



**Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits  
et missions de paix**

**INSECURITY, THE BREAKDOWN OF  
SOCIAL TRUST, AND ARMED ACTOR  
GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL AND  
NORTHERN MALI**

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**A Stabilizing Mali Project Report  
AUGUST 2017**

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## List of Abbreviations

ANSIPRJ	Alliance Nationale pour la Sauvegarde de l'Identité Peule et la Restauration de la Justice
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CJA	Congrès pour la Justice dans l'Azawad
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad
CMFPR-1	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance
CMFPR-2	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance
CPA	Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad
FLM	Front de Libération du Macina
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen
MAA	Mouvement Arab de l'Azawad
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNJ	Mouvement Nigérien pour la Justice
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad
MOC	Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination
MSA	Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Djihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
Plateforme	Plateforme des Mouvements du 14 Juin 2014 d'Alger

# Foreword

The following report is an analysis of the political and security situation in Mali following the outbreak of the crisis in 2012. In this meticulous report, Dr Sandor analyses the dynamics of insecurity and the corresponding governance efforts practiced by non-state armed groups operating in Central and Northern Mali since the signing of the 2015 Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali.

In the coming months, the Centre FrancoPaix will publish complementary reports and analyses that will cover different elements and dimensions of the situation in Mali. A final report will be available in the spring of 2018. The following is therefore part of a collective research effort.

Indeed, in September 2016, the Centre FrancoPaix launched a major research project on the Malian conflict and its international engagements. Entitled “Stabilizing Mali: the challenges of conflict resolution”, the project aims to produce a rigorous scientific analysis of Malian conflict dynamics. Through multidisciplinary and multidimensional analyses of the situation and opportunities for action, through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and with a team of eight expert researchers, the initiative seeks to establish the connections and relationships between multiple variables, notably the links between conflict dynamics and those of international intervention. As such, the Mali Project will develop an enhanced and detailed understanding of the conflict and opportunities for peace.

The complexity of the situation in Mali is undeniable. The difficulties of the peace process are obvious. The limits of mediation and international interventions are important and, some will say, counterproductive. We do not pretend to know or to have discovered the solution to the Malian conflict, but we are confident that our approach and our team can identify and analyse the crucial links between various dimensions of the conflict, and thus shed new light on it.

Good reading.

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## INSECURITY, THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIAL TRUST, AND ARMED ACTOR GOVERNANCE IN CENTRAL AND NORTHERN MALI

This report analyses dynamics of insecurity and the corresponding governance efforts practiced by non-state armed groups operating in Central and Northern Mali since the signing of the Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (hereafter ‘Accord’) on 15 May and 20 June 2015. The conflict in Mali has evolved significantly since the French military intervention of January 2013, and United Nations Security Council authorization of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) of April that year. The report analyses three interwoven trajectories that currently define the conflict. First, conflict zones in Mali are marked by a lack of control over large swathes of territory, the emergence of quotidian armed violence, banditry, and a generalized environment of insecurity that results in the breakdown of social trust amongst Malian communities. Second, in the aftermath of the French intervention, Mali is witnessing the partial dispersion, ephemeralization, and reconstitution of armed Islamist groups operating in Mali’s central and northern borderlands (notably the intensification of armed violence in the centre regions of the country - Mopti and some northern areas of Ségou) who are acting in the void of governance where the Malian central state in theory should be reintroduced. Third, in response to these previous dynamics and as they compete over the stakes of the peace process, several armed group signatories of the Accord are fragmenting and reconfiguring towards tribal bases of affiliation, and into new tactical postures and alliances. These dynamics add to the conflict’s complexity and increase the likelihood of its regionalization.

This report complements two other preliminary reports written by members of the Centre FrancoPaix on the national and international dynamics of the current political and security context in Mali (Charbonneau 2017; Sears 2017). References herein to state-society dynamics in Mali, and the impacts of the intensifying armed violence in the country in its various guises are made in relation to the content of those reports. The main objective here is to discuss and examine the conflict’s emerging patterns of deterioration and their consequences. Based on the analysis, subsequent reports will suggest potential ways forward, both in terms of policy decisions to be taken and implemented, and additional research questions to be answered.

### Methods

Researching armed conflict in the Global South is a complex affair. This report acknowledges its limits (for example, research was only conducted in the capital cities of the region and not in the borderlands due to security issues). The report, nevertheless, embraces and engages with the ‘messiness of researching in armed conflict’, knowing that evidence about the Malian crisis is inherently incomplete, one-sided, and political, as it is positioned in a way to curry the support from the researcher (Perera 2017). To fully embrace these dynamics, evidence for this report is drawn from a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork approach where semi-structured interviews were conducted in July-August 2016 in Niger, January-February 2017 in Mali, and May 2017 in Burkina



Faso. Alongside these interviews (99 in total), the analysis is enriched by informal conversations (too numerous to count) both in the field and continuing after field visits by phone. This evidence is further triangulated by documentary sources of information (press, social media accounts, and secondary reports).

## Generalized Insecurity North of Ségou

Historically, the Malian central administration has never been entirely capable, and arguably *willing*, of projecting its governance apparatuses beyond the Ségou region (part of the region itself in the throes of regular armed attacks; see SIPRI 2017).<sup>1</sup> This is also the case for its ability to project its coercive capacities and to provide security. In this absence, local populations have had to provide for their own security and economic opportunities, and have relied on various para-sovereigns for protection and to secure their varied sedentary or semi-nomadic lifestyles and mobility.<sup>2</sup> The absence of Malian state institutions remains to this day, leaving the governance of security north of Ségou to a coterie of competing violent entrepreneurs, recognized armed groups, and armed Islamist movements. Control over territory in northern Mali by these varied groups is precarious, and has produced the risk of perpetual violence in many zones, accompanied by the degradation of social trust that has historically held sway between communities in this part of the country. Communities in Mali are growing mutually suspicious, hesitant to speak with either national or international authorities, and increasingly distrustful of one another.

### *The Consolidation of No-Man's Lands*

No one group has yet to dominate and impose stable control over significant territories in the north, leading large sections of the local population longing for order, even if at the hands of armed Islamist groups like AQIM who controlled the region prior to the 2013 Serval intervention. Local populations recognize the risks associated with countering armed banditry, maintaining that “if you fight against them, 100 of them come back and burn everything. They steal money, vehicles, stores, equipment. As a result, people say they miss the days when ... the whole region... [was]... in the hands of the Islamists, because they kept order and stopped theft. For the people, thieves are worse than terrorists” (Moutot 2015). The inability to control territory in a lasting way that can contribute to the protection of local communities is even acknowledged by official signatories of the Accord. As one *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) battalion commander put it, “No group in the field, no matter what they tell you, can control more than even 100 metres outside of their little camp” (Interview, MNLA Battalion Commander, Ouagadougou, 17 May 2017). While territorial control is indeed consolidated in *some* key zones in Mali's north, this statement indicates the lack of certainty of even those armed actors who do attempt to consolidate governance action over specific

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to imply that the Malian central administration has been inexistent in toto. Certain municipalities have been connected to the sinews of the Malian state. However, it is without a doubt that resources have been concentrated in and around Bamako, with some individuals in the Ministry of Decentralization asserting that since 2002 only a maximum of 10 per cent of government spending occurs outside of the larger Bamako area (Interview, Ministry of Decentralization Official, Bamako, 3 May 2017). Some claim that in 2009 only 0.48 per cent of government revenue was transferred to the regions (see ICG 2015: 7 n. 42).

