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POLICY BRIEF:
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‘They treat us all like jihadis’

Looking beyond violent extremism to building peace in Mali

SUMMARY

This policy brief presents the findings of an 18-month project led by International Alert in Mali’s central regions, namely Timbuktu, Mopti and Ségou. Based on a range of multidimensional engagements with communities and local authorities, the project sheds light on the drivers and dynamics of ‘violent extremism’, their connections to other conflict dynamics and the importance of having a context-specific understanding and applying conflict-sensitive approaches rooted in local communities. Taking these aspects into account can ensure that responses to violent extremism deliver a long-lasting impact and contribute to peacebuilding and statebuilding in Mali.

Introduction

In 2012, Mali was confronted by a military coup, which opened up a space for separatist rebels and Islamist groups to take control of vast spaces of the Malian Sahel and to occupy major cities including Timbuktu and Gao. Three years after the start of the French-led military campaign,¹ that pushed many Islamist armed groups back to the borders with Algeria and Libya, and despite the Algiers Mali Peace Accord,² which brokered a deal between the government and rebel groups in June 2015, conflict and violence in Mali continue to severely affect civilians. Violence has spread to central Mali as far south as Mopti and Ségou. Catalysed by weak governance and generalised insecurity, pre-existing conflicts in these regions have been left unresolved and have festered into further divisions: within and between communities, along ethnic and social lines, between the state and citizens, between traditional and state authorities, and between generations. A normalisation of violence has developed across northern and central Mali alongside a sharp rise in crime linked to poverty and facilitated by the afflux of arms and trafficking networks transiting through the Sahel and terrorist networks operating in the north.

The framing of the French-led military campaign as a fight against 'global jihad' is placing violent extremism* centre stage in security agendas across Mali, narrowing security efforts into counter-terrorism strategies. Meanwhile, longer-term risks linked to the growing culture of violence, and protracted inter- and intra-community conflicts, are being poorly addressed. With a record number of deaths from terrorism registered in the country in 2015,³ strategies for countering and preventing violent extremism in Mali are now on top of the government's and donors' agendas; these strategies are being increasingly mainstreamed in aid strategies and are making their way into Malian civil society portfolio through donor funding. With this escalating emphasis on preventing and countering violent extremism, it is crucial to reflect on what this means in the Malian context.

This policy brief explores the changing face of conflict in Mali and examines the underlying drivers of violent extremism. It argues for the need to better track and understand the different forms of violence in Mali and highlights why an approach based on these specificities is essential in tackling the challenges of violent extremism in this context.



United Nations Photo (Creative Commons)

From north to centre: The changing face of conflict in Mali

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the erosion of state institutions through years of nepotism and corruption, aggravated by a rise in organised crime and trafficking networks, created a security vacuum in Mali. While the state's presence in the north has been limited, a range of alternative structures have flourished, based on individual and group historical, ethnic, cultural and religious identities, including organised criminal networks and jihadist organisations. These have, in different measures, complemented the functions of the state in these "alternatively governed"⁴ regions. Against this background, the backlash from the Libyan conflict in 2011 and the return of heavily armed rebels from Libya to north Mali, as well as the presence of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the north since 2004,⁵ set the stage for the 2012 crisis.

While the crisis may have begun as a military coup initiated by the Malian army, which was under-resourced to fight

* For the purpose of this policy brief, we use 'violent extremism' to refer to certain types of violence as well as policies targeting them, while recognising and addressing the imprecision of this term.

against the new rebellion by the *Mouvement de Libération Nationale de l'Azawad* (The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA), it slowly led to an occupation of several northern towns, including Timbuktu and Gao, by militant Islamist groups. These included Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO),⁶ both affiliated with AQIM. This unrest, allied to the political ambitions of the MNLA, also led to the creation of 'self-defence' militias,⁷ which has in turn exacerbated inter- and intra-community violence. Despite signing the Anefis agreement in October 2015, the *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (Coordination of the Azawad Movements, CMA) and the *Plateforme*⁸ have regularly clashed in the north, making any national reconciliation processes and the application of the Mali Peace Accord very challenging to implement.⁹

