

Interactions between civilians and jihadists in Mali and Niger

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND LESSONS FOR POLICY



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Updates, clarifications, and additional reporting have been regularly shared among the team via WhatsApp. These constant and vibrant exchanges throughout the data collection phase and the writing process have proved to be a robust internal quality assurance mechanism. Empirical findings and parts of the report have been shared externally with select colleagues and regional experts to strengthen our analysis. We are grateful for their time, their kindness and their pertinent comments.

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1. Takeaways and executive summary

What The study unpacks the relationships established between civilians and jihadists in areas of Mali and Niger under jihadist dominance, represented by local Al Qaeda and Islamic State branches, JNIM and IS Sahel

How The research is based on 150+ interviews with civilians from the Cercle de Djenné (Mali), Gotheye (Niger) and Baleyara (Niger), as well as officials or civil society representatives in Bamako and Niamey

Relevance The direction that the Sahelian crisis is taking crucially depends on the jihadists' ability to propose a social contract to populations, which is what the study assesses

The fictions of war

the actors involved in the crisis take decisions in an environment riddled with informational gaps, myths, delusion, deception, and omissions, all used more or less strategically

Deadly dynamics

from first encounters to jihadist rule or armed resistance, the process of jihadist "conquest" exposes civilians to extreme violence. Self-defence militias siding with the state exacerbate and "parochialise" violence to levels unknown so far

Zakat, one word, two different practices

zakat means two radically different things depending on which jihadist outfit is in charge. JNIM enforces a genuinely redistributive system while IS Sahel's logic is strictly extortionist

Power structures transformed

prewar power structures are dramatically transformed by the war. So are the norms regulating life and gender relations. The war is also deeply harmful to communal trust and social cohesion

The pitfalls of dialogue

state-led dialogue is non-existent at the moment in Mali yet exists through various local channels, for pure conflict management purposes. Niger has officially opted for a community-based dialogue whose results are ambiguous

Policy implications

promoting the return of the state in present-day Mali means promoting a state that fails to protect its citizen and even targets some of them. Protection of civilians, prevention and documentation of abuses and humanitarian relief to victimised populations should be utmost priorities

- * The Central Sahel has been witnessing a major security crisis since 2012. The crisis has multiple belligerents, among whom jihadist movements feature most prominently. Jihadist movements pose an existential threat to incumbent Sahelian governments. Not only are they militarily powerful, they also take advantage of the governance failings of the political regimes in place. More than a decade of soft and hard internationally backed counterinsurgency measures have not stopped their expansion, particularly in rural areas.
- * A reason for the failure to contain the jihadist insurgency, let alone stabilise the Central Sahel region, is rooted in the lack of understanding of the processes leading to jihadist expansion and territorial entrenchment, notably those involving political activities rather than strict military coercion. This is the gap that the current study aims to fill. The study inquires whether jihadists offer a social contract to populations living under their authority, and if so, what are its most salient terms. The overarching goal of the study is to understand the nature and origins of various configurations of relationships between jihadists and civilians in Central Mali and Western Niger. We insist however that these relationships are not strictly dyadic. They are shaped by what the state and its local allies do or do not do.
- * The research is inspired conceptually by recent insights into the study of relationships between non-combatants and insurgent groups in war-affected areas. The relevant scholarship stresses that civilians are not just passive observers or victims of people with guns but can exert agency and shape the political dynamic and the decisions affecting their well-being.
- * The research has four specific objectives: i) to establish the empirical variety of situations lived by civilians under jihadist rule; ii) to make sense of their origins, that is, the circumstances that enable their formation; iii) to assess the civilians' capacity to shape the order they are subjected to; and iv) to determine if third-party interventions can produce outcomes beneficial to civilians.
- * The jihadists' implementation of the Islamic tax, *zakat*, is a good marker of the nature of the relationship established between the jihadists and the civilians and is the central object of this research.
- * The research is based on primary data collected in the form of dozens of semi-structured interviews carried out in Niger and Mali, in the capitals, and in sites outside the capitals where populations are directly exposed to jihadist governance, emanating from two militant groups, *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State-Sahel (IS-Sahel), respectively affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.
- * The most salient themes emerging from the testimonies have been grouped under five main categories which form our main findings. **First**, we observe that all the actors involved in the crisis we study are not just caught in the 'fog of war' but instead in the 'fictions of war'. By this we mean that the narratives they express are riddled with gaps, myths, delusion, deception, self-censorship, and omissions, all used more or less strategically. This misinformation harms sound decision-making. **Second**, we propose an evidence-based simplified representation of processes involving jihadists and civilians, from first encounters to violent confrontation or jihadist rule. Whatever their outcome, these processes are terribly violent and costly for populations. In the worst-case scenario where social cleavages are

deliberately weaponised, they may lead to potentially catastrophic forms of ethnic-based violence. **Third**, we compare the enforcement of *zakat* between JNIM and IS-Sahel and stress the dramatic difference in behaviours between the two groups. JNIM tends to make *zakat* part of a proto-social contract including reciprocal obligations, while IS-Sahel enforces a revengeful, extortionist system. **Fourth**, we assess how politically transformative the jihadist occupation is for the social and political landscape. The research identifies four key areas where changes are critical. They concern the power of local elites, the demise of the state, gender relations and victimisation of women, and community cohesion. **Fifth**, we review the scope and achievements of dialogue initiatives between jihadists and the state (Niger) or various local entities (Mali). Both approaches show limited effectiveness, as well as major downsides.

- * Five main policy recommendations are derived from the research findings. **First**, reliable information is a public good, an end in itself necessary for actors to take sound decisions. It should not be downgraded to becoming ammunition in a clash of narratives. A healthy informational environment can be promoted. **Second**, stabilisation programmes are essentially articulated around the ‘return of the state’, yet reflecting on which state returns should be considered a prerequisite. The state has a history and a present of abusive behaviours which harm its legitimacy. Present-day abusive behaviours include partnerships with self-defence militias in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations which risk provoking dangerous spirals of ethnic-based violence. **Third**, states should refrain from encouraging militia formation in situations of overwhelming jihadist military dominance as inconsistent self-defence exposes civilians to more violence. **Fourth**, the protection of civilians should be made an utmost priority in a context where documenting and monitoring atrocities perpetrated against populations is made increasingly difficult. **Fifth**, in the specific case of Mali, it should be recognised that Western governments have largely lost classic diplomatic leverage to influence government policies and that usual tools to promote the protection of civilians may not be functional. High-level, behind-the-doors transactional diplomacy may i) represent a promising yet highly fragile avenue to avoid Mali’s diplomatic isolation, and ii) subsequently induce a de-escalation of violence and a rapid transition towards more consensual forms of governance.

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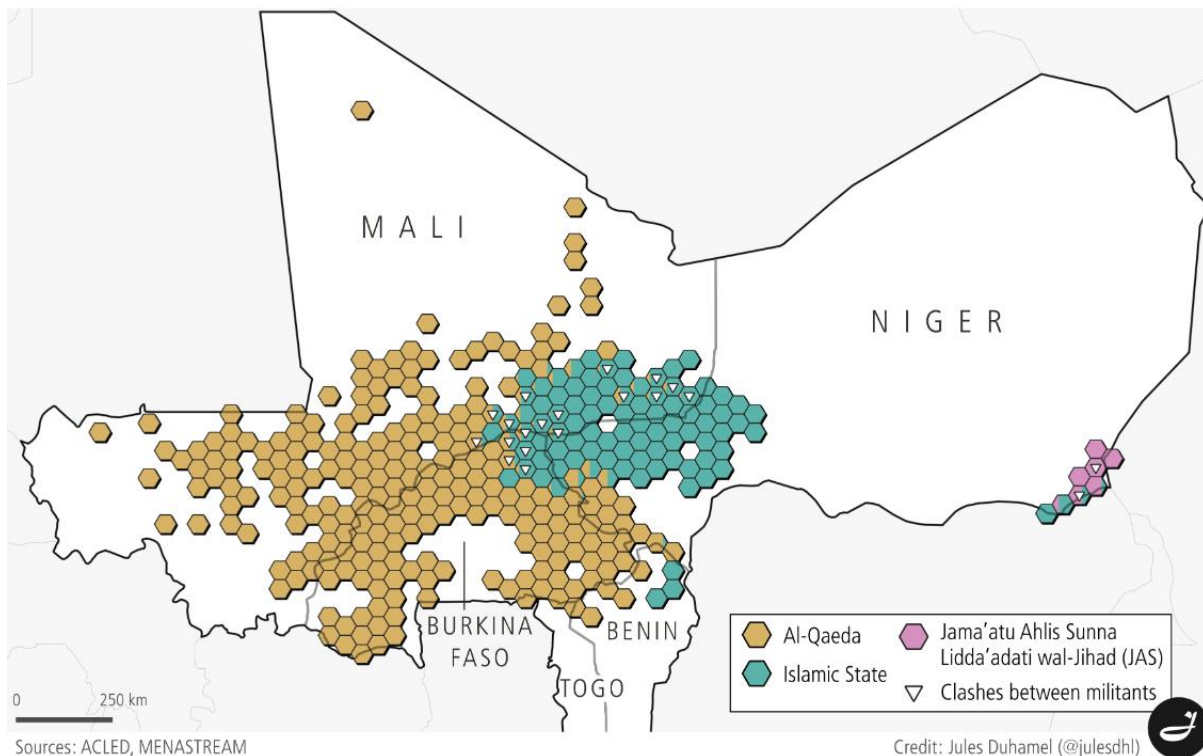
2. Introduction. Do Sahelian jihadist rulers offer a social contract?

In 2012, the North of Mali was stormed by an insurgency which removed any state presence over two-thirds of the country's territory for approximately one year. The political shockwave provoked a coup d'état in the capital Bamako, placing the regime on a shaky political trajectory. Multiple regional and international efforts – among which the French featured most prominently in military and diplomatic capacities – aimed at stabilising the situation through various strategies. These strategies have not yielded significantly and durably positive outcomes. Mali is still not stabilised to date.

Mali is the epicentre of a deep-seated governance crisis which exists in various forms across the Sahel. The 2012 insurgency led by Tuareg separatists was its most marked manifestation. The rebellion was soon crowded out by a more powerful and politically consistent jihadist insurgency aspiring to extend its military and political activities beyond the frontiers of Mali. The French military intervention in 2013, followed by international efforts to repel insurgents and bring back the state in areas it had previously withdrawn from, restored Mali's capacity to control urban centres but did not stop the jihadist expansion in the rural hinterlands, and did not prevent jihadist groups from establishing bases and operating in Mali's immediate or distant neighbours such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and, more recently, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Ghana, or Bénin Republic. Jihadist insurgents spread, but not uniformly. They factionalised in two main branches respectively affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS). They fought against each other, and continue to do so. The political landscape they control (with varying levels of military grip) is made of a myriad of heterogeneous local configurations of power, requiring the analysis to be granular and nuanced and defeating one-size-fits-all policy responses.

The internal feuds among jihadists do not stop them from expanding their geographical reach. In both Mali and Niger, their presence is felt in the immediate outskirts of the capitals Bamako and Niamey (see Figure 1.). The humanitarian consequences are immense. In August 2022, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Mali has reached a high since the beginning of the crisis in 2012, estimated to be above 400,000 (Ministère de la Santé et du Développement Social, Direction Nationale du Développement Social 2022). The trend is not better in Niger, where the absolute number of IDPs is similar. The most affected regions are Diffa (Southeast, bordering Nigeria) and Tillabéri and Tahoua (West, bordering Mali and Burkina Faso). Niger also hosts 65,000 refugees from Mali according to January 2023 figures (UNHCR 2023).

Figure 1. Map of activity of jihadist militant groups in Central Sahel (2022)



The range of policies used by governments to counter the ever-growing influence of jihadists on their national territories is essentially articulated around military action. The Central Sahel is now heavily militarised. Using force and seeking outside military assistance feature prominently among the options pursued by Sahelian governments. Their demands are partially met by international actors preoccupied by the descent of the Sahel region into a chronic security crisis. Mali is hosting a UN-led peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). It used to be France's privileged military partner before opting for an alliance with Russia after a bitter diplomatic sequence between the two countries which ushered in the deployment of 'Russian instructors' – in practice, Wagner mercenaries – replacing French troops. Niger is still actively cooperating with France on the security front.

In Mali and Niger, a plethora of self-defence groups have emerged, which entertain ambiguous, alternatively symbiotic, mildly cooperative, or contested relationships with the central governments. The overwhelming security efforts have caused multiple cases of abuse against civilians which are polarising the political landscape further. They have also been accompanied by stabilisation policies not involving the use of force, with little success so far.

A reason for the failure to contain the jihadist insurgency, let alone stabilise the Central Sahel region, is rooted in the lack of understanding of the processes leading to jihadist expansion and territorial entrenchment, notably those involving political activities rather than strict military coercion. **This is the gap that the current study aims to fill.**

The jihadists' capacity to engage with non-combatant populations and govern their activities, in particular, allows them to carve out some durable territorial and political influence. The jihadists'

ambition is not just to challenge power structures they consider ungodly; it also consists of establishing a political order complying with their reading of Islamic scriptures (Revkin 2016). Jihadists engage in what has been classically labelled ‘competitive state-making’ (Kalyvas 2006; Revkin 2020). Credible competitive state-making requires the elaboration of some form of social contract. Do jihadists offer such a contract? If so, what are its most salient terms?

Importantly, the eventual success of the jihadist agenda does not exclusively depend on its intrinsic features. It also depends on the way it resonates with the heterogeneous political preferences of the populations (which, in the case of the Central Sahel, were Muslim long before being colonised by Europeans and subjected to forms of governance inherited from colonisation), and, crucially, on which alternative regime types exist. In the contemporary Sahel, there is arguably a straightforward correlation between the appeal of the jihadist rule and the rejection of decaying pseudo-democratic, postcolonial systems of governance. In other words, the judgements about the nature and the exercise of power that populations express and the political leanings which they generate are always relative.

In the cases we review, the merits of the alternative systems of governance are established in a realm of second-best options, where predation or coercion by those holding authority are ubiquitous. For instance, a codified and predictable system of taxation by the jihadists may rely on force, yet still be considered better than the arbitrary extortion performed by state agents at checkpoints (Shouten 2022). As put forward by Zanoletti (2022), taking money from people is a very banal activity carried out by powerful people in Mali. What matters truly is whether reciprocal obligations are associated with money-grabbing activities or not. A similar rationale applies to the use of violence and coercion. Jihadist movements may not need to develop sophisticated approaches to win the hearts and minds of the populations if the state kills civilians indiscriminately as part of its counterinsurgency effort. Taxation by state or non-state authorities and reciprocal obligations between the authorities and the populations stemming from taxation and coercion are the essential research objects of this study. Crucially, as developed below, these behaviours unfold during wartime and are constantly at risk of being subsumed under military imperatives.

The present report features among a body of emerging research that takes the political offer of the jihadists and its imposition in Sahelian rural settings seriously (Thurston 2020). It specifically examines the taxation system imposed by the jihadists, whose manifestations are observable; are politically, socially, and economically meaningful; and may represent a proto-social contract allowing jihadist presence to endure.

The report is structured as follows. In Section 3, the specific objectives of the research are stated. Section 4 reviews the bodies of literature that helped frame the data collection strategy on which this study is based and organise our findings. The section also zooms into the socio-political history of the areas of Mali and Niger surveyed and offers contextual evidence for the specific governance-related questions that the study explores. Section 5 presents our key findings on jihadist/civilian interactions in Central Mali and Western Niger. Section 6 notes our conclusions. Finally, Section 7 discusses the policy implications of our work.