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of ‘para-sovereigns’, see Hüsken and Klute 2010.

northern spaces. Some smaller urban locales do experience control by armed groups. For example, while challenged militarily by the GATIA armed group which has attempted to lay siege to the town of Kidal since their forces were ousted in July 2016, the CMA have managed to maintain a modicum of control and stability. This has allowed for some visits from Malian government officials like Malick Alhousseini, Minister of Energy and Water in December 2016, and the holding of school examinations in May 2017.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming pattern is that of generalized insecurity. Particular axes, for instance the space linking Timbuktu, Goundam, and Diré have become notoriously insecure, marked by persistent banditry, the development of protection rackets by petty armed gangs only loosely affiliated with recognized armed movements, and the presence of armed Islamist groups (Interview, Arab Berabiche Notable from Goundam, Bamako, 8 February 2017).<sup>3</sup> Local people claim that the majority of acts of petty banditry in this space are perpetrated by young men from the region of the Songhai ethnic group who have flocked to larger towns in the months following the signing of the Accord to officially join an armed group signatory like the *Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance* (CMFPR-1) in return for payment of €75-150, and hopes of integration in the Armed Forces once the process of Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration kicks off (Ahmed 2016).<sup>4</sup>

It is also plausible, however, that Fulani, Arab, and Tuareg young men also constitute armed gangs. In mid-June 2015, local officials and residents of towns north of Goundam stated categorically that banditry in the zone follows no specific ethnic lines, and was developing to such proportions as to lead most of the area's inhabitants to leave for Goundam, or further south to Bamako (Interview, HCUA Representative from Léré, Bamako, 25 January 2017). Within these zones, few communities can mobilize a significant force of protection powerful enough to manage to stave off such attacks. For example, the CMFPR-1, led by the charismatic Harouna Touré, holds little control over foot soldiers on the ground who present themselves in local interactions as bona fide combatants but in reality are connected only by several degrees of separation from the movement's formal political and military structures.

Similar conditions of endemic insecurity are equally present in the central region of Mopti, notably in rural spaces straddling the Djenne-Mopti-Hombori highway axes, and the Mali-Burkina Faso borderlands (Interview, MINUSMA Official, Bamako, 10 February 2017; Interview, Senior Intelligence Official, Ouagadougou, 22 May 2017; see Dubois and Sangaré 2017).<sup>5</sup> In this region, official Malian administrative presence is largely inexistent. What state presence was initially reintroduced from August 2013 has since retreated southward due to persistent insecurity. State officials and bureaucrats have been threatened, targeted, or assassinated by bandits and armed Islamist groups that operate in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> While Malians living in urban centres like Bamako and Sévaré find security lacking, the insecurity felt along such axes and in northern cities and rural spaces is of an entirely different order of severity in terms of generalized insecurity (see Bleck, Dembele, and Guindo 2016: 11-15).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the role of the Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso militias, see Boisvert 2015. Boisvert correctly asserts that these militias are 'pro-government' without being a proxy for the Malian Armed Forces. Nevertheless, connections between the armed groups and state institutions do exist; the armed groups are rumoured to have attained some logistical support from the latter.

<sup>5</sup> Pastoralist Fulani communities refer to these zones as 'Macina' (located between Mopti and Ségou), and Hayré (the Douentza circle).

### *Inter and Intra Community Violence*

This institutional vacuum creates favourable conditions for small groups to commit acts of violent score-settling connected to longstanding local disputes between communities. This includes armed violence between Tuareg and Fulani herders, or more commonly amongst Fulani themselves.<sup>6</sup> In many respects, Fulani communities have been the most impacted by the recent northern rebellion (see Guichaoua 2016; ICG 2016). Many Fulanis in Mali and Niger feel they have been historically outpaced by the Tuareg and Arab communities, and disadvantaged by state concessions made following the latter's several uprisings. Rebellions in the north of Mali have fed on Fulani community resources (notably cattle) in neighbouring regions, which have not been officially addressed by the government as it focuses its concerns towards ending violent rebellion further north.

Frustrated by their community being ostracized and the lack of concern by Bamako elites, many Fulani youth have been successfully recruited to the ranks of several armed groups since 2012. These include what can roughly be classified as 'identity/community based' groups like the *Alliance Nationale pour la Sauvegarde de l'Identité Peule et la Restauration de la Justice* (ANSIPRJ)<sup>7</sup> and Ganda Iso, or armed Islamist groups like the former *Front de Libération du Macina*/Ansar Dine Macina, now called the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) ('Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims'). Just as common is the formation of unnamed/unknown informal self-defence militias. The first mass recruitment of young Fulani to armed Islamist groups commenced in 2012 as *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) militants actively courted disenfranchised communities south of the Niger River delta and in the Arabanda borderlands to be more involved in their takeover of northern Mali. Fulanis that joined MUJAO procured weapons, combat training, and money, all of which increase an individual's social status and recognition within nomadic communities. One rationale for Fulanis joining MUJAO was due to their frustration with Tuareg communities from the Hayré and adjacent Gourma regions, who they accuse of livestock theft, or the latter's purported direct support or complicity of the MNLA during the rebellion (Bagayoko et. al. 2017).<sup>8</sup> Historic rivalries and tensions between Fulani and Tamasheq herders (more specifically the Daoussahak tribe), dating from the 1970s droughts in the Mali-Niger borderlands, were also absorbed into the larger cleavage that developed between the Tuareg independence and jihadist movements in the Ménaka borderlands. Many Fulani from that region joined MUJAO to seek redress for a long history of Tuareg cross-border banditry and cattle theft, to protect themselves from 'exactions', and to advance their social position (Interview, Nigerien Fulani leader, Niamey, 26 July 2016; see Guichaoua 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> The Fulani are found across the vast majority of the Malian territory (especially concentrated in the Mopti region), and the Sahel more broadly. Intra-Fulani contests over the transformation of the community's traditional structures of power and authority add another layer of complexity to this generalized insecurity. Later analyses will examine this dynamic in more depth.

<sup>7</sup> The ANSIPRJ only lasted some six months, formally disbanding in November 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Acts of brigandage and opportunism are also commonplace in the borderlands straddling the Mali-Burkina Faso border, which has been facilitated by the increased availability of procuring automatic weapons since the early 2000s.

Inter-ethnic conflict has also intensified between Bambara and Dogon farming communities against Fulani herders over land rights and assumptions of involvement in jihadist activities. Competition for land use in Mopti is significant, but is not managed by government institutions that would serve to encompass rights for multiple communities seeking access to either agricultural plots or pasture space. Agricultural communities accuse pastoralists of not using designated trails for their herds, which trample over crops, while pastoralists accuse farming communities of encroaching on spaces of pasture. While tensions between farmers and herders in this zone have been recurrent, violent conflict between communities has only been sporadic, and has historically been settled by peaceful means. Since 2014, however, they have intensified, leading to regular violence throughout much of the Mopti region (see RFI 2016; HRW 2017).<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group (2016: 3-4) reports that an episode of violence in the Koro Circle in May 2012, where a land dispute ended in the killing of sixteen Fulani herders by Dogon farmers, triggered the decision of several Fulani groups to create small-scale, armed self-defence units. Some of these are locally believed to have subsequently joined with armed Islamist groups that had taken over Gao that year. In such conditions where formalized institutional authority is weak or absent over wide swathes of territory in Mali, either in the form of state agencies, armed movement Accord signatories, or jihadist movements, micro-dynamics of violent competition intensify as local groups attempt make up their own governance systems in response to generalized insecurity, or as they respond to violence with violence.

Joining local militias or forming impromptu self-defence units in order to protect one's land, cattle, and what little socio-economic circulation can occur in this context of perpetual armed violence is now a well-established practice north of Ségou (see SIPRI 2017: 30, 37).<sup>10</sup> This has the effect of heightening tensions between communities who pursue escalating tit-for-tat retaliatory violence, a trend that is sedimenting into a recurrent pattern following every northern rebellion. The difference between inter-ethnic violence in the mid-1990s in the Gao and Kidal regions and the current armed violence is its geographical extension and amplification in terms of the scale of violence: central Mali is now experiencing significantly higher-levels previously seen in episodes of Songhai-Tuareg inter-ethnic violence from 1994-1996 and 2008-2010 (see Klute 2011: 170-73). For example, in response to a fatal attack on a Bambara shop keeper in the village of Ké-Macina in February 2017, Bambara vigilante groups, locally referred to as 'Dozos', retaliated against local Fulani communities, leaving over 20 dead, including several children (HRW 2017).<sup>11</sup> In mid-June, again in the Koro Cercle (Mali-Burkina Faso border), following the murder of a Dogon notable by presumed armed jihadists operating in the zone, Dogon vigilantes attacked a Fulani village,

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<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to provide a number of individuals killed in local instances of violence due to lack of state presence, inflation of numbers by conflict participants, and the like. In May 2016 alone, the Mopti region had an official count of 30 dead in inter-ethnic violence.

