethnic lines.<sup>25</sup> Some Fulani elites and intellectuals, especially in the centre, say that the state treats their community unfairly in a way that reduces them to second-class citizens.<sup>26</sup> In fact, racism, partly

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<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of the elite of Fulani origin, Bamako and Mopti, March 2016; security expert, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>20</sup> The justice system is seen as corrupt. Malian Security Forces (known by their French acronym, FDS), including water and forest rangers, are accused of abusing their powers to impose heavy fines. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, nomads from the Douentza region and researcher specialising in central Mali, Bamako and Mopti, February 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Facebook page of Mali’s national reconciliation ministry, message posted on 29 January 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fulani director of an NGO, Mopti, March 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani individual from Méma and nomadic leader from the Douentza region, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Fulanis built theocratic states in the central part of the country prior to colonisation. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, nomads from Douentza and researcher, Bamako and Mopti, February 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>25</sup> “Fulanis used to be dominant, but the whites changed all that, which causes resentment”. Crisis Group interview, Fulani director of an NGO, Mopti, March 2016.

<sup>26</sup> More than a year passed before the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Malian government sent a team to investigate the massacre of Fulanis in Doungoura in March 2013. On the contrary, Fulani members of the elite note that MINUSMA and the government took action within days of the massacre of Tamasheq Imrad near Tamkoutat in February 2014. “This is unequal treatment”, say some of them, who also see it as a result of Fulanis’ underrepresentation in the Malian security forces. However, there are several senior Fulani officers in Mali, including generals. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani officer in the Malian security forces and Fulani director of an NGO, Bamako and Mopti, March 2016.

inherited from the colonial period, is still strong in Mali and Fulanis are seen as a category apart.<sup>27</sup>

Fulanis say the increased terrorist threat has worsened the situation because authorities often associate them with terrorism.<sup>28</sup> Fulani public figures emphasise that “there are no Fulani terrorists, there are only angry Fulanis”, while warning that if “the Tamasheq were the first to rebel, the Fulanis could be the second”.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, they point out that their people are becoming increasingly aware of their ethnic identity. Although Fulani mobilisation in West Africa as a whole remains timid and is sometimes confined to the realms of fantasy, it worries governments, anxious to avoid the export of violence to their territory.<sup>30</sup> In central Mali, the sense of stigmatisation is coupled with the impression that the modern state is responsible for destroying old hierarchies to the detriment of the Fulanis and conducting an aggressive policy toward nomads, of which the Fulanis make up a large proportion.

Since the 1990s, ethnic-based cultural associations have emerged and played an important political role, especially in conflict management. For example, Tabital Pulaaku is a Fulani association created at the beginning of the 1990s, and Ginna Dogon, formed in 1992, recruits among Dogon communities in central Mali. Often headed by urban elites, they try to bridge the gap between local structures and the central government. They are testimony to the trend for communities to organise politically along ethnic lines. In the wake of the 2012 crisis and rising insecurity, some local figures asked Tabital Pulaaku to organise a response, including the creation of self-defence groups. Some Fulani intellectuals say their communities should “take up arms to defend themselves” and “gain the respect” of the government and rival communities.<sup>31</sup>

However, this ethnic-based mobilisation faces several challenges. First, some acts of violence result from internal tensions among the Fulanis rather than from tensions between ethnic groups.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there is a feeling of distrust toward urban elites, which are suspected of playing the ethnic card to build up a client base and preserve their positions within the state apparatus.<sup>33</sup> Second, religion and jihad today compete with ethnicity as a driving force for identity-based mobilisation.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> Roger Botte and Jean Schmitz, “L’archipel peul”, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, special edition, vol. 34, no. 133 (1994).

<sup>28</sup> According to the French authorities, the majority of those involved in the attacks in Bassam, Bamako and Ouagadougou in 2015 and 2016 were Fulanis from Mali. Crisis Group interview, French adviser responsible for Africa, Paris, March 2016. As the Fulanis are an extremely heterogeneous group, this statement does not help much to understand the links between community affiliation and jihadist involvement.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interview, Fulani trader from Farimaké, Bamako, October 2015.

<sup>30</sup> A “world Pulaaku congress” gathering Fulanis from all over Africa and the diaspora is due to be held in October 2016 on the initiative of former members of the Fulani Tabital Pulaaku association. It is primarily a cultural and scientific initiative, but political issues might be discussed in a regional context marked by an upsurge in armed violence that affects Fulani communities.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, Bamako and Sévaré, November 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Botte and Jean Schmitz, “Paradoxes identitaires”, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, vol. 34, no. 133 (1994), pp. 7-22.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interviews, nomads originally from the Douentza region, Bamako, February 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>34</sup> A Fulani militiaman from Niger who was active in the 1990s regrets that Fulanis who share similar demands toward the governments of the subregion wear themselves out by fighting under the flag of the jihadists. In his view, this weakens the struggle for their own people as it provokes the

two forms of mobilisation are not necessarily incompatible but their agendas and actors are different.<sup>35</sup> In central Mali in particular, ethnic-based mobilisation takes place within the framework of negotiations with the government over access to representation and resources. Jihadist mobilisation, for the moment, takes place either outside or against the state.

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hostility of Western powers and Fulanis should rather form armed movements along ethnic lines as they used to do. Crisis Group interview, former member of Fulani militias, Niamey, December 2015.

<sup>35</sup> In a recording attributed to Hamadoun Kouffa, Fulanis are called “the country’s biggest ‘cafres’ (pagans)”. Crisis Group interview, Malian officer, Bamako, March 2016.

### III. Central Mali in Crisis (2012-2013)

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Central Mali, which separates the north, occupied by armed groups, and the south, which has remained under government control, was affected by the 2012 crisis. Parts of the Mopti region, such as the Douentza circle, were occupied by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (known by its French acronym, MNLA) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), although neither group managed to establish a solid presence outside the urban centres located on the road between Mopti and Gao. The rebels did not occupy the rest of the centre, but state officials and some locally elected representatives fled in 2012 because of insecurity and sporadic attacks.<sup>36</sup> The tourism industry, which had been flourishing for twenty years in Mopti and on the Bandiagara plateau, collapsed. The situation became particularly uncomfortable for most inhabitants of central Mali. They have lived under the threat of occasional attacks, while at the same time being suspected by the security forces of colluding with the rebels.<sup>37</sup>

#### A. *Recruitment to the Armed Groups*

In 2012, central Mali was partly occupied by armed groups from the north. They recruited on site to form small local contingents or encouraged these new supporters to go on military training in Gao and Timbuktu, particularly with the MOJWA and Ansar Dine, which held these towns at that time. Conversely, the pro-government militias from the north, especially Gao, found refuge in central Mali, near Sévaré, an area under government control where Ganda Izo and others recruited locals.

Most of these combatants were young men tempted by adventure and attracted to armed groups by either conviction or opportunism.<sup>38</sup> Armed bandits in the area also rallied to the rebel groups: for example, the Ntérére from Macina joined the MNLA and later the MOJWA in the Léré region.<sup>39</sup> Finally, in response to insecurity, some communities in central Mali lined up under the banners of armed groups to obtain protection or arms, sometimes after having unsuccessfully requested the government to provide them with weapons.<sup>40</sup>

Nomadic Fulanis from the Douentza region joined MOJWA training camps in Gao in search of military training and protection against MNLA Tamasheq groups that were harassing their camps. They were also seeking to gain the upper hand against the sedentary Dogons in conflicts over land. The MOJWA traded or offered protec-

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<sup>36</sup> For example, the locality of Youwarou (Mopti region) was attacked on 17 February 2012, and Ténenkou on 2 March 2012.

<sup>37</sup> A resident of Nampala (Ségou region, close to the border with Mauritania) said that “the MNLA came from Léré to loot the school and the town hall [of Nampala]. But the military in Nioro, where we went to get supplies, suspected us of supporting the rebels”. Crisis Group interview, public official, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Malian public official originally from Dialloubé (Mopti region), Mopti, October 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, resident of Nampala and former elected representative in the Mopti region, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Some nomadic Fulani leaders went to Bamako to request arms from the defence ministry. The ministry refused, saying “it did not have arms for its own army”. Other sources indicate that the government feared that Fulani nomads would join the rebellion once they were armed. Crisis Group interviews, nomadic Fulani leader, Bamako, February 2015; former Malian official, Bamako, March 2016.

tion in order to attract new recruits. Meanwhile, some young men left their homes and fully embraced the jihadist cause.<sup>41</sup> But the majority seem to have adopted an opportunist approach, joining up in order to obtain protection or arms and have a say in local conflicts.

