



# Jihadism in Mali and the Sahel: Evolving dynamics and patterns

by Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari

The Sahel is a crisis polygon. Following the French intervention in Mali in 2013, this vast and sparsely inhabited region has seen the gradual resurgence and the realignment of jihadist armed groups that have extended their operational range further south – across northwest African borders, where they interfere in and interact with already existing conflicts – and increased the challenges for regional stability.

The Algeria-sponsored *Accord pour la Paix et la Reconciliation au Mali* failed to bring about a sustainable solution to the violent conflict that flared up in 2012 between rebel armed groups (now clustered in the *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* – CMA) and Bamako's government and the pro-Bamako groups (now under the so-called 'Plateforme'). In a region where few job opportunities exist beyond extra-legal economies and smuggling of all sorts, the drive to capture the dividends of peace has often prevailed over good faith, significantly slowing down the implementation of key provisions of the Accord. While the peace process formally stumbled ahead, armed attacks gradually intensified in the north, and expanded to Mali's central regions, too. In February 2017, a devastating suicide attack in the city of Gao killed some 80 fighters from opposing armed groups as they were preparing to

deploy joint security patrols. While the two-year 'Interim Period' for the implementation of the Accord is almost over, progress remains slow and difficult.

Armed groups involved in the peace process keep fragmenting along ethnic/tribal lines that are dominated by local appetites and agendas. New self-defence groups spring up every month to exert leverage and extract benefits from the most delicate phases of the implementation process, while others rise as proxies that allow remote government by Bamako.

Growing levels of insecurity and banditry, partly triggered also by Bamako's playing realignment and repositioning games among local groups, are ultimately beneficial to jihadists. By sitting on the fence, jihadists can appear as an effective alternative source of assistance, protection and dispute resolution – both political and economic – to disempowered segments of the population.

## Sahelian central Mali

While international attention was focused on the rebellious north of Mali and large-scale attacks in the broader region, Mali's central regions of Mopti and Ségou experienced increasingly high

levels of insecurity. A long sequence of intimidations and targeted killings exposed how local, regional and global dynamics overlap, resulting in the reproduction, propagation and expansion of jihadism. At local level, inter- and intra-ethnic cleavages for access to natural resources (most notably pasturelands) have exacerbated latent conflictual relationships between Tuareg and Fulani pastoralists – and, among them, between the social groups descending from the Macina Empire, i.e. the landowning elites and the vast majority of outcasts and former slaves.

At national level, Bamako's sponsorship of patronage networks has historically relied heavily on local elites for the control of outer regions. When, in 2012, Fulani elites failed to protect local populations from what was seen as a Tuareg invasion, marginalised groups revolted: several among them sought protection by joining the ranks of the *Mouvement pour l'Unité du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO). In 2013, when the formal authority of the state was re-established in central Mali, Fulani elites seized the opportunity to reinstate their social pre-eminence by stigmatising potential outbreaks of rebellion as promoted by individuals aligned with a jihadist agenda. Malian armed forces thus easily conflated local struggles for access to pasturelands with terrorism. In cases that have been documented, their abuse of marginalised Fulani pastoralists could rely on the tacit approval of local and national elites. These patterns exacerbated tensions, pushing Fulani shepherds to form self-defence militias. As a result, the year 2015 saw a discernible pattern of assassinations targeting Fulani elites, *chefs de village*, and all those who were seen as cooperating with the state in defence of the *status quo*: army and police stations, forest guards, schools and traditionalist imams all came under fire.

Jihadist organisations were quick to exploit these cleavages and grievances, and managed to co-opt local demands for protection, redistribution and moral integrity by framing the revolt against corrupt neopatrimonial regimes backed by the West as part of the struggle for the global jihad. Instrumental to this end, the Fulani jihadist preacher Amadou Koufa exploited an ethno-nationalist rhetoric echoing the mythical jihadist

heritage of the Macina Empire, and managed to coagulate several Fulani self-defence militias within the *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM). As time went by, however, the FLM forged closer links with the former Tuareg rebel Iyad Ag Ghali, today Mali's jihadist *éminence grise*.

## Saharan north and western Mali

The desert expanses of north-western Mali have been home to a plethora of different armed groups, including jihadists, nationalists and criminals (and mixed versions thereof), most of them rooted in local Tuareg and Arab ethnic networks. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) is certainly the group which attracted greater international attention, while forging ties to local actors – both state and non-state – which ensured its longstanding resilience. AQMI was founded in 2007 from the ashes of the jihadist formations which fought the Algerian civil war.