<sup>10</sup> Boisvert (2015: 281-82, 296 n.78) demonstrates that major recruitment patterns for Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso militias in 2012-13 occurred through local networks in locales where these militias are active, and usually through familial or village relations. The same can be said of locally-initiated self-defence units and vigilante groups operating in central Mali.

<sup>11</sup> The initial spark of this particular set of violent events is contested. According to Agmour (2017), the shop owner was a Fulani village chief. Individuals linked to Amadou Kouffa assaulted the shop owner because he was outspoken about his decision to denounce Kouffa's movement, and his unwillingness to pursue violence against the state. As the account goes, a Bambara client was present for the attack, and before dying told witnesses that the act was committed by Fulanis of a neighbouring village, thus setting off the inter-communal violence (view shared in Interview conducted by Jonathan Sears with Fulani man from Bandiagara Circle, Bamako, 2 May 2017).

presumably on Burkina Faso territory, which sparked a reprisal attack by the latter, leaving at least thirty dead and over 1000 inhabitants fleeing for protection in nearby towns in Burkina Faso (Sangaré and Dicko 2017; Le Monde 2017).

This dynamic of inter-ethnic or intra-community distrust is intensifying in the Post-Accord period as the peace process drags on, and as the Malian central state relinquishes its presence and ability to act as a service provider for local populations (of the country's various communities) north of Ségou. In these circumstances, inter-ethnic rivalries, stoked by distrust and accusations of complicity and violence, are driving communities to find sources of protection from competing governance actors. As Malian Armed Forces, primarily of the Bambara ethnicity, have supported local Bambara community claims of Fulani complicity with armed Islamist groups or violent banditry, Malian soldiers have detained, attacked, and killed many Fulani people, thus further eroding trust in the central state and inter-community social cohesion (see Thiénot 2017).<sup>12</sup> Caught between Armed Forces they know do not practice Republican ideals with which they are tasked, or worse as a threat to their community, and armed Islamist groups who constitute a potential source of protection, many Fulani villages look to the latter to provide them with safety.

## Armed Islamist Groups and the Governance of Violence

In this context of generalized insecurity, armed Islamist groups are increasingly entering to provide protection and governance where local and state officials are either not trusted or present. As such, armed Islamist groups display a significant degree of manoeuvrability in their interactions with local populations who desire order; protection from rival communities; or simply to gain an upper hand against individual rivals by instrumentalizing the former's willingness to practice violent coercion. These are key mechanisms of armed Islamist governance in Mali: to enact violence on individuals that resist their claims to legitimate governance, and to increase their visibility as legitimate actors locally through providing protection and/or basic resources. Since armed Islamist groups are actively intervening in the day to day of local populations, one can confidently argue that armed Islamist groups in the country have successfully become constituted by local actors, identities, concerns, and interests: Jihadist groups have successfully 'Malinised' (see Lebovich 2016).

The term 'Malinised' refers to how commanders and fighters of existing armed Islamist groups are increasingly composed of Malian nationals. This is not, as some Malian and international officials state, "an external threat", but a fundamentally local one. This does not mean that armed Islamist groups do not act in a regional or transnational manner. The connections that they leverage and benefit from extend beyond the existing borders of Mali. Indeed, many individuals of these groups have tribal backgrounds that stretch across Saharan state borders, or even hold multiple citizenships from Saharan states (see Lecocq 2013: 65-66). However, for the most part, many of these fighters' concerns, interests, and priorities are fundamentally localized and their historical trajectories originate in Mali.

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<sup>12</sup> Videos, allegedly of Malian soldiers, hog-tying over a dozen purportedly Fulani men have been widely circulated on social media outlets in mid-July 2017, further casting doubt of the Armed Forces' credibility and legitimacy.

### *The Adaptations of Armed Islamist Groups after the 2013 Intervention*

The French military intervention (aided by regional militaries, especially Chadian forces), and subsequent international military actions severely weakened the coalition of armed Islamist groups that had taken control of Mali north of Konna by the end of 2012. Key katibat leaders like Abou Zeid, Omarould Hamaha, Ahmed el Tilemsi, and Abdelkrim al-Targui were killed, along with hundreds of other loyal fighters. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the ‘uncatchable’ and enigmatic AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun katibat commander, was also reported to be severely wounded in a US drone strike in late November 2016 (Middle East Eye 2016).<sup>13</sup> French and Nigerien sources have later claimed that Belmokhtar died from his wounds somewhere near Ghadamès, Southern Libya, likely in February 2017 (Phone Interview, Former rebel from Tahoua Region, Niger, 13 June 2017; Phone Interview, former French DGSE Official, 13 June 2017).<sup>14</sup>

While having lost key commanders, these groups quickly adapted to their circumstances by drawing themselves into rural areas inaccessible to intervention forces. It is by diffusing their elements into communities with whom they have extensive socio-economic and familial connections that armed Islamist groups have made it extremely difficult to discern who is a ‘terrorist’ from who is not (Interview, HCUA Representative from Gossi, Bamako, 28 January 2017). For example, some individuals that had supported Islamist rule in Gao in 2012 renounced their affiliation to these networks, insisting that they only collaborated with groups like MUJAO in order to protect themselves and their communities (Interview, MAA-Platform Commander from Tabankort, Bamako, 31 January 2017; see ISS 2016). The connections that many northern communities have with armed Islamist groups, therefore, persist and complicate perceptions of actor credibility. These connections also weaken the possibility of (re)developing social trust amongst local communities, and between them and national and international actors since each accuses the other of ties to enemies.

### *New Organizational Platforms, Tactics, and Governance Modalities*

Since 2014 armed Islamist groups have reconfigured their organizational platforms, recruitment practices, and tactics. The most significant organizational recomposition to date is the fusion of Al-Mourabitoun, AQIM, and Ansar Dine networks into the JNIM in early March 2017. Led by the Tuareg-dominated Ansar Dine founder and leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the JNIM introductory video announcement brought together emirs from all of the armed Islamist groups operating in Mali (and extending to southern Libya as well), representing three important Sahelian-Saharan ethnicities: Tamasheqs, Arabs, and Fulanis. While there are several possible contributing factors to this merger, the presence of large international forces (Barkhane and MINUSMA) provides an ideological justification for unifying existing armed Islamist groups under one banner. Another potential reason is that in contrast with armed groups to varying degrees connected to the peace process that have fragmented and reconstituted along ethnic or tribal affiliations (more

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<sup>13</sup> *Jeune Afrique* (2016) reported on 28 November that it was a French missile strike, possibly targeting Belmokhtar, that had occurred near Tripoli - not in southern Libya, which most likely killed him.

<sup>14</sup> In one report, Barkhane forces visited the village of Boghassa (a small village 165 km north of Kidal near the Algerian border) to acquire DNA from one of Belmokhtar’s sons. Belmokhtar was reported to have married Arab women in northern Mali, as well as a woman in southern Libya.

below), the JNIM has discursively signalled that their Islamic identity and principles overcome such parochial differences (see Offner 2017).