### B. *Renewed Tension with the Government*

In January 2013, the advance of radical groups toward Konna and Diabaly in central Mali led to a new round of violence in the area.<sup>42</sup> Operation Serval repelled the offensive but the Malian army returned in the wake of the French and committed abuses against local populations, including an unknown number of summary executions.<sup>43</sup> These events exacerbated the distrust between people, particularly some Fulanis, and the security forces.

As of spring 2013, the Malian administration redeployed in the Mopti region more quickly than in the northern regions, which were still occupied by armed groups. Despite optimistic official figures, absenteeism was nonetheless common within the civil service.<sup>44</sup> The state's return provoked tension with local populations. The security forces recovered small arms that some groups, including Fulani nomads, had acquired to protect themselves. This led to arms dealing, abuses and incidents, particularly in the Douentza circle.<sup>45</sup> Some inhabitants of central Mali had welcomed the government's retreat in 2012, which they perceived as a temporary relief from taxation and a whole range of predatory acts.<sup>46</sup> Others had got used to it despite feeling that they had been abandoned at a difficult time.

In many areas of central Mali, the government's return in 2013 did not therefore help to restore security for people and goods. On the contrary, people have claimed that the security situation was better under the jihadists or when the state was absent

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<sup>41</sup> Several witnesses confirm that at the start of Operation Serval, Fulani MOJWA combatants fled the Douentza region to the jihadist stronghold in the Tigharghar mountains (Kidal region) and perhaps even to southern Algeria. Crisis Group interviews, former MOJWA member from the Douentza region, March 2016; MNLA officer, April 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Konna is 65km to the north of Mopti and Diabaly is 150km to the east.

<sup>43</sup> Malian security forces, members of which were executed by Islamist combatants in Konna, accused Fulani nomads from the Mopti region of supporting the MOJWA. In retaliation, they probably executed religious leaders and some of their pupils (*talibé*), notably in Konna and Nyaminia-ma. "Exactions des militaires maliens: l'urgence d'une commission d'enquête indépendante", press release, International Federation for Human Rights, 23 January 2013. For more on Operation Serval, launched by France in January 2013 to repel jihadist groups from northern Mali, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°201, *Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform*, 11 April 2013.

<sup>44</sup> According to a UN 2014 report, in the Mopti region, "99 per cent of state officials have been re-deployed, 50 per cent in Gao and Timbuktu". The same document states that all the prefects and the great majority of subprefects were back in post. "Report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation in Mali", UN Security Council (UNSC) S/2014/403, 9 June 2014, p. 4. In fact, many state officials working for territorial administration live in the regional capital and make only short visits to the area they have been assigned to. Moreover, such visits become less frequent when security deteriorates.

<sup>45</sup> "Le cercle de Douentza pendant la crise: une étude de cas", European Union (EU) delegation to Mali, November 2013. Crisis Group interview, nomadic community leader in the Douentza region, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, nomadic leader from the Douentza circle, Bamako, February 2015; former elected representative in the Ténenkou circle, Bamako, March 2016.

in 2012.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, serious episodes of collective violence took place following the latter's return. In March 2013, in Doungoura, at least twenty people, mainly Fulani, were killed and thrown down a well. This case was never clarified or solved. Although representatives of the victims quickly contacted them, Malian authorities waited for more than a year before sending a delegation to support the investigation mission of the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (known by its French acronym, MINUSMA) human rights office.<sup>48</sup> With persistent insecurity since 2013, non-state armed groups such as former Ntéréré, and even jihadist elements, rather than Malian security forces, have offered their support to Fulani herders to protect the transhumance from predatory acts.<sup>49</sup>

In this context, the state's return to central Mali after 2013 seems more theoretical than real. Its presence is weak throughout large grey areas. Moreover, following the crisis in Kidal in 2014, part of the region has again fallen under the control of armed groups, such as eastern Douentza.<sup>50</sup> It is all the more worrying as the main actors in charge of Mali are neglecting this area and concentrating mainly on the northern regions.

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<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interviews, nomad from Douentza, Bamako, February 2015; former elected representative in the Ténenkou circle, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of Tabital Pulaaku, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, regional security expert, Dakar, April 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, researcher specialising in central Mali, Mopti, March 2016. In May 2014, Malian Prime Minister Moussa Mara's visit to Kidal caused major clashes between rebel armed groups and Malian security forces, which were defeated and again forced to retreat from a large part of the country's north.

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## IV. Toward a New Insurrection?

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At the start of 2015, a series of attacks against Malian security forces stationed in small towns in the centre of the country once again attracted attention to the area.<sup>51</sup> Subsequently, chronic low intensity violence appeared in rural areas. State officials and civilians said to be close to the authorities were threatened or killed.<sup>52</sup> Some attacks targeted MINUSMA convoys.<sup>53</sup> Armed groups occupied unprotected villages and small towns for a few hours, time enough to preach sermons and broadcast messages, including calls for jihad.

The Malian and international media frequently attribute these acts of violence to the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), created in January 2015 and reportedly led by a radical Fulani preacher, Hamadou Kouffa. On the ground, the situation is confused. The perpetrators of violence have various motives and the degree of coordination between groups is uncertain. It is often difficult to distinguish between acts of banditry, local vendettas and attacks by radicalised groups. Armed groups seem to be trying to use the endemic insecurity, local tensions and the deep distrust toward the government to achieve various objectives.

### A. *Elusive Perpetrators*

Hamadou Kouffa is a relatively well-known Fulani preacher in Macina.<sup>54</sup> After having, in his youth, recorded love poetry on cassettes, he became a preacher in the Mopti region. In the 2000s, he became known for his sermons on the Quran in the Fula language, broadcast on local radio stations. He denounced the corruption of morals and state officials, the region's major Marabout families, parliamentarians who supported the new Family Code and President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), whom he nicknamed the "Pharaoh of Koulouba".<sup>55</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, he joined the Tabligh Jama'at, a preaching movement born in Pakistan and known locally as

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<sup>51</sup> On 5 January, about 30 combatants attacked the town of Nampala (Ségou region, close to the border with Mauritania) and killed at least eleven Malian soldiers. Ténenkou was attacked on 8 and 16 January. Internal document of the Malian security services on the attacks attributed to the Macina Liberation Front made available to Crisis Group. "Mali: attaque de bandits armés à Ténenkou dans la région de Mopti", Info Mali (info-mali.com), 9 January 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Victims were mostly "uniformed corps" (members of the security forces, including water and forest rangers), local elected representatives and individuals suspected of acting as informers for the security services. Government representatives' homes and vehicles are regularly burned, for example on 12 September 2015 near Bankass after the attack on the police station. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, NGO managers and MINUSMA members based in the Mopti region, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>53</sup> The first took place on 10 May 2015 near Ténenkou. On 29 May 2016, a mine decimated a MINUSMA convoy near Sévaré, killing five Togolese blue helmets.

<sup>54</sup> His full name is Mohamed Alhassane Ahmadou Barry or Ahmadou Diallo, according to different sources. He is said to be about 60 years old and to have grown up in Sirakoro. His father was reportedly from the village of Kouffa in the Niafunké region in the centre of the country. Internal document, national security service, September 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Muslim leaders formerly close to Kouffa, Mopti and Sévaré, October 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani public officials from Méma and Macina, Bamako, February 2015; Mopti, October 2015 and March 2016. The then president of Mali, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), informed of the critiques directed against him, reportedly held back from arresting Kouffa to prevent him from claiming martyr status. Crisis Group interview, senior public official from Macina, Bamako, March 2016.

Dawa.<sup>56</sup> He became its spiritual leader in the Mopti region, alienating Marabout families and some followers who began to criticise his radical choices.

