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# IF VICTIMS BECOME PERPETRATORS

Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel



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“ Violent extremism is affecting the lives of millions in the Sahel, but the essentially military responses to date have failed to reduce violence and have instead undermined community resilience. This research adds to the analytical evidence explaining the rise in violent extremism in the Sahel and provides guidance for governments and international actors to step up responses for the peaceful resolution of this crisis. ”

**MARCO SIMONETTI**, WEST AFRICA REGIONAL MANAGER, INTERNATIONAL ALERT

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# Abbreviations

<b>AQIM</b>	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
<b>CMFPR</b>	Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements ( <i>Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance</i> )
<b>DDR</b>	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
<b>DSF</b>	Defence and security forces
<b>FC-G5S</b>	G5 Sahel Joint Force
<b>FLM</b>	Macina Liberation Front ( <i>Front de libération du Macina</i> )
<b>GATIA</b>	Imghad and Allies Tuareg Self-Defence Group ( <i>Groupe armé Tuareg Imghad et Alliés</i> )
<b>ISGS</b>	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
<b>LRTs</b>	Local research teams
<b>MAA</b>	Arab Movement of Azawad ( <i>Mouvement arabe de l’Azawad</i> )
<b>MINUSMA</b>	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
<b>MNLA</b>	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad ( <i>Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad</i> )
<b>MSA</b>	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad ( <i>Mouvement du salut de l’Azawad</i> )
<b>MUJAO</b>	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa ( <i>Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest</i> [in French] or <i>Jamat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Gharbi Ifriqiyyah</i> [in Arabic])
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

# Executive summary

The armed groups linked to jihadism that have been operating in the central Sahel have had a disruptive effect on the fragile social fabric locally. Confronted with this phenomenon, communities have responded in different ways, ranging from rejection to attraction. This study focuses on young Fulani people in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger), and analyses the factors contributing to community vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism.

The research adopted a comparative approach in order to verify the relevance of the findings across the three regions. This provided a broader understanding of the complex phenomenon of violent extremism in the central Sahel. This study builds on and provides a critical review of previous research, adding qualitative analysis of data collected primarily across Fulani communities living in conflict-affected areas. These communities are both victims of extremist violence and violence attributable to national and international counter-terrorism actions.

One of the key findings of this research is the assertion that violent extremism in the central Sahel is primarily a response to local conflicts, and that the link with international jihadism is more rhetoric than reality. In fragile and conflict-affected states, there are a number of factors that may influence the behaviour of marginalised young men and women who are confronted with violent extremism. However, this study shows that the most determining factor contributing to vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism is the experience (or perception) of abuse and violation by government authorities – in other words, real or perceived state abuse is the number one factor behind young people's decision to join violent extremist groups. On the other hand, the study shows that strengthening social cohesion, supporting young men's and women's role in their communities, and mitigating social and gender exclusion could strengthen community resilience.

The research also identifies strategies to deploy to curb violent extremism in the central Sahel. Due to communities' loss of trust in the defence and security forces, the 'total security' approach is doomed to fail. Widespread violence increases community vulnerability and their need for protection, which violent extremist groups exploit to increase their acceptance across communities in the Sahel. In this context, the deployment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, supported financially and politically by international powers, risks undermining its aim to reduce violence and could instead weaken regional stability and communities' wellbeing. To restore trust between marginalised citizens and their governments, international partners need to prioritise efforts aimed at supporting state accountability towards its citizens; improve access to justice, especially transitional justice, and ensure inclusive governance; improve supervision of the armed forces; and promote youth employment, including through migration. Given the possible escalation of violent extremism in the central Sahel, the international community cannot afford to make wrong choices.



Fulani youth return from collecting water, Mali.  
PHOTO: © FRANS LEMMENS/ALAMY

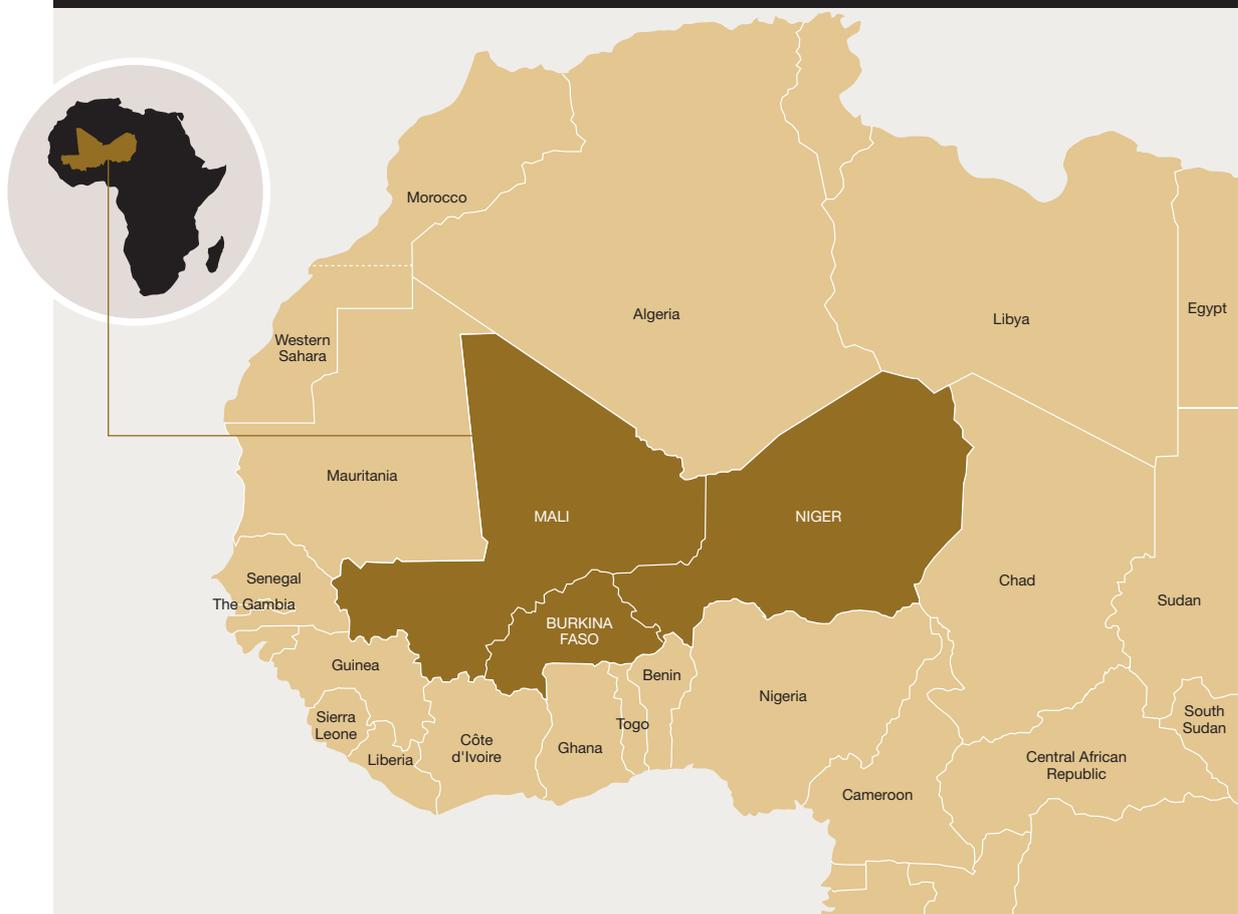
# 1. Unrest in the central Sahel and the Fulani issue: History and context

Since 2015, the central Sahel has been in the grip of an acute security crisis, fuelled by increasing radical Islamic rhetoric and the emergence of practices associated with violent extremism. As concerns grow among communities and political decision-makers, both national and international, addressing these phenomena requires a deeper understanding of the causes and dynamics that influence them in order to identify pertinent responses.

## 1.1 The central Sahel, a contiguous cross-border region

The central Sahel encompasses the areas adjacent to the curve formed by the River Niger between the cities of Ségou (Mali) and Niamey (Niger), and roughly covers the administrative regions of Ségou, Mopti, Tombouctou, Gao and Ménaka (Mali), along with Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger). Despite the political and administrative divisions, the continuity of the environmental context has helped to shape the unity and coherence of this region, leading to the development of a common way of life. This is based on the use of natural resources for transhumant pastoralism and agriculture (seasonal movement between summer and winter pastures), as well as small-scale vegetable farming, fishing and hunting. Thus, the same social, livelihood and ethnic groups are found throughout the central Sahel, with a significant presence of communities associated with pastoral activities. Such communities include the Fulanis (who are predominant in the Mopti and Sahel regions) and the Tuaregs (especially in the Tombouctou, Ménaka and Tillabéri regions), as well as sedentary farming communities such as the Bambaras (Ségou region), Dogons (Mopti region) and Songhai/Zarmas (Gao and Tillabéri regions), along with fishing communities such as the Bozos and hunters such as the Dozos.

**Figure 1:** Map showing the central Sahel region



Although at times complex, the coexistence of these groups goes back centuries, and the identity of the central Sahel has been shaped throughout history by multiple political entities that were established here long before colonisation. These include the Songhai Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Massina Empire in the 19th century. Such experiences gave the central Sahel a shared (albeit contested) history, traditions and common rules, as well as a single name across borders and periods. Today, external observers call it the 'central Sahel', while local communities describe it as the Liptako-Gourma region.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the central Sahel, the state presence is weak and everyday life is regulated by social norms and roles that have nothing to do with the state. After the Sahel states gained their independence, what the permeability of the borders made up for from the bottom, the fragmentation of the post-colonial heritage was unable to institutionalise from the top. Along the 500-kilometre border between Bénéna (Mali-Burkina) and Andéramboukane (Mali-Niger), there are only five checkpoints, two of which have not been operational since the beginning of the Malian crisis in 2012. A number of reports have recently noted significant cross-border dynamics in the central Sahel region with respect to perceptions of security,<sup>2</sup> narratives<sup>3</sup> and trafficking of various kinds.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 The rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel

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In 2012, the Malian part of the central Sahel was almost entirely occupied by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*, MNLA), a Tuareg-dominated separatist armed group operating in northern Mali. In response to the acts of violence perpetrated with complete impunity by the Tuaregs and their allies, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, MUJAO) soon emerged to protect the interests of various groups in the region. Proclaiming unifying and multi-ethnic political ambitions in the name of armed Salafism, MUJAO benefited in particular from support from wealthy Arab business people and traffickers in the region.<sup>5</sup> The group also attracted substantial numbers of recruits drawn from central and northern Mali and Niger, including Fulani community self-defence militias.<sup>6</sup> Following the MNLA's eviction from Gao in the summer of 2012, MUJAO's influence extended to almost the full length of the Malian belt of the central Sahel, roughly from Koro to Labbezanga. This resulted in the spillover of insecurity and conflict dynamics across the border.

