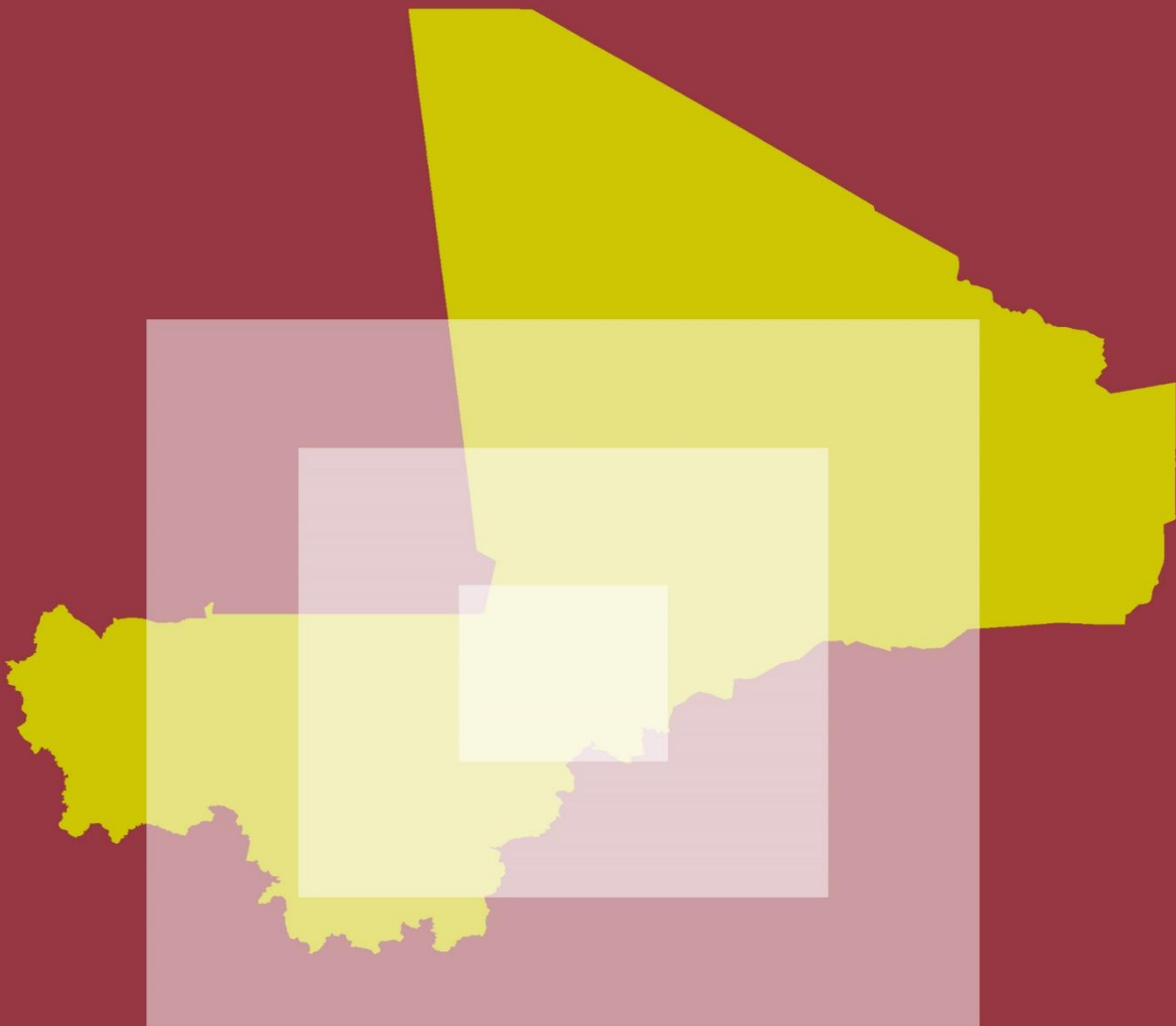# LOCAL DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL MALI

UNDP Policy Brief

Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali

Natasja Rupesinghe & Morten Bøås

This policy brief examines the processes of violent extremist mobilisation and radicalisation in Mopti, Central Mali. Specifically, it looks at the strategies employed by one of the most salient radical jihadist groups in the region, the Katiba Macina. It seeks to answer the following questions:

1) Given that violent extremist mobilisation has not taken root uniformly across regions in Mali, and because it is often endogenous to local dynamics, how has Mopti as a region become an enabling environment for jihadist actors like the Katiba Macina?
2) How do groups like the Katiba Macina mobilise local support and integrate themselves among communities?
3) Why do individuals join, adhere to or accept the Katiba Macina?

Introduction

The instability that erupted in Mali in 2012 led to interventions by France (through *Opération Serval* and now *Barkhane*), the African Union (AFISMA), the United Nations (MINUSMA) and prompted the deployment of an EU police and military training mission. Despite the efforts of these international interventions, and the signing of a Peace Agreement in 2015, security in the country is deteriorating, and has spread to the centre of the country.

Central Mali is currently gripped by escalating insecurity,[1] due to an increase in inter-communal conflicts, the proliferation of self-defense groups and non-state actors including violent extremist 'jihadist' groups and bandits. The absence and further retreat of the state coupled with the neglect of central Mali by international actors has opened this region to local, violent non-state actors who have become increasingly integrated and entrenched in local communities. Consequently, 2017 has been the most violent year since the French intervention in 2013,[2] and violence has escalated further in 2018.[3]

One of these radical Islamist groups that is now actively operating in central Mali, in the regions of Mopti and parts of Ségou, is the 'Katiba Macina',[4] led by Hamadoun Kouffa,[5] a well-known, respected Islamic Fulani preacher from Niafunké, in Mopti. While conflicts in the region are nothing new, these are being instrumentalised and exploited by Kouffa's group and other Islamist factions to mobilise local communities. The frequency and intensity of inter-communal violence, has increased, spurring cycles of violent reprisals. Inter-communal cleavages have become