Despite a strong national and international military presence, and efforts to apply the local Anefis peace deal, recorded violence is also increasing in the centre of Mali. New groups have appeared across the region, such as the Islamist group the Macina Liberation Front (MLF)¹⁰ and the *Alliance Nationale pour la Sauvegarde de l'Identité Peule et la Restauration de la Justice* (National Alliance for the Protection of the Fulani Identity and the Restoration of Justice, ANSIPRJ), leading to violent attacks on national security forces and on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali.¹¹ Meanwhile, both Ansar Dine and MUJAO (now renamed Al-Murabitun after its merger with the Algerian Salafist group *El-Mouaguiine Biddam*, meaning 'Those who sign in blood') are still carrying out attacks on national and international security forces.¹²

Violence in both the country's northern and central regions, however, is not limited to clashes between armed groups and security forces. The bulk of violence currently directly harming civilians, according to our own and other research, has been related mostly to criminality and interethnic violence.¹³

International Alert's monitoring of violent incidents in the Timbuktu region in 2016 revealed that 85% of violent incidents recorded were either financially motivated or related to inter-community tensions, conflict over land or sexual violence against women. Only a small part of the violence registered by civilians was directly linked to 'extremism' and these incidents were often of intimidation and cultural control, such as preventing girls from attending schools or commenting on people's inappropriate clothing, rather than physical violence. Alert's consultations with communities across Ségou, Mopti and Timbuktu reveal

that the majority of people in these regions do not identify particular armed groups as their major security problems, but rather see unresolved traditional conflicts, rising criminality and banditry – frequently driven by poverty and a chronic lack of jobs and opportunities – as the biggest risks to their personal and local security. The breakdown in trust between communities and in the government has increased levels of armed aggression, resulting in the normalisation of violence across much of central and northern Mali.

Conflict creates violent extremism, not the other way around

From March 2015 to September 2016, Alert and its partners facilitated more than 25 community dialogues on issues of conflict and security in 10 localities of the Timbuktu, Mopti and Ségou regions, including with local authority representatives, women, youth leaders, religious leaders and local community-based organisations. Overwhelmingly, the issues identified as primary obstacles to peace were inter- and intra-community tensions, traditional agropastoral conflicts (for example, non-application of local conventions on land use), conflicts over the misuse of power by traditional chiefs, as well as wide-ranging abuses by security forces. The lack of trust in government or local authorities to restore governance and arbitrate these conflicts as well as increasingly violent clashes between communities themselves have left many with a sense of despair. In many localities covered by the research, people expressed anxiety linked to the feeling of living in a security vacuum where bandits live among communities, and a sense of losing control over their immediate environment and traditional social life.

"We cannot denounce those responsible for this violence in our community because they are in our midst. If we do so, just a few hours later, they will come to my house and kill my children."

Workshop participant from Mopti, Mopti, October 2016

Our research into individual trajectories to extreme violence suggests that a lack of trust in state and security forces, plus injustice, self-protection and economic hardship are the primary drivers of people's readiness to take up arms.

"He is animated with a feeling of revenge against the Malian government [which] refuses to assist him. He encounters people who show him ways to make money but these people are brainwashing him. He is ready to join

a group if he gets an opportunity. In street discussions, I hear that other young craftsmen will take up arms if their conditions don't improve."¹⁴

Local administrator, Mopti, July 2016

In contexts where state authorities or local governance is failing to provide financial and physical security, armed groups provide not only alternative economic opportunities, but also an alternative society with its own governance and values effectively replacing the state's. Our research corroborates several other community engagement surveys¹⁵ in revealing that ideology does not usually play a primary role in recruitment into radical groups in Mali.¹⁶ Similar to other contexts such as Syria or Iraq, where extremist groups have filled the vacuum left by a weak state, a belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group, and is providing a narrative and justification for fighting.¹⁷ As opposed to starting from an agenda of religious indoctrination, these groups capitalise on existing structural grievances and offer alternative social mobility and recognition in societies. Frustrated by rigid hierarchies, many people, including 'social juniors' (*cadets sociaux*),¹⁸ start seeing these groups as an opportunity to achieve success and recognition otherwise inaccessible to them.