At the time of the 2012 crisis, his group was in decline.<sup>57</sup> He then allegedly went to Timbuktu to support Ansar Dine.<sup>58</sup> He was reportedly seen encouraging the population of Konna during the armed groups' offensive but all trace of him was lost as the French strikes began. His name reappeared in January 2015 when his links with the MLF, to which most of the armed attacks in the Macina have been attributed, were demonstrated.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike the armed groups in northern Mali, the MLF has no known military or political chain of command.<sup>60</sup> The armed groups that temporarily occupy towns in central Mali and preach there do not claim allegiance to any particular movement. The leaflets distributed or displayed in the mosques in the Mopti region are not signed by the MLF but by Ansar Dine, or use the name of Dina, a Fulani theocracy in the nineteenth century.<sup>61</sup> The only video posted on the internet by a group active in central Mali, which dates from 18 May 2016, was also signed by Ansar Dine's "Katibat Macina".<sup>62</sup> The MLF, if it really exists, has claimed responsibility for few actions other than two major attacks on a hotel in Sévaré in August 2015 and on the Hotel Radisson in Bamako in November 2015.<sup>63</sup> Finally, it is unclear whether Kouffa survived

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<sup>56</sup> In Mali, this movement established itself especially in the Kidal region and is said to have been organised by Iyad ag Ghaly, who has since become the leader of Ansar Dine. See David Gutelius, "Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2007. Sources consulted by Crisis Group say it would be a mistake to conflate the Dawa and the networks of Kouffa or Iyad ag Ghaly: "the followers of the Dawa do not completely identify with Kouffa, they have their own network". Crisis Group interviews, former Dawa member from Nampala and religious leaders from the Mopti region, Bamako, February 2015; Sévaré and Mopti, March 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, religious leader of Fulani origin, Bamako, February 2015. In December 2009, the American embassy in Bamako believed that recruitment to Dawa was weak in Mali. "Dawa meeting in Kidal not much to talk about", U.S. embassy Bamako cable, 21 December 2009, as made public by WikiLeaks, [https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BAMAKO822\\_a.html](https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BAMAKO822_a.html).

<sup>58</sup> In 2012, during negotiations about Malian soldiers detained by Ansar Dine, Iyad ag Ghaly reportedly accepted their release, by virtue of Islamic law, on condition they were handed over to Hammadoun Kouffa, who he believed to be a good Muslim, and not to the delegation of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HICM) with which he was in discussions. In January 2013, Kouffa was seen at the side of Ansar Dine combatants in Konna during their offensive in central Mali. He led a prayer and harangued the town's inhabitants, announcing the arrival of "new times". Crisis Group interviews, Fulani member of the elite in the Mopti region originally from Konna, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>59</sup> B. Daou, "Attaques de Ténenkou: l'ombre de Hammadoun Koufa avec un Mouvement de Libération du Macina plane", *Le Républicain*, 23 January 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Security forces and the media have mistakenly presented several individuals as Kouffa's lieutenants. Crisis Group interviews, security officer in Mopti, Malian security ministry official, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>61</sup> For more on Ansar Dine, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°189, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, 18 July 2012. Interestingly, in an audio message released in 2015, Iyad ag Ghaly, leader of Ansar Dine, referred to combatants in central Mali without mentioning the MLF but giving words of encouragement to "the lions of Macina and Douentza". Audio recording of Iyad ag Ghaly, 19 October 2015 (translation by Crisis Group). For more on the history of the Dina of Macina, see Ahmadou Hampâté Bâ and Jacques Daget, *L'empire peul du Macina, 1818-1853* (Paris, 1962).

<sup>62</sup> "First Video of Katibat Macina", message from Jamaat Ansar Dine, Jihadology (jihadology.net), 18 May 2016.

<sup>63</sup> In August 2015, Ali Hama, a former combatant close to Belmokhtar, one of the main jihadist leaders in the subregion and emir of the al-Morabitoune group created in August 2013, contacted Agence France-Presse (AFP) office in Bamako to claim responsibility for the attack in Sévaré, saying

the French bombardments of Konna in January 2013.<sup>64</sup> Dead or alive, his sermons continue to circulate and influence people.

Little is known about the people who have rallied behind Kouffa or have been fighting in his name.<sup>65</sup> His network reportedly attracts individuals from disadvantaged social backgrounds and Fulanis from the plains, seduced by his critique of traditional landowners in the Niger Delta. The financing of the movement seems largely local and to owe much less to the major trafficking networks than that of the armed movements in the north.<sup>66</sup>

Several local sources now doubt that the MLF exists or deny it is solely responsible for the violence that has affected the centre of the country since the beginning of 2015.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that no single group can be considered as the perpetrator of all the attacks against the state and its allies. Neither are the different entities that have been implicated clearly unified in a movement with a common agenda. The name Macina Liberation Front, popularised by the media, does not adequately reflect the nebulous nature of this assortment of small groups with uneven structures.<sup>68</sup> Armed violence in the area has complex roots and involves many protagonists; the MLF label simplifies this reality.

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that “Cheikh Hamadoun Kouffa has also given his blessing to the attack”. On the same day, Al Jazeera received a message from al-Morabitoune, also claiming responsibility for the attack. “Attaque de Sévaré: les explications d’un lieutenant d’Amadou Kouffa”, *L’indicateur du Renouveau*, 12 August 2015; “Un deuxième groupe djihadiste revendique l’attaque à Bamako”, *Le Monde*, 20 November 2015.

<sup>64</sup> He has not circulated any video recently even though audio recordings in Fula dating from 2015 were attributed to him by people interviewed by Crisis Group. Crisis Group interview, member of the elite originally from Macina, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>65</sup> According to the Malian State Security Department (known by its French acronym, DGSE), a Fulani called Hassan Dicko and nicknamed “Abou Leila” has acted as a link between armed groups in central and southern Mali. Considered to be Hamadoun Kouffa’s right-hand man, he was arrested on 5 September 2015. Internal document of the Malian security services made available to Crisis Group, Bamako, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> The movement does not raise taxes from the population but it seems that herders and traders supporting it contribute financially. Fulani leaders, including an imam reputed to be close to Kouffa and a former MOJWA member together made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 2015. That year, many other Fulani members of the elite made the pilgrimage with financial assistance from the Fulani diaspora in Saudi Arabia. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, individual originally from the Douentza circle, interior ministry official, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>67</sup> A Fulani public official born in Mopti spoke of the “imaginary Macina Liberation Front”. An NGO director from the same region said: “We Fulanis do not believe a Macina Liberation Front exists”. Crisis Group interviews, senior public official of Fulani origin, Bamako, March 2016; NGO director of Fulani origin, Mopti, March 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group research found that the existence of this group was reported on 16 January 2015 by an Arab language newspaper on the h-Azawad website, which had ceased to operate by mid-2015. The information has been published by other newspapers, such as *Jeune Afrique*, and then by the Malian press. Malian journalists have been the first to mention Hamadoun Kouffa as the leader of a movement responsible for the attacks. According to the press, the group that attacked Ténenkou carried copies of Kouffa’s sermons. “Mali: au Nord, la mosaïque des acteurs complique la crise”, *Jeune Afrique*, 16 January 2015; “Attaques de Ténenkou: l’ombre de Hammadoun Koufa avec un mouvement de Libération du Macina plane”, *op. cit.*

### B. *A Juxtaposition of Armed Groups*

Security sources say that several groups, rather than a single organisation, target the state. These groups do not necessarily coordinate their agendas even though they are in contact with each other.<sup>69</sup> The attacks on towns in central Mali at the beginning of 2015 were reportedly carried out by a group that came out of Ansar Dine and was formed along Mali's border with Mauritania. It allegedly includes Fulani and Tamasheq combatants, some of which are officers close to Iyad ag Ghali.<sup>70</sup> It planned to carry out a series of operations designed to impress the population and terrify the authorities, probably to facilitate the establishment of a new movement recruiting locally.<sup>71</sup> This group then apparently withdrew to the border area (perhaps dispersing toward several destinations, such as Léré, Malian refugee camps in Mauritania and Wagadou Forest). It may be in the process of reactivating under the name of Katibat Macina of Ansar Dine and broadcast its first video in May 2016.