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[1] There is some disagreement on the official delineation of Central Mali, which officially constitutes the regions of Ségou, Koulikoro and Mopti. Some analysts would classify Mopti as northern Mali. The study mainly focuses on Mopti, because this is the region that has been most affected by violence since 2015.
[2] ACLED, 'Conflict Trends (No.59) Real-Time Analysis of African Political Violence,' *ACLED,* June 2017. Available at: https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ACLED_Conflict-Trends-Report_No.59-June-2017_pdf.pdf and ACLED, 'Conflict Trends (No. 60) Real-Time Analysis of African Political Violence'. *ACLED*, July 2017. Available at: https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ACLED_Conflict-Trends-Report_No.60-July-2017_pdf.pdf
[3] ACLED, *ACLED 2018: The Year in Review*. Madison: ACLED, 11 January 2019. Available at: https://www.acleddata.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ACLED-2018-The-Year-in-Review_Final_Pub-1-1.pdf
[4] 'Katiba' is the French word used to describe a battalion or unit which emerged during the Algerian war but has since been used by especially Islamist insurgent groups in the Maghreb and Sahel.
[5] Kouffa was allegedly killed in a French counter-terrorism raid between 22-23 November 2018. However, he appeared in a video denying reports of his death 28 February 2019. See RFI 'Mali: le chef jihadiste Hamadoun Kouffa «probablement» tué par l'armée française,' *RFI*, 23 November 2018. Available at: http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20181123-mali-chef-jihadiste-hamadoun-kouffa-probablement-tue-armee-francaise; and France24, 'Exclusive : Key Mali jihadist Amadou Koufa resurfaces to deny reports of his death,' France 24, 28 February 2019. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/video/20190228-exclusive-key-mali-jihadist-amadou-koufa-resurfaces-deny-reports-death

hybridised with 'Islamist' violent extremism, adding a new layer to the already complex conflict dynamics in the Delta.

The further destabilisation of central Mali is particularly concerning for several reasons. First, central Mali is a melting pot of ethnic groups; it is the place where everybody meets. The region is ethnically diverse and home to a mixture of Fulani, Tuareg and Moor (mainly pastoralists) Bambara, Dogon, Songhai, Malinke (mainly sedentary farmers), and Bozo (mainly fishermen). The instrumentalisation of local conflicts, inter-communal and inter-ethnic cleavages by Islamist groups like the Katiba Macina ignite and exacerbate latent tensions between groups, fuelling and spreading violence, drawing in other communities. These dynamics are already spilling over to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger that have similar ethnic constellations in their border zones, and which have been affected by Islamist attacks. With a population size of 5.6 million in Mopti and Ségou, five times the size of the north, rising insecurity will have a significant humanitarian impact.[6]

Second, in comparison with the North, central Mali is a strategic zone with high economic stakes that are important for the national formal economy. The Delta is an important commercial hub and food basket, with three predominant production systems: pastoralist (livestock rearing), agriculture (cereals in the dry zone and rice in wet zones) and fisheries. These resources constitute a significant portion of Mali's export economy.[7] Increased conflict in the region thus has the potential to disrupt these livelihood systems, which would have severe consequences for an already receding economy.

This policy brief examines how violent extremist groups like the Katiba Macina have mobilised support and integrated themselves in communities which is critical to understand the escalating instability and insecurity in central Mali.[8]

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[6] Assessment Capacities Project. 'Violence Spreads and Intensifies in Central Mali and over the border to Niger and Burkina Faso,' *ACAPS*, 21 August 2017. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-outlook-july-december-2017-violence-spreads-and-intensifies-central-mali-and-over

[7] Traditionally the most productive agricultural area of Mali lies along the river banks of the River Niger, between Bamako and Mopti, and extends south to the borders with Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. Here, average rainfall varies between 500 mm per year in Mopti to 1,400 mm in the south around Sikasso. This is where most of Mali's cotton, rice, pearl millet, vegetables, tobacco and tree crops are produced. Likewise, traditionally the largest concentration of cattle is in the areas north of Bamako and Segou extending into the River Niger delta of the Central region. Cattle-raising is, however, turning southward due to the combined effects of droughts and increased cattle-raiding. This also implies that, with the conflict pushing south into the Central region, it could end up threatening Mali's main bread basket. That would have serious consequences for human security all over the country. The Malian crisis can therefore no longer be seen as a crisis of the North solely (see also Ba and Bøås 2017).

[8] It draws on thirty semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in Bamako and phone interviews with residents of Mopti in November and December 2017. Names of interviewees have been kept anonymous for security reasons.

Our findings support the view that violent extremist mobilisation and radicalisation in central Mali has not occurred in a vacuum, they are rather locally embedded in community and societal dynamics.[9] While the Katiba Macina, operates under the mantle of a global jihadist discourse, it ultimately thrives on appropriating local conflict, exploiting resource disputes, igniting inter-communal/inter-ethnic conflict and intra-communal tensions to garner support.[10] The global brand of jihad is therefore not the major vehicle for recruitment and local affiliation in the case of the Katiba Macina; nevertheless, its alignment with the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) (Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM)) affords the group with a global-religious identity and legitimacy, access to resources, allies and national and regional networks. It also makes them look more powerful and threatening than if they were an autonomous, and unknown 'katiba' with no linkages to the larger struggle and discourse of global jihad.

Like other insurgent groups in Africa, Kouffa's group maintains a tacit level of acceptance and collaboration from communities through a combination of coercive methods (targeted, selective violence), but also provides modest governance services that affords the group with some legitimacy.[11] These include protection, security, justice, and basic welfare to communities that have for a long time felt abandoned or preyed on by the state. The group also strives to solidify social bonds with communities through child recruitment and marriage, which contributes to their local traction.

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[9] Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn. *Africa's insurgents: Navigating an Evolving Landscape* (Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc, 2017).