Instead of setting up administrative bodies in towns, JNIM networks have strategically committed to operating from remote rural localities, seeking to conduct ambush-style attacks on MINUSMA battalions, and Malian Armed Forces and Gendarmerie stations. Most armed group officials spoken to in Bamako in January-February 2017 note that AQIM, FLM, and Ansar Dine try to avoid attacks on French military forces unless the circumstances are ideal. Instead, they actively target the signatories to the Accord, the Malian security forces, and MINUSMA, who are viewed as less risky targets. Such tactics, however, require significant planning and a granular knowledge of their targets' locations and routines. From 2014 to March 2017, groups like AQIM and Ansar Dine were very successful at leveraging their longstanding knowledge of local groups and terrain (gained since at least the early 1990s, in some cases) to acquire tactical information on potential targets from a wide network of interlocutors connected through direct familial and/or marital relations, nomadic social custom, and through cash transactions. Two largely Tuareg katibats have become noteworthy: *Youssef Ibn Tachfin* and *Al-Ansar*, who serve as bridges to Ansar Dine and local communities in the Gourma zone (Timbuktu region), across Taoudennit, and Kidal (Interview, Arab Berabiche Notable from Goundam, Bamako, 8 February 2017; Phone Interview, French Security Analyst, 14 June 2017). Not only has this had the effect of expanding the diffuse characteristics of armed Islamist groups, it has also proven a boon for local recruitment of youth who understand their communities to be under attack by foreign forces and keen on providing monetary resources to their families. In particular, due to the high risk of themselves planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) themselves, jihadist elements have been able to use local intermediaries in small towns to hire idle youth to plant IEDs for them at a rate of 50 to 150 euros per explosive - with bonuses given to those whose explosives cause substantial damage on international targets (Interview, Canadian Official, Bamako, 2 February 2017; Interview, MNLA Official, Bamako, 10 February 2017; Interview, MINUSMA Official, 10 February 2017; see Chebli 2017). Such tactics indicate how AQIM has acquired a distinctly 'local flavour' in Mali, following the now long-established franchise pattern of al-Qaeda's central command (see Mendelsohn 2015).

An important and growing tactic used by armed Islamist groups is to plant IEDs along roads travelled by security forces or international interveners. Once vehicles hit an explosive, attackers follow up with an ambushed assault.<sup>15</sup> When IEDs are not used, small groups run kamikaze attacks by motorbike, especially on remote police and gendarmerie stations. These attacks have been concentrated in the swath of territory from the tri-border region (south of Ansongo - an area known locally as 'Arabanda') extending north towards Tessalit and the border with Algeria; territory south of the city of Timbuktu, heading southwest towards Nampala; and from November 2016 to June 2017, increasingly in an arc of territory spreading east by southeast of Mopti that includes towns like Niono, Diabaly, etc. (Interview, UNMAS Official, Bamako, 9 February 2017). MINUSMA and Malian intelligence services believe that as early as 2008, Tuaregs now loyal to Iyad ag Ghaly's Ansar Dine had collected stockpiles of unexploded mines from the Ouzou strip in Chad where many Tuareg fighters fought for Qaddafi in the 1987 Toyota War for possible use in Mali (Interview, MINUSMA Official, Bamako, 26 January 2017). AQIM katibats are also known to collect unexploded mines near the Libya-Tunisia border for repurposing into IEDs.

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<sup>15</sup> Such attacks are arguably daily occurrences: "Nearly each day, an ambush, mine or rocket attacks target the Malian security forces, MINUSMA blue-helmets, and French Barkhane soldiers" (Roger 2017, *translation mine*).

Suicide attacks are also at a record high, often occurring in connection with kamikaze ambushes, similar to the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou. The suicide attack of 18 January 2017 in the city of Gao on the *Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination* (MOC in French), in which the Al Mourabitoun brigade of AQIM used a young Fulani suicide bomber known as ‘Abd el-Hadi al Fulani’, killed an estimated 79 individuals, and severely wounded 108 - the deadliest in Malian history (Interview, GATIA Commander, Bamako, 25 January 2017; Interview, CMA Official, Bamako 31 January 2017; Phone Interview, Tuareg Journalist, 20 June 2017; author has list of names of those killed, given by Tuareg GATIA supporter). Thus, armed Islamist groups are utilizing their asymmetric, nebulous qualities, and community connections to intensify attacks on any group that seeks to introduce state institutions in the north.

### *Protection Against Violence, and Violence Against Governance Challenges*

Armed Islamist groups, however, also position themselves in this insecurity landscape by discreetly practicing aspects of statecraft amongst local communities (ICG 2017). In late November 2015, AQIM fighters led by Talha al-Liby were videotaped participating in an Arab tribal meeting in Boudjbeha (150 km northeast of Timbuktu), contending to members of the Oulad Iche tribe present that AQIM has no problem with local tribes, and accused the French of seeking to divide the Malian Arab community (Al-Akhbar 2015).<sup>16</sup> During their brief inter-regnum, many (if not most) people living in Timbuktu appreciated AQIM and Ansar Dine control of the town and surrounding areas since these groups provided services that had previously been lacking such as “free water and electricity, weekly distributions of food stuffs, free hospital care and medicine, money for religious marriages, and an elimination of taxes” (Chebli 2017). Similar to the delivery of services and protection in 2012, these groups continue to provide basic life goods (like cash, telephones, water, and sometimes weapons), and the public good of security in those zones that local communities regard as ‘no-man’s lands’. For instance, in March 2017, elements of AQIM executed an armed bandit caught operating along the Timbuktu-Goundam highway axe. This act of deterrence provided a much-welcomed reprieve for local inhabitants who feared circulating in this zone, especially on market days (Phone Interview, HCUA Tuareg Representative from Léré, 14 June 2017).

Fulani armed Islamists connected to Amadou Kouffa, operating in rural zones of the Mopti region, also practice security provision. His adherents enter small villages to adjudicate disputes between individual herders, and spread messages to rural communities of a return to the practice of their brand of Islamic principles. Such messages please Fulanis that find themselves in situations of caste subservience, individuals situationally-dominated by Fulani elites connected to the Malian state, or to local landowners who charge high sums for rights of pasture that often reach exorbitant levels (see Dubois and Sangaré 2017). Some of the more affluent Fulani herders even subcontract protection services during transhumance periods to small groups formerly associated with MUJAO, or to Kouffa’s men directly (Interview, two Malian Security Experts, Dakar, 20 June 2016; see ICG 2016). When armed Islamist groups adjudicate in local conflicts in remote areas where individuals feel neglected by state institutions, they essentially act as conflict resolution brokers and para-sovereigns for nomadic communities who then come to see their objectives as legitimate.

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<sup>16</sup> Lebovich (2016) notes that the katibat’s participation in the meeting highlights the way that armed Islamist groups have been able to root themselves in local affairs and communities, as al-Liby has family ties to the Arab community in Timbuktu, and acted as one of the city’s Islamic police during the 2012 takeover.



Acknowledging how some individuals and communities recognize armed Islamist groups as legitimate does not mean that their social acceptance is uncontested, or that they do not perpetrate significant and regular acts of coercive violence. If anything, violent coercion is one of these group's key governance practices wherever they operate. Violent practices range in their degree of coercive harm. For example, in Dialloubé (50 km north of Mopti) and in surrounding villages, armed Islamist groups are rumoured to have established armed checkpoints where they scrutinize drivers for whether or not men and women are kept separated in cars (Sangaré 2017). In May 2017, armed Islamists entered the town of Dioungani (130 km east of Mopti, near the border with Burkina Faso) to deliver a letter outlining rules of order fashioned after their brand of religious piety for the town people. Rules included obliging men to pray at the mosque, for women to cover their heads and faces in public, and forbidding youth from listening to music on their phones. A woman whose head was not covered reportedly had her head shaved by the same group (Phone Interview, Tuareg Journalist from Gao, 5 May 2017). Armed Islamists delivered a similar letter to the residents of the village of Diabaly, mandating strict guidelines and stipulating harsh penalties in cases of disobedience (SIPRI 2017: 30).

What these groups view as more direct challenges to their social imaginary meet more severe forms of coercive violence. School buildings have been destroyed, and teachers and school administrators are regularly threatened by the Fulani jihadist youth that claim to follow Kouffa. Some reports indicate that over 270 schools in the Mopti region along have been closed – many since 2013 (Sangaré 2017). In 2016, reported Fulani jihadists (assumed to be Kouffa's men) killed the imam of Nampalari (northeast of Ségou) following his refusal to support their cause (SIPRI 2017: 30). In fact, armed Islamist groups have targeted all representatives of Malian state in the centre of the country including elected officials, gendarmes, forest rangers, prefects, tax collectors, and other civil servants or assumed collaborators of the Malian Armed Forces (see Carayol 2016a; SIPRI 2017: 30; Dubois and Sangaré 2017).