A second group was formed in the aftermath of the February 2015 attacks. Mainly active in the Ténenkou and Youwarou circles, it has recently recruited locally but also includes combatants who probably joined MOJWA or Ansar Dine during the crisis in 2012. Less well-armed and less well-versed in the tactics of war than the first group, it has not yet managed to take control of any town defended by the army.<sup>72</sup> It is quite active in rural areas, spreading its message among the local communities and harassing government informers and security forces convoys.

Further to the east, a similar group is active, some members of which joined the MOJWA during the 2012 crisis. It is growing in the Douentza circle, to a lesser extent in the Bankass circle, and occasionally spills over the border into Burkina Faso, especially in the northern and Sahel regions. It is mainly formed of nomadic Fulanis, namely the subgroups Seedoobe (from Mali), the Djelgobe (from Burkina Faso) and especially the Toleebe (from Niger). This group has links with others that are active in Macina and along the border with Mauritania, although it is difficult to determine the extent and solidity of these contacts.<sup>73</sup>

In 2015, military sources estimated that each of these groups had a few dozen members. The degree to which they coordinate their activities remains uncertain.<sup>74</sup> Local and French security sources say a total of 150 to 200 men have basic military equipment: Kalashnikovs, grenade-throwers, motorbikes, a few 4x4 vehicles with

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<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security experts, Bamako and Sévaré, October 2015 and March 2016.

<sup>70</sup> A native of Nampala said there were both "white" and "black men" among the group that attacked the town and that some of them spoke Fula. Crisis Group interview, individual from Nampala, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Nampala suffered a similar attack in 2009, when sixteen Malian soldiers were killed. The rebellion organised by Ibrahim ag Bahanga claimed responsibility for that attack. However, local sources believe the attackers had contacts with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which had a strong presence in the border region at that time. Crisis Group interview, public official, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>72</sup> "These people have thrown away their clubs and taken up arms. They are not professionals". Crisis Group interview, NGO representative from the Mopti region, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Some sources even mention the possibility that they are in contact with both the Macina group and an AQIM battalion (qatiba) that is moving around in the Gourma. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>74</sup> These groups circulate from east to west, between Méma, Farimaké, Macina and Hayre. Hamadoun Kouffa, who is relatively famous in the Macina and, to a lesser extent, in the Méma, is less well-known in the Hayre region. Crisis Group interviews, nomads from the Douentza circle, Bamako, February 2015 and March 2016.

heavy machine guns stolen from Mali's armed forces (FAMA), and the capacity to use landmines or improvised explosive devices.<sup>75</sup> Nothing like the columns of 4×4 vehicles mounted with machine guns, mortars and sniper rifles commonly used in the north. This is because there is a stronger and older warrior culture in the north, the purchase of military equipment is funded by trafficking and more arms are available from Libya and stocks of weapons stolen from the Malian army in 2012.

### C. *The Multiple Reasons for Violence*

The violence affecting central Mali involves movements inspired by the jihad, but is also the product of local disputes. The fight against terrorism should not therefore be the only response to this multifaceted violence.

Armed bandits are responsible for many incidents, notably attacks on fairs and markets, wrongly attributed to jihadist groups.<sup>76</sup> Jihadist and armed gangs occupy the same territories. There might be some contact between them and they may even cooperate at times, but they are very different in nature.<sup>77</sup> Armed bandits have an ambiguous status in local society: some communities see them as a shield against government abuses or rival communities, while others denounce them as mere predators.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to banditry, settlements of scores contribute to the increasing insecurity. In certain cases, local people seeking revenge for abuses by the “*porteurs d’uniformes*” (men in uniform), rather than jihadists, are responsible for the harassment and sometimes killing of public officials.<sup>79</sup> This reveals a local desire to chase the government out, which deliberately or not converges with the jihadist agenda. Distinguishing between local settlements of scores and “jihadist” actions is therefore difficult.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Internal document of a national security service, September 2015. Crisis Group interviews, journalist and senior French officer, Paris, August 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, security expert, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>77</sup> In the Méma and the Farimaké, Ntérére groups who joined the MNLA in 2012 opportunely joined the MOJWA after it defeated the MNLA in Gao. It is difficult to know what remains of these links but several security sources mention contacts between these bandit groups and jihadist elements, and even a possible sharing of roles. Crisis Group interviews, member of MINUSMA, Sévaré, October 2015; security expert, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>78</sup> They are known as “social bandits”, in the sense given to this expression by the historian E.J. Hobsbawm. “Armed men” such as the Hima brothers in the Douentza circle and Hama Founé Diallo, a native of the Macina, have a reputation for being both bandits and defenders of their communities. Crisis Group interviews, prominent figures, herders and public officials of Fulani origin, Bamako and Sévaré, October 2015 and March 2016. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959).

<sup>79</sup> In West Africa, the expression “*porteur d’uniforme*” refers to members of the security forces. For example, a forest ranger was killed on 6 April 2015 in Diafarabe and an informer of a water and forest ranger was killed on 9 March 2016 in Mbesso, 5km to the south of Diabaly. It is difficult to know whether such killings are local acts of vengeance or attempts by radical groups to chase the administration out. List of security incidents in the Mopti region since 2015, Malian internal document made available to Crisis Group.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview with a humanitarian worker active in Ténenkou, Sévaré, November 2015. According to other sources, combatants supporting Kouffa participate in local settlements of scores targeting civilians. “It was after the attack on Dioura that we started suspecting the Dawa people. Shortly after this attack, assailants went to Sikéré Tielo, a small hamlet populated by farmers. They killed someone who was in dispute with a person from the Dawa. The case had been referred to the Dioura town council, which reportedly demanded a fine of FCFA500,000 (about €750). Kouffa

However, some violent incidents are due neither to banditry nor settlements of scores. The destruction of the Hamdallaye mausoleums on 3 May 2015 and sermons hostile to the authorities and foreigners clearly denote a jihadist agenda.<sup>81</sup> In the villages they visit, Kouffa's followers call on communities to close French schools, veil women and insist that men's trousers do not hang below their ankles.<sup>82</sup> In Hayre and around Ténenkou, similar groups ban celebrations at major social ceremonies like, for example, costly weddings. Their discourse is never exclusively religious. Its social, political and economic dimensions help gain local support.<sup>83</sup>

Kouffa's criticisms of prominent Marabout families, who are large landowners, can appeal to some youths and the less well-educated population, although these families remain well-respected.<sup>84</sup> For example, economically marginalised groups support Kouffa's challenge to the Dioko – customary rights to exploit natural resources.<sup>85</sup> The radical religious discourse resonates with older protests against the local political and social order. Generally speaking, local concerns are used to justify the call to jihad. What is at stake differs from one area to another and there is not necessarily any interest in pursuing a common agenda. And at the individual level, it is difficult to say at what point interest in the jihad prevails over more local concerns.

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was the leader of the Dawa in this area". Crisis Group interview, individual from Nampala, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>81</sup> In an audio recording attributed to him, Kouffa reportedly called on people to chase out the Malian security forces ("the big shoes"), their local informers and their international allies. Crisis Group interview, senior Malian officer, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>82</sup> According to other sources, they also ban cola nuts and tobacco. They refer to regional history, emphasising that "the period of idolatry before the Macina theocracy is over". However, they also reinterpret the past, of which the Fulani communities of central Mali are proud. Kouffa vehemently criticises the prominent Marabout families, heirs of Cheikou Amadou, founder of the Dina. Moreover, Kouffa's followers are held responsible for the destruction of several mausoleums of prominent figures in the history of the Dina, including Cheikou Amadou himself. Some Fulani members of the elite in Bamako feel this is unforgivable. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani senior public officials and religious leaders, Bamako, Mopti and Sévaré, November 2015, February 2016.

<sup>83</sup> This forms part of the broader trend for religious discourse to reflect Malians' social and political concerns. See Benjamin Soares, "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era", *African Affairs*, vol. 105, no. 418 (2005).

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, elected representatives, members of civil society and Fulani religious leaders, Bamako, Mopti and Sévaré, November 2015, February 2016.