3. Research objectives. Capturing situations lived by civilians under jihadist rule

The highly effective military strategies and tactics used by the jihadists to advance territorially are well documented, notably by organisations such as the [ACLED](#). Less is known about the jihadists' capacity to carve out social safe havens and develop political influence in areas they covet or already under their military dominance. In rural areas of Mali and Niger, the jihadists have entrenched their presence, engaged with civilians, and established some pacts with them which regulate the economic, social, or political aspects of local life. This system of governance is in direct competition with what the state has been offering to populations.

Our study unpacks the jihadists' early encounters with populations and their agenda for governing as it is elaborated and deployed concretely in various local settings of the Central Sahel. It is inspired conceptually by recent insights into the study of relationships between non-combatants and insurgent groups in war-affected areas. The relevant scholarship stresses that civilians are not just passive observers or victims of people with guns but can exert agency and shape the political dynamic and the decisions affecting their well-being. The type of agency exerted – whether it concerns mere survival (Jackson 2021) or broader participation in governance – is context-specific, which we explore in the cases of Mali and Niger.

The research has four specific objectives:

- to establish the empirical variety of situations lived by civilians under jihadist rule
- to make sense of their origins, that is, the circumstances that enable their formation
- to assess the civilians' capacity to shape the order they are subjected to
- to determine if third-party interventions can produce outcomes beneficial to civilians

Since 'situations lived by civilians under jihadist rule' imply many different aspects and would have formed an overly ambitious and hardly tractable research agenda, it was decided to focus primarily on one aspect of insurgent governance, namely, the enforcement of the Islamic tax and redistributive system called *zakat*. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam. Hence, it occupies a central role in any ruling system based on Islamic principles. However, its enforcement is not straightforward. The way in which *zakat* is interpreted and executed reveals the features of an embryonic social contract varying in strength and legitimacy. All four objectives enumerated above become 'easier-to-research' when grouped around the implementation of *zakat*. Our research design, presented below, has been developed accordingly.

4. Approaches to study wartime interactions between jihadists and civilians in the Sahel

This study draws on three major bodies of literature. The first constitutes the so-called **rebel governance** strand of conflict studies. This stream of research argues that wars produce temporary orders and increasingly stresses that these orders do not just stem from the intentions of the insurgents but also the capacity of civilians to shape them through various behaviours they may adopt. The second strand of literature we mobilise considers **jihadist norms of governance**. Jihadist movements that have received an official endorsement from the central command of Al Qaeda or the Islamic State – through the pledge of allegiance called *bay'a* – are obliged to behave according to a certain playbook defined by their respective organisation's theologians, while parallelly making pragmatic and mundane political or military choices. In this work, we pay specific attention to the ways jihadist movements organise the collection and distribution of economic resources – in other words, their fiscal policy – in areas under their influence. Jihadist organisations may justify their behaviour by referring to norms codified from a distance; yet, they have to implement them, recruit combatants, and survive as political and military entities in very specific social environments where such norms may represent a break with the past. Jihadists have to adapt. Local history and politics heavily constrain what jihadists can achieve or not *in situ*, which is why we synthesise a third body of literature detailing the **peculiar political configurations** of the areas surveyed in Mali and Niger.

Civilian agency during wartime

A rich body of literature now emphasises that civilians are not just passive observers or victims of people with guns but can exert agency and shape the political dynamic and the decisions affecting their well-being, even though the relationship they entertain with armed actors is highly asymmetrical.¹ Relying on this literature crucially helps us formulate our hypotheses and serves as a compass to orient our empirical strategy in Niger and Mali.

The question of which type of agency is exerted – whether it concerns mere survival or broader participation in governance – has context-specific answers. The responses of a community to the demands of armed actors who have conquered the territories where they live or operate in their vicinity depend on the demands themselves but also on a series of community-specific factors. These factors shape how communities behave during wartime. They include how alien insurgents are seen in the eyes of the population, how politically fragmented the communities are, who and how legitimate their leaders are, which political economy prevails in their midst, or which options to flee and live elsewhere exist.

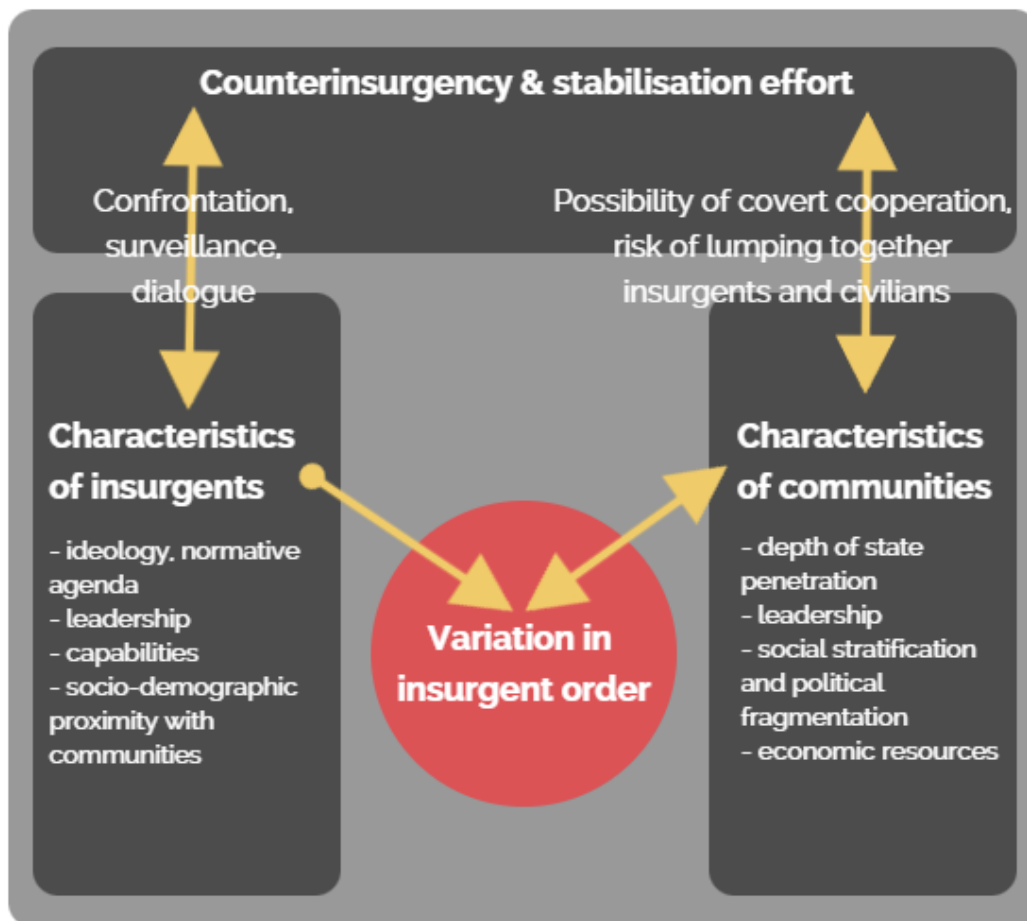
¹ See Arjona et al. (2015) or Staniland (2014). Bouhleb and Guichaoua (2021) apply these insights to Mali's occupation by jihadist movements in 2012 and show that jihadist rule differed in Gao and Kidal due to a combination of pre-war characteristics of these cities and postures of jihadist occupiers.

Crucially, the behaviours of the armed actors and the communities constantly adjust to each other and should be considered as shaky iterative interactions informed by relatively short-term decisions unfolding over time rather than an equilibrium of strategic responses. Further, the relationship should not be seen as strictly dyadic, first because armed groups and communities are not unitary actors, and second because, in most cases, the state and its local political and military proxies are never far away and retain some capacity to shape the interactions between armed actors and communities. For example, an armed group may allocate resources to offer basic services to populations if it is militarily unchallenged but may revert to emergency, predatory measures against civilians if the military pressure exerted by the counterinsurgent forces becomes too high. The state may also use dialogue or other non-military measures geared towards de-escalation – to end a blockade, for example – and ease the pressure imposed on populations by the armed groups. The state may rely on loyal informants among the communities, or, on the contrary, may lump together the communities and the insurgents and develop enmity against civilians. Moreover, as illustrated below, the state may have a sporadic military presence in jihadist areas and, consequently, expose the populations its soldiers interact with to retaliation from insurgents.

A basic and generic representation of our analytical framework is provided in Figure 2 below. It takes stock of the rebel governance literature. Insurgents and communities co-produce a political order whose nature depends on their respective characteristics. The process of order formation between two main entities is itself subjected to actions taken by stabilisation and counterinsurgent forces, which interact separately, violently or not, with the insurgents and the communities. The characteristics of the actors in this simple representation form the ‘moving parts’ determining the nature of order that eventually emerges, consolidates, shapes civilians’ behaviours (hence the bi-directional arrow), or eventually collapses over time. The order produced is what primarily interests us in this study. Specifically, we study taxation and redistribution, in the form of *zakat*, as a meaningful marker of the political order born in wartime.

The analytical framework represented in Figure 2 is not used as a predictive model, but more as a compass based on existing scholarship to organise our empirical strategy and our findings. In our context of research, not all the ‘moving parts’ can be studied with equal attention, particularly on the side of the insurgents, due to the evident obstacle to access relevant information. A rich range of variables is still integrated in the findings presented in this report. Note also that the representation below is relatively static and tends to obliterate the fundamental transformative nature of wartime interactions. For instance, the social stratification of a community may be considered a given at the beginning of the war (and, in fact, a cause of it) but it may be radically reconfigured as the war unfolds. This dynamic, transformative dimension of the war is captured by our research instruments and features prominently in the findings presented below.

Figure 2. Wartime insurgent/civilian relations and formation of insurgent order



Norms of jihadist governance and the importance of *zakat*²

Jihadists, particularly those with transnational affiliations, land somewhere with a plan to govern populations living in territories they gain control of. They also have methods to execute it that are more or less formalised.³ The spectrum of jihadist policies is wide, ranging from security provision, to criminal justice, the adjudication of disputes, or education.

Enforcing *zakat* is an essential part of the jihadist platform, primarily because the fiscal practice of *zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam. Theoretically, *zakat* requires that an individual redistribute 2.5% of their disposable income to the poor. Exactly how the obligation unfolds and which responses it triggers

² We are indebted to Florence Boyer, a researcher at the *Institut de recherche pour le développement*, for illuminating conversations on the topic covered in this section.

³ See Bouhleb and Guichaoua (2021) for an example of how shaky the implementation of the plans was when jihadists took control of Gao and Kidal in 2012.

among populations depends on a myriad of factors. Below, we discuss what *zakat* means in the particular contexts we study and how it translates into concrete actions conducted on the ground. In this section, we briefly explain why *zakat* and resource collection from civilians by jihadists more broadly is a good marker of the nature of the relationship established between the jihadists and the civilians.

Taxation by armed groups can be strictly about income generation but it is generally more than that (Bandula-Irwin et al. 2022). It frequently takes place within a larger moral economy, mixing transfer of resources, mutual commitments between payers and payees, and obedience to authority and norms. Taxation is about the politics and the social aspects as much as it is about the economy. Figure 3 provides a generic perspective of what *zakat*, in its colloquial Sahelian sense, can mean and which functions it fulfils during wartime, allowing us, in the empirical section of this report, to assess which functions are the most salient in the locations surveyed in Mali and Niger.

First, paying *zakat* serves a symbolic function; it entails adherence to a value system involving religious obligations and conveying a purification dimension. *Zakat*, as implemented by jihadists, can or cannot deviate from local custom in places where Islamic charitable mechanisms already exist. A **second** function, stemming directly from this symbolic function, is political in nature. Individuals paying *zakat* place themselves under the authority of those collecting it. When exerted by armed groups, this authority is in direct competition with the state. Jihadists abolish forms of taxation not originating from them.⁴ In this context, paying *zakat* means recognising the superiority of the insurgents' authority; it may be interpreted as an act of allegiance to the jihadists and a repudiation of the state. It may bring populations closer to the jihadists and simultaneously expose them more dangerously to counterinsurgent forces. **Third**, paying *zakat* is a group-making and territory-making practice. The entity paying *zakat* delineates a geographical and social space of political hegemony. City dwellers owning cattle or agricultural land outside urban centres may pay *zakat* even though their city is in the state's hands. Through *zakat*, jihadists penetrate cities without having to conquer them militarily. **Fourth**, *zakat* conveys what we refer to as a martial function. *Zakat*, as a group-making activity, mechanically results in the formation of an 'in-group' of payers and an 'out-group' of tax evaders. The latter, by dodging their Islamic obligation, become legitimate targets of jihadist violence. Evading *zakat* powerfully justifies war-making, as it is seen as an act of rebellion (Revkin and Ahram 2020). **Fifth**, the social function of *zakat* is the most explicitly in line with its redistributive essence through help offered to the poor. It is theoretically self-explanatory yet not that easy to translate in practice. The **sixth** function of *zakat* we identify, consisting of financing the cost of war, is a departure from its original purpose yet often conflated with it in the contexts we study. Waging war demands money, and emergency taxation is a straightforward route to raise funds (Revkin 2020).

⁴ Before the jihadist occupation, Muslims would pay *zakat* to the local imam or directly to the poor and simultaneously pay their taxes to the state.

Figure 3. The functions of zakat



Two additional remarks must be made. First, while collecting *zakat* that is equivalent to 2.5% of individual disposable income may seem self-explanatory, it is not so in practice. Tricky questions to solve in practice include how disposable income is defined, which assets can be taxed, and who are the owners of assets to be taxed, among other such aspects. Politically, how much fiscal pressure is acceptable is another highly sensitive issue. Armed resistance to jihadists in Niger, as seen below, is often justified by financial demands seen as unbearable.

Second, *zakat* should not be confused with *ghanima* (spoils of war), which is another redistributive mechanism organised by jihadist groups. *Ghanima* is the lawful acquisition of the property of the unbelievers with whom jihadists are at war during military operations. *Ghanima* is often discussed in conjunction with *fay*, which corresponds to property lawfully taken from infidels without a fight (*i.e.* left behind). The redistribution of *ghanima* is happening among those involved in warfare, hence, essentially the combatants. *Ghanima* and *fay* are essential aspects of the cohesion of jihadist militant groups, as the interpretation of the formula of redistribution among those involved in war may vary. We cannot accurately capture this aspect of transfer of resources through our research design in Niger. In

the Tillaberi region, where interviews have taken place, *ghanima* may concretely interfere with what respondents call *zakat* in our interviews, but we are unable to assess to what extent. This ambiguity may in fact be considered a finding more than a methodological obstacle to our research: resources are being extracted from people but it is not always clear to them why this is happening. The situation is more clear-cut in Mali where *ghanima* and *fay* are taken in three circumstances: during clashes with governmental forces, during sieges of villages, and through the dispossession of civilians considered as enemies.

Making sense of the behaviours of jihadists in Mali and Niger. The global/local debate and the everyday politics of *jihad*

The cases we study involve two types of jihadist outfits, *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State-Sahel (IS-Sahel), respectively affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. JNIM is a coalition established in 2017 under the leadership of the former Tuareg nationalist leader Iyad Ag Ghaly. Iyad Ag Ghaly embraced the jihadist ideals gradually in the years preceding the outbreak of the rebellion in 2012. The JNIM is composed of combat units originally dispersed in Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao, and Central Mali. Five years earlier, these groups were in control of northern Mali behind the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) banner. This key period offered them an opportunity to try and then revise their governing capacities (Bouhleb and Guichaoua 2021). The French Operation Serval in 2013 dislodged them from cities but not from rural areas where they were able to reorganise, build new local following, expand their influence, and perfect their governing skills, having to deal with typically rural problems such as access to land and farmers/pastoralists disputes. The geographic expansion of the group was dramatic and politically critical. The preacher Hamadoun Kouffa, who had fought under Iyad Ag Ghaly in 2012, introduced *jihad* in Central Mali in the form of the *katiba* [combat unit] Macina. Central Mali is a strategic area in Mali for agro-pastoral activities. It is where the 'inner delta' of the Niger river spreads, offering large swathes of grazing land which attract herders from the whole Mopti region and beyond (Nampala, Goundam, Niafunke). After 2015, Central Mali soon became the most active jihadist front in Mali and the Sahel, and home to the renewed jihadist governance, which we explore in this report. Subsequently, the JNIM deployed in Burkina Faso and Western Niger. Two of the three locations we have surveyed, Gotheye (Niger) and the Cercle de Djenné (Mali) are under JNIM's influence.