In early 2013, the French military mission, Serval, drove back the various jihadi groups operating in northern Mali, including MUJAO. While national and international actors were focused on resolving the

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1. The name Liptako-Gourma is not entirely unknown in administrative terminology, as evidenced by the establishment in 1970 of a development agency called the Liptako-Gourma Authority, which brought together Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. However, in this study, the name 'the central Sahel' has been used for the sake of simplicity.
  2. Danish Demining Group (DDG), *Évaluations des risques sécuritaires aux frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger*, Copenhagen, July 2014.
  3. Raleigh, C. and Dowd, C., *Governance and conflicts in Sahel's 'ungoverned spaces'*, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2(2), 2013.
  4. Lacher, W., *Organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region*, The Carnegie Papers, New York, September 2012; Briscoe, I., *Crime after jihad: Armed groups, the state, and illicit business in post-conflict Mali*, Clingendael report, The Hague, May 2014.
  5. Lacher, W., *Challenging the myth of the drug-terror nexus in the Sahel*, WACD background paper 4, Accra, September 2013.
  6. Thiam, A., *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, March 2017.

crisis in the north of the country, a ‘Fulani issue’ was beginning to emerge in central Mali. A number of interconnected factors contributed to this development.

Firstly, the defence and security forces (DSF) redeployed to the region of Mopti often failed to distinguish between ethnic affiliation and ideological alignment, suspecting the entire Fulani community of complicity with the Islamists of MUJAO. Human rights organisations reported cases of ethnic-based abuse, discrimination and stigmatisation, especially against members of the Fulani community, and this tainted the Malian armed forces’ regaining of control of the area.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the broader conflict affecting the region has dramatically weakened the culture of consensus that permeated the highly hierarchical Fulani society. Violence and feuds emerged between semi-nomadic herders, on the one hand, who took up arms for self-defence, and traditional chieftaincies on the other, who aimed to re-establish their control over communities and, at the same time, to rebuild trust in and the credibility of the Malian state.

Thirdly, the peace talks to resolve the crisis in northern Mali favoured the participation of ethnic-based armed groups and excluded groups associated with jihadism, such as MUJAO, Ansar-Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The widespread impunity granted to the militias that emerged from the rebellion in northern Mali – and the fact that the Fulanis were unable to benefit from the peace dividends – exacerbated the sense of abandonment and need for self-protection among the Fulanis of central Mali.

During 2013 and 2014, MUJAO succeeded in re-organising itself. Although it gave up control of territory, it generated considerable concern, claiming responsibility for a series of deadly attacks against Malian and international armed forces, as well as civilian targets. From January 2015, insecurity began to spread across central Mali and then to neighbouring countries. The regions of Ségou (Niono and Macina) and Mopti (initially in Ténénkou and Douentza, but eventually affecting every district in the region) were targeted by a series of attacks in which ethnic tensions, ideological demands and personal feuds intermingled. In May 2015, the Macina Liberation Front (*Front de libération du Macina*, FLM, later renamed Katibat Macina), headed by the Fulani preacher, Hamadoun Koufa, emerged with the destruction of the Sufi mausoleum of Seku Amadu, founder of the Fulani Empire of Massina. Attacks, rightly or wrongly attributed to the FLM, increased in the months that followed. In August 2015, this culminated in the attack at Sevaré, the headquarters of the international forces, which claimed 12 victims among personnel of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

Numerous attacks also took place near the border with Burkina Faso. Anti-terrorist operations conducted in this area, accompanied by large-scale searches and ‘sweep’ operations, drove large numbers of Fulanis to cross the border. From January 2016, and increasingly towards the end of that year, various provinces in the Sahel region in Burkina Faso were also targeted by attacks, largely perpetrated by Fulani combatants.<sup>8</sup> While clashes involving the FLM continued to increase in number and violence in Mali, including a number of massacres in the spring of 2016,<sup>9</sup> in Burkina Faso new armed groups appeared. These groups included Ansarul Islam, led by Malaam (‘master’) Ibrahim Dicko, a former comrade of Hamadoun Koufa, and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), led by the former leader of MUJAO,

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7. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Mali – justice in process, Paris, March 2014; Human Rights Watch (HRW), Mali: Lawlessness, abuses imperil population, HRW Report, New York, April 2015.

8. International Crisis Group (ICG), Nord du Burkina Faso: Ce que cache le jihad, Rapport Afrique, 254, Dakar/Brussels, 2017.

9. ICG, Central Mali: An uprising in the making? Rapport Afrique, 238, Dakar/Brussels, July 2016.

Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi. Between September and October 2016, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi was also responsible for a series of attacks in Niger, in particular in Tillabéri region, targeting Malian refugee camps. From the end of 2016, the 'baya' or declaration of allegiance of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi's group was recognised by the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

In the months and years since, the attacks have only increased in number in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This is evidence of the growing grip of armed groups active in the central Sahel that align themselves with armed Salafism. In this constantly evolving context, disentangling the perpetrators and drivers for the attacks is extremely difficult. The armed groups rapidly change their names, locations, configurations and alliances, and the boundaries between them are as porous as those between the states of the central Sahel.

### 1.3 Improving the response through greater understanding

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The armed groups linked to jihadism that have been operating in the central Sahel have had a disruptive effect on the fragile social fabric locally. Their presence has disrupted the social landscape and hit communities directly through armed attacks. It has also impacted on communities indirectly, not only through the armed groups' continual presence and the threat they pose to communities, but also because of the appeal they can exert by providing social services, sources of income and an alternative to the state.

Although conflict is not new to the region, its integration into the religious discourse calling for jihad is far from evident. The aim of this study therefore is to better understand and identify the factors that have led to the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel and the reactions of local communities to this unprecedented phenomenon. More specifically, the study seeks to explore the role of young Fulani men and women who are simultaneously its victims, targets and protagonists. As they explore the possibility of renegotiating their place within a hierarchical and gerontocratic society, it is imperative to recognise the factors that help to shape these young people's vulnerability or, alternatively, strengthen their resilience to the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel.

The research also considers the impact of the crisis response by national and international actors in the region. It is planned that the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) should become fully operational in 2018. Drawing on political and economic support from international actors, including the European Union, the aim is to facilitate better coordination of the DSF of the five Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Deployment in the regions covered by this research seems to be a priority.

At the same time, the stated objectives of the FC-G5S in the spheres of economic development assistance have been progressively sidelined in favour of a wholly security-based stance. Although driven by the context of urgency, a superficial and hasty response that is not based on solid conflict analysis and a far-reaching assessment of the conditions on the ground is inappropriate for the complexity of the challenges posed by the crisis in the central Sahel. In fact, it risks aggravating the problems, exacerbating tensions and increasing the vulnerability of communities to violent extremism. This report therefore seeks to decode the issues in order to help the actors involved to identify appropriate and realistic solutions.

Fulani herders trade livestock at a weekly cattle market, Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © IRENE ABDOU/ALAMY



## 2. Methodology

What factors contribute to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism among young Fulanis in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger)?

In recent years, violent extremism in the Sahel has attracted growing attention from the political and academic communities. This study is neither the first nor the only one to examine this phenomenon. In an effort to respect the realities on the ground, the methodological approach was carefully refined to bring it closer to the reality of the phenomena it seeks to describe. The conceptual framework was therefore not simply imported (or imposed) in an abstract way from outside. Instead, it was constantly reviewed and adjusted based on exchanges with the target communities.

## 2.1 Conceptual framework

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### ***Violent extremism***

There is no consensus on the concept of violent extremism. Despite its frequent use, the term remains somewhat ambiguous due to the lack of a universally accepted definition. Like terrorism, violent extremism is not clearly defined in international law. The UN Secretary General's Action Plan<sup>10</sup> notes that: "Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition." Its use as an academic category is also contested: the notion of violent extremism is more in keeping with the political and security practices of counter-terrorism than with the precision demanded by scholarly discourse.<sup>11</sup> Most studies on violent extremism are modelled on European dynamics<sup>12</sup> and the repetition of imported analytical frameworks risks losing sight of the local character of any radicalisation process.<sup>13</sup> The terminology of violent extremism does not have any equivalent in the discourse and practices of those it claims to describe.

Our research confirms that this is particularly true in the Sahel. In Tillabéri region, for instance, the communities most exposed to the actions of armed groups aligning themselves with jihadism do not understand the concept of violent extremism, but they immediately understand when the name 'Al-Qaeda' is used (although, notably, the groups active in the region are supposed to have declared allegiance to Islamic State). Most of the Nigerien institutional actors we interviewed for the research highlighted the inappropriateness of the concepts of violent extremism and radicalisation to the local conflict. In Burkina Faso, it is more common to refer to 'Irshad' (a reference to the organisation led by Ibrahim Dicko before he took up arms) or to armed groups in general.

In Mali, on the other hand, the concept of armed groups refers to the movements that were signatories to the Algiers Accord (Accord for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali) – the armed groups which, in theory, cut all links with armed jihadism (but which some representatives of the Malian government describe as extremists or even terrorists). In order to describe the array of groups that might be defined as violent extremists, the communities in the Mopti region tend to use the carefully ambiguous term 'people from the bush', which enables them to simultaneously distance themselves and withhold any value judgement.

For reasons of simplicity and ease of expression, this study retains the term violent extremism – without inverted commas, as discussed and selected by the research team – as a synonym for armed jihadi groups. Nevertheless, an awareness of the limitations of this term demands critical vigilance and a degree of care in its use, especially in the Sahelian context. Furthermore, as pointed out by the Sahelian researchers, the absence of a clear definition of violent extremism as a concept is not only incompatible with the principle of legality, but it also paves the way for human rights abuses: authoritarian regimes can exploit this ambiguity to try to delegitimise political adversaries. Numerous examples of this can be found throughout the Sahel.

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10. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to extremism in Africa*, New York, September 2017.