<sup>85</sup> The murder of the Mayor of Dogo is an example. The investigation is currently being carried out but this killing seems to be linked to a conflict between two Fulani groups for access to pastures. In this conflict, Kouffa's followers have supported the Tioki Fulanis (transhumants) who have been challenging the land rights of a sedentary Fulani group in the Macina. Crisis Group interviews, members of the two communities in conflict in Dogo and in Diallube commune, Sévaré and Mopti, October 2015, March 2016.

## V. Make Central Mali Secure: Military Operations, Political Dialogue and Self-defence Groups

The government's response has so far focused on security. Although this has had some results, violence continues to spread. Communities are taking up arms to defend themselves, probably with the support of sectors of the Malian security forces. Armed militias are undeniably becoming stronger and there is a danger that a major wave of violence will unfold.

### A. *The Security Response and Its Limits*

Following attacks against them in February 2015, the security forces strengthened their positions in the main towns of the country's centre, particularly Sévaré, Ténenkou and Douentza. This has allowed them to hold these small cities and avoid further defeats. However, armed groups continue to harass them in rural areas. In response, Operation Seno produced some results in autumn 2015 in the Bankass circle.<sup>86</sup> But this type of intervention aims to contain the expansion of armed groups rather than to deal with the causes of insecurity.<sup>87</sup> Like Seno, search-and-sweep operations organised by the FAMA lead to arrests. Carried out following denunciations, they are sometimes based on false information. This causes tensions with the population and some serious abuses have been reported.<sup>88</sup>

Mali's military partners are thin on the ground in the centre. MINUSMA has a limited presence but a new mandate, voted on 29 June 2016, provides for reinforcements.<sup>89</sup> However, there is a risk of reproducing the situation prevailing in Gao and Kidal – a larger force focused on self-protection, holed up in a fortified stronghold in town and incapable of restoring order to neglected rural areas.

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<sup>86</sup> Operation Seno was mounted after attacks on sedentary Dogon groups in the Bankass region. Despite having only the equivalent of a company at its disposal, the FAMA engaged and repelled an armed group reportedly close to the MLF. The clash took place in Tiébanda forest, near the border with Burkina Faso, where Islamists were trying to set up a base. Crisis Group interviews, member of the Malian security forces, researcher specialising in central Mali and MINUSMA member, Sévaré, February 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of the Malian security forces, Sévaré, February 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Opinions diverge on the atrocities committed by the FAMA: some feel they are inevitable given the lack of resources and emphasise that they are less common today than they were in 2013; others consider that the atrocities and disappearances of suspects are still too many. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, members of FAMA and Fulani members of the elite, Bamako and Sévaré, February 2016. See also, "Mali: Abuses Spread South", Human Rights Watch, 19 February 2016.

<sup>89</sup> "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali", UNSC S/2016/498, 31 May 2016, p. 17. In the Mopti region, MINUSMA only deploys one police unit in Sévaré and three Togolese army infantry companies in Douentza, more than 150km (by road) to the north east of Mopti. "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali", UNSC S/2016/281, 28 March 2016. On 29 June 2016, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2295, increasing the number of MINUSMA military personnel by 2,049 (from 11,240 to 13,289 deployed soldiers) and the number of police officers by 480 (from 1,440 to 1,920). It asked MINUSMA to take a more robust stance and focus on prevention. Following the UN Secretariat's strategic assessment of MINUSMA, the resolution also said the mission's strategic priority should be the effective implementation of the peace agreement, in particular, the reestablishment of the government's authority. "United Nations Resolution 2295 (2016)", UNSC S/RES/2295, 29 June 2016.

Meanwhile, Operation Barkhane does not cover the area, even though its soldiers have intervened to support Malian forces during a few joint operations.<sup>90</sup> It did not participate in Operation Seno, widely seen as a test for the Malian army, currently going through a process of reconstruction. More recently, when clashes with armed groups threatened to become more intense, as in the Douentza circle and along the border with Mauritania, it provided temporary operational support. From 22 February to 6 March 2016, Operation Gabi mobilised Malian, Burkina and French forces.<sup>91</sup> The results were limited: armed groups avoided combat and went into hiding during search operations.<sup>92</sup> Armed groups in central Mali, less structured than the political-military groups in the North, often avoid direct confrontations. The FAMA and their allies do not manage to be effective against this diffuse threat.

### B. *An Area Neglected by the Algiers Talks*

The peace process has ignored central Mali. As a participant in the inter-Malian negotiations that took place from June 2014 to February 2015 in the Algerian capital said: “in Algiers, we did not see many Fulanis from the centre”.<sup>93</sup> None of the armed movements’ main representatives were from this area.<sup>94</sup> Some public figures from the area approached MINUSMA to try and negotiate the official inclusion of their group in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process.<sup>95</sup> Underrepresented in the armed movements that signed the Ouagadougou (2013) and Bamako (2015) agreements, they have been sidelined from the peace process.<sup>96</sup>

The peace agreement signed in June 2015 in Bamako applies to the northern regions and contains only rare references to the centre.<sup>97</sup> Many public figures there, particularly Fulani, feel that history is repeating itself: peace is being built without them if not against them. Many believe that “you need to take up arms to be heard”. Some of them argue that the armed network that supports Kouffa has emerged precisely because there was no local armed group to bring the area into the spotlight. In this context, calls for the creation of self-defence groups are becoming increasingly common.

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<sup>90</sup> Launched on 1 August 2014 to take over from Operation Serval in the fight against terrorist armed groups in Mali, the French military force Barkhane is meant to pursue this fight within a more regional framework and facilitate its appropriation by the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad) over the entire Sahel-Saharan region.

<sup>91</sup> “Les armées malienne et burkinabé font patrouille commune à leur frontière”, *Le Monde*, 6 March 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, member of the Barkhane Force, Bamako, March 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, former member of the MINUSMA mediation team, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Meetings took place between Tabital Pulaaku and Ganda Izo, an armed group recruiting mainly among the Fulanis in the Gao region. They did not lead to a lasting alliance, the Fulanis from the Gao region remaining poorly represented at Tabital. Crisis Group interviews, members of Tabital Pulaaku, Bamako, February 2015.

<sup>95</sup> In December 2013, a Fulani member of the elite from the Mopti region approached MINUSMA’s DDR unit with a list of about twenty applicants for demobilisation. Suspected of wanting to take advantage of DDR funds, he was referred to the groups that signed the Ouagadougou agreement, the only interlocutors at that time recognised for the purposes of disarmament. Crisis Group interview, former MINUSMA member, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>96</sup> The underrepresentation of armed groups from central Mali also reflects their lack of resources and military forces. Crisis Group interview, former MINUSMA member, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers process, 20 June 2015.

### C. *The Temptation to Form Militias*

The nomadic populations of central Mali have been tempted to resort to arms for some years now.<sup>98</sup> The absence of government combined with insecurity during the occupation in 2012 accelerated this dynamic. In Bamako, some members of the elite close to the government supported the idea of arming and supervising local self-defence groups.<sup>99</sup> The transitional authorities were reluctant to do this because the regular army lacked equipment and because they feared they might lose control over these groups.<sup>100</sup>

While the return of public officials to central Mali is most often theoretical, persisting insecurity is currently reviving the wish of some communities to form self-defence groups. In the Macina, Fulani village chiefs have been meeting since 2013 to raise funds, mobilise young people and raise awareness to the idea among the elite in Bamako in order to obtain government support.<sup>101</sup> MINUSMA mediated to bring them together in Bamako in May 2014, which temporarily helped to reduce tensions without resolving the issue of local security.<sup>102</sup> In May 2015, a delegation of village chiefs again went to Bamako to demand “steps to ensure the security of people and their goods in the central Niger Delta”. They publicly supported the creation of local self-defence brigades. They held meetings to pass on this message in the centre. Some prominent individuals, concerned that taking up arms would aggravate local tensions and fuel criticism against existing power structures, expressed scepticism.<sup>103</sup>

Some Malian officers and politicians favour the formation of self-defence groups in the centre of the country.<sup>104</sup> Security forces are divided about whether it is useful to use paramilitary groups as local intermediaries for their operations.<sup>105</sup> Meanwhile, MINUSMA is uncertain about the capacity of the elites in the centre, particularly Fulani representatives of the Tabital Pulaaku Association, to reach agreement among themselves on a joint project to achieve security. It also doubts that they are representative and capable of mobilising trained combatants, which they have lacked so far. As a member of MINUSMA said: “the Fulanis have not found their Gamou”, the name of the Malian general viewed as the main defender of the Tuareg Imrad cause in Mali.<sup>106</sup>

Members of the elite from Central Mali do not share a common agenda or vision to form a unified self-defence group. Some of them believe that forming self-defence

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<sup>98</sup> However, some Fulani members of the elite Crisis Group talked to reject the idea of taking up arms or forming a Fulani army. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, Fulani religious leader and traders, Bamako and Sévaré, November 2015, February 2016.