Violent practices in the north are similar in intensity and frequency. A year after the Serval intervention, AQIM's Grand Sahara (*Al-Furqan*) katibat began regular forays from their rural hideouts, entering towns or marketplaces throughout the Timbuktu region to circulate pamphlets and give speeches threatening those who collaborate with Malian security and defence forces or international actors (see Al-Akhbar 2015; Lyammouri 2015). In September 2014, AQIM fighters entered Zouera (80 km north of Timbuktu) and placed the head of a Tuareg man from the Kel-Ansar tribe on a spike in the middle of town, accusing him of spying for the French, and warning locals against similar actions (Reuters 2014; Phone Interview, Tuareg Man from Gossi, 5 July 2017). In July 2017, again in Zouera, the JNIM reportedly entered the weekly marketplace, gave a speech announcing that any collaborator and traitors would be murdered, and delivered the head (shot and then decapitated) of a man identified as Oumeyda el Wasri, who was kidnapped several weeks prior (Kibaru 2017b; Phone Interview, Tuareg man from Gossi, 5 July 2017).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Given the name 'el Wasri', this individual was most likely of the al Wasra tribe of the Berabiche confederation. The al Wasra are believed to have developed a strong support of, and social links with AQIM (especially through marriage). Similar to the recruitment and support of many Fulani individuals to armed Islamist groups, the al Wasra have been motivated by their desire to alter their social position of historical subservience to other Berabiche tribes (like the Oulad Iche and Oulad Idriss) in the Timbuktu and Taoudenit regions (see Pellerin 2017: 21-22). At the time of writing this story is still developing. But individuals reportedly present for the public speech assert that el Wasri was a former AQIM fighter branded a traitor by the group.

Thus, armed Islamist groups' willingness to use violence, fed by a granular knowledge of local groups and their activities, has become a governance mechanism meant to sideline competition from other actors that present even a minimal challenge to their rule. In this way their practices of violent coercion act as a double-edged sword for populations in the north: while local populations may long for order and protection from roving bandits, rival communities, and enemy armed groups, their coercive influence nevertheless often targets those communities themselves. Given that this violence is regularly combined with acts of 'service delivery,' armed Islamist groups have been successful at dividing northerners either away from, or towards, Malian state institutions and international actors, or the various armed groups Accords signatories.

### *Violence Against Armed Movements*

Armed Islamist group violence has not spared any of the armed movements operating in Mali. Each group has suffered important losses in terms of military commanders, combatants, and other connected individuals (usually family members) that jihadists mark as collaborators for international forces, or simply challengers. In April 2016, prior to the establishment of the MOC, pamphlets circulated through Gao, threatening individual members of the armed group signatories from participating in this mechanism of the Accord (Interview, GATIA Official, Bamako, 20 January 2017). The MOC attack is still under investigation by international forces, but it is important to note that all armed movements suffered losses in the attack.<sup>18</sup>

As the CMA has fragmented since the signing of the Accord in 2015, newly created armed movements have also been targeted. In response to attacks against armed Islamist groups by the *Congrès pour la Justice dans l'Azawad* (CJA)<sup>19</sup> near Goundam in early 2017, the JNIM circulated pamphlets at Zouera marketplace in April that threatened its military commander, Colonel Abass Ag Mohamed Ahmed. The tracts stated that the JNIM was not at war with the Kel Ansar tribe, as some have asserted, but with Abass and his collaborators (Kibaru 2017a).<sup>20</sup> On 8 April 2017, the CJA garrison at Gargando (80 km east of Timbuktu) was attacked by unknown armed elements (assumed

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<sup>18</sup> Major controversy surrounds the involvement of the Mouvement Arab de l'Azawad-Platform in the attack. While all movements (and the Malian Armed Forces) lost combatants in the attack, several interlocutors (from the CMA, MINUSMA, and Western diplomats) insisted that none of the MAA-Platform victims were from the Arab community. The Arab community of Gao is predominantly Lamhar, the community from which the majority of the MAA fighters are drawn. Most interlocutors asserted that those MAA fighters that were killed were Fulani. What is important about this assessment is not the empirical veracity of the claim itself – a claim which is more than difficult to prove. What the assessments do indicate, however, is that the MAA is not viewed as a credible actor by a majority of the conflict's players (including their allies from the GATIA). Many assume that the MAA-Platform maintains important ties to armed Islamist groups, notably from the former *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO), now the so-called Islamic State's Saharan Emirate.

<sup>19</sup> A more detailed analysis of the CJA's creation and political objectives will be provided in a subsequent report.

<sup>20</sup> The pamphlets reportedly emphasized Abass' collaboration with foreign actors that counter Islam in the Sahel and Sahara. This tactic serves to further splinter nomadic communities away from their tribal-based affiliations towards a broader umbrella identity of Muslims under attack by foreign invaders. Abass has been unrelentingly vocal about his intentions to pursue attacks against suspected jihadists in the Timbuktu region.

to be JNIM), killing four CJA fighters, and targeting the village chief and local school administrator, Kel Ansar notable, Abdullahi Ag Oumar (Ag Ahmedou 2017).

The leader of the *Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad* (MSA), Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, was recently threatened by Abu-Walid al-Saharaoui, former MUJAO commander who declared fealty to Abubakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State (Journal du Mali 2017).<sup>21</sup> Since February 2017, Ag Acharatoumane has been making several declarations about al-Saharaoui on social media, asserting the local Daoussahak tribal community does not welcome al-Saharaoui's men in the Ménaka borderlands. Following an attack in early June 2017 on a Nigerien Armed Forces base in Abala, Niger by supposed al-Saharaoui's Islamic State fighters, MSA and GATIA contingents in Ménaka, in coordination with Barkhane forces, attacked the assailants, allegedly killing 15 (ibid.). While several interlocutors doubted the initial veracity of the threat, delivered by letter in Arabic and subsequently translated in French and disseminated over social media, al-Saharaoui then delivered an audio message repeating his accusations against Ag Acharatoumane, in which he called him a 'Pharaoh', his movement as servants to the French, and threatening to exterminate the Daoussahak.<sup>22</sup> Former CMA associates of Ag Acharatoumane assert that the MSA is composed of several fighters that had been close to al-Saharaoui in 2012-2013, who now takes them for traitors (Phone interview, HCUA militant from Ménaka, 5 July 2017). On 5 July 2017, two unidentified actors on motorcycles conducted a grenade attack on the offices of the MSA in Ménaka. Armed Islamist groups, therefore, practice violence against any leader or community that they assume to challenge their rule in rural borderlands they seek to control.

The MNLA has arguably been the most regularly targeted armed movement attacked by armed Islamist groups. A senior MNLA military commander stated that by February 2017 some 177 MNLA fighters have been killed by jihadist actions, 33 of which were killed in nine attacks (Interview, MNLA military commander from Kidal, Bamako, 5 February 2017).<sup>23</sup> While it is extremely challenging to verify the number of deaths from jihadist attacks for several reasons, it is possible to weigh the severity of killings of identified groups against others. If this is the case, then the MNLA has lost more fighters to armed Islamist attacks by far than other challengers.

There are several reasons why this is the case, four worth mentioning here. First, the movement has the longest history, and therefore has had the most time in battle with jihadists. Second, the MNLA worked very closely with the French Serval intervention in 2013 to track down armed Islamist fighters, which means that jihadists mark them as traitors to Islam. In fact, of all armed groups, the MNLA has most actively courted international actors (especially the French) in order to support their political objectives of an independent Azawad. Third, the MNLA has a dedicated anti-terrorist combat unit, and has been very vocal about this fact. MNLA Secretary General, Bilal Ag Acherif, has himself insisted that the MNLA would eradicate terrorism on condition that the international community recognize Azawad as a sovereign state. Finally, it is possible that MNLA fighters are targeted more regularly than *Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) and *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad – Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (MAA-CMA) fighters since the latter two groups arguably have stronger social relationships with armed Islamist

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<sup>21</sup> On the effects of al-Saharaoui's declaration of support to IS, see Lebovich 2016.