11. Kundnani, A., *Radicalisation: The journey of a concept*, *Race and Class*, 54(2), 2012.

12. Macaluso, A., *From countering to preventing radicalization through education: Limits and opportunities*, The Hague Institute for Global Justice Working Paper 18, The Hague, October 2016.

13. Coolsaet, R., *All radicalisation is local. The genesis and drawbacks of an elusive concept*, Egmont Paper 84, Brussels, October 2016.

## **Radicalisation**

The concept of radicalisation seeks to explain the process that leads individuals to embrace doctrines which radically contest the status quo. The European Commission drew on this definition for its 2005 report, 'Addressing the factors contributing to violent radicalisation', to increase understanding of the root causes of violent extremism as a social phenomenon. Like the concept of violent extremism, 'radicalisation' as a concept is rejected by the communities it is intended to describe, being viewed as a western label that is stigmatising and inadequate to describe local realities. In the regions examined here, the term 'radical' ideology is poorly understood and confusing. The different branches of Salafism, which provide the general frame of reference for religious radicalisation, are defined differently depending on the country: Sunnis or Wahhabis in Mali, Izalists in Niger and 'Irshad' in the Burkina Faso Sahel. These branches are generally opposed to 'traditional' Islam (associated with Sufism, marabouts and brotherhoods), which is inspired by the Maliki school that permeates religious discourse and practice in the region. The dichotomy between traditional Sufism and a reformist Salafist Islam has been challenged<sup>14</sup> and now only retains a textbook analytical value. More generally, it has been shown that the idea of a division between a tolerant and peaceable 'Black' Islam and a fundamentally uncompromising and violent 'Arab' Islam is purely a colonial construct with no academic merit.<sup>15</sup>

## **Vulnerability versus resilience**

The terms vulnerability and resilience seek to capture the two opposite ends of a spectrum of possible reactions, ranging from active engagement with and voluntary enrolment in violent extremist groups to the ability to resist adherence of any kind to the discourse and practices of these groups. Indicators of vulnerability include attraction to or voluntary cooperation with such groups, the exacerbation of conflicts defined in religious terms, and engagement in and recruitment to the groups. In contrast, indicators of community resilience include marginalisation of these groups, rejection of their messages or narratives, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully.

It should be noted that neither vulnerability nor resilience imply a passive attitude or victim mentality. Instead, they involve an active, deliberate approach in response to a possibility that has emerged and become accessible to communities – the possibility of choosing to join violent extremist groups. Voluntary enlisting and enrolment into such groups thus represents an indicator of the level of vulnerability or, where these actions do not take place, of the level of resilience among communities in the face of violent extremism which is rampant in the region. The emphasis on the shift from word to deed – the act of joining an armed group – acknowledges the difficulties inherent in analysing and measuring radicalisation from a purely ideological perspective, as has been observed in the academic literature,<sup>16</sup> and which is consistent with the most recent studies on this subject.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Amselle, J-L., *Islams africains: La préférence soufie*, Paris: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2017.

15. ICG, *Islam et politique au Mali: Entre réalité et fiction*, Rapport Afrique, 248, Dakar/Brussels, 2017a; Lecocq, B., *Distant shores: A historiographic view on Trans-Saharan space*, *Journal of African History*, 56(1), 2015.

16. Macaluso, A., *From countering to preventing radicalization through education: Limits and opportunities*, The Hague Institute for Global Justice Working Paper 18, The Hague, October 2016; Pellerin, M., *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel*, Notes de l'IFRI, Paris, February 2017.

17. UNDP, *Journey to extremism in Africa*, New York, September 2017.

## Youth

The concept of youth is extremely elastic and relative, and it changes depending on the context. In the regions and countries studied here, legal texts and traditions agree that youth covers those aged between 0 and 35. Thus, in order to gather the opinions of ‘young people’, our research focused on people under 36 years of age. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in this context, the notion of ‘youth’ should not be defined too rigidly. Apart from the numerical threshold, in the hierarchical societies of the central Sahel the line between youth and adulthood is also determined by an individual’s social, marital and occupational status. Typically, a man is recognised as an adult from the moment his work enables him to set up his own home, marry and become the head of a household. These steps allow him, in turn, to take part in decision-making in his village. At the same time, social achievement is restricted by default to certain categories or ‘castes’ (warriors) and is almost inaccessible to anyone else (former slaves). Women are also subjected to a perpetual minority status in relation to men and their status evolves in stages through marriage and motherhood, both of which contribute to their social respectability. Sahelian anthropology refers to the concept of ‘social minors’ (*cadets sociaux*)<sup>18</sup> to describe all those whose status attracts low levels of recognition. Recently, unemployment, population growth and the use of violence have led to a general questioning of social status and age categories.

## 2.2 Research hypotheses

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Existing studies have provided an analytical basis from which to formulate a number of initial hypotheses on factors that contribute to the resilience or vulnerability of young Fulani men and women exposed to violent extremism in the Sahel.

Several analyses highlight the significance of intense conflicts over access to declining natural resources in the central Sahel, which provide fertile ground for all kinds of ideological manipulation.<sup>19</sup> Underpinning these tensions, some authors consider that inter-ethnic and community polarisation (between herders and settled farmers or between herders) plays a major role.<sup>20</sup> Others point to the significance of intra-ethnic conflicts, which set land-owning chieftaincies against marginalised ‘*cadets sociaux*’ (those who are subject to the authority of elders, e.g. women and children).<sup>21</sup>

Since the inhabitants of the central Sahel, and young people in particular, are significantly affected by unemployment, under-employment and poverty in general, purely economic motivations (‘the pursuit of money’) are often cited as an explanation for opportunistic membership of violent extremist groups.<sup>22</sup> Ideological influences are another theory to consider, especially in a context characterised by the crisis in state education, the declining legitimacy of traditional religions and the increasing power of radical

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19. Bagayoko, N., Ba, B., Sangaré, B. and Sidibé, K., Gestion des ressources naturelles et configuration des relations de pouvoir dans le centre du Mali: Entre ruptures et continuité, ASSN, Bamako, June 2017; Djontu, H. and Gatelier, K., Conflit au Nord-Tillabéri: Analyse du conflit des ressources naturelles. Le transfrontalier au cœur de l’analyse et de l’action, Modus Operandi, Niamey, May 2017.

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21. Sangaré, B., Le Centre du Mali: Épicentre du djihadisme?, Note d’Analyse du GRIP, Brussels, May 2016; Thiam, A., Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d’une crise négligée, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, March 2017.

22. Tinti, P., The jihadi from the block, Foreign Policy, 19 March 2013.

Islamist discourses, such as Salafism, Wahhabism and Izzalism.<sup>23</sup> Other studies have illustrated the role of the demand for protection from marginalised communities facing abuses (or perceptions of abuse) perpetrated by armed forces – state and non-state – and the lack of response from the authorities.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, there is a need to examine the impact of tensions associated with the constructs of social and gender roles (such as access to marriage, community expectations, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and the crisis of the patriarchal system) on the propensity of young people, men and women, to join armed groups. This has been shown in a number of studies on this topic in other parts of Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Box 1 summarises the theories outlined above in terms of factors that may potentially explain the tendency towards vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism.

**Box 1:** Potential factors explaining vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism

1. Conflicts around access to natural resources
2. Economic and material motivations, poverty and the pursuit of money
3. Response to poor governance: corruption, harassment, impunity and arbitrary violence
4. Ideological radicalisation
5. Inter-ethnic polarisation
6. Intra-ethnic polarisation
7. Gender relations

Although all these theories are somewhat plausible, the studies conducted to date are not able to chart the interrelationships between the different factors (which may be contradictory), the relative weight of each of them (which may in some cases be non-existent) and the degree to which they are adapted to and found across the Sahel region as a whole. In other words, previous studies do not seem to have taken sufficient account of the potential issues of equifinality, multiple causality and asymmetry.

The use of a research approach inspired by qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), with appropriate adaptations, seeks to address these shortcomings. It draws on existing studies by analysing their results on the basis of new evidence. This methodology is well suited to explain the variation in results across a limited number of similar cases in relation to phenomena such as political violence.<sup>26</sup> The particular strength of the results presented here is found precisely in the ‘second-level’ nature of the research. Therefore, this study endeavours to introduce an investigative framework which: a) evaluates the relevance of each of the theories outlined above in the Sahelian context; b) identifies the relative importance of each of the potential explanatory factors; and c) identifies similarities and differences in the regions studied.

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23. Arnaud, C., *Jeunes femmes sahéliennes: Dynamiques d'exclusion, moyens d'insertion*, AFD Notes Techniques 15, Paris, March 2016; Kepel, G., *The roots of radical Islam*, London: Saqi Books, 2005.

24. Thérout-Bénoni, L.-A. and Assarvo, W., *Mali's young 'jihadists': Fuelled by faith or circumstance?*, Institute for Security Studies, Policy Brief 89, Dakar, August 2016; ICG, *Nord du Burkina Faso: Ce que cache le jihad*, Rapport Afrique, 254, Dakar/Brussels, 2017b; UNDP, *Journey to extremism in Africa*, New York, September 2017.

25. *Interpeace, Au-delà de l'idéologie et de l'appât du gain: Trajectoires des jeunes vers les nouvelles formes de violence en Côte d'Ivoire et au Mali*, Rapport de recherche participative de l'IMRAP, Abidjan, October 2016; Ndung'u, I. and Salifu, U., *The role of women in violent extremism in Kenya*, Institute for Security Studies, East Africa Report 12, Nairobi, May 2017.

26. Brady, H. and Collier, D., *Rethinking social inquiry: Diverse tools, shared standards*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

## 2.3 Units of analysis and data sources

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Vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism are phenomena that are rooted in intersubjective relationships. Thus, they cannot be reduced to purely individual dynamics, located solely in the psychology of the subject and detached from the social context. In the face of violent extremism, vulnerability and resilience are properties that belong to the community rather than to individuals, which is why this study chose to select villages and communities as the units of analysis for the relevance of each factor. This also means that a pathological and stigmatising understanding of the phenomena studied can be rejected in favour of a rigorous and ethical research approach. For each village, the task was therefore to determine, with the help of local data, the relevance of each factor and ultimately to ascertain whether the prevailing trait in each village was resilience or vulnerability.