[10] Morten Bøås. 'Crime, coping and resistance in the Mali-Sahel periphery'. *African Security*, Vol 8, No. 4, 299-319.

[11] See e.g. Ken Menkhaus. 'Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping'. *International Security,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (Winter 2006/07), 74–106.
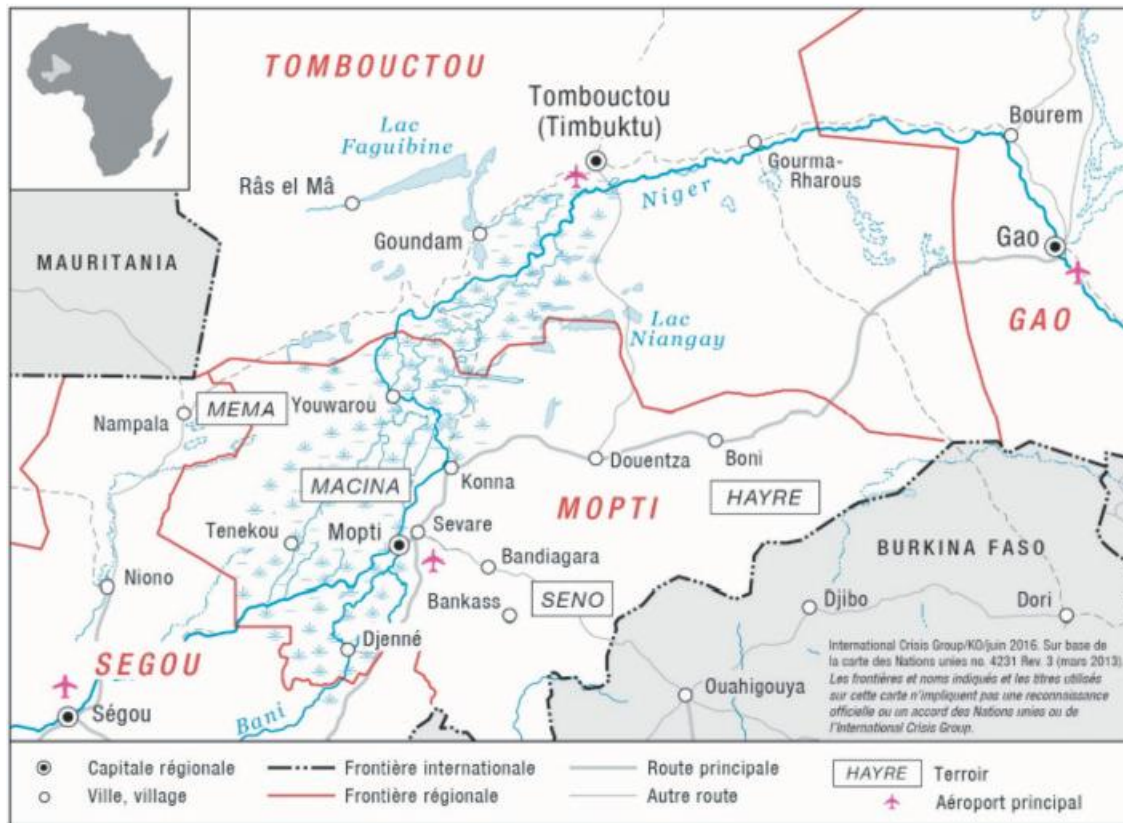
Source: ICG (2016)

The Katiba Macina

The study focuses on the "Katiba Macina", also known as the "Macina Liberation Front" or "Kouffa's Men", which has emerged as one of the most influential non-state, radical, "jihadist" armed actors in central Mali.[12] The region of Mopti in Central Mali is the focus of the brief, because this is where the group is most active, and is where instability has been most pronounced, though it is increasingly also active in Ségou and near the border of Burkina Faso. The Katiba Macina has steadily and progressively since the collapse of state authority in 2012 been augmenting its presence in the rural areas of Mopti and Ségou, as international forces have focused on stabilising the north. While discerning the composition, organisation and structure of the group is difficult, observers agree that it consists of 'hardcore' combatants who live in the bush, ideologues, informants, and auxiliaries. It has mainly drawn its recruits from the Fulani pastoralist nomadic

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[12] The group became known in national and international media as the "Macina Liberation Front", among those interviewed in Bamako the group is commonly referred to as the "Katiba Macina", while people living in communities in Mopti refer to them as "Kouffa's men" or "men of the bush." "Katiba" refers to "combat units" or "battalions," while the "Macina" refers to the 19th Century Macina Empire, stretching over the floodplain areas of the inner Niger Delta, in what are today the regions of Mopti and Ségou.

community, but has also recruited Talibés (children attending Quranic schools), disenfranchised groups, bandits and those interested in economic gain or settling old scores.[13] Evidence suggests that the group seeks to recruit males primarily; women are encouraged to stop working and to stay at home, or are recruited as informants.[14]

The group is led by Hamadoun Kouffa, a renowned Fulani preacher in the region who has been active in the region of Mopti for the past few decades, having developed a following at the Quranic schools he taught at. Kouffa developed links with Ansar Dine's Iyad Ag Ghali in the early 2000s through the 'Tabligh' (also known as the 'Dawa'),[15] which have now been solidified in the recent merger of the Islamist groups, under the stewardship of Al Qaeda in the JNIM. The Katiba Macina has promoted a much more local agenda than its global jihadist counterparts, arguably providing an inroad for groups like Ansar Dine and AQIM into central Mali. It claims that it is seeking to restore the Macina Empire or the Dina, which was the theocratic Fulani pastoralist empire (1818-1862) established through a jihad led by Shékou Amadou.

An emerging insurgency in Central Mali?

In many ways, Kouffa's group resembles both a 'Big Man network',[16] and a classical guerrilla insurgency.[17] With the multiplicity of actors that have proliferated in central Mali – from bandits, to 'jihadists', and self-defense groups, it is difficult to know who is whom. However, it appears as though Kouffa, the 'big man' of the region, is in command of a group which people know as 'the Katiba Macina', providing directives to a decentralised network of relatively autonomous 'katibas' who affiliate themselves with Kouffa's brand because this incites fear and affords them with more legitimacy.