<sup>22</sup> As explained below, Ag Acharatoumane recently visited Paris to meet with high-level security and military authorities.

<sup>23</sup> In late December 2015, this military commander lost 20 men in one AQIM attack (most likely the Al-Ansar katibat), some twenty kilometers south of the Algerian border.

groups, and in many ways closer religio-political beliefs. By maintaining close ties with, or directly infiltrating armed group signatory organizations, armed Islamist groups have leveraged their associations with local actors to enable practices of violent coercion against individuals and groups they consider enemies and traitors. In the case of the MNLA, armed Islamist groups regularly direct their violent actions against this so-called ‘secular’ armed movement within the CMA, with whom they took military control of the north in 2012.

## **The Tribalization of Armed Groups: Alliance Fluidity and Intra-community Violence**

It is in this context of generalized insecurity, where it is increasingly difficult to identify which actors are credible and not in league with one’s enemies, that one’s ethnic or tribal community becomes one of the surest bases on which to seek protection. Malian governmental elites have used this opportunity to exploit community divisions in order to weaken northern political movements like the CMA. In this way, broader socio-political cleavages operating at the national level in Mali (for example, the government versus northern rebels) come to be taken up in violent action amongst rival local communities in the peripheries of the country, some of which stem from inter-personal animosity (see Kalyvas 2003).

Malian elites in Bamako have become expert at their practices of co-optation of influential individuals in the country’s hinterlands who in many ways act on their behalf (or at least seem to act according to similarly aligned interests). By coopting northern authorities, the Malian government has effectively exploited community and personal rivalries that then become grafted on to national concerns and interests tied to the conflict and its governance. Their practices of co-optation have weakened government challengers in the short term, but this only exacerbates longstanding tensions at the community level, thereby augmenting risks for violence and insecurity that were a major contributor to the outbreak of the crisis in the first place.

### *Cooptation, Clientelism, and Armed Movement Fragmentation*

Similar to the mode of governance that dominated the period of democratic rule in Mali from 1992-2012, the current post-transition/post-Accord 2015 period is demonstrably marked by a deep clientelistic politics.<sup>24</sup> Access to the state resources and government positions are given to former rebels in return for political quietism; this has become a key mechanism in matters of post-conflict governance (see Sears 2017). Clientelistic politics, however, have a direct impact on the practices of armed movements in the country - not only for Accord signatories, but also those groups that have been created since June 2015 – and their willingness to engage in violent coercion. This form of governance has contributed to the breakdown of trust amongst armed movement coalitions, which has pushed towards their fragmentation and recomposition roughly along lines of tribal solidarity. Opining on how the conflict has fractured any semblance of Tuareg unity, one interlocutor explains

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<sup>24</sup> Whitehouse (2017, 18) succinctly sums up former ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré’s pattern of rule: “party leaders, potential rivals, and representatives of Malian civil society were allowed access to public resources in return for their support, or at least their unwillingness to criticize the president and his regime openly”.

that the conflict is now more than ever marked by an ethos of “to each armed movement its ‘*Amenokal*’”<sup>25</sup> (Interview, President of a Malian Tuareg Women’s Association, Bamako, 24 January 2017).

Drawing on colonial precedent, members of the Malian political class stationed in Bamako have a long history of co-opting elites from northern regions that can be reasonably trusted to influence their communities on Bamako’s behalf, often by providing them rents through parastatal agencies and institutions, local NGO fronts, or direct cash payments (see Van de Walle 2012: 15; ICG 2015a: 8 n. 46).<sup>26</sup> While poverty in Mali is endemic, its characteristics in the north of the country have meant that there have been fewer relevant patronage resources in the form of government positions, which augments the authority and notoriety of selected clients. Periphery elites are often representatives of numerically, politically, and militarily important communities in the north, who act as intermediaries linking Bamako to distant borderlands (currently where the signatory anti-government armed groups and trafficking networks operate and seek to control). Historically, previous Malian governments have allowed their northern clients to undertake illicit economic activities in return for their ability to either manage local conflict or to inform the Government on insecurity dynamics.<sup>27</sup> This situation of ‘*donnant-donnant*’ has increased the political importance, economic resources, and social status of some northern actors, which they have been able to leverage into the acquisition of government positions, or more currently in the form of guarantees for positions in the developing post-conflict political order.

### *El Haji Ag Gamou and the GATIA*

A key node within these shifting patronage networks, centering on General El Haji Ag Gamou and his close associates,<sup>28</sup> has become especially important to President Keita’s government. While technically a General in the Malian Armed Forces, as the head of the community of Imghad Tuareg tribe, by all accounts, Gamou acts as the de facto leader of the Pro-government militia, the *Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et alliés* (GATIA).<sup>29</sup>

Being the most populous Tuareg tribe, the Imghad have seen significant advances in their community’s social advancement since 1996 when intra-Tuareg fighting ended and decentralization efforts increased across the Malian territory. Gamou commands the Standing Battalion of Gao, one

<sup>25</sup> The *Amenokal* is the traditional chief of a Tuareg confederation of tribes.

<sup>26</sup> Clientelist management of south-north relations deepened and expanded throughout the 1990s rebellion and mushrooming mushroomed in earnest following the 1996-97 period that marked the end of its several iterations (see Boilley 1999; Seely 2001; Bøås and Torheim 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Iyad Ag Ghaly was arguably the most famous elite intermediary in the north, as he was central to ending the 1990s Tuareg rebellion (that he and others had started), and became the main interlocutor of armed Islamist groups like the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC)/AQIM in several rounds of kidnapping for ransom hostage negotiations since 2003.

<sup>28</sup> For example former governor of the Kidal region and current Malian Ambassador to Niger, Alhamdou Ag Ilyene, or recently nominated Governor of Kidal and Colonel in the Malian Customs Agency, Sidy Mohamed Ag Ichrah.

<sup>29</sup> GATIA’s primary political objective is to ensure the political advancement of the Imghad community, who they argue have historically been dominated by the Ifoghas Tuareg nobility. A more detailed bio of Gamou, the activities of the militia, and their links with other Platform armed movements will be provided in a subsequent report.

of Mali's two elite military combat units. Its auxiliary force, 'Delta Force' is composed entirely of Imghad fighters, which obscures the separation between the Malian Armed Forces and the pro-government militia (see Lecocq 2013: 62). Since 2015, GATIA's ranks have swelled as more young Imghad men have been provided with automatic weapons, ostensibly by Gamou, with the objective of mobilizing his tribe to sideline his rivals in the CMA, especially its Ifoghas component.<sup>30</sup> His social status as Imghad 'chief,' his notoriety as a rebel commander in the 1990s, his distinguished military career since 1996, his numerical strength in arms, and his familial connections to one of Mali's most successful alleged drug traffickers, Chérif Ould Attaher ('Acharieff'), a fact that has undoubtedly increased Gamou's opportunities for economic advancement, means the General has become perhaps the key intermediary between President Keita's government and northern populations in the Gao, Ménaka, and Kidal regions.<sup>31</sup>

While by definition the relationships between the GATIA militia and the Malian government remains nebulous (and secret), like those of all government-militia relations, it is possible to note that Gamou and some of his close associates have been instrumental in weakening his personal rivals that are members of the CMA, which benefits government hardliners in Bamako. Gamou's activities in the newly-created region of Ménaka have been consequential in this regard. Since their victory over the CMA and takeover of the city of Ménaka in late April 2015 and subsequent relinquishing of the city the following June, GATIA leaders (and Gamou) have kept a close eye on the local politics of this strategically important borderland.<sup>32</sup> The Anéfis agreements, in which armed group signatory representatives and important business leaders of nomadic communities met to define their own *modus vivendi* regarding the mobility of people and goods<sup>33</sup> allowed GATIA members additional leeway to circulate and associate with local communities throughout the Ménaka and Kidal regions, without violating the Accord.<sup>34</sup> From January 2016, Gamou and his associates began exploiting community-based tensions within the CMA that happened to dovetail with his movement's primary concern: his view of the dominance of the Ifoghas over Malian Tuareg society, manifested in the control over CMA decision-making.