Local data were collected by local research teams (LRTs) comprising one principal researcher and one assistant for each country. All members of the team had excellent local background knowledge, access to local facilitators and spoke the Fulfulde language fluently (all the researchers were Fulanis). In each of the regions covered by the study (Mopti region in Mali, Sahel region in Burkina Faso and Tillabéri region in Niger), the LRTs targeted four villages: Boni, Konna, Yorbou and Ouro Guérou in Mali; Arrayel, Firgindi, Gargassa and Soffokel in Burkina Faso; and Petel Polli (Tinfitan), Daya Peul, Boni Peul and Tchourkoundi in Niger. To ensure consistent measurement and evaluation, the criteria for identifying the villages included a number of indicators, evaluated on the basis of the expertise of the local researchers, the local experience of International Alert, the available literature on exposure to violent extremism, and a range of apparent tendencies towards vulnerability or resilience. In other words, violent extremism was a current reality in all the villages studied, but young Fulanis' support for it was only observed in some of the villages.

In each village, the LRTs organised focus groups of between five and 10 participants representing three target groups: a) the general population, with a mix of age, sex, civil status, social position and ethnicity categories; b) young Fulani men, especially herders; and c) women, especially Fulanis.<sup>27</sup> The focus groups aimed to distinguish the inherent collective dynamics and capture the intersubjective relationships in order to inform the relevant indicators of the different explanatory factors. To refine the information available and better triangulate the observations, the LRTs also conducted individual interviews with local resource persons (representatives of chieftaincies, local administrations, the DSF, armed groups, violent extremists, civil society, young people and women).<sup>28</sup> Other interviews were conducted by the principal researchers in the capitals (Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey) – in particular, with political decision-makers, representatives of the security sector, journalists, academics, diplomats and representatives of the international community (United Nations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and funders), and members of civil society at the national level.

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27. A local female mediator was sometimes enlisted to facilitate the operation of focus groups targeting women. While this study sought to focus particular attention on the influence of gender relations in the rise of violent extremism, data collection in this area was particularly complex.

28. In the majority of cases, the focus groups and individual interviews were organised by the LRTs in the participants' villages. Close access to primary sources who were hard to reach due to security constraints was certainly one of this study's greatest assets. The professionalism of the LRTs, the high level of acceptance of International Alert within the communities and the adoption of a security protocol agreed with the organisation helped to ensure the safety of all participants to the greatest possible degree. In some cases, it was deemed preferable to conduct the research activities away from combat zones in locations that guaranteed better conditions regarding the transparency of the exchanges, the duty of care to the interviewees and the safety of the LRTs.

The entire field study, with all the sources, took place between December 2017 and January 2018. The study had an empirical base of 36 focus groups in total (three focus groups in four villages in the three countries), each made up of between five and 10 participants, and 54 individual interviews (14 in Mali, 16 in Burkina Faso and 24 in Niger). The comparative analysis of the qualitative data seeks to identify the factors that are fundamental, sufficient or necessary to determine the vulnerability or resilience of Fulani communities in the central Sahel who are exposed to violent extremism.

## 2.4 Processing the data

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The information collected was analysed using an evaluation grid derived from the qualitative comparative analysis. At the same time, the need to value the richness of the qualitative data led to some adaptations to better adjust the methodological framework to the specific needs and themes of this study. Given the importance of the subjective and qualitative factors examined here, such as perceptions, identities and social divisions, the study of violent extremism is an area that is particularly sensitive to well-known issues around the reliability of quantitative analyses of political phenomena in fragile states.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the research sought to minimise the formal rigidity of qualitative comparative analysis and indirect calibration methodologies.

During a data analysis workshop, the researchers took part in discussions, on the basis of which they awarded a value of between 0 and 2 to represent the relevance of each explanatory factor in the context of each village (0 = factor absent; 1 = factor present but not very evident; 2 = factor present, evident and significant).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, for each village the level of vulnerability or resilience to violent extremism was determined (R = resilient; PV = partially vulnerable; V = vulnerable) based on common indicators.<sup>31</sup> The intersubjective nature of this approach benefited from different perspectives and expertise, and thus minimised the risk of potential bias that typically affects the direct calibration procedure.

The synoptic table (Table 1) provides an overview of the results obtained. The richness of the research hypotheses, on the one hand, and the objective constraints of a study conducted in conditions where access was particularly difficult, on the other hand, leads to an inevitable disproportionality between the total number of possible logical configurations (27=128) and the limited diversity of the cases actually observed (12, equivalent to slightly under 10%). At the same time, all the empirical configurations

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29. Jerven, M., *Poor numbers. How we are misled by African development statistics and what to do about it*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.

30. The specific calibration criteria considered inevitably vary depending on the factors: 1) frequency and intensity (number of victims) of conflicts linked to access to natural resources, according to the respondents; 2) prevalence of unemployment and under-employment among young men and women before the beginning of the conflict (i.e. independent of it) and the level of stigmatisation of those not in employment; 3) frequency of mentions of the DSF among those threatening the peace and security of the communities, frequency of mentions of conduct by the authorities perceived as abusive, intensity of harassment experienced (number of civilian victims); 4) presence of radical imams, presence of alternative educational facilities, recurrence of favourable opinions regarding the application of Sharia law; 5) frequency of mentions of other ethnic groups among those threatening the peace and security of the communities, frequency and intensity (number of victims) of conflicts with other ethnic groups or community militias; 6) frequency of mentions by young people regarding the conduct of traditional authorities perceived as abusive, frequency of identity-based references mentioning sub-ethnic groupings; 7) frequency of mentions of cases where women had directly joined violent extremist groups or indirectly supported them (provision of hospitality, discourse and encouragement).

31. R = no young person in the village had joined a violent extremist group; PV = a few young people (1–2) from the village had supposedly joined a violent extremist group, evidence in the village of rhetorical support for violent extremists; V = several young people from the village had joined violent extremist groups, evidence in the village of rhetorical and practical support for violent extremists.

observed are different, thereby reducing the need for a subsequent reduction in a classic truth-table. This complexity has an impact on the constraints of a research field that is still in its infancy, calling for potentially risky assumptions to be restricted to the minimum. In order to produce meaningful and parsimonious results, these observations prompted two complementary strategic choices to adapt the research approach to the realities on the ground. They are reported here for the sake of transparency. Firstly, this study focuses less on identifying complex causality configurations and more on looking for particularly significant individual causal factors as necessary or sufficient conditions influencing the vulnerability or resilience of young Fulanis in the central Sahel in the cases observed. Secondly, therefore, comparing empirical observations and descriptive formulations is prioritised here over numerical algorithmic minimisation procedures involving the use of logical reminders.

In this respect, the intermediate values (1 and PV) allow for a nuanced interpretation of the research data. However, it is the analysis of the exclusive values (0 and 2) which particularly serves to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for vulnerability (V) or resilience (R). Thus, the methodology employed here is similar to the binary qualitative comparative analysis approach (crisp-set QCA), although it does not automatically reproduce the standardised procedures of this method. To increase confidence in the results thus obtained, a demanding coherence threshold was used to identify individual factors as necessary and/or sufficient conditions for vulnerability or resilience, by adopting the following definitions.

**Box 2:** Definitions used to determine whether individual factors are necessary and/or sufficient conditions for vulnerability or resilience

- An explanatory factor (F1, F2, F3, ...) is a necessary condition for vulnerability if each time the result V is produced in the cases observed, the factor is clearly present (value 2).
- An explanatory factor (F1, F2, F3, ...) is a necessary condition for resilience if each time the result R is produced in the cases observed, the factor is clearly absent (value 0).
- An explanatory factor (F1, F2, F3, ...) is a sufficient condition for vulnerability if in each occurrence of the cases observed where the factor is clearly present (value 2), the result V is produced.
- An explanatory factor (F1, F2, F3, ...) is a sufficient condition for resilience if in each occurrence of the cases observed where the factor is clearly absent (value 0), the result R is produced.

Minimising the use of rigid, formal procedures thus enables the empirical diversity of the contexts studied to be better integrated into the processing and interpretation of the data. This approach invites the reader to consider the results of this research based on the standards of qualitative research, such as flexibility, fine-grained analysis and contextual specificity.

**Table 1:** Synoptic table of the study results

Village	Country	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Profile
Boni	Mali	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	PV
Konna	Mali	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	PV
Yorbou	Mali	2	1	2	1	2	0	1	V
Ouro Guérou	Mali	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	V
Arrayel	Burkina Faso	0	1	2	1	0	2	1	V
Firgindi	Burkina Faso	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	PV
Gargassa	Burkina Faso	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	R
Soffokel	Burkina Faso	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	R
Petel Polli	Niger	2	2	2	0	2	0	2	V
Daya Peul	Niger	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	R
Boni Peul	Niger	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	V
Tchourkoundi	Niger	0	2	1	0	2	0	1	PV

**Table 2:** Focus on the vulnerable villages

Village	Country	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Profile
Yorbou	Mali	2	1	2	1	2	0	1	V
Ouro Guérou	Mali	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	V
Arrayel	Burkina Faso	0	1	2	1	0	2	1	V
Petel Polli	Niger	2	2	2	0	2	0	2	V
Boni Peul	Niger	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	V

**Table 3:** Focus on the resilient villages

Village	Country	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	Profile
Gargassa	Burkina Faso	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	R
Soffokel	Burkina Faso	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	R
Daya Peul	Niger	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	R



Fulani women at the Cure Salée festival, marking the end of the rainy season, Niger.  
PHOTO: © ALICE MUTASA/ALAMY

### 3. Comparative analysis of the factors contributing to violent extremism in the central Sahel

In the face of different and sometimes contradictory theories, a better understanding of the factors that shape resilience or vulnerability to violent extremism among young Fulani men and women in the central Sahel makes it easier to identify courses of action to strengthen community resilience. This section considers the merits of each of these factors and their capacity to explain more comprehensively why the target groups might be more or less likely to exhibit vulnerability or resilience when faced with violent extremism. Nuanced responses are required. Not all the explanatory factors considered here are present in the same way in each of the villages examined and, despite all being exposed to the phenomenon of violent extremism, not all the villages present the same degree of vulnerability or resilience.