Since then, however, the internal coherence of AQMI was undermined by leadership struggles. In particular, the anarchic attitude of one of its most prominent chiefs, the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, led to conspicuous fractures and realignments of splinter groups, whose alleged involvement in the trafficking of *haram* (forbidden) goods was regarded with suspicion by the

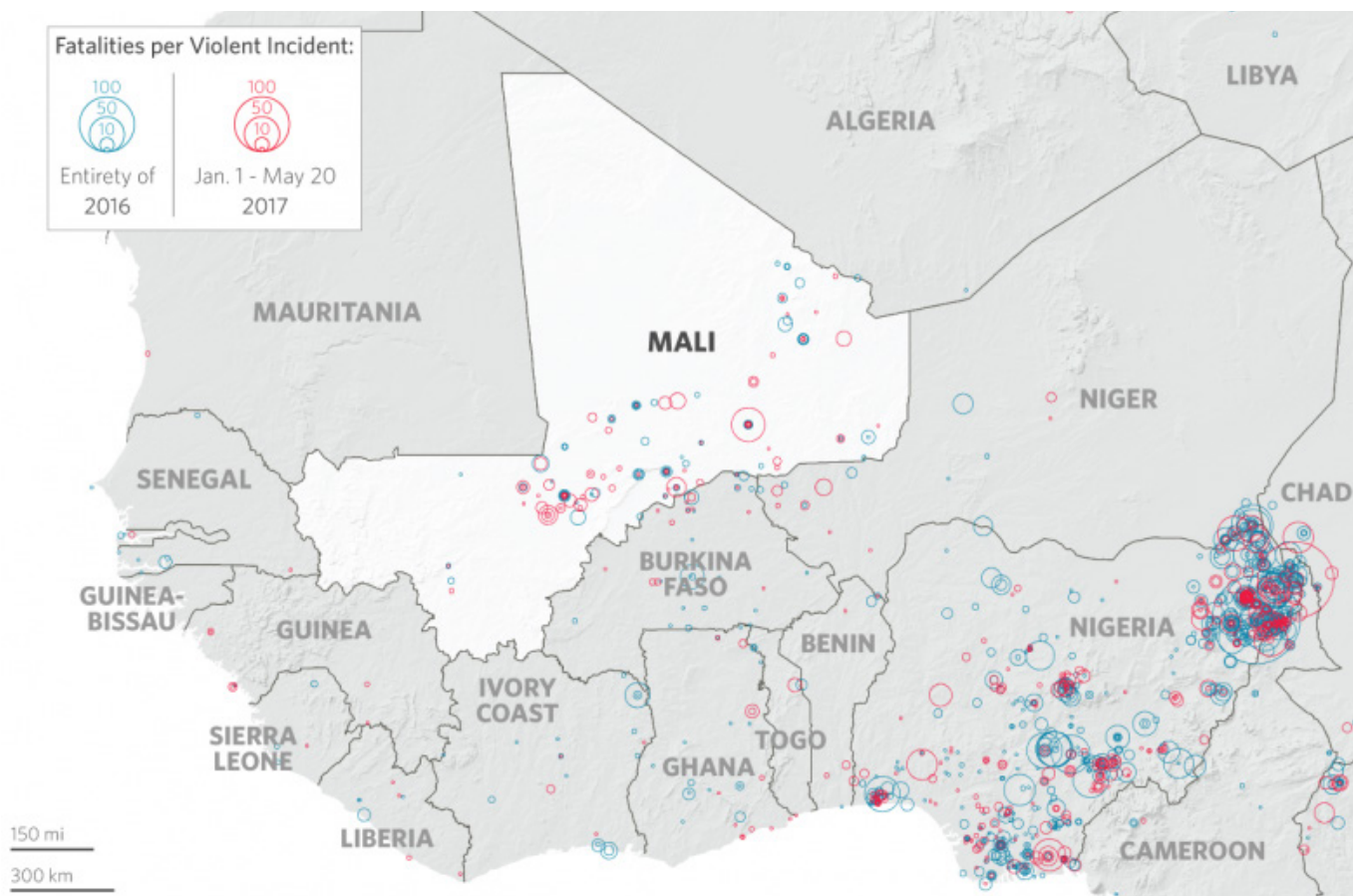
‘Jihadist organisations [...] managed to co-opt local demands for protection, redistribution and moral integrity by framing the revolt against corrupt neopatrimonial regimes backed by the West as part of the struggle for the global jihad.’

supreme commanders based in Algeria. In spite of his doctrinal misalignment, Belmokhtar's involvement in lucrative illicit trafficking ensured that his *katibats* (fighting units) had the resources to carry out spectacular attacks against soft targets scattered across the region, thereby propagating insecurity

regionally. By targeting places where Westerners and African ruling elites gather, Belmokhtar claimed responsibility for the attacks against In-Amenas (Algeria, January 2013), Arlit and Agadez (Niger, May 2013), Bamako (March and November 2015), Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso, January 2016) and Grand Bassam (Ivory Coast, March 2016).

However, on 2 March, Iyad ag-Ghali appeared in a video along with prominent clerics and fighters, announcing the coming together of the main jihadist groups involved in Mali's conflict under the umbrella of a new armed coalition, named

## Sahel insecurity



Source: Stratfor 2017, data from ACLED

Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM) and acting under the banner of al-Qaeda.

Such a development shows an explicit convergence formula that somehow echoes the strategy adopted by Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. The video proclaiming the birth of JNIM features the presence of the most prominent jihadist leaders in the region. However, the absence of Mokhtar Belmokhtar himself has nurtured speculation about his death in an airstrike conducted by France in south Libya in November 2016. Belmokhtar's inability to command might provide a rationale for the regrouping of jihadist forces in the region at a time when the dispersion of Daesh combatants from Libya has the potential to generate competition and exacerbate frictions.