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<sup>30</sup> It must be stated that not all Imghads support Gamou, or the GATIA. The MNLA have a small but significant Imghad component, for example. Furthermore, by many accounts it seems that there are many Imghad civilians that remain in the city of Kidal under CMA administration and live peaceably with Ifoghas, Idran, and other Tuareg tribe neighbours - although several members of the community itself contest this point. It is impossible to independently verify or assess by means of a census or survey the tribal composition of Kidal for security and political reasons.

<sup>31</sup> Chérif Ould Attaher is an Arab from the Gao region (like Gamou), and is married to one of Gamou's daughters.

<sup>32</sup> The Ménaka region borders Niger. Control of this area is coveted as a highly lucrative terrain for drug trafficking that moves through northern Niger towards Libya. Allegedly, local populations in the town supported the arrival of the Platform militias, even demanding in public demonstrations that the GATIA remain to protect the population from a return of the CMA (see Jeune Afrique with AFP 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Most assume this to mean drug trafficking and the appeasement of northern communities generally.

<sup>34</sup> For an astute analysis of the Anéfis agreement, see ICG 2015b; Offner 2016.

### *The GATIA-MSA Alliances: Weakening the CMA*

The most recent and significant act of clientelism and co-optation by Malian state officials through Gamou's initiatives has been the political capture of the Daoussahak and Chamanamas communities by way of Ag Acharatoumane and Assalat ag Habi respectively, both MNLA founders and CMA members.<sup>35</sup> Daoussahak and Chamanamas fighters were well-represented in the MNLA. They were often tasked with combat and protection missions in the Kidal and Ménaka regions. These fighters, however, began to develop grievances with the CMA leadership, who they perceived to be dominated by Ifoghas notables (especially the Ag Intallah family), who they felt were unwilling to send Ifoghas fighters to support Daoussahak and Chamanamas contingents when fighting occurred in the Ménaka borderlands, or to involve them in CMA decision-making (Phone Interview, former *Mouvement Nigérien pour la Justice* (MNJ) Rebel close to MSA, 7 September 2016; Interview, Former *Front Populaire pour la Libération de l'Azawad*, Chamanamas Rebel, Ouagadougou, 20 May 2017). Many assume that Governor Daouda Maïga, appointed in January 2016, began efforts to create a sense of community rapprochement between Imghad GATIA supporters and Daoussahak fighters within the MNLA in order to draw individuals like Ag Acharatoumane and Ag Habi closer to Gamou, one of Maïga's close friends (Interview, Malian Journalist, Bamako, 23 January 2017). Following the Anéfis agreement, GATIA fighters began conducting security missions to track down cattle thieves operating between Ménaka and Kidal, enamouring Daoussahak communities who had some of their community's stolen livestock returned. These actions purportedly angered Ifoghas leaders of the CMA, who regularly chastised Daoussahak fighters in Kidal for their cooperation with Gamou's men (Phone Interview, former MNJ Rebel close to MSA, 7 September 2016).<sup>36</sup> Thus, as inter-communal tensions became accentuated within the CMA,<sup>37</sup> its prominent members (predominantly of its MNLA wing) from Gao and Ménaka regions grew closer to Gamou's vision of the Ifoghas, culminating in Daoussahak and Chamanamas meetings being held in Tin-Fadimata (northern Ménaka) in August 2016 to create a new armed movement on 2 September, the MSA (Carayol 2016b).<sup>38</sup>

The MSA dissension from the CMA certainly weakened the position of the Ifoghas members of the HCUA, led by Gamou's rival, Alghabass Ag Intallah, which played into Gamou's hands and by extension the Malian government. Emboldened by their position and new alliance, GATIA

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, when GATIA took over Ménaka in May 2015, Ag Acharatoumane stated that the militia was definitively "housed, supported, financed and trained by the Malian army", and thus an enemy of Tuareg communities in Ménaka (Morgan 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Daoussahak communities find an important sense of honour and pride in the protection of their herds, and often provide such protection for other Tuareg tribes.

<sup>37</sup> Ag Acharatoumane stated "en dépit des accords d'Anéfis, les problèmes intercommunautaires se sont accentués. Nous avons assisté à une recrudescence de l'insécurité et à la résurgence de conflits fratricides, or la CMA est incapable d'y mettre un terme" (Carayol 2016b).

<sup>38</sup> This is not to minimize members of the Daoussahak and Chamanamas communities' rent seeking opportunities by seeking a rapprochement with Bamako through Gamou in order to secure more favourable terms in the eventual post-conflict governance order. For example, Ag Acharatoumane was given the position of Head of the Ménaka Regional Office for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration. Being in this position will only consolidate his patronage network since he will be in a position to choose which former combatants acquire positions in the Malian Security and Defence Forces, not to mention access to cash from government coffers. Ag Acharatoumane has also been provided with a villa in Bamako in order to facilitate his work, although most of this author's interlocutors argue that it is a gift in return for his support in solidifying Daoussahak acquiescence.

fighters extended their attacks outside of the city of Kidal throughout September and October 2016. The MSA and the Platform reached formal agreements on 17 September about conducting joint security operations in Gao and Ménaka, including the MSA's arrival in Gao for the run up to the implementation of the MOC and the establishment of joint patrols (an important stepping stone in the implementation of the Accord). When CMA fighters from Kidal attempted to enter Gao, their advances were immediately blocked by MSA, the *Coalition du Peuple pour l'Azawad* (CPA), and CMFPR-II fighters, all demanding their formal inclusion in the MOC implementation process (Kibaru 2016). Through the actions of Governor Maïga who provides the formal link between the MSA and the Malian government, GATIA, MSA, and Malian Armed Forces have conducted their own impromptu joint patrols throughout Ménaka to much local fanfare in November 2016, and occurring periodically since then (Interview, Senior Malian Government Official for Ménaka, Bamako, 6 February 2017). This has only furthered resentment within the CMA towards the Daoussahak and the Chamanamas that are swayed by the GATIA, as evidenced by senior MNLA officers brushing aside past contributions made by its former Daoussahak and Chamanamas adherents (see Coulibaly 2016).

### *Tribalization and Inter-Community Violence*

While we see a shift in armed movement and community alliances via the GATIA-MSA agreements for Gao and Ménaka, this does not mean that violence has been quelled in these regions. Agreements made between the Imghad, Chamanamas, and Daoussahak tribes, or with other communities in the north will not necessarily result in durable alliances that could quell violent action in these borderlands. In fact, these strategies of co-option are intimately connected to acts of violence in local level conflicts, which then become enveloped into wider social and political cleavages long in the making between community groups. For example, while there are few details regarding the murder of GATIA military commander for Ménaka, Alhamdi Ag Lengach in March 2017, informed sources insist that the murder stems from GATIA's actions in support of Imghad and Daoussahak populations in the region that have frustrated other nomadic communities, notably Arab communities in Tidarmène who support the CMA and reportedly had vehicles and other goods stolen from them by GATIA fighters (see Ag Ismaïel 2017; Personal Communication with Arab Journalist from Northern Mali, 29 June 2017). GATIA fighters subsequently executed three Arab suspects of the murder, which has polarised tensions between Ménaka's Arab and Tuareg communities. What these acts of violence and strategies of cooption demonstrate is that the conflict's alliances are inherently fluid, conducted out of convenience, and shaped by contests over authority at the local/micro-level, which only increases a fragmentation amongst northern communities and fuels additional inter-communal violence (see Bencherif and Campana 2017).