### 3.1 Factor 1: Conflict over access to natural resources – a governance issue

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The fragile equilibrium between the different ways of life and livelihoods of people living in the central Sahel have traditionally been determined by the rhythms of the rainy seasons, the rise and fall of the waters of the River Niger, and the rotations of transhumant herd movements. Competition for access to water and pasture has certainly given rise to conflicts, typically between herders or between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers. At the same time, climate change and demographic pressure have only served to exacerbate these dynamics. However, far from being automatically determined by ‘natural’ factors, violent conflicts seem to erupt especially due to shortcomings in governance systems and failings of conflict resolution mechanisms meant to regulate access to natural resources.<sup>32</sup> This may explain the marked differences in the relevance of this factor in the three countries, despite the fact that they are exposed to the same climatic and demographic trends. Conflicts over access to natural resources are very prevalent in the Mopti region, moderately frequent in Tillabéri region and virtually absent in the Burkinabe Sahel.

Understanding the different systems of governance of natural resources is therefore vital. The differences in ethnic and social composition as well as superimposed legal traditions help to explain the variations observed in the three regions. In the Burkinabe Sahel, and especially in Soum Province, the Fulanis make up the vast majority of the population and their traditional leaders, the ‘djowros’, manage the land uncontested. Conflicts are generally resolved peacefully and by consensus because traditional governance is not questioned.

Livestock thefts are often cited as the root of the Fulanis’ deep-seated frustration and their demand for protection.

In Niger, the opposite is true: although the Fulanis see themselves as the ‘original inhabitants’ of Tillabéri region, the land does not belong to them and conflicts over land and natural resources often set them against Zarma farmers and the Tuareg herders of the Daoussakh tribe who actually control the land. Since customary law is ambiguous and generates misunderstandings, the Fulanis of Tillabéri region are more inclined than those in the other countries to take their grievances to court. Nevertheless, the Fulanis in the villages studied believe that the justice system systematically penalises them because the judges are corrupt and other ethnic groups collude with the administration. The complete impunity in the wake of numerous livestock thefts by the Daoussakhs on both sides

of the border with Mali, over a period of at least 20 years, is often cited as being at the root of the Fulanis’ deep-seated frustration and their demand – unfulfilled – for protection. Given the state’s lack of action, a sense of abandonment and a gradual loss of trust in the authorities drove the Fulanis to take up arms to protect themselves.

This is an aspect that is specific to Tillabéri region compared with the rest of Niger. In other regions, the presence of the authorities and the relatively swift adoption of effective measures (such as territorial

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32. This confirms what has long been reported by other studies (see, for example, Homer-Dixon, T., Environmental scarcities and violent conflict: Evidence from cases, *International Security*, 19(1), 1994; Benjaminsen, T., Alinon, K., Buhaug, H. and Buseth, J., Does climate change drive land-use conflicts in the Sahel?, *Journal of Peace Research*, 49(1), 2012).

monitoring, the rule of law and marking out the land) have enabled the more significant episodes of communal violence over access to natural resources to be quickly contained. More recently, the conflict in Mali exacerbated these dynamics because the insecurity hindered herd movements and thus intensified the conflicts over access to natural resources. Further east, where the Nigerien border provides space for decompression and greater movement, it appears that tensions of this kind do not escalate as much and conflicts are more sporadic.

It is in the Mopti region that competition for control of access to land and water has generated the most violent conflicts, the severity of which was acknowledged by all respondents in the four villages assessed. Customary governance of natural resources and land in central Mali is derived from the Diina system, established by the Fulani Massina Empire of Seku Amadu in the 19th century. Since then, the control of 30 pastoral areas has been allocated to the djowros who are drawn from a limited number of aristocratic Fulani families.

The process of modernisation has called into question this societal organisation. Customary rights were largely ignored by Malian law, while development strategies were clearly oriented towards the agricultural sector. At the same time, the decentralisation initiated in the early 1990s has progressively given power to the traditional leaders, including the families of the djowros, in order to strengthen Bamako's influence over the peripheral regions. The hybridisation of the clientelist networks in power, as well as the gaps between customary law and substantive law (which, for example, does not recognise the same concept of land ownership), have led to the questioning of both public and customary authorities' legitimacy.<sup>33</sup> The insecurity triggered by the 2012 crisis only served to exacerbate the existing tensions, with the subsequent undermining of land titles, the implosion of the dispute resolution mechanisms and the intensification of violent conflicts.

In the face of explosive tensions in the three countries, when extremist groups manage to gain control of an area, they are often perceived by the local communities as a force capable of re-establishing law and order. Even the summary brutality of the Sharia law introduced by the jihadis appears preferable to the corrupt impunity that results from anarchy and poor governance. In the areas they control, the jihadi groups draw inspiration from a rudimentary interpretation of Islamic law to settle disputes, ensure 'judgements' are followed up and implemented, punish the guilty and compensate the victims. Against a background of state shortcomings, the jihadis are appreciated for the fact that their 'justice' is free, honest, speedy and effective, even when it crosses the line into intimidation and cruelty: "The conflicts over access to resources are lessening because the guys from the bush have taken matters in hand and they settle things fairly. Nowadays, we're even scared to argue amongst ourselves."<sup>34</sup> According to testimonies collected by way of examples, the violent extremist groups have forced the djowros to significantly reduce the fees they charge herders for access to the pastures. They protect the livestock and ensure the rules of transhumance are respected, but do not hesitate to punish any disobedience, including any attempt to object, with summary executions.

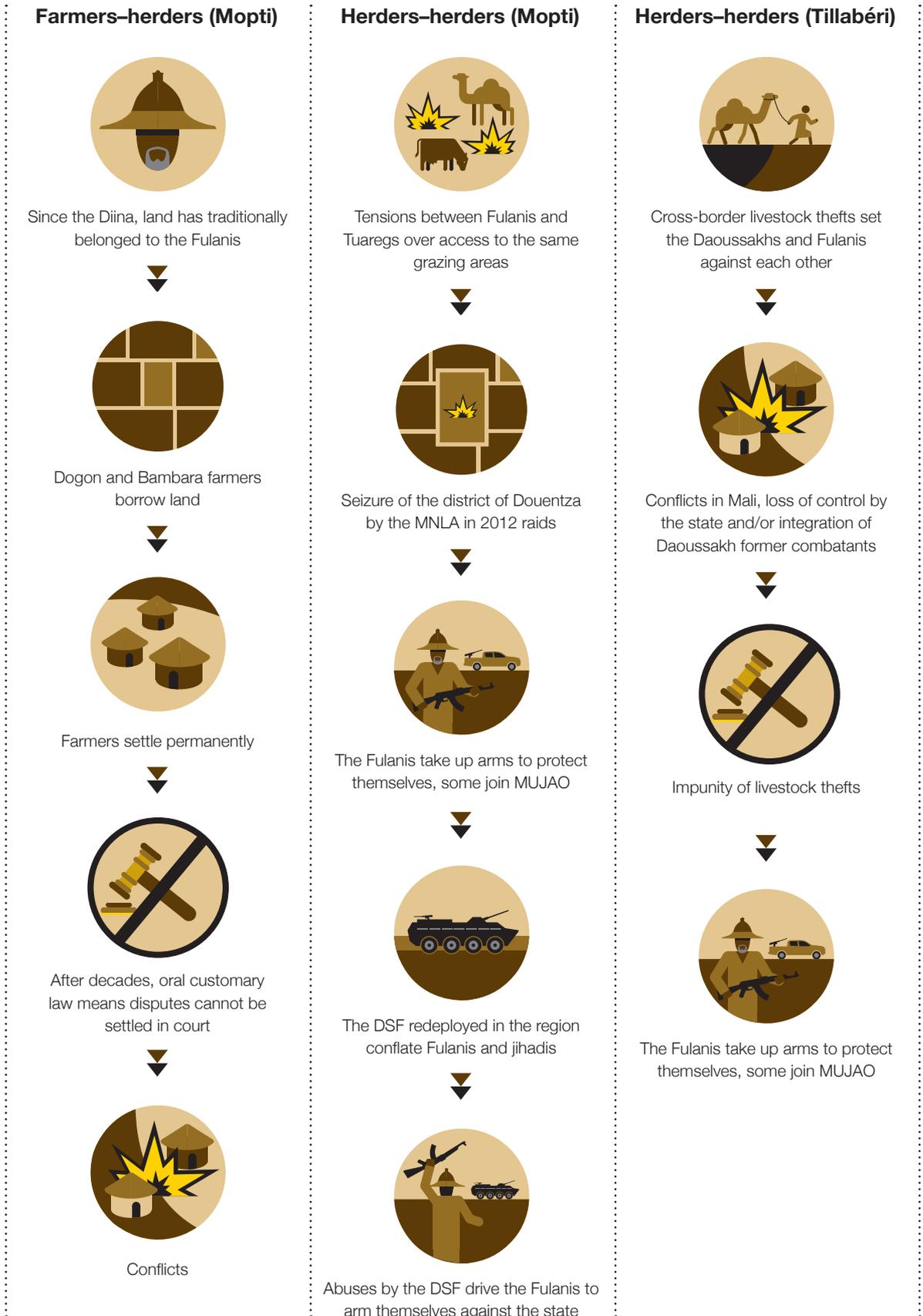
Even the summary brutality of the Sharia law introduced by the jihadis appears preferable to the corrupt impunity that results from anarchy and poor governance.

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33. Van Veen, E., Goff, D. and Van Damme, T., Beyond dichotomy: Recognising and reconciling legal pluralism in Mali, Clingendael Report, The Hague, October 2015.

34. Focus group in Yorbou.

**Figure 2:** Some typologies of violent conflicts over access to natural resources



The people interviewed in Yorbou confirmed that: “Land conflicts are very common. It’s because of the injustice of the authorities which leads to people taking justice in their own hands and retribution. But now the jihadis want to re-examine all the unfair judgements made by the Malian justice system.”<sup>35</sup> In Ouro Guérou, the self-proclaimed members of jihadi groups assert that: “The application of the Qur’an prevents violence in the community. If the hand of just one thief is cut off, no-one in Ouro Guérou will dare to steal again.”<sup>36</sup>

Similar statements were heard in Niger – for example, in the village of Petel Polli: “Young Fulanis joining armed groups has to some extent helped to safeguard the herders in the area and their families ... Before the jihadis, there was a lot of conflict [with the Tuaregs over livestock thefts and with the Zarmas over access to natural resources] and the jihadis brought young people from all the ethnic groups together to fight the Tuaregs. The Fulanis aren’t afraid of the Tuaregs and the Zarmas anymore.”<sup>37</sup> The way these practices are socially embedded means there is a real risk among communities of growing disaffection with state governance, of which they have largely negative memories. The return of the state may thus generate more resistance than enthusiasm, unless an inclusive process is undertaken to re-establish the bond of trust.