On the other hand, the group has employed strategies used by more classical insurgencies. To survive, thrive and succeed, insurgencies need to win the collaboration of local people.[18] Mao Tse-tung spoke of guerrillas as fish swimming in the sea, implying that an insurgent cannot

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[13] See e.g. Adam Thiam. *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d'une crise négligée.* Bamako: Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire, March 2017, 37-39. Available at: https://www.hdcentre.org/fr/updates/nouvelle-publication-centre-du-mali-enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-negligee/. Interviews with stakeholders in the Bamako and Mopti reached the same conclusions, Bamako, November 2017.

[14] Evidence based research on the role of girls and women in the Katiba Macina, and on gender-specific recruitment strategies are lacking and require further research.

[15] The Pakistani Dawa al-Tabligh is a radical Islamist movement which originated in late 19th Century India that spread to northern Mali, especially Kidal, between 1997-98. The movement quickly attracted local Tuaregs including Iyad ag Ghali. See Stephen A. Harmon. *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013.* (Burlington, VT:Ashgate, 2014), 159-161.

[16] Morten Bøås, 'Castles in the sand: informal networks and power brokers in the northern Mali periphery' in *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks,* ed. Mats Utas (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012), 191-136.

[17] Bøås and Dunn, *Africa's insurgents*

[18] Stathis N. Kalyvas. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

survive without the population. The Katiba Macina depends on the local population to provide them with resources, including combatants, auxiliaries, and informants, but also reverses this dynamic by making civilians dependent on them through the provision of basic services and governance. Without means of establishing territorial control, Kouffa's katibas focus on achieving social control of the population using persuasion and coercion, as well as using pre-existing social networks (like ethnic affiliations).

The Katiba Macina have strategically installed themselves in the inundated flood zones of Mopti, establishing a strong presence in the 'cercles' of Ténenkou and Youwarou, as well as Douentza. They also have a strong presence in the border zones with Burkina Faso, including the 'cercles' of Koro and Bankass. In these areas, they have threatened non-collaborators, chased away state representatives, and tried to implement Sharia law. They have also sought to introduce alternative forms of governance which makes local people tolerate, accept or support them.

The level of integration and assimilation attained by this group is important to understand because Islamist violent extremist groups in Mali have not been successful in establishing presence in all regions. To understand how the Katiba Macina has established a foothold in Central Mali, it is necessary to consider the centre as an 'enabling environment'.[19]

Central Mali: an enabling environment for violent extremist mobilisation?

Once a commercial hub in the region, Mopti is undergoing an economic downturn. The droughts of 1973 and 1980s badly hit the regional economy and its livelihood systems, decimating one third of livestock in the region.[20] Climatic variability impacts on the productive yields on the region. Irregular rainfall and the low-flooding of the Niger river, reduces the area of cultivable land and agricultural production, making families vulnerable to protracted food insecurity.[21]

Pastoralists have become increasingly vulnerable after successive droughts and poor harvest, and drastic reductions in herd size.[22] The livestock sector has been hit due to reduced demand and plummeting livestock prices across West African markets. Recent estimates suggest only 33 per cent of livestock in Mopti are sold.[23]

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[19] Ansar Dine failed to establish itself in Southern Mali on the border of Côte d'Ivoire, because these areas have been integrated into the state. See International Crisis Group. *Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural*, International Crisis Group, 11 January 2017. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural

[20] See Lorenzo Cotula and Salmana Cissé. 'Changes in 'Customary' Resource Tenure Systems in the Inner Niger Delta, Mali', *Journal of Legal Pluralism*, no. 52 (2006): 1-30.

[21] OCHA. 'Mali: Failed rainy season forces some communities to the brink', *OCHA*, 5 February, 2014. Available at: http://www.unocha.org/country/top-stories/all-stories/mali-failed-rainy-season-forces-some-communities-brink

[22] IRIN News. 'Pastoralism – between resilience and survival' *IRIN News,* 3 August, 2012. Available at: http://www.irinnews.org/report/96019/mali-pastoralism-%E2%80%93-between-resilience-and-survival

[23] Thiam, 'Centre du Mali', 20.

Tourism, which represented 25 per cent of the regional economy was badly affected by insecurity in the North of Mali. This has resulted in rising unemployment rates, and prompted many young people to turn to banditry, particularly cattle-theft.[24]

Relative to the other south-central (Bamako, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Kayes, Ségou) regions of the country, Mopti suffers from acute levels of poverty, with over 70 percent of its population living in severe poverty and destitution.[25] Another striking feature that is revealing at the subnational level, are the low levels of literacy and education rates in central Mali. In Mopti, only 21 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women are literate, compared to 72 and 51 percent of Bamako.[26] Compared to other regions, Mopti and Ségou record the lowest net enrolment rates in primary/secondary schools.[27]

Taken in combination, these structural factors demonstrate that central Mali is a fertile, 'enabling' environment for violent extremist mobilisation. Economic downturn, rising unemployment and low education rates suggest that some disadvantaged communities could be susceptible to collaborate with or join Kouffa's men. These structural factors have translated into an array of deep-seated grievances at the local level, providing the Katiba Macina with emotive entry points to garner support. The group has tried to target those who are most vulnerable in society, offering them a means of escaping a situation of despair and directionlessness to the dead certainty of violent resistance.[28] By seeking to recruit in the poorest and least educated areas, they target destitute young men some of whom perceive that they do not have anything to lose by joining the movement as combatants, and are considered to be more malleable to religious indoctrination.

Violent extremist mobilisation and community integration in the Delta

Mobilisation along ethnic lines?