The Islamic State in the Sahel is an offshoot of the coalition that ruled northern Mali in 2012 (Warner et al. 2021). It was originally led by Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, who was killed by a French strike in August 2021. Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi was a prominent member of the defunct Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (French acronym: MUJAO), the jihadist movement which controlled the Malian city of Gao in 2012. Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi defected from AQIM and swore allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) – and its leader at the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – in May 2015. His movement officially gained the IS 'province' status in March 2022, after his death. IS-Sahel ventured in Central Mali where it clashed with the JNIM, before retreating and concentrating its operations in the so-called tri-border area spreading over Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (see Figure 1 above). In this area, IS-Sahel has been responsible for large-scale massacres of civilians, clashes with local militias, and attacks against state forces. One of the three locations we have surveyed, Balewara, Niger, is home to IDPs who fled IS-Sahel's extreme violence.

A debate exists among scholars of transnational *jihad* as to how the main drivers of observable militant dynamics (ideology, recruitment, leadership style, technology or warfare, governance) should be concatenated analytically. Are jihadists, wherever they are operating on the planet, following a playbook written for them by the higher level of command in the Middle East or are they primarily the product of local grievances opportunistically taking the name ‘jihadists’ to fulfil their aspirations for change? Exploring the multiple ramifications of this debate is not our intention here. However, since our objective is specifically to make sense of interactions between jihadists and civilians in Mali and Niger and derive policy implications from our findings, we have to adopt an informed position in this debate.

Our stance, based on our observations and preceding works, could be summarised as follows: Sahelian jihadists are essentially locals⁵ who read their immediate political environment very well, enjoy some decentralised decision-making power, but who also, simultaneously, connect with each other across borders, and are bound ideologically by the franchise they belong to. The jihadists’ actions need to be justified in the idiom of their respective franchise.

Precisely how local and global influences are intertwined is not just a scholarly debate; it is also a practical dilemma that jihadists have to deal with. Local and global forces provoke possible tensions that jihadists have to solve as part of their everyday politics. Typically, fighting in the name of Islam requires that parochial considerations are transcended. However, in practice, recruitment is made easier through community-based networks. Positions of command need to be distributed carefully to ensure a fair representation of the communities composing the militant groups. Tribal matters and the distribution of favours which may accompany them are a constant threat to the groups’ cohesion.⁶ Disciplining the combatants may be subjected to the same kind of tensions.

The temptation to perpetrate revengeful ethnic killings can be high in zones where counterinsurgent forces and ethnic militias perpetrate atrocities against civilians and, consequently, boost the recruitment of jihadist groups among victimised communities. Communal violence is not something jihadist movements would officially approve. As a result, some actions by militants may be driven by pure revenge but eventually not be claimed. This was the case with the horrific killing of bus travellers by JNIM militants in Songho, Mali, in December 2021. The victims were essentially from the Dogon community, living in an area known as the hotbed of the notorious pro-government militia Dan Na Ambassagou, responsible for multiple atrocities ([HRW 2020](#)). Communal tensions may engulf the jihadist agenda in places where community-based self-defence has organised, such as Bandiagara in Central Mali. However, not so far from there, in the Cercle de Djenné (a case study in this research) where anti-jihadist resistance has been crushed, a ‘purest’ form of jihadist political order may emerge.⁷

⁵ This may not have been true in the early days of Sahelian *jihad* in the mid-2005 period, when the main leaders were from Algeria and had pursued international careers including spells in Afghanistan. Nowadays, notably because of the decapitation strategy adopted by French counterterrorism, most recruits and commanders are Sahelians. Jihadist militancy in the Sahel has largely become endogenous. Jihadists have adapted quite efficiently to counterterrorism tactics used against them through the quick replacement of those killed, also combined, in times of heavy military pressure, with geographic relocation in areas deemed safer.

⁶ Although the evidence on this particular subject is patchy, interviews carried out in Niamey in early 2022 indicated that the killing of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, leader of the Islamic State in the Sahel, by the French in August 2021, caused some organisational hiccups among the militants, stemming from personal rivalries between commanders but also ethnic and clan-based considerations.

⁷ Interview with an international expert of protection of civilians based in Mopti, February 2023.

A final illustration of the potential ambiguity of jihadists' behaviour concerns the strategy of geographical expansion pursued by IS-Sahel in the tri-border area, as seen by Tuareg leaders, but also Zarma farmers or traders we have interviewed. There, IS-Sahel simply expels populations, particularly Tuareg pastoralists, and targets priority zones with abundance of water. The militants carry out an eviction strategy of populations through 'ultimatums', that is, by telling populations they have to leave ([DRC 2023](#)). This is interpreted by multiple witnesses as a plan by Fulani pastoralists – well represented in IS-Sahel ranks – to evict competitors in the local political economy. As seen below, a number of our interviewees have an exclusive ethnic-based reading of IS-Sahel spatial deployment. They consider that IS-Sahel carries out ethnic cleansing in order to carve out a Fulani 'pastoral state' over Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁸ These perceptions may capture some of the drivers of expansion of IS-Sahel. They also matter as they eventually shape the sense of security and the ensuing responses of the communities and the state.

Sahelian jihadists form bifurcated organisations, simultaneously grounded in local politics and dependent on material and immaterial resources circulating across borders (ideas but also, most likely, cash or weapons).⁹ Managing this bifurcated logic may raise quotidian mundane challenges but is also an asset if an effective combination is found between local and more cosmopolitan considerations. This is exemplified by the communication strategy adopted by jihadist militants who classically release videos of their spoils of war in vernacular languages for local consumption and, less often, recycle footages in slick productions in Arabic, for international consumption and impact.¹⁰

Beyond the above important considerations, how do the JNIM and IS-Sahel differ? A systematic comparison of doctrines is beyond the scope of this work, but key differences shaping the relationships of these groups to pre-war social structures and their social environment more broadly must be mentioned. Let us note first that both outfits share a similar objective of establishing a caliphate and fighting the state. Their methods to achieve this goal differ (Soto-Mayor 2022). Al Qaeda-affiliated groups are encouraged to adopt a gradualist approach towards the imposition of the Islamic Law, the *Sharia*. According to Al Qaeda strategists, an overly brutal strategy may compromise the plans of consolidating their rule by increasing hostility of Muslims. Instead, the Islamic State opts for a more direct strategy. This means, in practice, that Al Qaeda-affiliated groups will not alienate local power structures but work instead progressively towards their rectification. A more radical *tabula rasa* logic is expected from the Islamic State-affiliated groups, in which adherence to the group is immediately requested and non-compliance punished, an injunction involving the systematic elimination of pre-war power structures.

⁸ Interview with a Tuareg activist, Niamey, February 2022. A female trader interviewed in Baleyara formulates the argument even more bluntly: 'They want the land in order to create their Fulani state. That's why they don't justify their actions [in Islamic terms]' (June 2022).

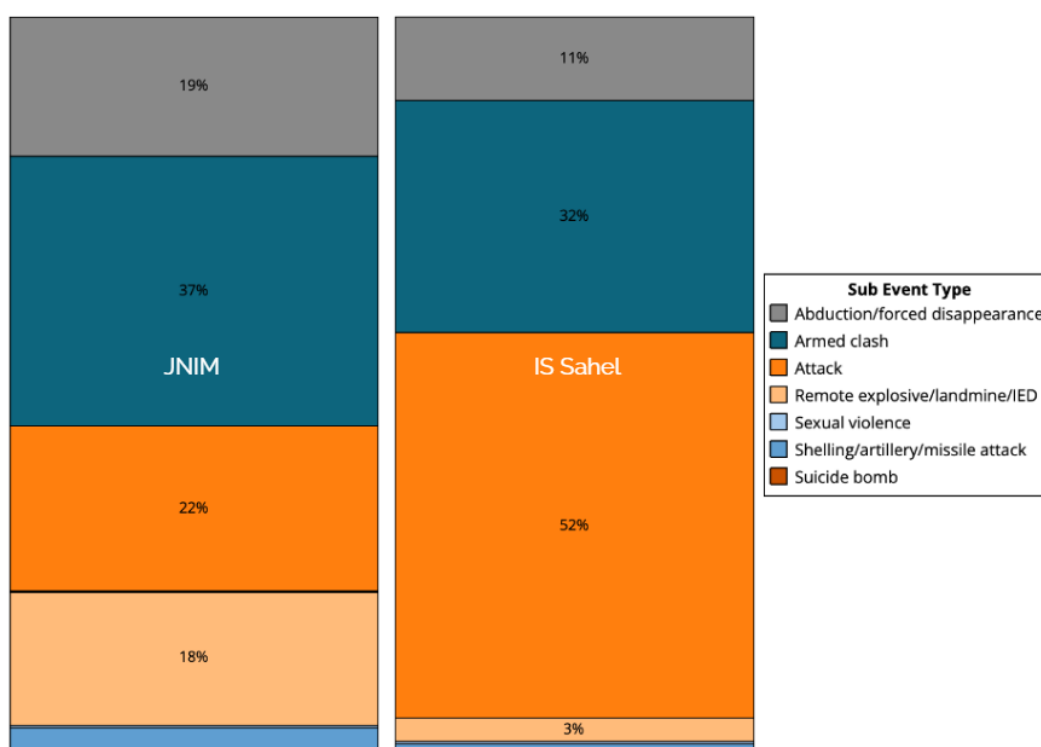
⁹ The transnational connections and solidarity networks among Sahelian jihadist groups involving 'hardware' (manpower, weapons, ammunitions etc.) are the blind spot of most analyses. Their existence is highly suspected, yet the evidence is thin and can hardly be collected through regular scholarly research. The circulation of weapons is partially documented by organisations such as [Conflict Armament Research](#), which regularly stress that governmental stockpiles are a major source of supplies for jihadist groups. The circulation of ideas is less of an analytical conundrum since ready-made ideological material and Islamic justifications for the actions perpetrated are available online (Soto-Mayor 2022).

¹⁰ This communication strategy displays some discontinuities due to the sporadic shortage of relevant skills among jihadist outfits (online conversation with Héni Nsaibia, Jan 2023).

The use of violence against perceived enemies in the course of the war is another area of departure between the two organisations, which derives from the strategic thinking that precedes. The Islamic State has a broader definition of who is a legitimate target, which includes other Muslims siding with the state. Indiscriminate killing of non-compliant Muslims may follow. On the contrary, AQ-affiliated groups are reluctant to do so and would opt for targeted killings. These broad doctrinal differences between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State do trickle down on their Sahelian franchises.

In the Sahelian context, the military capabilities and the mode of operation vary as well, as exemplified in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Types of violence employed by the JNIM and IS Sahel (Jan 2018–Dec 2022)



Credit: [ACLED](#)

The magnitude of violence used to police the society under the control of jihadist groups is another source of divergence between the groups. Extreme corporal punishments, such as amputating robbers or stoning adultery couples, are more prevalent in IS-held areas than in AQ-held areas. Here again, the rationale for AQ-affiliated groups is to make sure a support base is not appalled by extreme behaviours, while IS-affiliated groups favour the immediate enforcement of the *Sharia*.

Our empirical investigation detailed below illustrates many of the doctrinal differences claimed in the official intellectual production of the two parent groups of JNIM and IS-Sahel. The procedures for paying *zakat* are supposedly equally codified across jihadist outfits. Below, we show that the enforcement of *zakat* varies in practice, and quite dramatically so. The above doctrinal differences remain relatively theoretical. Pragmatism and urgency may eventually determine the course of action taken by the militants. It is wrong to postulate that, because their behaviour is supposedly based on scriptures, jihadists know what to do in every circumstance. Typically, local commanders also play a

role in determining the nature of the engagement of the militant groups with civilians – as recurrently noticed by networkers of humanitarian organisations to whom interpersonal trust-building is essential. As put unambiguously by a specialist of humanitarian access in jihadist-controlled contexts, ‘eventually, all groups realise that they need some level of popular support’ (interview in Niamey, February 2022). The pragmatic management of their relationships with civilians is a fairly stable feature of jihadists’ behaviour provided that governing populations is their goal, rather than just exploiting territories economically – an option that should not be ruled out, in light of the point made above about ‘ultimatums’ to evacuate addressed to populations.

The jihadists’ behaviour towards civilians is mirrored by principles determining the ways they recruit combatants and distribute resources internally. Among IS-affiliated groups, a ‘come as you are’ logic is notoriously applied. Bravery and feats in combat may transform former criminals into flag-bearers of Islam and erase their past sins. This organisational feature is evidenced by our study: in Niger, many jihadists are recognised as former “bandits”. AQ-affiliated groups are supposedly more selective in their recruitment and require more solid ideological credentials. The internal management of the spoils of war is in line with the recruitment rationale, as evidence from our study suggests. IS-Sahel adopts a system of individual rewards for participants in combat and allows its soldiers to acquire wealth as a result of their merit in the fight. On the contrary, war is not supposed to make JNIM combatants rich (see Quotes 1 below). This difference has historical roots in the Islamic codification of warfare and has translated into a major dispute in the Malian context.

Quotes 1. Why joining the *katiba* Macina won’t make you rich (Mali)

“

One of the big conflicts between the JNIM and IS-Sahel concerns the way spoils of war are shared between combatants. Hamadoun Kouffa [JNIM leader in Central Mali] has argued that the spoils are not big enough for sharing. Take the case of weapons. To make sharing possible, one should sell the weapons against cash first, which is a loss for the group. According to the Islamic State, the combatants engaged in the fight can keep the spoils for themselves. Kouffa prefers to retain the weapons centrally to protect himself. This disagreement has caused tensions between Kouffa and Abou Mahmoud, one of his officers who eventually defected to the Islamic State

”

Interview with a Malian researcher, Bamako, June 2022

A brief micro-history of the locations surveyed

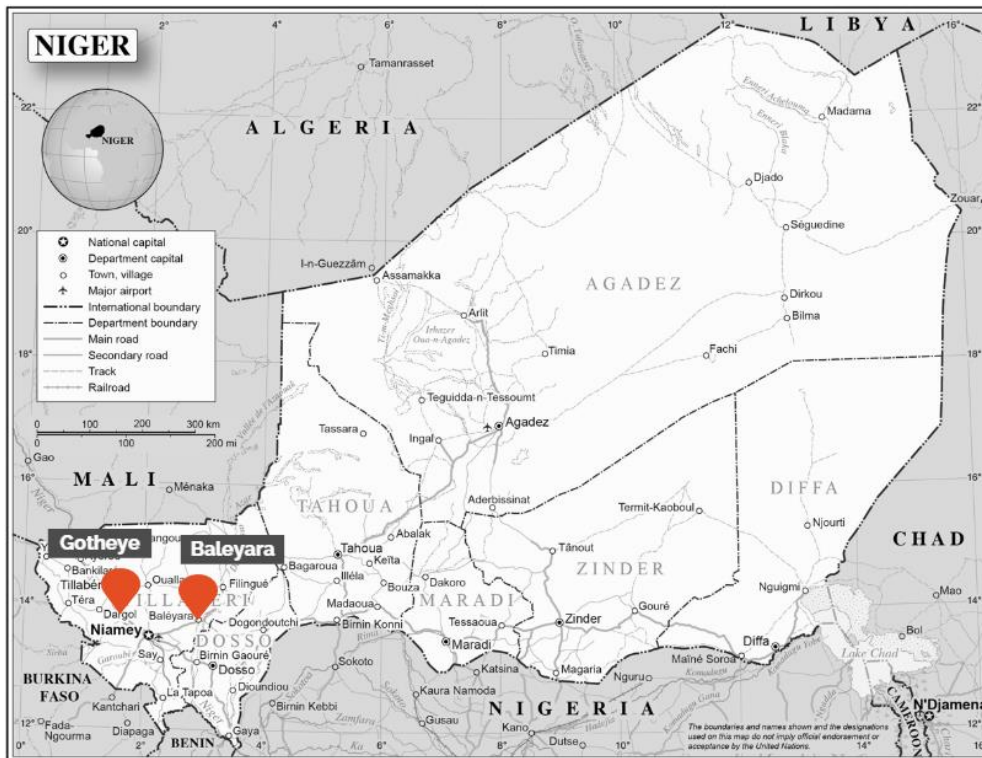
Three locations have been selected to conduct interviews with civilians exposed to jihadist rule (see Figure 5 and the methodological Appendix below for details on the strategy for case selection and sampling of respondents). Two of them, Gotheye and Baleyara, are in Niger and belong to the Tillaberi region. One of them, the Cercle de Djenné, is located in the Mopti region of Mali. Interviewees met in

Gotheye and Baleyara are IDPs coming from dispersed villages closer to the borders of Burkina Faso and Mali (Tera area for the Gotheye IDPs and Banibangou for the Baleyara IDPs).