“ Young Fulanis joining armed groups has to some extent helped to safeguard the herders in the area and their families ... The Fulanis aren’t afraid of the Tuaregs and the Zarmas any more.

However, for all the localities studied, these observations do not lead to the conclusion that unresolved conflicts over access to natural resources represent a necessary or sufficient condition for greater vulnerability or resilience among communities in response to violent extremism. In fact, a number of villages in Burkina Faso, such as Arrayel, displayed a high level of vulnerability, despite not having experienced violent land conflicts. In contrast, none of the resilient localities exhibited an increased level of conflict around access to natural resources. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that good governance of natural resources is a contributory factor to community resilience towards violent extremism, but not necessarily sufficient in itself.

Some examples of good practice already implemented in the countries and regions studied could strengthen this tendency. For instance, marking out land, plots and boundaries, as practised in some regions in Niger, has prevented land conflicts from erupting. Similarly, training provided by local NGOs to communities in the Sahel and Tillabéri regions has facilitated ownership and understanding of the rules, both customary and formal, governing access to natural resources. Moreover, the examples from Niger and, most recently, from Mali show that land and grazing laws are more likely to be adopted, understood, supported and implemented if they are derived from an inclusive rather than a purely technocratic process and result in customary titles being formalised.

**Summary:** Conflict over access to natural resources

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	No
Sufficient condition	No	No

35. Focus group in Yorbou.

36. Interview with a jihadi from Ouro Guérou.

37. Focus group in Petel Polli.

### 3.2 Factor 2: Economic and material drivers, poverty and the lure of money – earning respect takes precedence over earning money

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The countries of the central Sahel are among the poorest in Africa. Unemployment and under-employment affect a significant proportion of communities, including young people. Precarious living conditions lead to the risk of social marginalisation because, due to existing social norms, lack of money prevents young men from marrying and crossing the symbolic threshold to adulthood. The lure of easy money is therefore often cited as one of the strategies employed by violent extremist groups to garner the support, albeit opportunistically, of a deprived and rebellious younger generation to their cause. However, a causal link between economic drivers and vulnerability to violent extremism is by no means clearly established. The results of this study show that, in some cases, economic drivers may be a contributing but not determining factor in young people's vulnerability to violent extremism. Yet again, nuanced analysis is required in response to the differences observed in the three regions studied.

For young men, joining violent extremist groups is more about a quest for recognition in society than opportunism.

In the Mopti region, poverty and unemployment were seen as high priorities among communities' security concerns, even before the outbreak of the crisis in the central Sahel.<sup>38</sup> In the majority of villages studied, unemployment affects several hundred individuals and is a source of severe social stigmatisation. The employment prospects for young people vary: traditionally, young women would be involved in small businesses or small-scale vegetable farming and young men would be employed in rearing livestock for sale. Irrespective of the uncertainties generated by conflict, while these activities generally enable young men and women to meet their basic needs, sometimes even comfortably, they nevertheless no longer award social respectability in line with existing traditional norms. For young men, this can easily lead them to question the way society is organised economically and morally. Joining violent extremist groups can provide a solution where the quest for recognition outweighs opportunistic drivers.

During interviews, the self-declared jihadis were the only ones to acknowledge that young unemployed men are not 'bandits', 'good-for-nothing' or 'thugs', but instead are unfortunates who deserve help.<sup>39</sup> However, this solidarity does not open up avenues to instant personal enrichment. The bulk of the resources of the violent extremist groups in the Mopti region comes from protection money collected from the community, 'spoils of war' and contributions from partners of Al-Qaeda.<sup>40</sup> This may sometimes provide access to personal items (a motorbike or weapons), and occasionally even a subsistence wage as well as a guarantee of status, but it will not lead to a vast fortune.

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38. DDG, Évaluations des risques sécuritaires aux frontières. Région du Liptako-Gourma: Mali, Burkina et Niger, Copenhagen, July 2014; Tobie, A., A fresh perspective on security concerns among Malian civil society, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, 2/2017, Stockholm, July 2017.

39. Interviews with jihadis from Ouro Guérou.

40. Since March 2017, the majority of Fulani armed jihadi groups in the Mopti region, including the FLM in particular, have pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda under the command of Ansar-Dine leader, Iyad Ag Ghali. The AQIM has substantial financial resources as a result of its involvement in trafficking and kidnappings (Lacher, W., Organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region, The Carnegie Papers, New York, September 2012; Daniel, S., Les mafias du Mali, Paris: Descartes et Cie, 2014). It is also likely that the various partners of the AQIM network receive a proportion of these financial resources to fund their activities.

According to those interviewed, the risks involved and the isolation from society prevent an easy and prosperous life. However, all the respondents acknowledged that joining armed groups that are signatories to the Algiers Agreement<sup>41</sup> provides free rein to indulge in all kinds of robbery, banditry, theft and trafficking, and to return to the village without risk of being targeted by the security forces. In other words, taking up arms with violent extremist groups brings more respect than money.

In the Burkinabe Sahel region, while the communities suspect that joining various armed groups occasionally brings certain luxuries, they do not condone the acquisition of property by means of weapons and violence, even in the villages most affected by extremist violence. They therefore tend to rule out the relevance of expediency as a driver in this context, since other much less risky activities, such as artisanal gold mining or migration, are more profitable.

In Tillabéri region, young people are even more affected by poverty and unemployment than in the other regions. According to a local administrator: “The north [of Tillabéri] has been abandoned by the state; there are no public services, people die of thirst, they drink water from ponds soiled by their own animals.”<sup>42</sup> Insecurity has only made the situation worse because the barriers to movement, the state of emergency and the withdrawal of NGOs have led to reduced economic prospects (with the possible exception of the village of Daya, which benefits from its proximity to the town of Ayorou). The ban on riding motorbikes, for example, has deprived many young people of their sole source of income.

According to local communities, this situation represents a determining factor in explaining the appeal for young people to violent extremism: “Youth unemployment is a major problem in our community, there’s so little employment ... That’s the main motivation for young people joining armed groups.”<sup>43</sup> Another focus group participant outlined: “The majority of young people from Boni [Fulani, in Tillabéri region] don’t have jobs, lots of them do nothing. They have nothing and they’re really poor. That’s what motivates some of them to turn to the armed groups and the organised crime that’s rife in the north of the country, a few kilometres from Boni. People know where the jihadi recruiters and their hideouts are. Violent extremism is an idea that appeals to young unemployed people.”<sup>44</sup>

Yet, the violent extremist groups in the Tillabéri area do not have significant financial resources. Although in 2012 MUJAO may have benefited financially from the various kinds of trafficking it helped to organise, Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi’s ISGS would have difficulty finding a place in the trafficking economy – by far the most profitable in the region, due to its political and geographical isolation. Thus, for young men from Tillabéri region, joining violent extremist groups does not seem to result

“ The majority of young people from Boni [Fulani, in Tillabéri region] don’t have jobs, lots of them do nothing. They have nothing and they’re really poor. That’s what motivates some of them to turn to the armed groups and the organised crime that’s rife in the north of the country...”

41. These include the armed groups admitted to the peace talks, some of which signed the Algiers Agreement from the outset, and other groups that have formed subsequently. Among those that are active in the Mopti region (but also to a lesser extent in Tillabéri region) are, in particular, the MNLA, the Imghad and Allies Tuareg Self-Defence Group (*Groupe armé Tuareg Imghad et Alliés*, GATIA), the Arab Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad*, MAA), the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (*Mouvement du salut de l’Azawad*, MSA) and the Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR).

42. Interview with a local authority representative, Petel Polli.

43. Focus group in Petel Polli.

44. Focus group in Boni Peul.

in substantial bonuses or even fixed wages, but only ‘resources’ (weapons, motorbikes and fuel) – the value of which is more symbolic and status related than economic. In other words, joining such groups constitutes “voluntary work with benefits”,<sup>45</sup> which in itself is sufficient to inspire admiration from young women and a desire to emulate by some young men with nothing to do: “Having weapons gives you a kind of prestige – young people from the villages are very influenced by the young armed bandits who drive around on motorbikes, well dressed and well fed. Young herders are very envious of them, they admire their appearance.”<sup>46</sup>

For young herders, joining a violent extremist group may not guarantee easy self-enrichment, but it is still a way of protecting the family’s modest capital from theft and raids.

For young unemployed men in Tillabéri region, there is a dual rationale for joining violent extremist groups. Firstly, it offers a chance of social redemption for a younger generation with nothing to do, who are without employment or other prospects, who feel useless and who “are even ready to form an alliance with the devil if it will make their lives meaningful”.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore the feeling of being fundamentally surplus to society which ignites in young men the desire for social recognition and a taste for adventure. Secondly, for young herders, joining a violent extremist group may not guarantee easy self-enrichment, but it is still a way of protecting the family’s modest capital – their livestock – from theft and raids by bandits and other ethnic groups. This is why in Tillabéri region, unlike other regions, those who take up arms are generally admired for their bravery and greeted as heroes when they return to the village. This generates dynamics rooted in social gender constructs: the young men who have gone ‘to the front’ are the pride and joy of their mothers and attract acclaim from young women.

Accordingly, in these two specific cases, simple greed for the purpose of personal enrichment provides an overly reductive perception of the economic drivers at play.

These observations show that, as a general rule, economic and material motivations such as the desire for personal enrichment and pursuit of money are not a key driver in explaining vulnerability to violent extremism among young people in the central Sahel. However, an absence of economic grievances and securing access to employment represents a sufficient condition to guarantee the resilience of young people in the face of violent extremism. Although this observation is only based on a limited number of cases due to the difficult conditions in the central Sahel, the results of this study reflect the conclusions of other studies, thus helping to corroborate the validity and general applicability of these inferences.

This confirms the strategic importance of development policies that can prevent the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel. Although insecurity currently threatens the adoption and implementation of ambitious, long-term projects, a number of people interviewed insisted that gold mining and migration (national, regional and international) could significantly strengthen the resilience of communities. The field data suggest that, in the eyes of young people, ‘taking to the road’ may offer a valid alternative to ‘taking up arms’ for both income and social respectability. As noted by a woman from Tchourkoundi: “I would choose migrant as the occupation for my husband – given the current situation, I think it would be a thousand times preferable for him to go somewhere else and work by the sweat of his brow

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45. Interview with a Fulani member of the elite, Niamey.