"One night, a man approached us. He said he could help us fix our financial problems if we follow him to Diafarabé to join [an] armed group. There we will have enough money to fulfil our dreams and send to our families. He said the training would only last a few months. He put 25,000 West African CFA francs [around US\$40]¹⁹ in our pockets at which point we rushed to take our bags and follow him."

Young student from Macina, Segou, June 2016

The reference to 'training' in the above quote highlights one of the main impediments to peace from radical groups. Rather than a threat of religious radicalisation, there is long-term risk of radicalisation through the professionalisation²⁰ of violence as a lifestyle that further aggravates the normalisation of a criminal culture. This was, however, legitimised by organised crime and trafficking even before the crisis in 2012.²¹

Another driver of violent extremism is the perceived unjust treatment by security forces and reported abuse against certain ethnic groups.

"We are targeted because we are Arabs or Touaregs or Fulani. Even if we are in Timbuktu, every Arab is suspected to be close to AQIM. There was even a time

when people saw an Arab [and] would shout: 'There goes a jihadist!' This problem resurfaces every time there are tensions. They raise terrorism as a spectre to justify killing us and diminishing our struggle."

Young Touareg man from Léré, M'Béra refugee camp, April 2016

This is particularly visible in Mopti and the Douentza Cercle, where Diallo Fulani herders – accused by other ethnic groups of being jihadis due to their perceived allegiance to MUJAO during the crisis – have been targeted by security forces, leading to hundreds of them fleeing and seeking refuge in Mauritania.²²

"Concerning the abuse committed by the security forces in Zinzin [Goundam circle], authorities were contacted and the government helped to appease the situation. Army officials came here to apologise. A sensitisation campaign was organised to prevent the situation getting [more] violent. However, until now, the army continues its heavy-handed control, treating everyone as a 'jihadist'."

Touareg leader, Doukouria, March 2016

Here, what started as an inter-community conflict has morphed into a national one due to the intervention of national armed forces. The 'jihadi' rhetoric has resulted in an amalgam between communities and their alleged affiliation to armed groups, creating a cycle of reprisals where Fulanis defend themselves either in self-protection groups such as the ANSIPRJ or by joining Islamist networks such as the Katibat Khaled ibn Walid and the MLF, both of which are branches of Ansar Dine.²³ The leader of the MLF, Amadou Koufa, reportedly promised young people training in Mopti camps that he would "re-establish the Fulani empire by establishing a Fulani caliphate",²⁴ illustrating how 'jihadi' narratives are being used to advance identity and ethnic political interests.

These different and complex incentives for individuals or groups to form or join armed groups and violent networks create a cycle of misunderstandings over political motivations and a simplified reading of conflict dynamics through an 'extremism' lens. Within this context, although extremist groups do represent a significant risk of protracting armed conflict through professionalised recruitment and training strategies, it is important to acknowledge that violent extremism does not emerge in a vacuum but rather thrives on existing conflict, ingrained tensions and grievances, and normalised violence. This is supported by evidence that shows that 90% of all terrorist incidents in 2015 occurred in countries with violent conflict.²⁵

Our focus, therefore, needs to shift from addressing the symptoms of violent extremism to understanding – and tackling – the root causes of these conflicts. This will help ensure responses lead to improvements in prospects for peace, justice and security in Mali.

It is vital to look at extremism from local perspectives and to gauge its impact on local populations alongside other types of violence, such as local criminality, to ensure that responses not only prioritise national security interests but also reflect local security needs.

The importance of mapping conflict

In the Malian context, with multidimensional conflicts taking place at the same time, understanding conflict dynamics is key to addressing all obstacles to peace, including extremism. Throughout its engagement with communities, Alert found that terms such as ‘criminal’, ‘bandit’, ‘jihadist’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘thief’ are being used interchangeably by local populations. This is because they have little awareness of the differences in motivations and identity between different violent groups or individuals, as they are confronted with not the causes but the symptoms of violence on a daily basis. They cluster these in a wider context of violence from a myriad of new conflict actors, who frequently describe perpetrators in general as jihadists. Many attacks on markets for example, attributed to jihadists by local populations, are actually led by armed bandits.²⁶ This confusion can also be explained by unclear relationships between criminal and terrorist groups in Mali, which range from coexistence to cooperation to convergence,²⁷ blurring the lines between their aims, their methods and their members. This is why accurate language and mapping matters.