The Katiba Macina, at first recruited across predominantly ethno-religious lines, drawing members primarily from the Fulani pastoral nomad community. It is however important to nuance this

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[24] Ibid., 21

[25] According to the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, those identified as 'destitute' are deprived in at least one third of more extreme indicators of poverty (education, health, living standards). For example, two or more children in the household have died (rather than one), no one in the household has at least one year of schooling (rather than five years), the household practises open defacation, the household has no assets. See Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2017). 'Mali Country Briefing,' Multidimensional Poverty Index Data Bank. OPHI, University of Oxford. Available at: www.ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/mpi-country-briefings/.

[26] International Crisis Group, 'Forced out of towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists go Rural'

[27] EU Directorate-General for External Policies. 'Mali: Economic Factors Behind the Crisis,' *European Parliament*, 2014: 1-44, 20 and World Bank. 'Geography of Poverty in Mali', Report No. 88880-ML, April 23, 2015: 1-144, xix.

[28] See also Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn. *Politics of Origin in Africa: Autochthony, Citizenship and Conflict*. (London: Zed Books, 2013)

ethnic mobilisation narrative. The intersection of socio-economic status with ethnic groups also seems to have played a role in violent extremist mobilisation in central Mali. The majority of Fulani have not joined the group, and those from the religious or aristocratic lineage have been targeted by jihadist groups.[29]

The group appealed to the sentiments of marginalisation and stigmatisation of Fulani pastoralist nomads, which have seen their socio-economic status dwindle over decades, mainly due to state-led policies that have prioritised agriculture over pastoralism.[30] Nomadic communities are vulnerable to extortion by water and forestry agents and cattle-raiding from other communities. They have also been targeted by other communities who accuse them of encroaching on their agricultural land.[31]

However, it was the clampdown on Fulani pastoralist nomads following the re-installation of the state in central Mali following the French intervention in 2013 which triggered the increased radicalisation and mobilisation of this community towards the Katiba Macina. When the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) occupied parts of Mopti, some Fulani pastoralists joined MUJAO, fearful of a Tuareg hegemony in the region, and to protect themselves from cattle-raiding and theft.[32] When the security forces re-entered these areas, 'ethnic profiling' of Fulani herdsmen as 'jihadists' led to mass arrests, abuse and torture. Nearly all of those arrested were released due to a lack of evidence.[33] This resulted in some turning to Kouffa's group for protection and instigated the mobilisation of other politico-military armed groups and self-defense groups.[34] This event facilitated the development of the Katiba Macina, by generating frustration, resentment, and humiliation among Fulani pastoralist herdsmen, effectively catalysing their mobilisation towards the group.

The FAMA (Malian armed forces), continue to stigmatise Fulani herdsmen through arrests, disappearances and raids, which continues to fuel recruitment.[35] These processes have given rise

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[29] Aly Ousmane Diallo 'Ethnic Clashes, Jihad, and Insecurity in Central Mali.' *Peace Review,* 29:3 (2017): 299-306.

[30] See e.g. Tor. A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba. 'Farmer-Herder Conflicts, Pastoral Marginalisation and Corruption: A Case Study from theInland Niger Delta of Mali' *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 175, No. 1 (Mar., 2009), pp. 71-81

[31] Interviews with consultants and in Bamako, November 2017.

[32] Boukary Sangary. *Le Centre du Mali: épicentre du djihadisme? GRIP,* 20 May 2016. 1-12, 2.

[33] Human Rights Watch*. Mali: Abuses Spread South, Islamist Armed Groups' Atrocities, Army Responses Generate Fear.* Dakar: Human Rights Watch, February 19 2016. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/19/mali-abuses-spread-south

[34] These include for instance the National Alliance for the Protection of Fulani Identity and the Restoration of Justice (ANSIPRJ), the Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie du Delta Central, du Hayre et du Seno (MPD); and the Ganda Izo, the Dewral Pulaaku, and other self-defence groups.

[35] Interview with civil society, Bamako, November 2017. Also see Human Rights Watch. *Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations: Mali, Burkina Faso Troop Commit Killings, 'Disappearances,'Torture.*

to a reification of ethnic identities, which creates mutual suspicion and mistrust of the 'ethnic other', which has fueled further radicalisation processes and inter-communal violence.[36]

The activities of Islamist insurgents like the Katiba Macina has triggered the counter-mobilisation of ethnic self-defense militias among Dogon, Bambara and Fulani communities. Some of these groups claim to have taken up arms due to the state's inability to protect them against attacks on their villages.[37] Several concerns have been raised suggesting that some of these self-defense groups have been trained and equipped by the Malian state.[38] This has caused heightened and disproportionate targeting of Fulani, who are accused of hiding or being allied to the "jihadists" by self-defense groups and by FAMA counter-terror operations.[39] A vicious cycle of deadly inter-communal violence has ensued, underpinned by a logic of retaliation and revenge. Entire villages have been pillaged and burned, several large-scale massacres have occurred on all sides.[40] Human Rights Watch documented that in 2018 over 200 civilians were killed in communal violence in Mopti.[41]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the group is in the process of actively recruiting from other ethnic groups in a bid to expand its support base. To what degree they have succeeded is uncertain. According to some informants the group is now in a secondary stage of recruitment, where they are positioning themselves as a protector of all Muslims across ethnic groups, to expand their membership, and also to assuage some of the negative backlash that was generated when the group was perceived to only be protecting the Fulani.[42] The group appeals to the most marginalised in society, including those at the bottom of the ladder in the social hierarchy. However, as the group initially focused on recruiting from the Fulani community and were seen as a Fulani group (though it reportedly never publicly expressed that it solely represented the