All three areas are rural and multi-ethnic. Their economy is based on pastoralism, commerce, farming, and artisanal gold mining in the case of Gotheye. JNIM is the dominant jihadist movement in the Cercle de Djenné. IS-Sahel is hegemonic in the villages that IDPs in Baleyara have left. The selection of Gotheye was based on the postulate that JNIM was the dominant force in the area but the reality proved more complicated, with zones of origin of respondents controlled by the JNIM or IS-Sahel, or disputed between the two jihadist outfits.

In the Cercle de Djenné and the Banibangou area, self-defence groups have formed and are still active, but no such thing has happened in Gotheye and its surroundings. In these three locations, the people that have been interviewed have been exposed to jihadist rule and violence but the three locations themselves are not under direct jihadist control – deploying researchers in jihadist territory was not an option. This creates a selection bias which has to be acknowledged: a majority of the interviewees sampled lives in the periphery of the jihadist heartland because they are hostile to their agenda. People in Gotheye and Baleyara fled jihadist violence, and all the villages visited by our team in the Cercle de Djenné have self-defence groups. Paradoxically, the voice of those accepting to live under jihadist rule has been recorded indirectly through select interviews in the capitals among relatives of rural dwellers.

Figure 5. Map of locations surveyed (based on UN Maps)



Jihadism took root in Central Mali and the Tillabéri region of Niger for a few reasons. Both areas have a difficult historical relationship with the state, have intra- and inter-group fault lines, and have a history of communal violence. In these particular settings, jihadists have managed to exploit cracks in the social fabric and appear – at least in the eyes of some sections of the communities – as problem-solvers invoking legitimate Islamic norms of governance and promising egalitarianism to fix past abuses. Their strategy of conquest also relies on extensive use of violence and coercion.

The zones where interviewees come from are under the dominance of the jihadists, yet the state has not disappeared from them completely. The state's sporadic presence manifests through military activity but also, occasionally, through the deployment of state agents whose presence is not considered threatening by the insurgents, typically health workers – and in one unexpected case, a *sous-préfet*. The consequence is that what we observe is not a simple dyadic relationship. It is a relationship that involves, at least, the armed groups, the civilians – both forming potentially heterogeneous groupings – and ‘the ruins of the state’.¹¹ The state is also present, militarily and administratively, in nearby urban centres and offers an exit strategy to populations fleeing jihadist occupation. It remains a physical threat to jihadist groups (as well as a target), also because the geographical proximity allows civilians to communicate with it, in line with the rationale depicted in Figure 2 above.

The Tillabéri region is home to deep-seated conflicts around land, between farmers and pastoralists, and among pastoralists themselves (Guichaoua 2016). These conflicts partly stem from disputes around land rights in a region where farming land has expanded at the expense of grazing land in recent decades (Sani Souley Issoufou and Caremel 2022). They have historically been adjudicated through local diplomacy, but state-making efforts biased towards sedentary communities, cycles of rebellion, or the circulation of firearms have dramatically weakened the peace-making abilities of local representatives.

The outbreak of the 2012 rebellion in Mali has arguably triggered a security dilemma among communities in Niger adjacent to the Malian ‘Azawad’ – the region that separatists aimed to gain control of. Groups whose social base was made of pastoralist communities in particular engaged in an arms race and sided with larger armed antagonistic actors. The weaponisation of local cleavages continued after the French intervention and its counterterrorism tactics which inflamed communal tensions (Carayol 2023). There is a general observation among the persons interviewed in the Tillabéri region that jihadist groups represent something new in the local political landscape in many respects, as Section 5 presents. However, respondents also stress that communal feuds have formed the background of the insurgency (see Quotes 2 below).

¹¹ Expression borrowed from Niger-based colleague Jean-François Caremel (Niamey, February 2022).

Quotes 2. Continuities and discontinuities of political violence in the Tillaberi area (Niger)

“

They [jihadists] fight for reasons we don't know, but, at the very beginning, there were conflicts between herders and farmers. Certainly, this is what pushed these Fulani to take up arms

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

“

Between the Zarmas and the Fulani, there's a communal conflict we cannot ignore. We know the bad things that the Zarmas did to the Fulani and this is what deteriorated into the insecurity we now live in. It started more than 24 years ago, but in a different way from what happens now

”

Interview with a farmer, Baleyara, June 2022

“

Before today's insecurity, there was a communal conflict between the Fulani and the Zarmas which started seven years ago. The Fulani were chased away from Banibangou. Later, the state called for a cease-fire and the communities reconciled. Years after, this new form of insecurity we know now surfaced

”

Interview with a driver, Baleyara, June 2022

“

These armed groups appeared for the first time in the village three years ago. But before that, there were small bandits stealing from people on their way back from the market. But they would not kill, they would take money and goods. Today's insecurity consists of spilling blood

”

Interview with an elderly man, Baleyara, June 2022

Central Mali and the Cercle de Djenné in particular share features with the Tillaberi region but also depart from it along several dimensions. There too, the land issue is central. Relationships between farmers and pastoralists also raise tensions and the postcolonial state was also biased towards sedentary farmers. However, historically entrenched forms of social stratification among the Fulani are more

salient in Central Mali than they are in Niger and lead to tensions. They are based on status¹² and indigeneity (see Quotes 5). Such politically inflammable configurations have made Central Mali the epicentre of today's Sahel-wide crisis, where violent, indiscriminate state responses have led to further violent mobilisation (see Quotes 3 and 4 below). Since December 2021 in particular, the Malian forces and the 'Russian instructors' have intensified their actions in Central Mali as part of the Operation *Keletigui*, making 2022 the deadliest year in a decade.¹³

¹² The area has a large population of *Rimaïbé*, the former slaves of the aristocratic segments among the Fulani. In a context of violent subversion of the political order, some *Rimaïbé* have arguably found opportunities to elevate their status. For a comprehensive review of the social drivers of armed mobilisation, see Zanoletti (2020).

¹³ This [animation](#) based on ACLED data shows the year-by-year evolution of fatalities in Mali. This [map](#), also based on ACLED data, specifically focuses on violent incidents involving the Wagner Group. Note the concentration of Wagner violence in the Cercle de Djenné in particular.

Quotes 3. Who joins the *katiba* Macina. The role of abusive land elites and the intra-Fulani cleavages (Mali)

“

It's mostly the “allochthone” Fulani who joined Kouffa. In order to gain their support, Kouffa has promised them that they won't have to pay taxes to the *Jowro* [autochthonous Fulani elite regulating land access]¹⁴ anymore. Kouffa's argument is that land belongs to God and that, as a consequence, everyone should be equal before God. Allochthone Fulani contest the tax abuses that happened in the recent past. And, indeed, there have been a lot of abuses lately. In a more distant past, taxes used to be paid in kind depending on the size of the herd: kola nut, buffalo, sheep etc. People were happy to pay their dues to the *Jowros* because this would translate into social communion, bonds, and protection, in line with the tradition of the *Diina* Macina [theocratic Fulani kingdom established in the 19th century, including what is now Central Mali]. Today, the families of the *Jowros* are bigger and no one respects hierarchies anymore; the children, the grand-children of the *Jowros* all want their share of the taxes! Also, some *Jowros* demand a lot, money, cattle etc. In addition, some *Jowros* have been created ex nihilo by the Malian administration, to line their pockets. These *Jowros* are protected by the security forces [...] These changes have eroded the traditional institution and tarnished the image of the *Jowros* among herders. What is going on is a revolt against this state of affairs

”

Interview with a member of a *Jowro* family from the Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

“

It's essentially the “red Fulani” – the allochtones – who took up arms, because of injustice and taxes on cattle. Even for a basic administrative procedure, when a municipal civil servant asks for XOF 1,000 from a sedentary person, they ask for XOF 10,000 from a herder. Allochtones are victims of cultural prejudice. Nomadic people are not trusted; their need for freedom raises suspicion [...] Allochthone Fulani didn't let the autochthonous Fulani know when they started the jihad. The latter didn't join the insurgents even though the state considers that all Fulani are the same

”

Interview with an NGO worker from [Femaye](#), Cercle de Djenné. Bamako, June 2022

¹⁴ The Cercle de Djenné has four *Jowros*. Two of them directly inherit their power from the *Diina* Macina era while two others have been appointed by the state. As a result, authorities overlap and this may lead to double-taxation, causing anger among allochthone herders. On land use rights, abusive taxation, and racketing of herders by the state, see Benjaminsen and Ba (2009; 2019; 2021), Thiam (2017), or Antouly, Sangaré and Holder (2021).

Quotes 4. Who joins the *katiba* Macina. Avenging atrocities, then espousing the jihadist cause (Mali)

“

A group of traditional hunters [self-defence militia] led by a man named XX has killed 18 people in my family and destroyed the village named Somena in the Cercle de Djenné. All 18 bodies have been found in a well. The hunters had pillaged the village and stolen women's jewellery. After this episode, many youths from my village have joined the jihadist groups out of pure vengeance. But later, they adopted the vision of the jihadists. They wouldn't attack villages without reason, nor would they kill civilians. Their desire for vengeance is being gradually altered. Jihad changes people who want to avenge their parents; 80% of the youths join for vengeance but eventually comply with internal discipline. This is the truth!

”

Interview with a notability from Somena,¹⁵ vicinity of [Senossa](#), Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

Quotes 5. Who joins the self-defence groups. Subverting social stratification with the help of the state (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

The dominant armed group in our municipality here in [Senossa](#) is made of Donsos [traditional hunters]. They claim they are here to protect people and their properties. But in practice, it's very different. [Their objectives are:] hunting their former Fulani masters because of all these grievances which are the consequences of slavery; appropriating their cattle; and putting an end, for good, to the superiority complex of the Fulani. The core [of the self-defence group] is made of poor idle young people and opportunists, sons of poor people. In Senossa, the backbone of the militia is made up of the Rimaïbé

”

Interview with a female civil society representative, Senossa, June 2022

¹⁵ Somena, a small village, disappeared after the killings in 2018. Its population relocated in Djenné-ville and in the outskirts of the capital Bamako.

Quotes 5 (cont). Who joins the self-defence groups. Subverting social stratification with the help of the state (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

The state has gradually established an alliance with the people at the very bottom of the Fulani social ladder, the *Rimaïbé*. They told them “revolt against your masters who want to embark you in the jihad and tighten their grip on you” [...] As a result, everywhere, the *Rimaïbé* have joined the militias to massacre the Fulani populations. They are the most ferocious in the attacks

”

Interview with a Fulani leader from the Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

5. Research *in situ* results. Key findings about the dynamics of jihadist occupation

This section draws on the primary data collected in Mali and Niger and synthesises the most salient findings, which are grouped into five themes. The Appendix below details the methodology, the research instruments, and the data analysis process of the research. We have opted for a concise, analytical presentation of the findings rather than a lengthy descriptive approach. **First**, we observe that all the actors involved in the crisis we study are not just caught in the ‘fog of war’ but in the ‘fictions of war’. By this we mean that the narratives they express are riddled with gaps, myths, delusion, deception, self-censorship, and omissions, all used more or less strategically. This misinformation harms sound decision-making. **Second**, we propose an evidence-based simplified representation of processes involving jihadists and civilians, from first encounters to violent confrontation or jihadist rule. Whatever their outcome, these processes are terribly violent and costly for populations. **Third**, we compare the enforcement of *zakat* between the JNIM and IS-Sahel and stress the dramatic difference in behaviours between the two groups. **Fourth**, we assess how politically transformative the jihadist occupation is for the social and political landscape. **Fifth**, we review the scope and achievements of dialogue initiatives between jihadists and the state (Niger) or various formal and informal local entities (Mali).

Ubiquitous patchy narratives

The informational environment in which actors of the Sahelian crisis live and, crucially, make decisions in is not just characterised by the fog of war but instead by the **fictions of war**. Mischaracterisation of the reality, delusion, strategic deception, and rumours abound. They concern the military situation on the ground (defeats, victories, fatalities), the role played by outside (possibly occult) forces, the identification of the enemy, and the depth of the humanitarian crisis, among other such factors. We

identify two logics of production of highly confusing information, from both bottom-up and top-down channels. Patchy narratives emanate from the ground as much as from the highest political spheres.

In the areas of Niger surveyed, as stated above, militancy is not so new but its jihadist form has elements of radical novelty in the eyes of the respondents. Intriguingly, respondents offer highly incomplete accounts of what is happening to them and why, largely because what is happening raises too many questions they cannot answer. The militants are not necessarily aliens; in fact, many of them are recognised by the respondents as locals. However, who the commanders are, where their weapons come from and, crucially, why are governments incapable of dealing with the situation are aspects of the insurgency that respondents fail to explain. Gaps are filled by speculations frequently leaning towards conspiracy theories (see Quotes 6). Such conspiracy theories may echo discourses of officials in Mali or some activists in Niger; yet, it is important to stress that they are mostly generated locally, as a product of the psychological sideration caused by the jihadist minimal engagement with the populations and the dislocation of pre-war power structures.

Quotes 6. Respondents' speculations about the identity of the jihadists (Niger)

“

Beyond the small Fulani bandits that we recognise, we don't know who these armed groups are, their ethnicity, where they come from. The only thing we know is that the state cannot fight them and that they have powerful backers

”

Interview with an elderly woman, Baleyara, June 2022

“

These people are Fulani coming from nearby villages, because strangers cannot penetrate a village without accomplices from the village. As for the commanders, I think they are backed by the state; they act with and for the state

”

Interview with a female trader, Baleyara, June 2022

Quotes 6 (cont.). Respondents' speculations about the identity of the jihadists (Niger)

“

There's no way we can know about their internal hierarchy because they don't live among the populations and they don't want the populations to understand who they are

”

Interview with a cattle owner, Baleyara, June 2022

“

We think that the state is behind them, because the state doesn't do anything for us. The state is sacrificing us

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The commanders of these armed groups are people in the government and Europeans who supply them with arms

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

“

These groups obviously have commanders at the highest level. They have big patrons. Otherwise how can you explain why they have weapons as sophisticated as those of our security forces? Originally, the Fulani only knew how to handle cattle, and now they're killing our security forces with big weapons!

”

Interview with an elderly farmer, Gotheye, June 2022

A logical implication of these observations is that locals, often celebrated in peace studies as the authentic source of durable peacebuilding, do not 'know better'. They do not know but suspect all sorts of things, out of profound despair, as stressed by McCullough (2022).