Available databases on violence in Mali are mostly national in scope and focused mainly on vertical violence (that is, between rebel or Islamist groups and the state). They fail to capture the changing dynamics of local and national conflict, including the phenomenon of recurring violence related to land, the rise in abuses by security forces, the persistence of interethnic conflicts and the rapidly increasing incidence of criminal violence.

Development and peace practitioners can be invaluable resources in helping to draw a clearer picture of conflict dynamics. In the Malian case, a thorough monitoring and mapping of micro- and macro-level conflicts, especially in the central regions, would be a huge asset to understanding

and tackling extreme violence. This mapping needs to clearly detail the range of different kinds of conflicts including horizontal conflicts (inter- and intra-community, land and resources, intergenerational, competition between armed groups, violence on women and girls); vertical conflicts (with security forces, foreign army, insurgency, attacks on representatives of the state); and global conflicts (in the case of extremism, this aims to shed light on how local groups are connected to regional and global networks). In addition, mapping the Malian context demands separating out incidents of violence linked to opportunistic crimes, local banditry and organised crime.

Multidimensional geo-mapping tools, such as Conflict Alert²⁸ or the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project’s database,²⁹ can allow practitioners and policy-makers to fill this gap and design programming better suited to address local conflict in an informed and context-specific way. Alert has successfully used a version of the former tool in the southern Philippines,³⁰ which is a major site of rebellion, criminal violence and shadow economy-based conflicts. Conflict Alert generates data to track and verify incidents, causes and costs, plus trends and directions of violent conflict. These data can be used by local authorities, practitioners and governments to bring improved clarity to policy, development planning and peacebuilding approaches.

Measuring/mapping the intensity and types of violence in particular regions in Mali would help reveal where violence has the highest human cost, and help to better distribute resources. For example, if mapping showed that criminal violence had a higher human cost on civilians than attacks by militant groups, this would help target support to communities and advocate for the government to deal with the normalisation of criminal violence. Monitoring conflicts over time can also reveal cycles of violence, for example, related to land issues around the pastoral calendar, and help design solutions (including through the use of technology) to allow for improved land use and conflict-sensitive land policies.³¹

Local context matters

Understanding nuances of local debates and discourses on conflicts is key to working efficiently in the Malian context.

In an effort to rigorously identify local types of violence and their impact on peace, broad terms such as ‘violent extremist’ can prove particularly unhelpful – and can also be seen as imposed by international actors, which can itself undermine the legitimacy of actions to prevent

violence, to some. Although the term violent extremism is now at the centre of aid strategies of many governments and international institutions,³² it is markedly imprecise. There is no agreed global definition of what constitutes violent extremism – the term is used to describe very different dynamics in different contexts. This can lead to context-inappropriate programming and limit progress in understanding the actual phenomena at stake.

Alert's 18 months of research in Mali strongly indicates that the language of 'extremism' does not translate usefully in communities that do not have equivalent terms for 'radicalisation' or 'extremism' in their local languages. It also reveals that the main cause of violence experienced by civilians is not related to extremism, but to crime or conflict over resources or identity. This raises important questions around the emphasis on violent extremism in a country divided by many more prevalent tensions that represent obstacles to peace and security for its people, as well as for the wider Sahel region.

This top-down approach to governance and security needs to be examined regarding its effectiveness and use of development resources. Due to a lack of knowledge and experience from practitioners, programmes targeting violent extremism often follow international blueprints, which are rolled out and mainstreamed in international assistance agendas,³³ at times replacing or reframing crucial peacebuilding and development strategies. Some of these programmes offer 'training' and programming models on countering/preventing violent extremism to local civil society organisations (CSOs) without necessarily first adapting them to the realities of the local context in order to make them effective. In other cases, they can undermine the safety of local communities engaging in them.

The leaders of extremist groups are focused on extreme ideological and political goals, and coordinated security measures are needed to weaken and dismantle global, national and local violent networks. However, a narrow focus on the threat from these extremist groups and their appeal has the perverse effect of constricting the analysis and the range of responses available to development, security and peacebuilding practitioners. This is especially relevant if all violence is seen through a 'terrorism' lens, thus focusing on the symptoms and most obvious causes, while masking rooted and unresolved conflicts that need to be addressed in their own right through sustained and multidimensional approaches.