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Nairobi: Human Rights Watch, September 8, 2017. Available at:
https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations
[36] See also Cédric Jourde. 'How Islam intersects ethnicity and social status in the Sahel' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (2017):1-19.
[37] Human Rights Watch. *We Used to Be Brothers: Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali*. New York: Human Rights Watch, December 7, 2018, 1. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/07/mali-dangerous-upsurge-abuse-ethnic-militias
[38] Ibid, 22-24.
[39] Human Rights Watch, *We Used to Be Brothers: Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali*
[40] Ibid, 32-33.
[41] In July 2018, MINUSMA documented 99 incidents, of which 289 civilians had been killed, the majority of which (about 77 percent) occurred in Mopti OHCHR, 'Press Briefing notes on Nicaragua, Mali and Kashmir,' Geneva: United Nations, 17 July, 2018.
https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23383&LangID=E. Human Rights Watch asserts that over 200 civilians have been killed in communal violence in central Mali in 2018.
[42] Interviews with researchers, academics and consultants, Bamako, November 2017.

interests of the Fulani), this means that expanding its support base will involve some difficult internal navigation and negotiation within the group.[43]

The role of religion

The role of 'religion', and the appeal of 'jihad', has been an important vector but not a critical factor explaining strategies for violent extremist mobilisation in the Macina, in line with other studies.[44] The egalitarian aspects of religion has appealed to many particularly as this is has been juxtaposed with the corrupt, unjust Malian state.[45] The group has reportedly pressured and coerced many *marabouts* in order to get access to their Talibés, but cases of Talibés joining Kouffa's group is again more due to the socio-economic vulnerability of these children, than a religious appeal.

Some observers believe that the power of Kouffa's preachings, are becoming increasingly important for the persuasion and indoctrination of young people. On a weekly basis, Kouffa's preachings are distributed on memory cards or via Bluetooth, spreading instantly among communities.[46] While initially focussing on recruiting among the Fulani herdsman community, the group has reportedly shifted tactics, presenting itself as a protector of all Muslims, to garner support from other ethnic groups. This is arguably a natural evolution for Islamist insurgent groups, but it is probable that we will see the limits of the initial strategy of achieving local integration by taking sides in local rights-based conflicts. It remains to be seen if the Katiba Macina will find a way of solving the logical inconsistencies of such a double strategy that other similar groups as AQIM and Ansar Dine has struggled to find.

Exploiting intra-communal tensions: a liberator of the oppressed

Another strategy employed by the Katiba Macina, is to exploit intra-group tensions, presenting themselves as the 'liberator' of the lower classes and the 'cadets sociaux' (youths or social minors). Intra-group social hierarchies are particularly pronounced in some localities in the Delta, and are particularly rigid in Fulani society. The 'egalitarian' discourse espoused by the group has afforded it with popularity.[47]

Many attested to the group's aim of reversing social hierarchies, which enables it to draw recruits and gain acceptance from disadvantaged classes. This also supports findings of other studies which note that the attainment of an improved social status is a key explanation for why

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[43] Interview with researcher, Bamako, November 2017.
[44] Institute for Security Studies. 'Mali's young 'jihadists': fuelled by faith or circumstance? Policy Brief 89. Dakar: ISS, August 26, 2016). Available at: https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/malis-young-jihadists-fuelled-by-faith-or-circumstance
[45] Interviews with researchers, Bamako, November 2017.
[46] Interviews with NGOs working in Mopti, consultants and researchers who have networks in the region.
[47] Interviews with consultants, civil society workers, Bamako November 2017.

individuals join the Katiba Macina.[48] After proving their loyalty, committed combatants often get access to a motorbike, a modest salary, and the association of belonging to Kouffa's men affords them with an improved social status in society. There is also evidence to suggest that the group taps into inter-generational tensions, particularly among young men, who are frustrated by the rigid social hierarchies, and who want to rebel against their elders.

These processes risks exacerbating cleavages within groups, and in some localities, this has led to clashes and settling of scores between Fulani social groups.[49] Understanding the socio-economic status of disadvantaged social groups is thus crucial for understanding violent extremist mobilisation.

<u>Appropriation of Resource and Rights-Based Conflicts</u>

Resource and rights-based conflicts in the Delta are nothing new.[50] Conflicts over disputed access to and control over land and water resources have been increasing in the Delta, exacerbated by environmental and demographic pressures. These conflicts are often the most pronounced between herders and farmers. Disputes arise for a multitude of reasons, but may be caused by disagreements on the demarcation of land, rights to land, water usage, or crop damage caused by herder's passage.[51]

The Katiba Macina has generated widespread acceptance due to its management and control of the prized 'bourgoutiéres',[52] by halting the access fees, claiming that the land belongs only to 'God'. Observers remark that the group is managing the transhumance corridors very well.[53] This is in stark contrast to the rising access fees (sometimes up to 1,000,000 CFA, approximately 1,700 USD) exacted by the 'Jowros' who are part of the noble Rimbé class, and gatekeepers of the pastures. Pasture access fees fostered much resentment among herdsmen, who perceive the Jowros to be corrupt, and unjust as they pocket the fees for personal gain.[54]

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[48] Louisa Waugh and Mana Farooghi. *They treat us all like jihadis: looking beyond violent extremism to building peace in Mali*. International Alert, December 2016. Available at: http://www.international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis-en and Mercy Corps and Inter Peace. *We Hope and We Fight: Youth, Communities and Violence in Mali.* Mercy Corps, September 2017.

[49] See also Sangary, *Le centre du Mali: epicentre du djihadisme?*

[50] See e.g. Trond Vedeld. 'Village politics: Heterogeneity, leadership and collective action'. *The Journal of Development Studies* 36 no.5, (2000): 105-134

[51] Cotula and Cissé, *Changes in Customary' Resource Tenure Systems*

[52] These are highly nutritious dry-season pastures, which pastoralists are dependent on for livestock-grazing. See Cotula and Cissé 2006, 7.

[53] Interviews with consultants and journalists and phone interviews with civil society in Mopti, Bamako, November 2017. Some also observed that in some localities, where the 'Jowros' are particularly strong, the 'jihadists' have allowed them to continue collecting access fees but at a reduced rate, and have forced them to share the earnings with their extended family and village.