<sup>99</sup> Djiguiba Keita, “Après Tenenkou, l’Etat va-t-il abandonner Macina?”, Maliweb (www.maliweb.net), 20 January 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani member of the elite and nomadic leader from Douentza, Bamako, February 2015, February 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, Bamako and Sévaré, February 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former MINUSMA member, March 2016.

<sup>103</sup> A meeting took place in Bony (Douentza circle, about 100km to the north east of Mopti) in August 2014, but the Fulani elites in the town were opposed to the idea of forming self-defence groups and wanted to disarm the Fulani Seedoobe nomads with whom they compete. Crisis Group interviews, Fulani member of the elite and researcher, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Fulani members of the elite, Fulani religious leader and traders, Bamako and Sévaré, November 2015, February 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interviews, members of FAMA and security ministry official, Bamako and Sévaré, February 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, MINUSMA member, February 2016.

groups may help fill the vacuum left by the FAMA's inability to make the area secure: they would go where the regular security forces are unable to go for lack of resources. Others seek to use these groups to build a local political support base or attract aid funds (DDR, funding for peace). Still others believe that the fight will be more long term: Fulani communities in the centre of the country should form a common front in order to establish a position of strength with which to regain their place in the Malian mosaic.<sup>107</sup> These agendas are not necessarily contradictory but they do not serve the same interests and do not share the same vision of local security. Worryingly, even the more peaceful elements now seem resigned to the emergence of self-defence groups to try and contain the violence.<sup>108</sup>

Faced with the gradual expansion of the centre's insecure areas, the government is hesitating about what response to make. At the start of 2016, members of the Fulani elite in Bamako acted as intermediaries at meetings between senior government officials and political-military leaders of small armed groups active in the centre of the country.<sup>109</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Malian press announced, with customary exaggeration, that "several hundred elements" of the MLF were in the process of joining the DDR program.<sup>110</sup> Lists of combatants were produced and centralised by members of the elite in Bamako who met with the MINUSMA in February and March 2016. Negotiations also took place to enable these groups from the centre to join the Coordination of Azawad Movements (known by its French acronym, CMA) and the Platform, the two coalitions of armed groups that signed a peace agreement with the government in 2015, and therefore benefit from MINUSMA-led DDR process. However, the control of these groups and the issue of their affiliation generate worrying tensions.<sup>111</sup>

It is unlikely that the elements concerned are the most committed militants of the Kouffa network.<sup>112</sup> The initiative may nonetheless help to put a brake on recruitment by radical groups and encourage the more opportunistic elements, who are respon-

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<sup>107</sup> "We need to restore the balance of power so that we will not need intermediaries to protect ourselves. No Tamasheq will respect us if we do not do this". Crisis Group interview, Fulani member of the elite, Bamako, November 2015.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group email correspondence, Malian intellectual of Fulani origin, May 2016.

<sup>109</sup> "At the instigation of some members of Tabital Pulaaku, a National Security Council led by Modibo Sidibé, ex-governor of the Ségou region, was formed to identify armed Fulanis with a view to including them in the DDR program. That implies that once they have been identified, they will be cantoned, disarmed and will participate in joint patrols with other armed groups". Facebook page of the Kisal Association. Malian authorities allegedly paid some Fulani political-military chiefs from the centre to come to Bamako and help with "assembling their groups". Crisis Group interviews, Fulani member of the elite who participated in these meetings and senior security official, Bamako, February 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Sékou Tamboura, "Situation sécuritaire dans le Macina et le Seno: 500 djihadistes d'Amadou Koufa rendent les armes", *L'Aube*, 7 March 2016.

<sup>111</sup> In June, a group of Fulani combatants close to Ganda Izo, preparing for DDR, was reportedly attacked in the Gourma region, to the east of Douentza, by the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and allies (known by its French acronym, GATIA) who either did not accept their presence or were trying to recruit them into their own ranks. The death toll from the confrontation is unknown. Behind it lies the struggle to control armed groups in the centre and gain access to DDR resources. Crisis Group telephone interviews, members of Ganda Izo and GATIA, Malian researcher, June 2016.

<sup>112</sup> Indeed, militants close to Kouffa reportedly threatened young people wanting to join the DDR program. Crisis Group interviews, security expert and Fulani member of the elite, Sévaré and Bamako, February 2016.

sible for some of the violence in the centre, to turn away from them.<sup>113</sup> But there is a risk it will cause a misunderstanding: some sectors see this initiative as an opportunity to extend DDR to the centre and begin to buy local peace by distributing funds; others are concerned that it constitutes a kind of recognition that will only encourage militias to form. In Mopti, in January 2016, a meeting of representatives of different communities supported by the national reconciliation ministry repeated an appeal “to create monitoring units composed of young people and hunters in every part of the country or, if that is not possible, to create vigilance brigades in sensitive municipalities (where access is difficult and the army cannot intervene quickly)”.<sup>114</sup>

In May 2016, violent clashes between armed Bambara and Fulani groups resulted in the death of at least 30 people and hundreds of nomads fled to Mauritania’s refugee camps.<sup>115</sup> Members of the security forces allegedly helped to arm traditional Bambara hunters in order to halt the advance of jihadists in the centre. Shortly afterwards, armed Fulani elements, reportedly close to the jihadists, gathered near Mali’s border with Mauritania, raising fears they would reinforce jihadists in the area. In Bamako, the authorities are concerned and have revived the idea of forming Fulani self-defence groups distinct from the jihadist groups as a way of reducing the attraction that the latter are exercising over Fulani nomads.<sup>116</sup> The current rise in tensions is leading to the constitution of armed groups that are more or less controlled by the authorities.<sup>117</sup>

Without efficient action to reduce tensions, the centre could quickly become the new epicentre of violence in Mali.<sup>118</sup> Jihadist elements gain from these troubles by making themselves useful to some communities and consolidating their own positions. However, tension originates less from the supposed radicalisation of any community than from the government’s lack of legitimacy and the inability of the authorities to peacefully regulate local conflicts to secure the area.

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<sup>113</sup> Facebook page, Malian national reconciliation ministry, consulted in March 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Facebook page, Malian national reconciliation ministry, message posted on 29 January 2016 (Crisis Group translation).

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, expert visiting camps in Mauritania, June 2016.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group email correspondence, member of a Fulani Association in Mali, May 2016.

<sup>117</sup> The creation of the National Alliance for Safeguarding Fulani Identity and Restoring Justice (known by its French acronym, ANSIPRJ), a new political-military movement for the defence of the Fulani populations, was announced on 18 June 2016. It is led by Oumar Al-djana, a young Fulani teacher who claims to be a former MNLA member. The creation, still largely theoretical, of a new armed movement falls within the broader context of competition between Fulani elites to form an armed movement to represent them. “Oumar Aldjana: ‘Nous avons créé un mouvement pour mettre fin aux exactions contre les Peuls’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 20 June 2016.

<sup>118</sup> In the words of the Malian researcher, Boukary Sangaré. “Le Centre du Mali: épice de djihadisme?”, Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security (GRIP), 20 May 2016.