The result of such alliance fluidity is the development of a pattern wherein communities seek redress for violence enacted on them from armed movements who share the same enemies; the creation of one's own armed group; or favourable views toward armed Islamist groups who appear to be some of the only actors in Mali that can provide some semblance of order amidst such persistent insecurity. In Mali, any combination of these three responses is likely. Indeed, the recent tit-for-tat violence between the Idnan and Imghad tribes, where individual Idnans close to the MNLA have been summarily executed by GATIA fighters in mid-June 2017, are similarly inscribed in this logic of using violence to foment inter-communal animosity in the hopes that new community-based armed movements will be created. GATIA's actions can be seen as attempts to



further weaken the Ifoghas in Kidal by seeking to fragment the CMA, and to pursue cooption of the Idnan in the region when the Ifoghas do not respond in their support (Phone Interview, Tuareg Journalist from Gao, 15 June 2017).

Finally, we see the connected dynamics of co-option, the instrumentalization of tribal affinities, and inter-communal violence in efforts by armed groups to counter the perceived threat of terrorism. General Gamou, Ag Acharatoumane, Ag Ilyene, and contested *Amenokal* of the Kel Ansar Tuareg confederation, Abdoul Magid Ag Mohamed Ahmed dit ‘Nasser’, recently participated in high-level security meetings with French military and intelligence officials in Paris in mid-May 2017. Many in Ménaka assume that the visit’s purpose was to court Barkhane officials, to ask them to work more closely with their armed movements which are heavily concentrated in this strategic borderland (Crétois 2017). Following Abu-Walid al-Saharaoui’s threats on Ag Acharatoumane and Gamou and the attack on the MSA offices in early July 2017, GATIA and MSA fighters have conducted numerous raids on bandits and potential terrorists in the Ménaka region. Attacks near Taglalt-Anderamboukane and Infoukaretane, in which the MSA has claimed to have killed 30 men and recuperated weapons and ammunition, are some of the most recent.<sup>39</sup> However, the Fulani cultural association, Kisal, later claimed that the GATIA-MSA joint fighters killed 5 *Fulanis* in Infoukaretane who were not necessarily close to jihadist groups. It is important to note that while it is nearly impossible to pin down the details of violent events such as this with exactness, concerns such as generalized insecurity or the presence of armed Islamist groups can put immense pressure on inter and intra community dynamics, thereby fragmenting armed movements into recompositions along tribal lines of affinity, which only become temporarily connected by ad hoc arrangements between actors, as demonstrated by the GATIA-MSA alliance. This tribalized fragmentation also increases tensions between respective communities that competing armed actors assume form a basis of their rivals’ support. Such dynamics only reinforce the context of generalized insecurity due to the degradation of social trust between communities. Violent actions that target rival communities also assuredly stoke support for and adherence to armed Islamist groups who show a willingness to protect against shared enemies, as we are currently witnessing in Ménaka as Fulani seek out jihadist groups in the zone out of protection, or pure anger and a desire for vengeance (Phone Interview, Tuareg Police Official based in Ménaka, 21 July 2017).

## Conclusion

The on-going Malian conflict cannot be understood by any single factor, but must be examined synthetically and in all its complexity (see Gnanguênon and Tisseron 2017). This report has examined three inter-woven and mutually reinforcing dynamics: the development of a generalized insecurity marked by competition between multiple actors over the governance of violence in territory north of Ségou; the reconstitution of armed Islamist groups on Malian territory who act as para-sovereigns and conflict resolution brokers, and who enact violence on their challengers or on civilians who will not support their cause; and the growing tendency of tribalization of armed movements in the country, leading to inter and intra community violence. These mutually reinforcing factors are resulting in a severe degradation of social cohesion and trust

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<sup>39</sup> Infoukaretane was reportedly attacked on 28 June 2017, possibly by al-Saharaoui’s men.

amongst Malian communities, which only exacerbates each individual dynamic, thus amplifying the probability of continual armed violence in the country for the foreseeable future.

Several factors of this conflict are not yet well understood. Given the importance of tribal politics to northern communities, to what extent are contests over tribal status tied to alliance formation in the conflict?<sup>40</sup> As fluid as armed movement alliances happen to be in the conflict, the fluidity of individual fighters choice of affiliation, who migrate between groups (especially between some Accord signatories and connected armed Islamist groups) is perhaps even more prevalent. Many international organizations understand this migration in terms of violent radicalization. The radicalization lens, however, is wanting, as it implies that an individual moves uni-directionally from supporting a legitimate actor to an illegitimate one. In Malian case, this migration between groups is much more unstable, moving back and forth depending on the situation. The reasons for this fluidity require more attention and analysis. Finally, many argue that Accord signatories and armed Islamist groups form a drug-terror nexus in Mali, which is significantly shaping the conflict. A more nuanced understanding of the relations of power between individuals and groups involved in illicit economic practices in Malian borderlands, including their ties to licit northern economies, and the competition over political power as the conflict continues to develop is required. Examining the activities of individual members of both the CMA's and Platform's *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA) will be especially pertinent in this regard.

The breakdown of social cohesion poses several additional analytical and policy challenges. For example, if communities are beginning to use armed Islamist groups as security providers and conflict resolution brokers, it is in part because they either find the Malian state illegitimate or they are not in a social or economic position to not side with jihadist elements since the alternative option is suffering predation from a host of bandits and violent entrepreneurs. As demonstrated above, if agents of the Malian Armed Forces tend to pick sides in inter-ethnic tensions, enacting violence against groups in support of ethnic brethren instead of acting according to its republican ideals, the wedge between the central state and ostracized communities will deepen, as the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and all of its previous iterations have taught us. Indeed, this may not even be a 'northern' phenomenon, since "one can observe a disconnection of the dominant views of the mainstream population...[in and around Bamako]... from the daily realities of minority, rural, and otherwise marginal communities" which have increasingly supported armed Islamist groups' governance efforts (Sears 2013: 446, my emphasis). How can the Malian central state increase its legitimacy in areas north of the capital given its severely tarnished reputation of endemic corruption, clientelism and nepotism, human rights abuses, and the general perception of its lack of concern? Without strategies to increase their legitimacy, state institutions will continue to lose support of its populations to para-sovereigns (of various ilk) who envision a competing basis of political authority for the Sahel.

An uptake in clientelistic politics, the strategy chosen by the Keita Administration, may support short term gains in the form of splintering its northern opponents but it does not strengthen a sense of legitimacy in the idea of a diverse but united and reconciled Mali as stipulated in the Accord. If anything, the GATIA-MSA alliance and extraverted willingness to tackle security issues is leading to an increase in violence against Fulani and Arab communities in Ménaka who

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<sup>40</sup> A subsequent report will examine this question with regard to the development of the CJA, which many Tuareg from Timbuktu argue is more about asserting dominance over the Kel Ansar confederation than support for the Malian cause or a return of peace in the north.

challenge this local hegemony, and thus an atomization of the region's peoples. Instead of pursuing a long-term vision by drawing in populations to feel part of the national community, Bamako's clientelist politics only accentuate community divisions. Given the slipperiness of the conflict's many fluid identities and alliances, Bamako's support of some elites over others could serve to unite common enemies against its allies. Northern populations increasingly understand the conflict through the lens of tribal animosities, with Bamako's coordinating hand behind selected groups' actions regardless of the extent to which such claims are empirically true. As this trend continues to consolidate, the country will remain divided, mired in violence, and further from the ultimate goal of peace and reconciliation.

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# About the Centre FrancoPaix

Following the 15th Francophonie Summit and the Resolution on crisis situations, crisis resolution and peacebuilding in the French-speaking world, the Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic and Diplomatic Studies set up the Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix (in conflict resolution and peace missions) in order to support the strategic objectives of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) in conflict prevention and management.

Inaugurated in January 2016 with the financial support of the OIF, the mission of the Centre FrancoPaix includes:

- The promotion of scientific research and university training in French in the field of peace and conflict studies, in particular conflict resolution, conflict management and peace missions;
- The promotion of scientific research and university training about conflict resolution and conflict management in French-speaking countries, particularly in Africa;
- The production and diffusion of scientific research that focuses on conflict resolution and peace operations, particularly through knowledge production activities with policymakers and practitioners in the field;
- Enabling intellectual exchanges and the flow of knowledge by promoting mobility, innovation and collaboration between institutions, university researchers and students from the “Global North” and the “Global South”.

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