[54] Cotula and Cissé, *Changes in Customary' Resource Tenure Systems*, 6

The instrumentalisation of these conflicts by the Katiba Macina adds fuel to the fire, igniting and exacerbating latent conflicts between groups. There have been recorded cases where Kouffa's men have strategically intervened in existing conflicts over resources, by assassinating a 'chef de village' from another community (Dogon or Bambara), to prompt reprisal attacks against the Fulani herders. This leads many to turn to Kouffa who can provide them with a surplus of arms for self-defense in exchange for their allegiance.[55]

<u>Providing alternative forms of governance</u>

The 'katibas' have introduced some modest forms of governance in rural areas where the state has largely been absent. It has progressively sensitised communities to their mode of rule, by making frequent visits to villages, on motorbikes and heavily armed, summoning inhabitants to listen to Kouffa's preachings and explaining to them the new rules of Sharia law.

The group first suspended the collection of taxes, which was met with broad-based acceptance. It has introduced the Zakat in some localities, an Islamic custom that requires families to give up a proportion of one's wealth to the poor, but which also partly go towards feeding and funding combatants.[56] They have attained some level of fluvial control of the river Niger, through checkpoints, extorting fees and raiding merchandise of passing boats.

The Katiba Macina have successfully exploited feelings of injustice mainly concerning the state's poor management of resource conflicts, and its inability to deliver justice. When disputes arise, 'mobile courts' arrive on motorbikes with a couple of representatives from Kouffa's group, who listen to both sides of the story, and resolve the dispute immediately. This swift, fair and hassle-free rendering of justice on the spot is popular among local people. This starkly contrasts with the corrupt behaviour of local judges, that are renowned for extorting money and payments in-kind from plaintiffs for personal enrichment. Conflicts over resources are difficult to resolve because of the overlapping customary and statutory systems.[57] Cases would churn on for years, unresolved, impoverishing both sides, because ultimately the community who pays the most wins.[58] In the words of one local source 'it behaves just like the state, but is fair and more just'.[59]

The Katiba Macina has demonstrated its capacity to exploit the most vulnerable communities, such as those living in destitute poverty, and those affected by food insecurity. This is particularly

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[55] Interview with consultant undertaking fieldwork in the region, Bamako, November 2017.

[56] Phone interview with resident of Mopti, Bamako, November 2017.

[57] Niagalé Bagayoko, Boubacar Ba, Boukary Sangaré, Kalilou Sidibé. 'Masters of the land: competing customary and legal systems for resource management in the conflicting environment of the Mopti region, Central Mali,' *The Broker,* June 2017*.* Available at: http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/Blogs/Sahel-Watch-a-living-analysis-of-the-conflict-in-Mali/Masters-of-the-land

[58] Interviews with consultants, researchers and NGO workers in Mopti, Bamako November 2017. Similar observations were made by Vedeld during his field research in the region during the 1990s. See e.g. Trond Vedeld. 'The State and the Commons in the Sahel: Observations in the Niger River Delta in Mali,' *Occasional Paper.* (2014):121-156.

[59] Interview with teacher in Bamako, who frequently visits the region, Bamako, November 2017.

the case in the 'cercles' of Douentza, Ténenkou and Youwarou. In these areas, Kouffa's men have come often with food, to ensure the collaboration of villages. As one interviewee said 'a hungry man is not free, if someone offers food for your starving children, you will follow them'.[60] In this way, the group makes civilians dependent on them by providing the most basic public goods necessary for survival.

Social ties and relations with communities

In addition to introducing tenuous forms of alternative governance, the 'katibas' have penetrated the social fabric of the Delta using methods of 'social entrapment'.[61] The group tries to solidify social bonds with communities as a means of ensuring collaboration and allegiance. Reports suggest that the Katiba Macina has started forcible child recruitment, which symbolises a village's allegiance to the group, who will in return benefit from its protection, a practice which has been observed in other insurgencies. Kouffa's men are the brothers, fathers, uncles and breadwinners of these communities, creating a reverse social dependency on the group. The group has also engaged in marriage (sometimes forced, other times not) in villages which was also a strategy used by MUJAO and AQMI to integrate themselves in communities in the North.[62]

Use of Coercion

The Katiba Macina achieved a level of population control through applying a combination of 'coercive' measures. These include the use of 'selective violence' through targeted assassinations, to weed out non-collaborators, identify potential denouncers, which is common strategy used by insurgent groups that seek to exert territorial control.[63] Since 2015, there have been a string of targeted assassinations of public authorities including local councillors, village chiefs, local imams, religious figures and judges. Journalists and radio stations who may be critical of the group have also been threatened.[64] When Kouffa's men arrive to persuade a village to follow them, non-collaborators are threatened, so village leaders often have no choice but to capitulate to demands. The combined impact of these coercive measures is the further retreat of the state, which enables the group to consolidate its grip on communities.

The Katiba Macina has established an entrenched network of informants who intermingle with and live amongst the communities. They are instructed to inform Kouffa's men if they spot state representatives, FAMA, Barkhane or MINUSMA. Reportedly many women who have been told to stop working, have been recruited as informants and offered a modest payment. This also feeds

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[60] Anonymous Interviewee, Bamako, November 2017.
[61] See Jannie Lilja. 'Trapping Constituents or Winning Hearts and Minds? Rebel Strategies to Attain Constituent Support in Sri Lanka' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12, no.2 (2009): 306-326
[62] See e.g. Morten Bøås. Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery. *African Security* 8 no.4, (2015): 299-319, 312.
[63] Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*
[64] Interview with media outlets in Mopti, Bamako, 30 November 2017.

into a sentiment that the group is ubiquitous, in the words of one respondent: 'we do not know who is who, they are the community',[65] which spreads fear and silences dissent.

Just like the Islamist groups' introduction of brutal Sharia law in the north alienated local communities there, the katibas' curtailing of civilian freedoms is engendering resistance across many localities in central Mali. The group has achieved some law and order, but through severe punishments against theft.[66] Forcing women to wear the veil, forbidding alcohol, smoking and preventing civil marriages, festivities and folklore are deeply unpopular.