## VI. Looking Beyond the Security Challenge: A Test for Crisis Prevention and Management Policies

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Some groups affiliated to terrorist movements already exist in central Mali, but their numbers remain small and it is difficult to ascertain to what extent they coordinate their activities. Policies designed to combat violent radicalisation should not focus on anti-terrorist operations led solely by the security forces, especially as their methods are partly to blame for local people rejecting the government. They should take into account the broader context that is fuelling the increase in armed violence, as described in this report. As Crisis Group recently highlighted, resolving local conflicts will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises.<sup>119</sup>

Without the armed violence that has again affected the north since 2012, it is unlikely that resentment in the centre of the country would have so quickly resulted in political-military mobilisations. The two regions are undeniably connected but there are also major differences between them. For example, joining armed groups as a form of social integration and the criminalisation of the economy, especially drug trafficking, are much less developed in the centre. Specific responses must therefore be designed in each region. The Malian government should design a special plan to respond to the specific problems and forms of violence affecting the centre. This would avoid losing too much energy trying to extend to the centre the benefits of the peace agreement negotiated for other regions by their own representatives.

### A. *The Objective: A Government with Renewed Legitimacy in the Territories*

The danger of increased armed violence in central Mali results less from the action of terrorist organisations than from years of negligence by the authorities and what are viewed as their unfair policies. The priority for the government, with the aid of Mali's partners, should therefore be to restore its presence in the area in order to build good relations with the local populations. It must first understand the extent of rejection of the state by local people and rebuild its legitimacy not by returning to repressive, partial and authoritarian policies but, on the contrary, by playing its role of regulator, guaranteeing access to basic services and being on hand to help the people, including nomadic groups.

This requires results in areas where work has already begun. Justice, which is too often corrupt and at the service of the powerful, must be independent and autonomous from those who hold political and economic power. The government must guarantee the populations' access to basic services. In addition to justice and security, which are priority fields for intervention, the government must also invest in education and natural resources management. It should rethink its presence among the population, including nomadic groups. In today's world, it is essential, for example, to intensify efforts to create nomadic schools.

In terms of security, the government must reassure citizens and restore public order. As Crisis Group emphasised: "Jihadists' ability to offer protection ... is ... usually more central to their success than ideology".<sup>120</sup> The government must again prove

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<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016. Full Report only available in English.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

it has the capacity to protect. That requires, firstly, that the security forces regain credibility in the eyes of the populations. To break the cycle of predation by the “*porteurs d’uniforme*”, senior officers must punish abuses in a conspicuous way.

The government must also start working on local security as soon as possible. The Malian security forces are currently too few in number to cover the entire territory.<sup>121</sup> A territorial or communal police force, funded by regional or local authorities, should be put in place.<sup>122</sup> It would ensure security in places where other security forces only rarely venture. It could take responsibility for affairs that are under the remit of the police. The army, which has no investigative capacity, currently secures the area, but that is not its role.<sup>123</sup> In addition, local recruits to a territorial police force would further reconciliation between local populations and the forces responsible for ensuring their security. Their powers and recruitment procedures should be clearly defined. The aim is to create representative police forces that serve local people and not communal militias that serve particular communities or interest groups.

Finally, the government should try to end divisions between local elites, by encouraging them to take part in the political debate rather than resorting to arms to resolve their differences and rivalries. It is necessary to prevent political competition from leading to the formation of the kind of armed militias present in the north. Moreover, the stigmatisation of some nomadic elites because of their recent association with groups such as MOJWA is counterproductive in the long term. It is essential to avoid a situation in which some communities, feeling excluded, would be tempted to join radicalised groups to make their voice heard. In partnership with the government, local elites can play a central role. They should accept their share of responsibility for the current turmoil and stop blaming each other and manipulating desires for vengeance.

#### B. *A Realistic Approach in Accordance with Government Resources*

The hope that the 2012 crisis would provide a wake-up call to the nation and lead to ambitious governance reform has been largely disappointed. Public resources often continue to disappear before reaching intended beneficiaries. Development partners have been largely unable to reform aid policies. Worse, because of the insecurity, it has become more difficult for development aid to reach the more remote areas. The government remains constrained by limited budgetary resources. Investments in social services suffer as a result of the priority given to defence and security. In this context, recommendations to reform public administration in central Mali do not have much chance of success.

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<sup>121</sup> The Mopti region, which is twice the size of Belgium, reportedly has only 753 gendarmes, police officers and National Guard members to maintain order. Crisis Group interview, MINUSMA member, Sévaré, March 2016.

<sup>122</sup> Mali and its partners could learn from recent efforts in Niger to develop a local police force in the Agadez region. This project, still at the evaluation stage, was developed with the support of the EU, the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the Danish cooperation agency. Crisis Group interview, member of the EU delegation to Niger, Niamey, May 2016.

<sup>123</sup> The Malian Security Forces (known by their French acronym, FDS) include the armed forces (FAMA) under the authority of the defence ministry and the internal security forces (national police, gendarmerie and National Guard) under the authority of the interior and civil protection ministry.

A realistic approach is needed, one that carefully assesses what can be done in a situation suffering from such constraints. Rather than designing major new reforms, which rarely get much further than the ministries and departments in Bamako, the government should concentrate on practical action in the field. It must identify and work with all local actors, including members of civil society and those who, by necessity, made a pact with jihadist groups. The priority now is to invest in the neglected regions of the centre.

Given the extent of the needs in different parts of this still fragile country, the centre must find its champions, for instance a consensual figure able to win the support of the local people. The government could appoint a high representative for the central regions responsible for coordinating initiatives and preparing a special plan. The peace agreement has disregarded the centre so much that it cannot be implemented there.

The different sectors of civil society in the centre, not only armed groups or those in power, must be closely involved in the preparation of such a plan, to ensure that the elite will not take the lead. The peace agreement signed in Bamako, rather favourable to the armed movements, was not the product of an inclusive process.<sup>124</sup> Only the DDR program, which pre-existed it, could be extended to the centre of the country, along the lines provided for in the agreement, to facilitate disarmament and reduce the increasingly worrying availability of war weapons.<sup>125</sup>

Mali's partners should allow those in their ranks who have a more detailed knowledge of these regions (European Union, Netherlands, etc.) to take responsibility for dealing with matters relating to central Mali. Duplication and pointless competition should be avoided.

Together, the government and involved partners should identify and focus on priority causes: security, justice, education and natural resources management are probably among the areas requiring immediate strategic intervention. It is less a question of developing the economy of regions that are rich in natural resources than of rebuilding the ability of the authorities to regulate conflicts and guarantee access to basic services. Finally, it is necessary to stop prioritising security solutions in the fight against radical groups. Military efforts are certainly useful but they must not be the main response. The challenge is to restore the state's presence and ensure that the population recognise its legitimacy.

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<sup>124</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°226, *Mali: An Imposed Peace?*, 22 May 2015.

<sup>125</sup> But it would be risky to extend to central regions the appointment of interim authorities as provided for in the peace agreement. That would provoke enormous tensions between the groups that might expect to choose these transitional authorities. Moreover, appointments to the Peace Agreement Monitoring Committee (known by its French acronym, CSA) of public figures from the centre would undoubtedly lead to arguments between signatory parties, which already clashed on these issues in 2015. That would paralyse even more the bodies responsible for monitoring the agreement.

## VII. Conclusion

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Violent extremist groups prosper in areas of tension where the state is absent, where its authority is contested or where it is only present in the form of its security forces, especially if those commit abuses. They take hold when conflicts between communities for access to natural resources worsen and when the government is too weak and traditional authorities too contested to ensure the peaceful resolution of disputes. In these circumstances, radical groups know how to win ground by making themselves useful and by supporting some groups against others. They provide protection, arms and military know-how, but they are also able to respond to strong local demands for justice, security and, more broadly, moral standard in politics. Central Mali provides them with particularly fertile terrain in which to establish themselves. They avoid big gestures but chase the state and its representatives from large swathes of territory and gradually replace them with their own people.

It is still time to prevent and contain this phenomenon. The government is contested but not entirely rejected, even among sympathisers of radical groups. Moreover, these groups remain poorly coordinated and a minority. Much of the violence is still perpetrated by predators who have no coherent political agenda and sometimes use religious arguments. By intervening in the centre, the government and its partners must, however, focus on the correct objective. The aim is not to destroy a few dozen armed individuals. Something else is at stake: the government must restore its credibility by taking action that is fair and useful to the communities, including nomadic ones.