### Eastern borderlands

In 2012-2013, the eastern borderlands of Mali were home to the MUJAO, one of the most lethal jihadist groups, with a consolidated record of cross-border criminal activities. Yet, since 2013 the en masse deployment of international

forces in Gao, the flight of Mokhtar Belmokhtar and, since 2014, the regime change in Burkina Faso have resulted in the fragmentation of local jihadist groups, who now look for alternative alliances. Today, remnants of the MUJAO can be found in the three-state border region dividing central-eastern Mali from Burkina Faso and Niger. These include most notably the groups led by Abou Walid al-Saharawi and by the Burkinabé preacher Ibrahim (Bourahima) 'Maalam' Dicko.

Abou Walid Al-Saharawi's group splintered from Belmokhtar's and since then has been gravitating around the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso, carrying out mainly small-scale acts of banditry. Aiming to step up his jihadist profile, Al-Saharawi pledged obedience to the 'Caliph' Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in May 2015. In 2016, his group claimed responsibility for attacks against check-points in north Burkina Faso and prisons in eastern Niger, which eventually led to the acknowledgement of his *bayat* (oath of allegiance) by Daesh in late 2016. Given these premises, al-Saharawi seeks operational support from the main Daesh-affiliated actor in the broader West African region – namely Boko Haram and





the survivors of Daesh offshoots from Libya, although their actual links remain poorly substantiated.

A Fulani native from the north of Burkina Faso and a former MUJAO combatant, 'Maalam' (transliteration for 'teacher' in Arab) Dicko is the leader of Ansarul Islam, a group preaching a radical version of Islam, which eventually turned into an armed movement under the influence of Amadou Koufa. Shifting away from political quietism in 2016, Ansarul now throws lavish weddings, operates public schools and employs traditional imams. In December 2016, some 30-40 members of Ansarul attacked a Burkinabé military position in Nassoumbou, 45km from Djibo, leaving 12 servicemen dead.

Sharing a similar background in the MUJAO, both Al-Saharawi and Maalam Dicko have condemned the aligning of jihadist groups inside Mali under the al-Qaeda umbrella. In the case of Maalam, however, this can be arguably attributed to his refusal to subordinate the Fulani struggle under the leadership of a Tuareg such as Ag-Ghali. It remains to be seen whether this will incline Ansarul towards an affiliation to Daesh, which could possibly resonate more with ethno-nationalist Fulani rhetoric. Recently, Malian and Burkinabé armies – as well as French special forces – have undertaken major military actions aiming to eradicate armed jihadists from the porous borderlands across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which reportedly resulted in the deaths of about 20 suspected terrorists, with many more arrested and military materiel seized.

## Understanding complex dynamics

The peace process in Mali has been deteriorating into a situation of sustained instability and protracted conflict in which Mali's EU-trained military pays a weekly toll to jihadist attacks, while both MINUSMA and *Operation Barkhane* have come under fire dozens of times.

While some jihadist formations have acquired a distinctive transnational character and now extend their operational radius across different borders, the local dimension of long-term radicalisation and present-time recruitment remains under-explored. Behind the volatility that characterises the kaleidoscope of armed group acronyms, their constant splintering and re-aligning, there is undoubtedly an opportunistic strategic calculation that historically marks indirect and distinctly asymmetric forms of warfare. More deeply, however, one can also find resilient social structures

that interact with rapidly changing challenges and opportunities.

In particular, an important driver of jihadism in this context has to do with its appeal as a compensatory path to social emancipation. Jihadist movements tend to present themselves as equal employers that beat the drum for Islam as true to indigenous aspirations and reject external templates stemming from colonial domination. By doing so, they drive a wedge in latent forms of ethnic/social stratification, provide a bulwark of protection against the abuses that accompany Mali's neo-patrimonial governance, and offer simplified and 'effective' dispute resolution practices which echo local calls to swift action and end of impunity. Needless to say, these dynamics are more likely to take root in regions where the action of the state as a provider of public goods is less present and more problematic, and where the state's monopoly of force is more vulnerable – such as in neglected regions and in borderlands.

Widespread insecurity provides fertile ground for the development of alternative projects challenging state authority, including those pitting the intransigence of divine law against the failures of secular institutions. In the meantime, while jihadist formations grow stronger and show significant convergences, the divisions among other armed actors – who often trade their cooperation and co-optation with dividends and impunity – undermine the ability of the international community to promote positive change.

The relaunch of France's political engagement in the region – as epitomised by newly elected President Macron's first visit to Bamako last month – offers an opportunity to provide new impetus to the peace process, especially in view of the renewal of the mandate of Mali's UN peacekeeping mission. However, the idle repetition of predictable formulas (enhanced military support, showers of external assistance and more regional cooperation) has little prospect of success unless national and international stakeholders accept to bear the cost of addressing key structural aspects of bad local governance, social segregation, corruption and impunity that the jihadists are able to exploit for strategic purposes.

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