Powerlessness and fear are key tropes of the narratives recorded in our surveys in Niger, often accompanied by the (probably grounded) belief that jihadists have eyes and ears everywhere (see Quotes 7).

Quotes 7. Fear of eavesdropping and denunciation (Niger)

“

Today, we fear mobile phones more than motorbikes [which jihadists typically use for their transportation]. Mobile phones are more silent and cause more damages. You are at home, someone may accuse you and the next minute you are being detained

”

Interview with a civil servant, Gotheye, June 2022

In the Sahel, misinformation as a top-down, intentional process is more documented than bottom-up conspirationism (Audinet and Dreyfus 2022). Investigating it was not part of the scope of this study, yet its impact on the climate in which the research was conducted was flagrant, particularly in Mali. Unsurprisingly, state actors make a point in using information strategically during wartime, which arguably makes them chronic, insincere interlocutors, diffusing messages alternating between alarmism (to attract donors’ attention)¹⁶ and triumphalism (to reassure their domestic constituency while appearing to be a credible international partner).

Since May 2021, the Malian authorities have pushed the logic of controlling and distorting information further. This has translated in the deliberate diffusion of fake news (such as accusations of complicity with terrorist groups raised against the French at the United Nations Security Council),¹⁷ intimidation of journalists, ban on international media, closure of the civic space, or denial of any wrongdoing by the security forces.

In parallel, the Malian authorities promote an alternative narrative articulated around the supposedly unstoppable *montée en puissance* of the national army against the ‘forces of evil’ – a dehumanising term which designates equally the jihadist insurgents and their alleged Western backers. At the domestic level, such a dehumanising portrayal of the enemy blocks any form of conflict resolution not based on force. As a result, self-censorship and polarised statements have been major characteristics of the testimonies of the persons interviewed as part of this research. This is a direct reflection of the rhetorical binaries that officials adopt, which leave no room for nuance or no option but to be categorised as a friend or an enemy.

Official Malian discourses also erase from the immediate history episodes that do not fit their glorious narratives. The case of the Mourah massacre perpetrated by the Malian forces and the Russian

¹⁶ The various communiqués of the now dormant G5 Sahel issued, summit after summit, are a good illustration of this rhetorical strategy.

¹⁷ See Reuters (2022).

mercenaries in March 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2022) is telling in this regard. It is a taboo in the Malian public conversation that even the MINUSMA has so far decided not to infringe.¹⁸

While Niger authorities do not indulge in incendiary discourses blaming outside evil forces for causing their security predicament, their communication towards IDPs is ambiguous, occasionally leading to movements of populations making civilians more vulnerable to violence, as reported by respondents from Chingodiar, a locality attacked by IS-Sahel in early 2020, abandoned by its inhabitants who returned there following a cue from the government, to be attacked again once back in their villages.

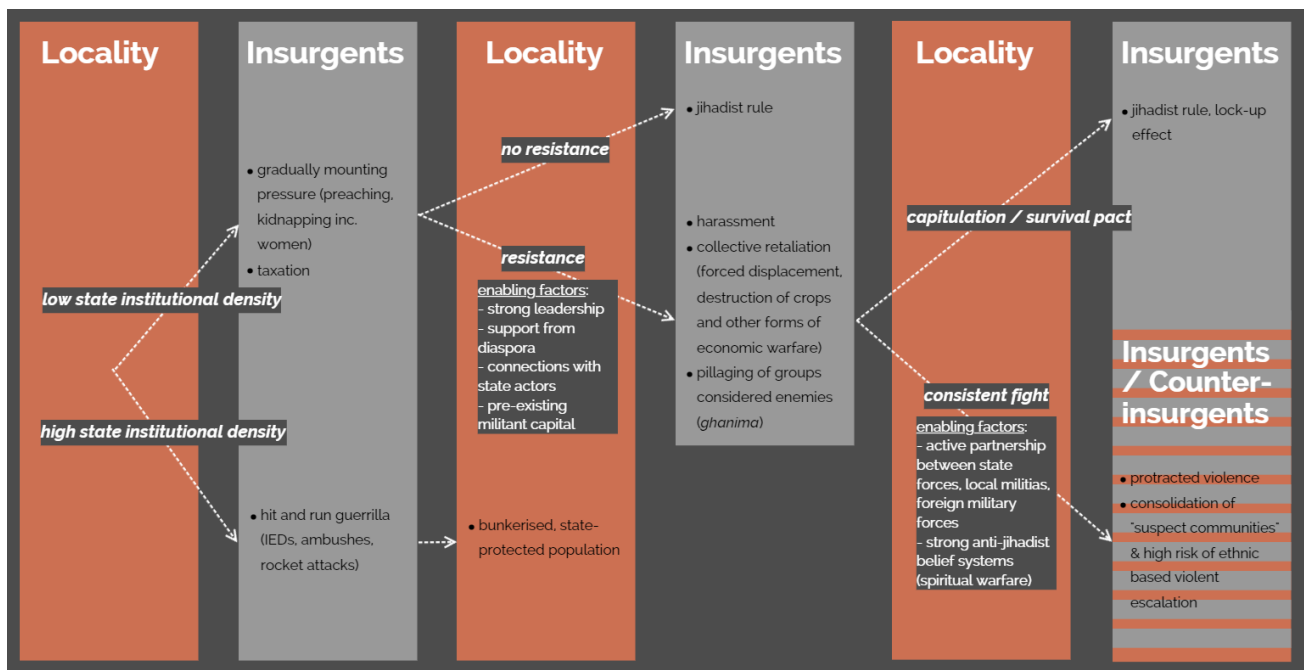
Pathways of jihadist violence and occupation

Figure 6 below synthesises most of the situations that have been recorded in the interviews we conducted. It is a parsimonious, simplified but not simplistic representation of scenarios involving civilians, insurgents, and state or non-state counterinsurgents as synthetically portrayed in Figure 2 above. In practice, processes are messier, reversible, and temporary. Differences exist between Mali and Niger and depending on which jihadist group operates, but the essence of the model remains true. However, its design should not be considered as a predictive exercise but more as a comprehensive and dynamic portrayal of relational configurations. The situations it encloses start with the characteristics

¹⁸ Since May 2022 at least, a report by the Human Rights Division of the MINUSMA documenting the massacre is being withheld (based on various interviews with anonymous officials and representatives of human rights organisations).

of the localities considered and ends with three possible outcomes: state control, jihadist rule, or all-out war.

Figure 6. Pathways of jihadist violence and occupation



The varying degrees of ‘state institutional density’ at the locality level (left column) is the starting point of the wartime pathways we identify. They refer to the strength of state presence in a given locality. Since 2012, jihadists do not occupy big cities, which are better protected than they used to be – notably by the MINUSMA contingent in the case of Mali. While the jihadists’ agenda may still involve gaining full control of the territory, it is probably too costly for them to conquer big or midsize cities by force, which does not prevent them from infiltrating them for various purposes (money laundering, surveillance, access to supplies) or even taxing their inhabitants, as already mentioned. Therefore, a first distinction we establish is between areas with high state institutional density (essentially, big urban centres) and areas with low state institutional density (unprotected rural areas). The latter occupy our attention in the present study. The former constitute islands of state dominance in what increasingly resembles an ocean of jihadist influence.¹⁹ A first, relatively trivial situation we identify corresponds to bunkerised human settlements placed under the protection of the state or international forces (bottom of third column in Figure 6 above). Jihadist insurgents concentrate their military and governance efforts on the rest of the territory while maintaining their military pressure on such bunkerised spaces.

In the ‘softer’, rural spaces, jihadist movements gradually impose their rule in various ways: through preaching, intimidation, kidnappings or coercion. Diverse behaviours are observable in the early phases of jihadist presence. In Mali, the fair management of agro-pastoral resources, the struggle against cattle theft, or the abolishment of abusive hierarchies are central pieces of the discourses of jihadists. The

¹⁹ While media attention has recently highlighted that Bamako is increasingly surrounded by jihadist activity, Niamey is not necessarily in a better situation with jihadist presence detected dozens of kilometres away from Niger’s capital in all directions.

cornerstone of the political platform of jihadists in the Cercle de Djenné involves putting an end to pre-war forms of taxation imposed on pastoralists and being perceived as abusive. IS-Sahel in Niger follows a more coercive, less politically sophisticated, and more elusive approach. They make the threat of their violence permanent while not permanently occupying the localities under their *de facto* rule. Frequently, state presence in the form of schooling is forcibly terminated.²⁰ In Niger too, marabouts (traditional Islamic clerics whose Islam is repudiated by the jihadists) and village chiefs may be instantly kidnapped (and later exchanged against ransom – see OCHA 2023) or killed.²¹

The main obligations of the civilians exposed to jihadist presence are twofold: they are asked not to cooperate with the state and to pay the *zakat*. Additionally, although this may not be permanently enforced due to the absence of continuing policing, populations are asked to comply with a series of dos and don'ts which disproportionately hit women, whose lives have to retreat to the private sphere. Quotes 8, 9, and 10 below capture three different patterns of approach adopted by jihadists.

Quotes 8. First contacts. JNIM's gradualist approach (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

Right from the start, the jihadist groups that want to occupy a place try to talk. Their first point of contact is always the village chief or the imam. This is what happened in every village in the inner delta of the Niger River. They insist that they are not here to impose a new form of Islam. They say they want to rectify the nefarious behaviours that exist in the society, in the families. They say they won't harm anyone if people follow the right path. And they add: “you will see by yourself the difference between our governance and what you've seen before”

”

Interview with a mediation professional, Bamako, June 2022

²⁰ In August 2022, 784 primary schools and 33 secondary schools were closed due to insecurity in the Tillabéri region, leaving 72,000 children without formal education (UNICEF 2022, Studio Kalangou 2022).

²¹ Although kidnappings by jihadists have rarely been reported in the interviews conducted in the Cercle de Djenné, there is evidence that they exist on a broader scale: as a way of vetting potential informants of state forces, to intimidate populations, or to collect ransoms (interview with GI-TOC analyst, January 2023; see also Le Cam and Douce 2021).

Quotes 9. First contacts. Brutal encounters with IS-Sahel (Baleyara, Niger)

“

We saw these people for the first time six years ago. At the very beginning, they would stay in the bush and steal cattle from herders. Then they killed herders; then they came to the villages on their motorbikes and demanded *zakat*. And finally they started killing villagers, just like that

”

Interview with a herder, Baleyara, June 2022

“

These people were seen for the first time in the village two years ago. Initially, they were in the bush and did not engage with the population. Then they started stealing cattle and shot at anyone trying to chase them. Then they stopped people from cultivating their land and finally they banned people from leaving their village

”

Interview with a herder, Baleyara, June 2022

Quotes 10. First contacts. JNIM's changing approaches towards civilians as military challenges mount (Gotheye, Niger)

“

Their initial demands concern the application of the Islamic principles. They insist on what men and women should wear. Men need to let their beard grow, cut their trousers; women need to cover their head and their body with a black veil. They are asked to stay at home; they're not allowed to fetch water from the well or collect wood, or go to the market. But the main message is to help them in their mission to defend Islam. Communities should abandon their old Islamic practice and follow their ideology. They should oppose the state and everything that is connected to it. The state is their main enemy

”

Interview with a female trader, Gotheye, June 2022

“

At the beginning, their discourse was essentially about the Islamist ideology [...], but now it has changed. They now say that they'll stop preaching, that they'll take severe actions. Anyone who does not follow their rule will be killed. Furthermore, they have become increasingly hostile to the marabouts, the village chief, and anyone working with the state

”

Interview with a farmer, Gotheye, June 2022

“

Their discourse has changed. At the beginning, they told people to follow the Islam that they profess. But lately, their discourse is articulated around the interdiction to collaborate with the state, death threats, kidnappings, and forced displacement

”

Interview with a farmer, Gotheye, June 2022

In areas where no resistance emerges, jihadist rule is imposed, which can be maximalist (mostly in JNIM-controlled zones) or minimalist (in IS-Sahel-controlled zones). A maximalist platform of government may include the delivery of justice, the adjudication of local disputes, the imposition of new marital norms (see below), or crime-fighting activities on top of *zakat* collection. A minimalist platform includes the collection of a degraded form of *zakat* only.

Some areas resist or decide to not cooperate with insurgents in a more or less confrontational way (Masullo 2021; Bamber and Svensson 2022). Resisting requires a series of circumstances, or 'enabling factors', as indicated in Figure 6 (third column). State support may be one of them but is not a necessary condition for self-defence to emerge. Self-defence occurs in places with idiosyncratic characteristics pertaining to local leadership, or capabilities to mobilise military power obtained by

selling cattle or assets, or by seeking financial assistance in the country's capital or among diasporas (see Quotes 11, 12, and 13).

Quotes 11. The deadly business of self-defence (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

At the beginning, most villages resisted. But the more and more sophisticated armament of the terrorist groups eventually made some villages opt for negotiations. The choice for negotiation was not unanimous. It is considered treason by the Donso hunters

”

Interview with a customary leader, Cercle de Djenné, June 2022

Quotes 12. How diasporas help setup militias (Baleyara, Niger)

“

The village has received help from people in the village who are abroad. They send money for the militia committees to buy arms and ammunition. The militias have stayed in Banibangou to help the security forces confront these armed groups

”

Interview with an NGO worker, Baleyara, June 2022

Quotes 13. Occult self-defence against IS-Sahel (Baleyara, Niger)

“

Soumate is protected by the sheikh [a person revered for his deep knowledge of Islam] who, every morning, puts holy water in the canaries [pottery to keep water fresh] of the villagers and it is said that the armed groups say that when they come to Soumate, they see buffaloes that try to attack them

”

Interview with a female trader, Baleyara, June 2022

Once self-defence is established, it can be either endorsed or not by the state. In all the cases reviewed, the state and the self-defence groups dance an ambiguous tango mixing converging interests and reciprocal mistrust. In Central Mali, the Donso militia started as by-products of traditional hunters' societies, and were then state-sponsored for a while under the presidency of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. They perpetrated massacres and were, consequently, de-activated, until they were revived under the

military regime which seized power in August 2020. They now serve as auxiliaries for the Malian forces and the Wagner mercenaries. For years, in Niger and Mali, the state's attitude towards self-defence has been alternating between tacit acceptance and more active support (International Crisis Group 2021). Importantly, state support to local resistance is generally not consistent over time, nor is it sustainable due to the highly unbalanced fire power of armed actors (Quotes 14).

Quotes 14. Hopeless resistance against IS-Sahel (Baleyara, Niger)

“

Some have resisted violently in the village. They have created self-defence militias to protect the population in case of attacks, but they are not up to the task of fighting these groups without soul or conscience. Even the SDF could not fight them. Others have resisted non-violently because they refuse to leave the village and prefer to die on their land

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

Indiscriminate military operations and killings by state forces not followed by the return of the impartial delivery of services (Mali) have provoked further polarisation between communities and exposed populations to a greater danger of retaliation from all sides. The Mourah massacre perpetrated by state forces and their Russian partners in Mali in March 2022 has been a defining moment for a whole region, indicating that collaboration with the state was counterproductive and legitimising firmer military actions by the jihadists in the name of protection of communities targeted by the state. Mourah is presently a ghost town abandoned by its inhabitants who have been caught between two fires.

The evident dramatic consequence of the emergence of militias is the parochialisation of violence and the risk of an escalation into an all-against-all war in which civilians are the target. Relying on ethnic militias to fight jihadist groups causes a dangerous shift in the counterinsurgency logic supposedly pursued by the state, by empowering local actors who may take advantage of state support to evict rivals in the highly disputed agro-pastoral political economy and, in the worst-case scenario, by provoking an escalation in ethnic-based violence.