46. Interview with a Fulani member of the elite, Ayorou.

47. Interview with an international humanitarian worker, Niamey.

than to join these armed groups.”<sup>48</sup> However, the increasing barriers to migration routes and the criminalisation of migrants risk leaving few other options. The international community should choose its battles and priorities more carefully to avoid supporting incoherent policies.

“ I would choose migrant as the occupation for my husband – given the current situation, I think it would be a thousand times preferable for him to go somewhere else and work by the sweat of his brow than to join these armed groups.

**Summary:** Economic and material drivers, poverty and the lure of money

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	No
Sufficient condition	No	 Yes (absence of)

### 3.3 Factor 3: From corruption to physical violence – the impact of poor governance on violent extremism

Revolting against the perceived unfair and abusive conduct of state authorities is the reason most commonly cited by (“former”) combatants to justify joining violent extremist groups in Africa.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in the central Sahel, the abuses for which the state authorities are believed to be responsible have led to frustrations that have been exacerbated by impunity. The violent extremists have taken advantage of these failings to criticise ‘bad governance’ and ‘corruption’ by the state, in turn inciting communities to rebel and embrace an alternative political and social model, inspired by the Sharia.

The results of this study underline the relevance of this factor as being absolutely key in the Sahel. The legitimacy of institutions has declined substantially due to widespread poor governance, as evidenced by among other things the numerous cases of corruption, illegal trafficking and misuse of financial resources. This includes misuse of international development aid, which, after having been inefficiently allocated by Mali’s partners, has ended up supplying opaque networks.<sup>50</sup> According to representatives from Nigerien

48. Interview with a female leader, Tchourkoundi.

49. International Alert, They treat us all like jihadis, Policy brief, London, December 2016; Théroux-Bénoni, L-A. and Assanvo, W., Mali’s young ‘jihadists’: Fuelled by faith or circumstance?, Institute for Security Studies, Policy Brief 89, Dakar, August 2016; UNDP, Journey to extremism in Africa, New York, September 2017.

50. Bergamaschi, I., The fall of a donor darling: The role of aid in Mali’s crisis, The Journal of Modern African Studies, 52(3), 2014.

civil society: “The drug traffickers are members of parliament and ministers.”<sup>51</sup> The corruption which plagues public service provision shapes the day-to-day relationships between communities and the state, and thus fuels frustrations. Control exerted by clientelist networks prevents young people from accessing public sector employment and undermines meritocracy. While immense wealth is accumulated in the circles of power that have better access to the global economy, several million people in the Sahel are affected by structural malnutrition. Unlike in the past, it is now less a problem of availability and more one of access, and the perception of a natural disaster is gradually being replaced by one of social injustice.

Faced with these kinds of abuses, communities have completely lost trust in the ability of institutions to ensure justice that is effective, impartial and respectful. Rampant impunity only serves to increase the sense of impotence. In the Mopti region, the perception that justice is “sold to the highest bidder”<sup>52</sup> and “serves the wealthy”<sup>53</sup> is one that is shared in all the villages studied, especially among young people.<sup>54</sup>

At the root of many of the shortcomings and delays are the limited resources available to the justice sector. The recurring challenges facing the judicial system have been exacerbated by the adoption of criminal legislation that is vague in its definition of terrorism and by the excessively restrictive measures within the framework of counter-terrorism which are often adopted with the support of the Sahel countries’ international partners. Legal insecurity thus reinforces the precarious working conditions of the courts. This situation encourages some people to ‘oil the wheels’ of the courts to ensure priority and favourable treatment of their cases. In addition, the relative affluence of the Fulanis and the social stigma associated with imprisonment provides officials with lucrative opportunities for racketeering and extortion.

“*The impunity and partiality of the justice system create more frustrations than jihadism.*”

The interviewees in Burkina Faso stressed that: “The state should conduct proper investigations before pointing the finger at people or imprisoning them. Nowadays, you can easily be humiliated because you are seen as a guy from the bush and lumped together with the criminals ... The reality is that the people from the administration all want to build themselves big houses, so they abuse their power and ruin people.”<sup>55</sup> The profitability of public service posts in the regions of the central Sahel has become notorious. This is summarised by a representative of Nigerien civil society: “The impunity and partiality of the justice system create more frustrations than jihadism.”<sup>56</sup>

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51. Interview with Nigerien civil society actors, Niamey.

52. Focus group in Konna.

53. Focus group in Boni.

54. This corroborates the unanimous results of recent research on this issue (Afrobaromètre, *Le citoyen, l'État et la corruption*, Rapport de Sikasso, Sikasso, 2013; Hague Institute for the Internationalisation of Law (HIIIL), *The needs of the Malians for justice: Towards more fairness*, HIIIL policy report, The Hague, 2014; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Enquête d'opinion: Que pensent les Maliens?*, Mali-Mètre 7, Bamako, 2015).

55. Focus group in Gargassa.

56. Interview with a civil society representative, Niamey.

### Box 3: Jihadi 'avengers' respond to injustices of the justice system

Numerous examples confirm that violent extremism in the central Sahel is sustained by a willingness to do battle with a system seen as unfair and corrupt. In 2016, for example, a jihadi attack on the prison in the town of Niono allowed several dozen alleged terrorists to escape. They had been arrested during large-scale sweep operations which infringed constitutional guarantees. In November 2017, the Niono court judge was kidnapped from his home by armed men. A few weeks later, he appeared in a video appealing to the state to enter into talks with his abductors to negotiate his freedom in exchange for that of “combatants detained by the state”. According to local observers, the kidnapping of the Niono judge would have been specifically ordered by communities frustrated by the incessant abuses they suffer: “He was a bribe-taker, the people were fed up and they asked the terrorists to take him.”<sup>57</sup>

Relations between communities and the DSF are even more problematic. During the interviews and focus groups, communities from the three regions reported innumerable cases of ill-treatment, abusive violence, arbitrary arrests, extortion and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the DSF of all three countries. The water resources and forestry services were singled out as being responsible for harassment, ill-treatment and racketeering, particularly against disadvantaged Fulanis. At the same time, the deployment of the DSF in counter-terrorism operations in the central Sahel exacerbates a widespread sense of mistrust, as it involves dramatic and unprecedented abuses.

In the Mopti region, human rights organisations have reported cases of torture, forced disappearances and summary executions involving the military.<sup>58</sup> Off the record, they acknowledge that: “Sexual violence is widespread, but it is under-reported because people are afraid to talk about it.”<sup>59</sup> In the Burkinabe Sahel, following the government’s decision to secure the area by sending in large numbers of young, inexperienced soldiers, the communities reported the following: “Maltreatment and abuse at every turn ... When the army comes, they just round up everyone indiscriminately ... If they find you with a weapon, they don’t try to understand, they see you as a terrorist and you risk being killed on the spot.”<sup>60</sup> According to testimonies collected, many people have lost a loved one in these summary executions. NGOs active in Burkina Faso report that: “The response of the authorities was negative; it led to a rise in violence and radicalisation. The Burkinabe DSF raped women in front of their husbands and sons and summarily executed between 25 and 75 people, while others were kidnapped. The UN even had to launch an inquiry into these episodes because people are now more scared of the DSF than the jihadis.”<sup>61</sup>

This interpretation has also been confirmed by diplomatic sources: “In Ouagadougou, it’s hard to comprehend that the reprisals committed by the DSF are one of the main factors in the rise of violent extremism. Politically, we are told to maintain the greatest discretion on the subject, but the impact of the abuses is beginning to be felt and a lot of people feel uncomfortable.”<sup>62</sup> In the three countries, the

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57. Interview with an investigative journalist, Bamako.

58. FIDH, Mali – justice in process, Paris, March 2014; HRW, Mali: Lawlessness, abuses imperil population, HRW Report, New York, April 2015; MINUSMA, Human rights and the peace process in Mali (January 2016 – June 2017), MINUSMA and OHCHR Report, Bamako, February 2018.

59. Interview with a representative of a human rights NGO, Bamako. Sexual torture in the countries of the Sahel may affect men as well as women.

60. Focus group in Arrayel.

61. Interview with an NGO representative, Ouagadougou.

62. Interview with a European diplomat, Ouagadougou.

extended discretionary powers of the DSF due to a state of emergency being declared has exacerbated tensions and led to an increase in widespread abuses and impunity.

With the refusal by the authorities in both Mali and Burkina Faso to shed light on these episodes or even acknowledge they happened, the communities appear to have been abandoned to trauma and fear. For example, young people in the Burkinabe Sahel expressed the view that: “The only thing we can do when we suffer these abuses is to hold our tongues.”<sup>63</sup> The situation has led to a worrying shift in communities’ perceptions of security. In Mali and Burkina Faso, for instance, 75% of the villages surveyed listed the DSF among the entities threatening the peace and security of the communities; 62% openly expressed the desire to form self-defence militias to protect themselves against all kinds of abuse; and 50% said that violent extremist groups help to protect them from abuses by the security forces.

In this context, Tillabéri region provides a notable contrast. Unlike the situation in Mopti and the Sahel, the communities here criticise the actions of the Nigerien DSF more for their absence than for their (abusive) excesses. The lack of intervention by the DSF is felt particularly by the Fulanis in the region: on the one hand, they suffer continued abuses at the hands of the Daoussakhs on both sides of the border with Mali and, on the other hand, they consider that the poor public services are not commensurate with the taxes levied from the herders, which are equivalent to 80% of the local administration’s budget. Many testimonies clearly express a sense of abandonment: “The state does nothing for the communities who live in the bush, the soldiers only work for themselves ... When a man is killed, nothing happens. My Fulani uncle from Inatess was taken by the Tuaregs, abducted, killed and then burnt until only his bones were left – all in front of the soldiers”;<sup>64</sup> “The real threat is the absence of the state”;<sup>65</sup> “There’s bad governance everywhere, the state is very guilty of that. There’s negligence and indifference from the authorities ... The DSF should be given proper resources to keep communities safe”.<sup>66</sup>

This insistent demand for a greater presence by the public authorities and the DSF in Tillabéri region seems to suggest a bond of trust rarely encountered in the central Sahel. One explanation for this may be found in the structure of the Nigerien state. Although peripheral, this region is close to the capital, Niamey, and therefore the Nigerien DSF, which, as throughout the region, is made up largely of the predominant ethnic groups around the centres of power and includes a considerable proportion of people from there. This might act as a brake on potential abuses (“It’s their guys, they can’t let themselves go too much”<sup>67</sup>) and might explain the higher level of acceptance by the communities.