The Malian government and its international partners need to balance their investment in short-term security-focused responses, with support for longer-term responses that also embrace peacebuilding and development approaches. In order to contribute to long-term peace, local and international CSOs need adequate resources for small-scale, localised pilot projects that include robust research and monitoring, and adaptive programming. This approach will allow them to work safely on a very sensitive issue and will help practitioners and policy-makers to gauge what works and, critically, to define what types of approach are needed to create and maintain long-term impact on reducing violence in different parts of the country – with the potential for adaptation elsewhere.

Conclusion

Despite a national peace process, conflicts in Mali continue to spread due to often deeply embedded drivers that have not yet been successfully addressed. As protracted, chronic conflicts feed a growing and long-term normalisation of a culture of violence, peace in Mali can only emerge from a clear understanding – and tackling – of these conflict drivers, which are multidimensional and varied. Malian authorities and international actors risk failing in their objective of ending violence and creating an environment conducive to peaceful development if they continue to implement strategies based on ill-defined broad categories and narrow approaches to violent extremism, which have not proven effective. It is essential to invest in local peace

in order to mobilise effective deterrence programmes to prevent the appeal of extremist armed groups and criminal networks, as well as discourage the use of violence as a way of achieving one's aspirations.

Increasing the potential for people to find satisfying economic, psychological and social opportunities without the use of violence, re-establishing trust between communities and ethnic groups, and between state and citizens, and the resolution of long-standing conflicts at the local and regional levels are all prerequisites for long-term improvements in local- and national-level security governance. This, in turn, is necessary for the creation of a national vision for peace in Mali.

Recommendations

We make these recommendations broadly to the community of actors in a position to influence the approaches being taken to reduce the incidence of violence, including violent extremism, in Mali: the government, its external partners, including donors, and civil society.

Get smarter at mapping different kinds of violence

- Systematically map the changing dynamics of conflict and crime across Mali to better understand the nature of conflict, crime and violent extremism, and use these data to direct and design appropriate strategies that can be owned and built upon by communities themselves.
- Ensure that strategies addressing these conflict challenges not only tackle symptoms, but also begin the long-term task of addressing the underlying conditions driving these dynamics.
- Through active community engagement, map out the different conflict and power dynamics in the northern and central regions of Mali, to avoid wrongly linking groups or individuals to global jihad and in order to avoid further internationalisation of local problems that could be managed using local solutions.

Adopt multidimensional approaches at multiple levels

- Design programmes that firstly address the lack of trust between and across communities, and create safe dialogue spaces where these issues can begin to be addressed.
- Prioritise security programmes that address the breakdown of trust between communities and security forces, begin to build trust and opportunities for cooperation on both sides in order to counter violence,

including violent extremism, in and across communities.

- Improve local governance accountability, especially relating to security issues and land tenure.
- Reassess violent extremism programming for its effectiveness in Mali and prioritise community engagement and participatory research into conflict dynamics, including training of communities in conflict analysis. Institutions working on violent extremism need to be better trained in conflict-sensitive approaches to ensure that programmes use sensitive language and methodology that reflect and address local security needs.
- Assess the capacity of Malian security forces to address different new forms of violence in order to distinguish between criminality and violent extremism, and the links between them.
- Link local and national responses together in a combined top-down and bottom-up approach. Ensure that local context analysis is included in all national forums, and local forums are used as opportunities to feed into national analysis and policy.

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Endnotes

- 1 Also known as 'Operation Serval', the campaign followed the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085 of 20 December 2012 and an official request by the Malian interim government for French military assistance. ECOWAS also deployed its African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) in January 2013.
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- 7 Such as the Groupe d'autodéfense Imghad et alliés (Touareg Imghad Self-Defense Group and Allies) and Ganda Izo (Songoy and Fulani militias).
- 8 *Plateforme* is a coalition of 'self-defence' groups such as Ganda Izo, Ganda Koy and the Coordination des mouvements et forces Patriotiques de résistance.
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International Alert

346 Clapham Road, London, SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800 Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900

Email info@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org



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