A permanent feature of the crisis in Mali and Niger (and even more in Burkina Faso, which this study does not cover) is the stigmatisation of Fulani as accomplices of the insurgents. The empowerment of local militias translates into an immediate boost to this narrative (see Quotes 15 and 16) with the risk of transforming the cleavage of the civil war into an ethnic-based opposition, with potentially catastrophic consequences. This risk may not have concretised yet but is made more plausible by the 'cognitive armament' offered through state propaganda (see above) and the impunity for perpetrators of atrocities.

Quotes 15. The stigmatisation of the Fulani and its consequences (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

What's worst in our situation is that we are fought against by both the terrorists and the Donso hunters. The terrorists use all sorts of violent means to make the Fulani community join them. At the same time, the Donso hunters, whatever our views are, suspect us to conspire with the terrorists. One of our community members, a cattle owner, has been kidnapped then released [by the jihadists]. During his detention, he was tied and whipped every day as a punishment for not rallying their cause. After this torture and after being robbed of part of his cattle, he gathered what he had left and moved to Bamako. This is a hopeless situation

”

Fulani IDP, Cercle de Djenné, June 2022

Quotes 16. Suspected by both sides (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

In reality, people are between a rock and a hard place. The army blames the villagers for not being alert about roadside bombs. They told my 86-year-old grandfather that if a soldier stepped on a mine, they would gladly kill them all, because they consider them to be accomplices

”

Interview with an NGO member, Bamako, June 2023

“

The Fulani community of Senossa is doubly victimised by the Donsos (because the jihadists take *zakat* from our herds in the bush) and by the jihadists (because we live in a village of Donsos and contribute to their maintenance). The two sons of the *Jowro* family, who are also my relatives, were abducted and killed, one by the jihadists and the other by the Donsos

”

Interview with a female leader, Senossa, June 2022

Crucially, jihadists do not tolerate any form of complicity with the state and, even less so, self-defence initiatives among the populations. Radical responses are put in place in such instances. In both Mali and Niger, these responses include economic warfare or large-scale punitive operations. The systematic use of economic warfare is immensely damaging to populations and horrifically effective to lock populations into an exclusive dyadic relationship with jihadists or make them leave for good (Quotes 17 and 18). In Mali, such drastic measures are introduced after warnings sent to populations. They seem more sudden and violent in the IS-Sahel-controlled areas of Niger. In Banibangu, for example,

widespread killings of civilians occurred since self-defence had been established (Agence France Presse 2021, Human Rights Watch 2021). Most of the respondents of Baleyara have directly witnessed gruesome episodes of violence perpetrated by IS-Sahel.

Quotes 17. All-out jihadist punishment for collaborating with the security forces (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

Diallo-Be is the third village to have been besieged in the Djenné circle. It was in 2018, at the end of March and beginning of April. When the army arrived in the village, the radicals warned the villagers: "we are going to leave; we can't stop the army from coming, but if it comes don't cooperate with it! It's an order! But when the army arrived, the soldiers started to interact with the villagers and sleep with the village girls, in exchange for money, pressure, and sometimes even threats. The jihadists sent a message to the village that they forbid them to collaborate with the army. They told them: "You didn't listen to us and we know that women are seeing the military, we have a list of names. So, we give you an ultimatum: anyone who is not with the army must leave the town. But the army forbade people to leave. So the jihadists laid siege to the village. No one went out and no one went in to get firewood. Among the population, they targeted certain families. They accused them of having brought in the army. They took away their animals; they took away a number of people from these families. The embargo lasted six months. There are six people from the village who were killed, including a woman. They accused her of having relations with the military in the village. The list of women was long, but this one was taken. She was able to leave the village but she was intercepted in a *pinasse*, they made her get off and shot her

”

Interview with the head of village of Diallo-Be, Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

Quotes 18. The siege of [Kouakourou](#) (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

This town has a cultural tradition: during the Tabaski festival, all the people who live outside return to the village. The inhabitants race dugout canoes and play music. The jihadists forbade them to play music. This led to an argument. The young jihadists tried to stop the music and a villager fired his rifle into the air. The jihadists went to report the story to their leader. They sent a delegation to meet the village chief. They said that they had to hand over the rifle and the person who fired the rifle by the next morning. Some of the young people in the village organised themselves and the village council met. In the meantime, a young man from the army deployed a group of soldiers. This is how the army arrived in Kouakourou. Following this, the jihadists put the village under an embargo and considered the village to be an accomplice of the army. This embargo was the longest in the delta, lasting more than two years from 2017 to 2019–20. During this period, the villagers could no longer go to the field; no one came in or out and all the *pinasses* were controlled. They took all the oxen in the village, and burned the machines that watered the fields

”

Interview with a notability from the Djenné area, Bamako, June 2022

In Mali, when critical pressure is applied on populations, ‘survival pacts’, discussed more systematically below, may surface (Kleinfeld and Tapily 2022a, 2022b.). They consist of agreements between populations and jihadists that end violence yet make their civilian participants suspects in the eyes of the counterinsurgent coalition. Paradoxically, in the bellicose environment currently prevailing in Mali, local peace-making is growingly criminalised by state actors, as suggested by multiple testimonies.

Even if not seen in a good light by authorities, survival pacts offer a relative protection to populations, as opposed to the worst-case configuration (bottom-right of Figure 6), where jihadists and the counterinsurgency coalition actively fight, weaponise social and ethnic cleavages, and embark civilians in a potentially catastrophic deadly spiral of violence.

Zakat: one word, two highly different practices

The key difference between JNIM-controlled areas in Mali and IS-controlled areas in Niger concerns the enforcement of the *zakat*. In Mali, the *zakat* is organised as a bureaucratised mechanism of redistribution of resources adapted to agro-pastoral, highly mobile activities. It delineates the contours of a proto-state.

Six functions of *zakat* have been identified in Figure 3 above. Do they concretise on the ground? All six functions are at work in JNIM-controlled Cercle de Djenné, while only the economic, political, territorial, and martial functions are active in Niger, in both JNIM-controlled and IS-Sahel-controlled areas, at the expense of the social function, the very essence of *zakat*.

Jihadists began collecting *zakat* in 2018 in the Djenné circle and more widely in the Mopti region. The *zakat* procedure contains two steps: collection and distribution. In most cases, the jihadists scrupulously respected local practices. The collection was carried out in a proper manner and the redistribution was aimed at exactly the same (poor) people in the village concerned, while respecting the intermediary role of the local chiefs. In this way, the jihadists ensured the arbitration of the legal religious tax known to all, while ensuring its continuity. As a result, the taxation system established in the Cercle de Djenné enjoys relative legitimacy (Quotes 19). Its relative flexibility has also been welcomed (Quotes 20).

Quotes 19. Alignment of *zakat* with local custom (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

Zakat is paid for by faith. You give to the poor and you purify yourself. But state taxes, you give but you receive absolutely nothing from the state. In fact, the opposite is true. They make you pay for the smallest piece of paperwork, so your taxes don't even help you to have the minimum rights. In spite of this, many farmers paid their taxes, but many also defrauded. For example, a person who had 100 cows would only declare 10 or 15. The state tax is fixed, even if you only have one cow. It is different for *zakat* where you pay according to what you own, your goods, your animals, not your person

”

Interview with a notability from the Djenné circle, Bamako, June 2022

Quotes 20. Adaptive fiscal system (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

In the beginning, the collection of *zakat* was problematic because they did not follow the social organisation of the villages. They counted on the number of herds they saw, not on the owners. However, the herds often belonged to several families, to several owners. There were disputes and debates about these methods. Afterwards, they returned to the traditional *zakat*. Today, they call the village chief and tell him, “Do as you usually do.” In fact, there are two ways, either the village chief gives the *zakat* directly to the poor of the village, or the jihadists take the *zakat* and send you an amount to give to the poor of the village. But it doesn't change anything, the same poor continue to receive it, as before

”

Interview, notability from the commune of Femaye, Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

The observations made in Niger contrast sharply with those made in Mali. There, even in JNIM-controlled areas, taxation may be codified but it is, above all, messy and extortionist (Quotes 21). In Niger, *zakat* is seen as pure extortion only serving the needs of the militants and worse in magnitude than the state's pre-war taxation system (also perceived as abusive). No redistribution is involved except within the armed groups. Failure to pay triggers immediate violent responses. The contentious imposition of the *zakat* by IS-Sahel is arguably the cause of one of the worst massacres of civilians that happened in recent years in Niger (interview with Tuareg leader from Tillia, Niamey, February 2022; see also Human Rights Watch 2021).

Quotes 21. Codified yet untransparent taxation (Baleyara, Niger)

“

They deduct *zakat* from the cattle with a well-defined calculation. Out of 15 sheep/rams, they take one as *zakat*. And out of 10 oxen, they take one ox as *zakat*. The *zakat* is taken every year. These armed groups are numerous. After the first groups passed by, another group came by to collect *zakat* again. We don't know if they are the same groups or not

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

Transformative governance systems

Just as any civil war critically transforms societies (Wood 2008), the jihadist occupation is highly transformative in the Sahel in the political, social, or economic dimensions. The current research identifies four key areas where changes are critical. They concern the power of local elites, the demise of the state, gender relations and victimisation of women, and community cohesion.

The jihadists' attitudes towards **local elites** vary. In Mali, their rule is based on non-state pre-war social structures, meaning that traditional elites are relatively preserved. As seen above, traditional elites in charge of controlling the access to pastures are asked to revise the taxation practices formerly imposed on non-indigenous pastoralists. Yet, the changes demanded are not pushed too far out of fear of alienating the traditional elites regulating access to land (Quotes 22).

Quotes 22. Compromise between insurgents and elites (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

At the beginning of the revolt, Kouffia's men no longer paid any taxes to the *Jowros*. The *Jowros* were afraid to ask them for anything. This went on for two years. Then, in 2017, Kouffia was forced to issue a fatwa to rehabilitate the tax system to the *Jowros*, otherwise he would alienate all the indigenous Fulani. He had to make a compromise. Since then, it is the jihadists themselves who come to pay the tax, voluntarily, out of respect. But it is not the same as before, it is modest, as it was in the days of the *Diina*

”

Interview with a researcher, Bamako, June 2022

In Niger, the attitude of IS-Sahel towards pre-war power structures is more explicitly revolutionary and revengeful. It translates into the brutal removal of all forms of pre-war authorities, including local chiefs, state actors (with the notable exception of health workers), and marabouts. IS-Sahel systematically eliminates them or forces them to leave. The JNIM in Niger kidnaps them or forces them to leave. In Niger, the killing or displacement of chiefs are generally followed by population displacement. Similarly, in places where self-defence militias have been established – essentially, in Mali – they too evict local authorities (Quotes 23). Mali and Niger are no exceptions to the classic observation that civil wars bring militants to the forefront of decision-making.

Quotes 23. Leaders of self-defence militias crowd out civilian authorities (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

All the administrative, political, and customary authorities have lost their influence as a result of the armed groups presence. In certain localities, self-defence groups are more influential than mayors. This will be the case as long as they keep their weapons. Oftentimes, the mayors have to cede part of their prerogatives to coexist with the self-defence groups. Customary leaders are in the same situation. Remember that they have been accused of all sorts of arrangements with the administration, at the expense of the population. Whether it is about collective fishing, allocation of land, or corridors for cattle, the self-defence groups always have a say

”

Interview with an NGO worker, Cercle de Djenné, June 2022

The **demise of the state** is the second critical change observed and a source of discontentment among respondents. The state is failing to protect its citizens; worse, it is making them more vulnerable to violence. This applies to Mali and Niger. The state is either absent and apathetic (Quotes 24) or a source of danger (Quotes 25, 26). The danger induced from the state is due to its sporadic presence leaving populations exposed to jihadists' retaliation once the state patrols are gone. The danger from the state is also directly stemming from the polarised, occasionally racist worldviews prevailing among the military. Fulani communities are disproportionately targeted by counterinsurgency measures (Courtright 2023). In the end, the perspectives recorded on the state are paradoxical and heterogeneous. Populations demand its protection and fear its abuses simultaneously.

Quotes 24. Denouncing the state's apathy (Baleyara, Niger)

“

We condemn the state because the state does nothing to protect us. In fact, it is even the state that exposes us because the security forces catch the villagers who inform them of the attacks or who show them the route that these armed groups have taken. They are accused of being complicit, so the villagers don't talk anymore. The security forces always come after the attacks; they make their report and leave without saying anything

”

Interview with a farmer, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The defence forces always come late and this does not allow for the pursuit [of the jihadists]. They take stock, help to bury the dead, and return to the main towns

”

Interview with an elderly woman, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The state comes to take stock of the damage, to bury the dead, and then leaves us at the mercy of these armed groups. The state itself cannot do anything against them. We asked the state to secure the area so that we could at least finish the harvest, but nothing was done until we decided to leave the village to be safe from these armed groups

”

Interview with an elderly man, Baleyara, June 2022

Quotes 25. Denouncing the state's abuses (Baleyara, Niger)

“

If the village of Weidabongou has moved, it is only because of the security forces who come to arrest people to take them to Niamey and say that they are the terrorists. The security forces even kill some of the people they take. The security forces accuse us of being accomplices of these armed groups; they even say that it is the Fulani who kill people. So we are more afraid of the security forces than of these armed groups. If I may say so, it is even the state that kills us instead of protecting us

”

Interview with a Fulani pastoralist, Baleyara, June 2022

Quotes 26. Sporadic state presence makes things worse (Gotheye, Niger)

“

In our village, at the moment, there is no more talk of local governance. The village chiefs no longer have power over their territory because of the bandits. Only the marabouts of the bush [i.e. the religious figures of the jihadist groups] claim to be the chiefs of places and lands. We ask the state to provide the security forces with effective means so that they can carry out the fight against the armed groups. If the state is not able to do this, it must prevent the security forces from circulating in our villages, because their presence really causes us problems

”

Interview with a Fulani village chief, Gotheye, June 2022

A most concerning development due to jihadist influence relates to the **status of women**. As seen above, the interdictions placed by jihadists on communities disproportionately concern women through harsh restrictions on their economic activities and capacity to move. In 2015, in a series of vocal notes circulated on WhatsApp, Hamadoun Kouffa also detailed how men should re-affirm their dominance over women in the private realm – including sexuality.²² When in control, the *katiba* Macina contributed to some form of democratisation of marriage by lowering the costs of marital ceremonies, hence allowing youths to establish themselves legally as husbands and wives (Quotes 27). The same is observable in the Gotheye area, where a cap has seemingly been placed on the dowry payments.²³

²² The authors are grateful to Bokar Sangare for sharing these vocal notes as well as their translations.

²³ This same observation has been made by Laura Berlingozzi as part of her PhD research (personal communication with Laura Berlingozzi, Brussels, March 2023)

Quotes 27. Marital ceremonies made cheaper (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

The jihadists have helped to reduce the celibacy of women. Now everyone finds someone; all girls are married; rich or poor, socially well-endowed or poorly endowed. They reduce all the expenses of the ceremonies that prevented young people from getting married, so they get married more easily

”

Interview with a notability from the Seno area formerly living in the Cercle de Djenné, Bamako, June 2022

The sophisticated normative shift observed in Mali with regard to marital practice contrasts with the brutality emerging from testimonies collected in Niger, including in JNIM-controlled areas. There, forced marriages and kidnappings have been recorded, leading to population displacement (Quotes 28).