The closure of schools, is a direct rejection of Western education, and has fostered much resentment among local communities. The group has also sought to purify the region from Western influence, much like Boko Haram's strategy in Northern Nigeria. In May 2017, UNICEF estimated that in the region of Mopti, 270 schools have closed due to the 'jihadist' menace, leaving 80,000 pupils out of education, which also puts children and youth at risk of being recruited.[67]

Conclusion

The case of central Mali demonstrates that to understand the drivers and enablers of violent extremist mobilisation, a local perspective is necessary. Central Mali has been a fertile enabling environment for violent extremism to thrive. Most importantly the absence and further retreat of the state has provided a window of opportunity for groups like the Katiba Macina to become entrenched in local communities with relative ease, assimilating themselves in the social fabric of communities and introducing sorely needed government measures. The group has astutely employed a variety of tailored strategies, tapping into a variety of local conflict dynamics. It presents itself as the protector of the stigmatised, the provider for the vulnerable, and the liberator of the socially oppressed, all in exchange for 'support', which we can interpret as tacit acceptance or tolerance in the face of coercion, to active participation by joining the group.

Ethnicity is an important mobilisation tool among the Fulani community, but we must also pay attention to socio-economic differences within and between groups, which provide entry points for violent extremist groups to exploit grievances and frustration. These mobilisation strategies have broader implications for the spread of violent extremism across the Sahel; Islamist groups are already recruiting disenfranchised groups on the borders of Burkina Faso and Niger.

While Kouffa's global-local brand of jihad may be an attractive brand name for his movement to gain more legitimacy, what this analysis reveals is that violent extremist mobilisation is rooted in deep-seated socio-economic and political grievances particularly among disadvantaged groups. The implication of this is that any efforts at resolving this crisis, must be rooted in governance

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[65] Phone interview with Mopti resident, Bamako, November 2017.
[66] Some interviewees cited reports about 'jihadists' cutting hands of thieves.
[67] Kieran Guilbert. 'Spreading south, jihadist violence threatens future of children in central Mali' *Reuters, 22 May, 2017.* Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-violence-aid/spreading-south-jihadist-violence-threatens-future-of-children-in-central-mali-idUSKBN18I1JE

reforms at the regional and local level, as well as a concerted effort to mend and strengthen state-society relations. The government must be able to present itself as a viable, legitimate and preferable alternative to groups like the Katiba Macina, and win back the confidence of local communities.

Policy Recommendations

Address macro-level factors that make Mopti an enabling environment:

- Security actors such as the FAMA, Barkhane, MINUSMA or Joint Force of the G5 Sahel must increase their presence outside the town centres in rural, inaccessible areas. This security must be constant over time, to prevent Islamist groups like the Katiba Macina from re-infiltrating and consolidating their presence.
- The government of Mali should focus on re-establishing legitimate state presence in central Mali and provide essential basic services (especially education, healthcare and support to families affected by food insecurity) particularly in rural areas.
- To reverse the perception that the state is corrupt, unjust and predatory, the *quality* of the re-establishment and extension of state-presence should be a key focus of support to the government by international actors. A major priority should be to improve the management of resource conflicts, and on bolstering law and order as well as the state justice system to ensure an equitable, fair justice is provided to communities in a timely manner. One concrete measure that could be considered is establishing state-led mobile courts sponsored by international rule of law programmes.
- Civil society should be supported to initiate regional level state-community as well as inter-communal dialogues to give communities of central Mali the opportunity to express grievances and their priorities moving forwards to improve state-society relations and reconciliation between communities.
- The government must encourage equal enrolment rates for boys and girls. The Malian government should ensure that there is adequate capacity in schools in the surrounding areas of Mopti so that children and youth who have fled due to insecurity have the opportunity to enrol in schools close by as a short to medium term measure.
- The government, international and national NGOs must better understand the impact of rigid social hierarchies on youth, to address the intergenerational divide between youth and elders in communities of Central Mali.
- When and if stability returns to this region, a comprehensive development strategy for Mopti is needed. International development actors should start preparing to support this plan, in coordination with government initiatives like the regional integrated security plan for the central regions, "Plan de Sécurisation Integré des Regions du Centre" (PSIRC) so that development interventions can immediately be implemented once conditions are ripe. All interventions both humanitarian and developmental must be provided in a neutral and unbiased manner so that the provision of such assistance does not further aggravate existing grievances between communities.

Prevent mobilisation strategies of the Katiba Macina and create alternatives for those who are vulnerable to joining these groups:

- Targeting youth in particular, the Malian government and its partners should focus on providing vocational training and encourage private companies and businesses in central Mali to provide traineeships to young people to boost the prospects of employment and to provide alternative avenues for social empowerment.
- Religious leaders and teachers should devise counter-narratives to tackle the radical discourse in the preachings of radical jihadist groups. These should be dispersed through Bluetooth and WhatsApp as well as orally to reach those without mobile phones. Reaffirming the teachings of the Qu'ran and debunking myths should be prioritised in Quranic schools across the country, while a special focus should be placed on vulnerable areas in Mopti and Ségou.
- Women should be included in efforts to implement income-generating activities including vocational training, so that they are less vulnerable to be recruited as auxiliaries. Women should be a key focus of local countering-violent extremism efforts, given their influential role in decision-making in the family.
- The FAMA and other security actors such as Barkhane and the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel must ensure respect for human rights, justice and accountability during the course of its military counter-terror and counterinsurgency operations, to avoid fuelling further radicalisation of communities in central Mali. FAMA's partners should highlight the strategic cost of noncompliance to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), by providing evidence-based findings on how abuses by security services have fuelled radicalisation. The European Union Training Mission (EUTM) should focus on bolstering compliance to IHL and IHRL and determine how it can support the Malian government in ensuring accountability for abuses.

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