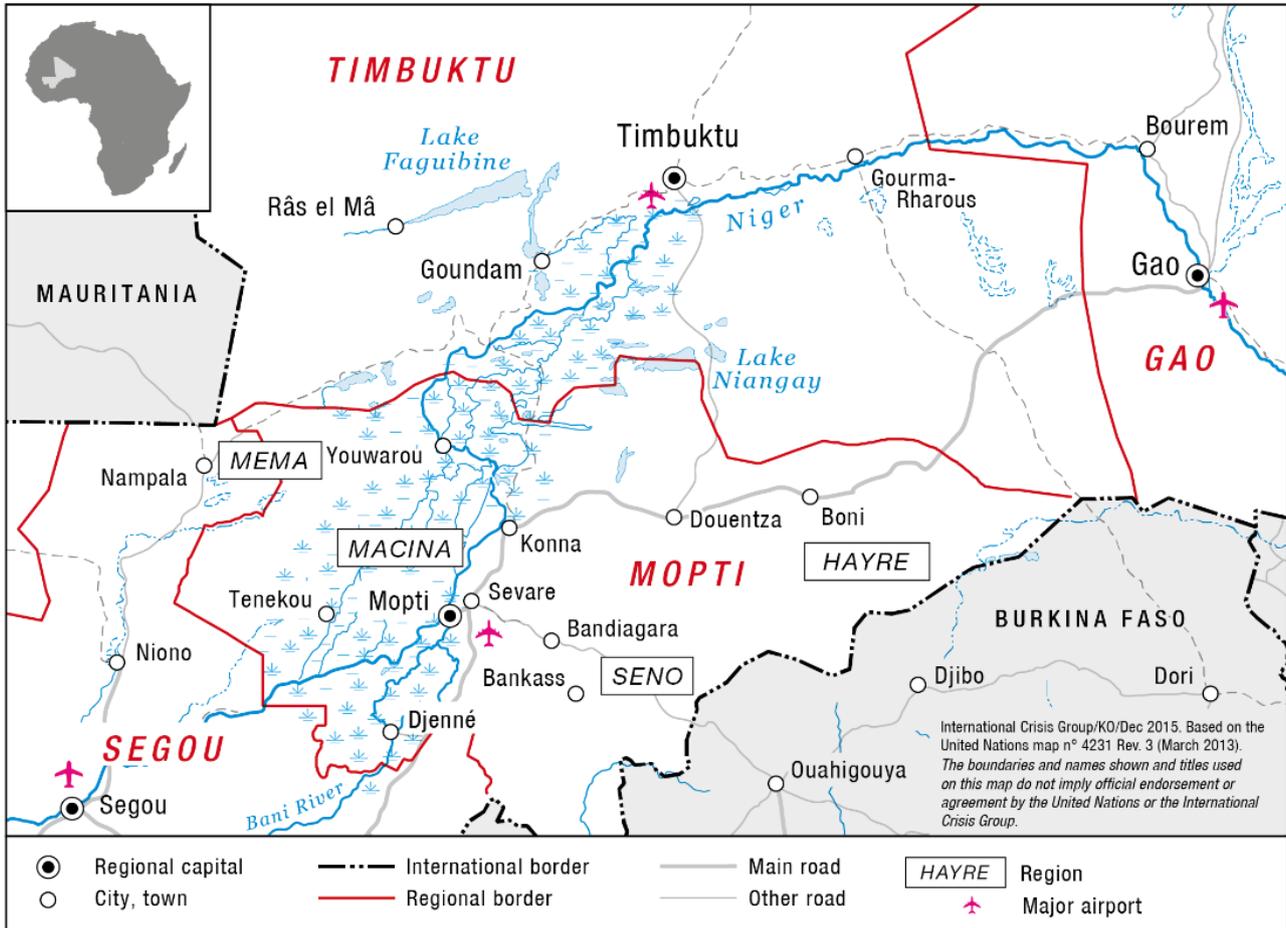
It is important for the government to show that it serves all citizens and that the political system is sufficiently open to allow them to participate in the management of their own affairs and security. Central Mali could become a showcase for the implementation of local government policies and early action to avoid national states collapsing and violent radical groups establishing themselves. For this to happen, it must not be neglected any longer.

**Dakar/Bamako/Brussels, 6 July 2016**

Appendix A: Map of Mali



Appendix B: Map of Central Mali



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## Appendix C: Chronology of the Main Attacks in Central Mali (Mopti and Ségou)

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### **9-17 January 2013**

Battle of Konna, Mopti circle and region. French military Operation Serval halts the advance of Ansar Dine, MOJWA and AQIM forces toward Mopti and Sévaré on 11 January. Malian forces retake Konna on 17 January.

### **18 March 2013**

Armed individuals kill about 20 civilians in the village of Doungoura, Ténenkou circle, Mopti region. They ambush vehicles, execute the passengers and throw their bodies down a well.

### **5 January 2015**

About 30 armed men attack the town of Nampala, Niono circle, Ségou region, and kill at least eleven Malian soldiers.

### **8 and 16 January 2015**

Two attacks, attributed by the press to the MLF, in the town of Ténenkou, Ténenkou circle, Mopti region. Three FAMA soldiers and six attackers are killed.

### **13 March 2015**

A Malian army vehicle is blown up by a mine (IED), killing two Malian soldiers and wounding six others.

### **3 April 2015**

Unidentified combatants attack the Boni police station, Douentza circle, Mopti region.

### **22 April 2015**

Two armed individuals suspected of being members of the MLF kill the Dogo village chief, Youwarou circle, Mopti region.

### **5 May 2015**

The CMA attacks FAMA positions in Ténenkou, before withdrawing. The fighting leaves one FAMA soldier and between six and ten members of the CMA dead.

### **8 August 2015**

A jihadist commando attacks the military camp and the Byblos Hotel in Sévaré, Mopti circle and region, leaving four MINUSMA contract workers and four FAMA soldiers dead. The al-Morabittoune group and then the MLF both claim responsibility for the attack.

### **12 September 2015**

Three presumed members of the MLF attack a gendarmerie station near Bankass, Bankass circle, Mopti region. One gendarme is killed and another wounded.

### **18 September 2015**

Unidentified armed individuals kill a forest ranger in Tougou, Ségou region.

### **19 September 2015**

Seventeen armed men attack a police post station in Koro circle, Mopti region, killing four including two police officers and seriously wounding three.

### **9 October 2015**

Eighteen armed men on motorbikes attack the village of Dounapen, Koro circle, Mopti region. They kill the deputy mayor of the neighbouring town of Dioungani.

### **21 January 2016**

Four armed individuals attack the village of Kouna, Macina circle, Ségou region, targeting the gendarmerie.

### **13 April 2016**

Several armed men attack a FAMA checkpoint in the town of Boni. One attacker is killed and five arrested. The attack is attributed to the MLF.

### **2-4 May 2016**

Clashes between Bambara and Fulani communities in the Ténenkou circle, Mopti region, leave 30 dead.

### **22 May 2016**

A convoy of three MINUSMA vehicles is blown up by a mine in Djénné circle. At least two Togolese soldiers are wounded.

### **29 May 2016**

A Minusma convoy is ambushed near Sévaré. Five Togolese soldiers are killed.

## Appendix D: List of Acronyms

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AFP	Agence France-Presse
ANSIPRJ	Alliance nationale pour la sauvegarde de l'identité peule et la restauration de la justice, National Alliance for Safeguarding the Fulani Identity and Restoring Justice
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
CMA	Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, Coordination of Azawad Movements
CSA	Comité de suivi de l'accord de paix malien, Malian Peace Agreement Monitoring Committee
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DGSE	Direction générale de la sécurité d'Etat, State Security Department
FAMA	Forces armées et de sécurité du Mali, Malian Armed Forces
FDS	Forces de sécurité maliennes, Malian Security Forces
MLF	Macina Liberation Front
GATIA	Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés, Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defence Group
GRIP	Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security
HICM	High Islamic Council of Mali
INSTAT	Institut national de la statistique, National Institute of Statistics
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MNLA	Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MOJWA	Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Program