Quotes 28. Kidnappings of girls and forced marriages in Gotheye, Niger

“

In a neighbouring village, armed groups used to ask the girl's parents if she was married when they saw her. If she is not, they forbid the parents to marry her, saying that she is now their wife and that they will come back to take her. In many cases, armed groups kidnap girls aged 15 and over to take them away. They give the girls' parents 2000 francs as a dowry. These girls become their wives and live with them in the bush

”

Interview with a marabout from Taako, Gotheye, June 2022

“

They conduct forced marriages. They take people's wives and give the parents small amounts of money. If they see a woman they like, they will do anything to get her. In my village, they took two of my cousins, a widow and a divorcee. They were the ones who killed the widow's husband. They took the woman the same day they killed her husband. Moreover, they do not respect the widowhood ritual. In fact, these practices are carried out by local youths who love people's wives and who cannot afford them. So they will do anything to create a problem for the husband or kill him to take his wife. This practice is part of the reason why many people have fled

”

Interview with a marabout from Tera, Gotheye, June 2022

Finally, and worryingly, as recurrently mentioned throughout the report, the surveys conducted in Mali and Niger reveal a pervasive framing of the crisis by its protagonists in the idiom of ethnicity. **Social cohesion** is evidently endangered (Idrissa and McGann 2021). Rather unsurprisingly, the war polarises views but also separates groups physically, as emphatically expressed in the testimonies collated below (Quotes 29). Social scars may require proper healing mechanisms in the future, yet the urgency is probably to stop them from deepening.

Quotes 29. Community cohesion torn to shreds (Niger)

“

In recent years, the Fulani have been singled out in the area. We are accused of being responsible for the attacks and accomplices of these armed groups. Nobody trusts the Fulani anymore, especially the Zarmas. They think we have hidden weapons and this makes life difficult for the Fulani, especially in Banibangou

”

Interview with a Fulani IDP, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The security forces think that we are accomplices and do not trust the Fulani. After the displacement, we settled in Banibangou. There, the Zarmas killed the Fulani whom they accused of being members of the armed groups and so we fled Banibangou to settle in Baleyara

”

Interview with a Fulani housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The village of Kodeye Koira is made up of the Zarmas, who form the demographic majority, the Tuareg, and the Fulani. The Fulani were inhabitants of the village before the insecurity, but the Fulani have not been in the village for two years. They have all left. As soon as the Zarmas see them, they kill them because they think that the Fulani and Tuaregs are the bandits. These conflicts have become intra-community conflicts between the Zarmas. Indeed, Fandeyganda, for example, is a Zarma village that has never fought back against bandit attacks. This has created tensions between the Zarma villages because people think that if they never fight back, it is because they are accomplices

”

Interview with a trader, Baleyara, June 2022

“

The Zarma (majority), Fulani, and Tuareg are the groups that make up the village. Before the crisis, there was no conflict between these communities. People respected each other, did favours for each other, and made courtesy visits. But with the crisis, people no longer trust each other. This has pushed the entire Fulani community to leave the village, for fear of reprisals from the people who accuse them of complicity with the armed groups

”

Interview with a housewife, Baleyara, June 2022

The valuable yet limited – and possibly dangerous – effects of dialogue

‘Survival pacts’ – as they are called by MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali – or ‘local agreements’ have mushroomed in Central Mali. Figure 7 shown below describes what they are made of. Local agreements are an effective but temporary pathway towards the de-escalation of violence. They are generally the product of a process that has been extremely costly for the populations, involving among other woes, as detailed above, drastic forms of economic warfare (see Quotes 30).

Quotes 30. The violent enforcement of pacts (Cercle de Djenné, Mali)

“

There are peace agreements and there are pacts. Agreements are between communities. The pacts are between the villagers and the armed groups. There is no signature, it's more a list of things and conditions to respect. The representatives of the village (which also includes the Donsos) come and discuss with jihadists mandated by the head of the *markaz* [jihadist administrative division] of the locality. Often, the public school is closed, people are asked to grow beards, women are asked to wear veils, and people are asked to pay *zakat*. If these conditions are violated, if members of the villagers betray or give up the names of jihadist fighters, in this case, the latter retaliate and are implacable: they impose embargoes, the granaries are looted, and the perpetrators are systematically abducted, especially when they are accused of having committed exactions with or without the army

”

Interview with a notability who participated in several agreements in the Centre, Bamako, June 2022

Local mediation is a useful but opaque and tortuous business for which no explicit and rigorous impact evaluation exists (Turkmani 2022). It would be ideal to elaborate a typology of local agreements and then assess which ones do and do not work, but we are unable to do so in practice. There is seemingly not one effective single pathway to make such local pacts work. Third parties may or may not be useful. In any case, local agreements are too fragmented to offer a long-term, wide-ranging political solution to Mali's protracted crisis. A higher ‘track’ of talks would be needed for this to happen (remote conversation with Boubacar Ba, July 2022; see also Bouhlel 2020).

However, what we can observe with relative accuracy are the kinds of local outcomes that agreements produce. In Central Mali, local agreements produce a relative peace and a semblance of normal life (under jihadist rule) but as a result ‘lock’ populations with the jihadists.²⁴ Breaking the pact exposes populations to very severe retaliation; however, maintaining it makes populations legitimate targets in the eyes of security forces and militias.

²⁴ To a point where MINUSMA decides not to patrol in certain villages for fear that civilians incur retaliation if they are seen talking with the peacekeepers (remote interview with an anonymous international expert of protection of civilians, November 2022).

Establishing a pact with jihadists is a situation which Malian armed forces and their local or international partners now increasingly criminalise and contest, thus making peace talks a double-edged sword potentially endangering their protagonists. Donso or Dogon militias, which have recently been revived by the authorities and enjoy more credible firepower, increasingly break the agreements they accepted when they were weaker or target those who, in their own ranks, continue to accept them (Quotes 31). This leads to a deadly parochialisation of conflicts in which warfare is extended against those accepting to place themselves under the protection of one armed actor or the other, even though no political affinity exists.

Quotes 31. The origins of local agreements and their violation by militias

“

Imam Dicko [a Bamako-based prominent figure of conservative Islam in Mali] asked for negotiations to be opened in 2017. The agreements began at that time and have continued until now. But you have to know that in any case, in the Djenné circle, if there is a rupture, it is because of the militias. In 2019, it was almost all the circles that were concerned by the agreements, they were violated from April 2020 by the militia. The violation of the two agreements in 2020 and 2021 was done by the militias, never by the jihadists

”

Interview with a participant in several peace agreements in the Djenné Cercle, Bamako, June 2022

Figure 7. Documenting local agreements in the Mopti and Segou regions of Mali²⁵

Local sources in Mopti and Segou have documented a non-comprehensive sample of 52 local agreements established between 2019 and June 2022 in the region. The agreements are formal or informal and involve various local representatives, including militants, as well as different facilitators

.....

What are the agreements made of?

A wide range of issues is covered. Here's a list of items that may be mentioned:

- land use and transhumant corridors
- non-aggression between communities
- end of economic blockade
- authorisation to resume economic activities and travel
- return of IDPs
- no state presence, no schools
- obligation to pay *zakat*
- obligation to refer to Islamic judge (*cadi*) for legal matters
- disarmament
- trust-building measures between community representatives
- returning stolen cattle

An example

An agreement between JNIM, Donso militias, and residents of several communes in the Cercle de Djenné entered into force on 6 July 2022. The signatory communes are Femaye, Derary, Ouro Ali, and Djenné. Four influential Donso chiefs are not part of the agreement. These include XX from Diombougou, XX from Gagna, XX from Soumatogo, and a certain XX from Koloye. However, it should be noted that the men under the command of these chiefs already have surrendered their weapons. The chiefs themselves have fled the area, which indicates that under current conditions, the capacity of these Donso chiefs to act as spoilers is extremely limited or non-existent. The points of commitment of the agreement are as follows:

1. Surrender of weapons and renunciation of wearing hunter's clothing
2. No meddling in the affairs between the jihadists and the state, including no provision of information and support to the army with logistics, etc.
3. Jihadists can use public buildings
4. Give and collect *zakat*
5. Jihadists will come to mosques and preach there
6. Jihadists will settle disputes at the local level with their own marabout without resorting to the traditional justice system
7. Mutual forgiveness and no right to claim lost or destroyed property

Respondents from Niger overwhelmingly consider the door for decentralised dialogue with jihadists to be closed (see Quotes 32). This might be due to a selection bias in our sampling strategy (see Appendix below) but the consensus is striking. Throughout the year 2022, however, the state has opened channels

of discussion with IS-Sahel as well as options for defectors to be cantoned and receive some form of disarmament package.²⁶

Quotes 32. No resistance, no local dialogue in Gotheye and Baleyara (Niger)

“

You really make me laugh, you think anyone can resist these people. Even the state cannot resist them, let alone the poor people who are trying to save their lives. In this area, we can't talk about resistance, but rather obedience and submission

”

Interview with a driver, Gotheye, June 2022

“

Negotiate? Who will be able to negotiate with people like that? People who kill for no reason can't keep their word and we can't think of resisting these groups who are better armed than the security forces, it's impossible unless it's a miracle

”

Interview with an elderly woman, Baleyara, June 2022

The process of dialogue in Niger is state-led and officially endorsed by the President who has pragmatically declared his intention to establish peace in every possible way. A notable aspect of the process is that the French, Niger's main security partner, let it happen. This is a change of doctrine with what happened in Mali under the presidency of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, when the French would consider high-level dialogue with jihadists a 'red line'. In Niger, the French acceptance for dialogue translated into actual restraint in military strikes against IS-Sahel (Interview with a French MoD official, November 2022).

The methodology of dialogue may sound confusing as multiple channels, formal and informal, have seemingly been opened, sometimes competing with each other. Veterans from old Fulani militias and from different Fulani clans feature among the intermediaries. The degree of influence that old-generation militants have on young jihadists with substantial experience in combat is unclear. The

²⁵ The left column compiles information shared by international contacts based in Mopti. We are grateful to Hédi Nsaibia, Sahel Senior Analyst for ACLED, for providing the information on the local agreement featuring in the right column which is extracted from his own meticulous documentation of jihadist activities in the Sahel.

²⁶ This mini-section on peace negotiations in Niger is essentially based on interviews conducted in person in Niamey in February 2022 and remotely throughout the year 2022 until February 2023 with a participant in the talks and a security analyst for a humanitarian organisation familiar with the process. The rationale for the talks is also derived from public interventions of General Abou Tarka, the man in charge of the process, in his capacity of head of the *Haute autorité à la consolidation de la paix* (HACP).

incentives provided to putative defectors are primarily socio-economic and tend to depoliticise their mobilisation.

Fewer incidents happened in Niger throughout 2022 than in 2021, but this is not necessarily because of the talks: IS-Sahel was busy consolidating its positions in the Menaka region of Mali after the French Operation Barkhane's departure from Mali. A welcome [agreement](#) led by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue brought divided communities closer in Banibangou in early 2023. While these efforts seem to move in the desired direction – particularly in light of what precedes about the risks for the social fabric of Niger to be torn apart – it is premature to declare them fully effective.

6. Conclusion

A striking and relatively unexpected – also perhaps unsophisticated – aspect of this research concerns the level of everyday violence that civilians are subjected to, from all sides in this war. A close monitoring of media releases on the Sahel would only allow readers to hear about the most dramatic security incidents, but not the constant intimidation, coercion, deliberately provoked economic stress, and fear that populations live under and which this study sheds light on.

However, civilians do occasionally manage to preserve their life chances. The JNIM-occupied areas of Central Mali offer multiple illustrations of negotiated political orders, from which violence is not absent but where daily activities are possible. Some dimensions of this jihadist governance such as taxation are even considered fairer than pre-war systems of tax collection by the state. A worrisome development is that these negotiated orders are increasingly criminalised by the Malian authorities, the self-defence militias they work with, and the Wagner mercenaries with whom counterinsurgency operations are carried out. Entire communities are made suspects of complicity. Put simply, the rationale goes as follows: 'if you stay behind, you're one of them'. This extreme polarised logic, the official dehumanising language that goes with it, and the blatant disregard in military theatres for rules of engagement complying with the International Humanitarian Law contain the seeds of even worse forms of violence requiring urgent attention. Deep concerns for this reality should precede any plan for rebuilding the state – or at least be factored into it.

The civilians living in the Tillaberi region of Niger do not enjoy a much safer environment, particularly those exposed to the radical, indiscriminate, and extortionist forms of violence perpetrated by IS-Sahel, whose actual intentions to govern populations are questionable. In contrast with Mali, Niger authorities have opted for some form of community-based dialogue, the outcomes of which remain unclear and which does not exclude targeted military operations. Moreover, importantly, Niger still allows human rights watchdogs to document eventual abuses of its armed forces, keeping the civic space relatively alive compared to its Malian counterpart.

7. Policy implications

The policy recommendations which follow are conceived of as principles guiding measures that need to be taken based on the study's findings more than concrete measures *per se*. A large chunk of our

policy considerations concern Mali as the country remains the epicentre of the crisis in the Sahel. Most of the recommendations concern the protection of civilians whose lives are threatened by hard, bellicose measures taken by the state in Mali to end the conflict and by brutal targeting by jihadists, notably IS-Sahel. The choice of focusing on civilians is all the more important as the Sahel is now increasingly seen as a subaltern battlefield for big power politics opposing Russia to western countries, at the expense of more granular dynamics causing the current disastrous regional destabilisation and humanitarian situation.

First, a public conversation involving Sahelian and non-Sahelian actors can only yield collectively beneficial outcomes in a healthy informational environment. This is far from being the case, as emphasised in Section 5 above. In a space saturated with distorted information, clarity, rigour, and credibility are needed more than a clash of narratives and counter-narratives designed to push political agendas. **Reliable information is a public good, an end in itself.** It has been made clear in the case of Niger that conspiracy and the circulation of fake news are not simply the product of external manipulation but circulate at the grassroots level because they fill a gap. A need for reliable information exists, which can be met by already existing initiatives such as the patient, low key yet highly serious and reflexive network of radio stations supported by the [Fondation Hirondelle](#) (Studio Tamani in Mali and Studio Kalangou in Niger). Their voice may be crushed by state propaganda machines, yet it exists and should be maintained.

Second, stabilisation programmes are essentially articulated around the ‘return of the state’; yet, reflecting on **which state returns** should be considered a prerequisite. The implementation of *zakat* by jihadists in Central Mali exemplifies the capacity of insurgents to put in place forms of governance enjoying relative legitimacy in the eyes of local constituents in contexts where pre-war power structures have been seen as abusive. This observation applies particularly well in rural settings where economic and political fault lines are aptly understood and experimentally (and coercively) addressed by jihadists in Central Mali. An eventual ‘return of the state’ needs to make room for the aspirations of rural populations, particularly pastoralists to conduct their activities in a predictable, non-extortionist environment.

In addition, the levels of violence against civilians used by the state in Central Mali today does not make it a welcome authority among the targeted communities. In the present war-oriented context of Mali and Niger, it seems unrealistic to open an ambitious conversation on what the post-war state should look like. However, such a conversation should be encouraged. Hard realities should be recognised in the short run: states fail to protect their populations and may even make them more vulnerable in places where jihadists are militarily too strong. States are at risk of being durably locked out from local systems of governance they have no control of anymore, which makes the necessity to reinvent state legitimacy through dialogue even more urgent. Local dialogue is effective yet fragile and increasingly criminalised by authorities in Mali. **Local agreements may prove useful to de-escalate violence but not to resolve conflicts.** Conflict resolution may use the channels activated for local dialogue but crucially requires more high-level negotiations to address more fundamental political issues. In Niger, high-level dialogue has not been conclusive so far, possibly because a community-based paradigm has been privileged, at the expense of a more ideological one relying on religious normative references.

Third, states should **refrain from encouraging militia formation** in situations of overwhelming jihadist military dominance, as inconsistent self-defence exposes civilians to more violence. Crucially, relying on ethnic militias for counterinsurgency purposes incites a parochialisation of violence and may pave the way for more grave forms of violence such as **ethnic cleansing**. This alarmist scenario may (hopefully) not concretise but worrying precursors multiply in Mali, beyond the already existing yet publicly unacknowledged ethnic-based violence perpetrated by armed forces and their local and Russian

associates. These precursors involve polarising, dehumanising official discourses and the systematic shutdown and erasure of any dissenting voices and a healthy civic space in Mali. The human rights discourse is presented as a neo-colonial instrument and is systematically [disqualified](#) at the highest level of government. As aptly put forward by Scott Straus (2015), one does not need officially publicised plans of extermination for large-scale massacres to happen. An accumulation of cues may suffice for perpetrators to unleash violence.

Fourth, the protection of civilians should be made an utmost priority in a context where documenting and monitoring atrocities perpetrated against populations is made increasingly difficult. Any ambitious process of conflict resolution will require to hold perpetrators of abuses accountable. While stopping them may not be feasible at the moment due to lack of political leverage in Mali, documenting their crimes and protecting whistle-blowers is urgent. MINUMSA is the best-equipped organisation to perform such tasks, which feature prominently in its mandate. However, MINUSMA also has difficult relationships with the host country on the specific question of human rights and has to negotiate its institutional survival. These negotiations possibly make MINUSMA leadership less vocal about human rights abuses, as exemplified by the absence of publicisation of the findings of the *ad hoc* Mourah massacre investigation, almost one year after the facts – a delay dramatically at odds with the celerity of investigations on human rights abuses conducted before the May 2021 coup. In Niger, efforts should be directed to humanitarian support of fleeing populations and clarifying the strategies of dialogue pursued, bearing in mind that the community-based rationale guiding it and involving essentially socio-economic incentives to reintegrate combatants may miss the literally revolutionary ideological agenda of jihadists.

Fifth, it should be recognised that Western governments have largely lost classic diplomatic leverage to influence Mali's policies and that usual tools (Stoffel, Steets and Westphal, 2022) to promote the protection of civilians may not be functional. Indirect approaches relying on local proxies may crucially put such proxies at risk. High-level, behind-the-doors transactional diplomacy may represent a more promising yet highly fragile avenue to avoid Mali's diplomatic isolation first, and second, induce a de-escalation of violence and a rapid transition towards more consensual forms of governance. Recognising Mali's acute existential crisis rather than seeing it as a proxy for external influence should be a first step in this direction.

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Appendix

Methodology, ethics, and research challenges

An essential ambition of the work was to base it on first-hand evidence to fill the gaps in the existing body of knowledge on jihadist governance in the Sahel. Literature reviews have been conducted in various relevant areas prior to the field work, including rebel governance, jihadist taxation, or the socio-history of the localities studied. However, the main effort consisted of collecting primary evidence on the issues at the centre of our research puzzle, namely the existence and nature of a proto-social contract between civilians and insurgents in areas ruled by jihadists.

Our empirical strategy was based on what we considered the following necessities (in order of priority):

1. preserving the security of the respondents and the research team
2. getting as close as possible to the lived experiences of the populations under jihadist influence
3. having some variability in situations covered by the research, notably in terms of which jihadist groups operate

Preserving the security of the respondents and the research team

Security for our team and the respondents was our paramount concern: we would select localities deemed safe before thinking of any other selection criterion. The consequence is that our logic of sampling is *ad hoc*. We started by listing the potential localities where we thought the data collection process was feasible in security terms.

Assessing the safety in areas distant from the capitals where the teams are usually based proved complicated. Multiple, partially informed judgements were collectively made before choosing the localities surveyed and deploying the teams. The green light for launching the data collection process was eventually given after many hesitations and iterations. There is some incompressible (and stressful) arbitrariness behind this decision. It was decided that the research trips away from the capitals should be made as short as possible and frequent communication must be arranged so that contingency plans could be made in case of trouble – which, luckily, never happened.

The locations surveyed were considered safe enough from jihadist threats. However, threats can originate from the governmental side as well. For this reason, authorisations were required, and obtained via the *Haute autorité à la consolidation de la paix* (Niger) and the Ministry of Reconciliation (Mali). An official letter was issued that teams on the ground could show to local officials if needed. Calm and discrete settings were chosen to carry out interviews and consent was verbally requested from respondents after they were informed of the research objectives.

Capturing the lived experiences under jihadist rule

Approaches *in situ* were considered a requirement. Interviews were carried out with a diverse range of respondents in June 2022 in localities hosting populations exposed to jihadist rule and considered safe enough for the research team and the respondents. These are the [Cercle de Djenné](#) (Mali), [Gotheye](#)

(Niger), and [Baleyara](#) (Niger). Along with the interviews conducted *in situ*, dozens of additional interviews have been conducted in the capitals, Niamey and Bamako, with officials, scholars, or civil society representatives.

Our approach is testimony based. We relied on semi-structured interviews allowing complex and nuanced narratives and capturing the dynamic dimension of civilian/insurgent interactions. The interview guide (see below) – common to all the areas surveyed – was based on a semi-structured questionnaire following a simple, essentially chronological logic. The design of the interview guide followed three mini-workshops organised in Niamey and three others organised in Bamako. The first mini-workshop in Niamey included scholars and stakeholders (FCDO representatives, security officials, civil society representatives, and humanitarian NGOs). The two other workshops were internal; they comprised the Principal Investigator, the Lead Investigator for Niger, and the research assistants. The three mini-workshops in Bamako aimed at gathering expert knowledge on the Cercle de Djenné and the broader political dynamic in Central Mali.

Respondents were asked about the following topics: i) the political landscape of their community before the jihadist presence; ii) the circumstances of their first encounters with the jihadists; iii) the demands addressed to the communities by the jihadists and their use of violence; iv) the reactions to jihadist presence observed among communities, including changes in local power structures; v) their perception of the role played by third parties (state, NGOs etc.).

The variability of situations

Populations in all the geographic areas surveyed are subjected to *zakat*. Variation exists in two clear dimensions. The areas surveyed belong to two different countries, therefore they have a different history with their central authorities and are exposed to different counterinsurgency strategies and tactics. The second evident dimension in which cases differ is that some areas are under the influence of the JNIM while others (in Niger) are under the influence of IS-Sahel. Therefore, our research allows us to verify a common idea suggesting that the JNIM follows a gradualist approach to the imposition of the Islamic Law, while IS-Sahel is relatively more brutal. However, the research also reveals other moving parts in the settings studied, which we try to concatenate in consistent sequences. An unexpected element disrupted this original plan: Gotheye, in Niger, is known to be a place where JNIM is the dominant insurgent force. The situation is in fact more complicated as some villages from which respondents originate are exposed to the JNIM, IS-Sahel, or both. Consequently, the jihadist behaviours recorded through the testimonies collected are not always easy to attribute to one group in particular – also because populations often refer to insurgents as ‘bandits’ without making much difference between their jihadist affiliation. In the best-case scenario, the JNIM is referred to as *Nusra*, and IS-Sahel as *Dawla*.

Timeframe of data collection and profiles of respondents

The ‘fog of war’ constantly changes, thus it is important to specify when our data collection happened. A word of caution should also be expressed about the relevance of our findings over time. While we believe that our observations represent behaviours that are relatively stable across time in several dimensions (typically: doctrinal), in other dimensions (military commanders, nature of territorial control, intensity of violence) what we offer may just be snapshots of a reality that no longer exists.

The research in Bamako and the Cercle de Djenné was carried out in June 2022, soon after the [Mourah massacre](#) and the ensuing [false mass grave](#) episode in Gossi, which itself follows a [massacre in](#)

[Hombori](#). Political tensions were high but, perhaps because of the international attention raised after these episodes, the activity of the Malian forces and their associates from Wagner, temporarily decreased. They resumed forcefully in August. The research in Baleyara and Gotheye was carried out in June 2022, in times of relative decrease in security incidents. One may be tempted to attribute this relative peace to negotiations with jihadists initiated by the state but the reality is probably more complex, as discussed in the report. In any case, the ‘calm’ of mid-2022 follows brutal episodes of violence experienced by civilians in 2021, which have caused their displacement.

The respondents from the Cercle de Djenné have been interviewed in the villages where they reside, while the persons interviewed in Gotheye and Baleyara are internally displaced persons (IDPs) coming from nearby villages.

The interviewees from the Cercle de Djenné live in territories under the influence of *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM), the Al Qaeda affiliate in the Sahel, while the IDPs interviewed in Baleyara used to reside in areas exposed to the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel), an official new province of the Islamic State since March 2022. Specifically, they come from [Banibangou](#) and its surroundings. As stated above, IDPs interviewed in Gotheye come from areas where dominant insurgent groups are not always easy to identify. In the Cercle de Djenné and in Banibangou, the jihadist presence has provoked the emergence of self-defence militias but no such thing has happened in Gotheye.

A purposive sampling of respondents was adopted to allow for the inclusion of a diversity of profiles by gender, social status, age, or professional activity. This choice, the only feasible in our view, introduces clear biases in the information collected: the respondents we could access and who accepted to talk to us do not occupy roles in the heart of the jihadist governance system and do not feature among its beneficiaries. Respondents mention members of their communities actively involved in the jihadist system of governance in various capacities (combatants, suppliers etc.). However, the latter have not been interviewed, meaning that our sample fails to capture the full heterogeneity of individual trajectories under jihadist rule. In the Cercle de Djenné, only pro-dozos (the local self-defence militia) have been visited. We have many more men than women in our samples, except for the case of Baleyara, where the conditions of work allowed for a strict gender balance in the sample (our ideal plan). The more volatile situations in Gotheye and the Cercle de Djenné led to a less patient sampling strategy, eventually creating a bias in favour of the male gatekeepers of the communities. In the Cercle de Djenné, several women declined to be interviewed. The average duration of each interview was between an hour and a half and two hours.

	Location			
	Cercle de Djenné (Mali)	Baleyara (Niger)	Gotheye (Niger)	Bamako (Mali) and Niamey (Niger)
Male	19	18	31	N/A
Female	1	20	6	N/A

Age				
< 30	0	8	5	N/A
30–40	3	12	6	N/A
40–50	6	9	15	N/A
> 50	11	9	11	N/A
Total	20	38	37	50+

Acknowledging biases and twisted narratives

Another bias needs to be mentioned: the environment in which interviews have been carried out was intoxicated by propaganda, fake news and, more generally, highly polarised public discourses from state sources, media, or social networks. While it is hard to assess exactly how testimonies are affected by this climate, we need to acknowledge its highly probable impact on the narratives collected, as well as the self-censorship that results from it.

Data analysis

All the interviews have been transcribed while on the field or immediately after. The transcription produced hundreds of pages of text which were then reviewed by national Lead Investigators, before being transferred to the Principal Investigator for a first review followed by exchanges with the team, for the purpose of clarification. After this phase of the work, a thematic approach has been adopted consisting of identifying key recurring topics in the responses collected and recording their nuances from one account to the next. The quotes selected to feature in this report are the most emblematic under each salient themes in the narratives recorded.

Interview guide (in French)

Rappel des objectifs de l'étude

- Préciser les types d'influence des groupes armés djihadistes et leurs conséquences sur la vie (sociale, économique, culturelle) locale, et plus spécifiquement sur la redistribution et l'orientation des ressources (taxation ou « zakat »). Est-ce qu'un « contrat social » se met en place dans les

zones sous influence djihadiste ? Quels sont les principaux acteurs qu'implique ce contrat ? Quelles sont les dimensions de ce contrat social en rapport avec des ressources (taxation ou « zakat ») ?

- Identifier les objets et marges de négociation des communautés dans cet environnement ainsi que les acteurs de cette éventuelle négociation. Par-delà les possibles espaces de négociation, quelles sont les autres réponses communautaires : fuite, consentement, appel à l'Etat, mobilisation communautaire endogène violente ou non violente etc.
- Inscrire ces interactions dans l'histoire locale récente : quand les groupes armés se sont-ils manifestés pour la première fois ? Qui sont-ils ? D'où viennent-ils ? Comment justifient-ils leurs actions auprès des communautés (civils) ? Leur comportement évolue-t-il en termes d'interactions avec les communautés ? **NB** : construire des chronologies locales des interactions avec les groupes armés par le biais des entretiens est d'une importance primordiale
- Proposer des pistes d'explications des interactions évoquées : caractéristiques des groupes armés (commandement, idéologie, origine géographique des membres, intérêt stratégique de la localité – par exemple richesse locale etc.), caractéristiques des communautés (structuration interne, composition ethnique, histoire politique, proximité avec l'Etat, le parti au pouvoir etc.), caractéristiques individuelles des représentants communautaires
- Identifier des actions qui ont pu être profitables aux populations et discuter dans quelle mesure, ces actions peuvent inspirer des mesures que pourraient prendre les autorités ou les PTF

Profils des interviewé.e.s

Sur place, à distance, à Niamey et Bamako /// méthode boule de neige /// ordre de grandeur : une vingtaine d'entretiens pertinents pas localité

- Autorités communales
- Autorités coutumières
- Autorités religieuses
- Personnes déplacés internes (PDI)
- Parents (personnes âgées, sages)
- Commerçants
- Éleveurs
- Agents de santé
- Transporteurs
- Syndicats
- Représentant.e.s de la société civile (femmes, jeunes, lycéens etc.)
- Acteurs humanitaires
- Des « [repentis](#) » ?

Thèmes des entretiens

0. les circonstances de l'entretien. Qualité de la personne interviewée, lieu, date, durée, présence ou non de personnes autour

1. Un portrait politique et social des localités enquêtées. **NB1** : s'il existe des références bibliographiques facilement transférables sur l'histoire politique récente des localités enquêtées, merci de me les faire suivre. **NB2** : des supports visuels digitaux peuvent être partagés si cela est possible.

- Quelle est approximativement la composition ethnique de la communauté

- Quelles sont les autorités influentes de la localité ? **NB** : lors de l'atelier réalisé ensemble, il a bien été précisé que nous avons souvent dans ces localités ce qu'un participant de l'atelier a appelé une « gouvernance mosaïque ». C'est cette complexité fluide que nous essayons de capter ici
- Quels sont les services de l'Etat en place et fonctionnels. L'Etat continue-t-il de collecter l'impôt ?
- Quelles sont les activités économiques principales de la localité
- Quelles sont les ONG présentes ?
- Quelles ont été les modifications les plus significatives du paysage politique local ces dernières années ?

2. Présence et comportements des groupes armés. Etablir une chronologie récente de la présence des groupes armés

- Quand ont-ils été vus pour la première fois
- Comment s'est manifestée leur présence
- Qui sont-ils ? Des ressortissants de la localité ? des environs ? des étrangers ? Ont-ils des représentants identifiés qui interagissent avec les communautés ? que peut-on percevoir de leur hiérarchie interne ?
- Comment se présentent-ils ? Quelles sont leurs demandes ? Comment justifient-ils leurs actions ?
- Leurs discours ont-ils évolué au fil du temps ?
- Les groupes armés ont-ils commis des actions violentes ? Lesquelles ? En quelles occasions ? quel est leur mode opératoire ? L'Etat est-il intervenu pour protéger les populations ciblées ?
- Modalités de prélèvement des ressources par les groupes armés (montants, fréquences, justification donnée au prélèvement, en cash ou en nature)
- Que sait-on de l'économie interne des groupes (partage des ressources entre eux). **NB** : réserver ce questionnement à des personnes au fait de ces questions uniquement

3. Interactions groupes armés / populations. (En adaptant le contenu selon les réponses du bloc précédent)

- Face à la présence des groupes armés, des membres de la localité ont-ils fui ? Si oui, lesquels
- D'autres ont-ils cherché à négocier, si oui, quoi, comment, par l'intermédiaire de qui ? Donner un maximum d'exemples
- D'autres ont-ils cherché à résister. Si oui, comment ? De manière violente ? De manière non violente ?
- Des membres de la communauté ont-ils cherché de l'aide en dehors de la communauté ? Auprès de qui ? Sous quelle forme s'est matérialisée cette aide ?
- Les comportements des groupes armés, notamment en matière de taxation, ont-ils changé suite à des initiatives de discussion provenant de la communauté ou d'en dehors de la communauté (par exemple ONG de médiation)