In the Diffa region, where relations between the communities and the state and army appear to be more tense, there have been more alleged abuses by the DSF. As a result, the demands for security provisions to be strengthened are not as strong, more in line with the general tendency in the rest of the Sahel. In north Tillabéri, meanwhile, it is more the state’s failure to respond to demands that is the source of frustrations. This has led the communities to disengage from the administration and to draw closer to the violent extremists. In the face of pressing demands for the integration and protection of communities exposed to the attacks by the Daoussakhs, “(t)he shameful silence and inaction of the authorities”<sup>68</sup> has ultimately persuaded the young Fulani herders that the government has taken sides

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63. Focus group in Firguindi.

64. Interview with a Fulani member of the elite, Ayorou.

65. Interview with a local authority representative, Petel Polli.

66. Focus group in Boni Peul.

67. Interview with a civil society representative, Niamey.

68. Interview with a Fulani member of the elite, Niamey.

with their adversaries. In addition, the closeness displayed by the authorities in Niamey to the Malian militias – where the Tuaregs and the Daoussakhs are in the majority, such as in the case of GATIA and the MSA – has only served to reinforce mutual distrust. As a consequence, the widespread perception of state abuses has taken hold in Niger, even in the absence of large-scale abuses perpetrated by the DSF. Furthermore, harassment of civilians is on the rise following attacks against the DSF perpetrated by young Fulanis who have joined ISGS. According to local observers, it was on this basis that Abu Walid al-Sahrawi was able to convince a proportion of the young Fulanis in north Tillabéri that the enemy was not actually the Tuaregs but the state.

In this context, taking up arms is an unsurprising outcome in response to authoritarian states. The experience of systematic, unpunished abuses by the state undermines the promise of liberal good governance and reinforces the impression of use of coercive force by the state to control societal relations. When democratic routes are obstructed, access to weapons supplied by violent extremist groups appears to have provided communities with the means to make themselves heard.

Community opinions on the presence of foreign military forces in the regions of the central Sahel are more mixed. In the Burkinabe Sahel, the foreign armed forces are seen as more respectful than the local DSF. As a result, their presence is welcomed and their contribution broadly appreciated by the communities. In the Mopti region, opinions are more divided but, as a general rule, reactions to the strong presence of foreign armed forces are not particularly hostile. It is in Niger, where the local DSF are less criticised, that the presence of foreign armed forces generates more questions. Although strong contingents from France, the United States and other European countries are present in Niger, inadequate communication by the foreign armed forces with the communities and the local DSF feeds rumours, suspicions, misunderstandings and even downright fantasy.<sup>69</sup> The latter are prone to somewhat inflammatory manipulations, including by violent extremists, as evidenced by an example from Boni Peul: “This tale of jihadism is a set-up by the Whites so they can control us better. If they wanted to, the big world leaders could stop this conflict in a day.”<sup>70</sup>

These observations seem to suggest that the experience or perception of abuses perpetrated by various elements of the state, whether it be the authorities, public services, the justice system or the DSF, may be the main factor explaining the vulnerability of young Fulanis in the central Sahel to violent extremism.<sup>71</sup> As the only unequivocally relevant factor in all the most vulnerable villages, it represents a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for young people being drawn to violent extremism. In other words, if there was no state abuse, there would be no violent extremism.

The experience of systematic, unpunished abuses by the state undermines the promises of liberal good governance and reinforces the impression of use of coercive force by the state to control societal relations.

In central Sahel, the experience or perception of abuses perpetrated by various elements of the state may be the main factor explaining the vulnerability of young Fulanis to violent extremism. In other words: no state abuse, no violent extremism.

69. As confirmed by all the studies on this subject (e.g. Pellerin, 2017; Tisseron, 2017).

70. Focus group in Boni Peul.

71. This conclusion echoes the results of other major studies conducted on the same topic (UNDP, 2017) and thus boosts confidence in the robustness of these observations.

Respectful and inclusive governance (or the perception of it) is a sound defence against the appeal of violent extremism, even where there are social problems such as poverty, conflict around access to natural resources and identity polarisation.

However, this does not mean that state abuses automatically trigger violent extremism in the absence of other underlying factors. For instance, as outlined, the villages in Mali and Burkina Faso display a lower level of vulnerability, despite being exposed to serious violations by their governments. In particular, the example of the village of Boni, in the Mopti region, suggests that the experience of abuse is less likely to translate into extreme vulnerability if living and livelihood opportunities are more secure. Furthermore, the complete absence of the experience or perception of state abuses seems to constitute a sufficient (but not a necessary) condition to guarantee community resilience to violent extremism. Respectful and inclusive governance (or the perception of it) is therefore a sound defence against the appeal of violent extremism, even where there are social problems such as poverty, conflict around access to natural resources and identity polarisation.

In order to prevent violent extremism taking root, it is thus recommended to work to build peaceful and inclusive communities. The examples of good practice observed in the regions and villages studied represent a step in this direction. Local recruitment would help to make the DSF more representative and limit abuses. At the same time, democratic oversight, improving access to justice for communities, and monitoring the activities of the DSF would ensure the accountability and justiciability of those responsible for what are described as blunders (but might be considered more as abuses), in order to increase community confidence in the institutions.

In addition, international military support should be based on sensitive analyses of the root causes of the conflicts, as well as the regional security forces' absorption capacity. The deployment of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) by no means meets these requirements. Despite the stated intentions, the deployment of forces accused of serious abuses, negligence around DSF training, the right of pursuit without the right of inspection and the absence of a proper risk mitigation strategy all seem to be a recipe for exacerbating tensions and increasing local communities' vulnerability to violent extremism. Thus, the FC-G5S seems set to do more harm than good.

A purely security-focused response to the challenge of violent extremism risks not only leading to extensive abuses, but above all may exacerbate the sense of marginalisation and exclusion felt by some communities when the aim should be to encourage inclusion. There is reason to believe that a solely military response prevents understanding and dialogue. The response should also involve the so-called 'violent extremists', a label whose meaning is considerably compromised by the careless and highly politicised way it is used. As shown by the development projects currently being implemented by the High Authority for Peacebuilding (*Haute Autorité à la consolidation de la paix*) in areas under the control of 'violent extremist' groups in Niger, it is possible – and desirable – to engage all the actors in inclusive processes. At the same time, there should be greater use of transitional justice, especially where systematic abuses have had traumatic consequences in communities, particularly in the Mopti and Sahel regions.

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**Summary:** Poor governance and state violence

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	 <b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Sufficient condition	<b>No</b>	 <b>Yes (absence of)</b>

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### 3.4 Factor 4: Ideological radicalisation – ‘ideology has nothing to do with it’

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Although taking up arms in the name of Islam is still a marginal and recent phenomenon, over the last two decades a rise in radical religious discourse has been observed in the Sahel, especially among young people. In fact, Islamist discourse lends a certain legitimacy to challenging the authority, both traditional and formal – an authority which increasingly fails to meet the demands of a society in transition and which is accused of material and moral corruption. According to the experts interviewed for this study: “In the villages, the chiefs have the right to sleep with anyone’s wife with the blessing of a marabout [religious teacher] who often can’t even read Arabic. In response, the IZalists preach to young people that they should be slaves only to God and should reject the abusive dominance of men. So it’s a liberating discourse which is eroding social strata that have become obsolete.”<sup>72</sup>

According to studies on the topic: “The current religious reformers are promoting a discourse of breaking with tradition which is seen as liberating. The Salafist movements are viewed as rationalist, as they enable young people to free themselves from the social norms and hierarchies that constrain them.”<sup>73</sup> Given the customary and religious authorities’ support for and from the clientelist governance system of the Sahelian states, including the central Sahel, the moralising discourse of the clerics encourages questioning not only of the traditional powers and inter-generational hierarchies, but also of the entire state apparatus as a tool of dominance imported from or even imposed by the west.<sup>74</sup> Religious radicalism thus spreads through organisations, the media and institutions whose influence is increasingly visible throughout the Sahel.

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72. Interview with a Nigerien expert on political Islamism, Niamey.

73. Arnaud, C., Jeunesses sahéliennes: Dynamiques d’exclusion, moyens d’insertion, AFD Notes Techniques 15, Paris, March 2016.

74. ICG, Islam et politique au Mali: Entre réalité et fiction, Rapport Afrique, 248, Dakar/Brussels, 2017.

In the Sahel, numerous actors aligning themselves with a radical reading of Islamic scriptures are not violent. In fact, for many actors the normalisation of violence has **nothing to do with an ideological framework inspired by religious radicalism.**

Strongly rooted religious education, whatever the branch, arguably **strengthens young people's resilience to violent extremism.**

While it is true that, in the Sahel, armed groups aligning themselves with jihadism link their actions to an interpretation of Islamic scriptures inspired by Salafism (in however vague and imprecise a manner), many local observers consider that: “The call for armed jihad is nothing but a simple cover to play to the crowd”<sup>75</sup> and the real drivers of violent extremism are in no way ideological. It is interesting to note that the territorial influence of extremist violent groups appears to be particularly strong in the regions where institutionalised radical religious movements have not made headway. In fact, strongly rooted religious education, whatever the branch, arguably strengthens young people's resilience to violent extremism. Here again, significant regional differences demand that the issue be treated in a more nuanced way.

However, there is little consensus on the links between spreading a radicalised vision of Islam and violent extremism, that is, between uncompromising ideology and violent coercion. The existing studies have shown that, in the Sahel, numerous actors aligning themselves with a radical reading of Islamic scriptures are not violent. In fact, for many actors the normalisation of violence has nothing to do with an ideological framework inspired by religious radicalism.

In the Mopti region, the ideological influence of religious radicalism is much more evident than in the other regions studied, although it is not easy to determine whether this is more a cause or an effect of the influence of violent extremist groups in the region. Radical preachers are found near all the villages targeted and especially in the administrative centres such as Boni and Konna. In the smaller villages, like Yorbou and Ouro Guérou, the presence of radical preachers is more sporadic but is accompanied by explicit threats against followers and Sufi marabouts. Radical discourse is directed particularly at marginalised groups (such as landless people, poor herders, former slaves and *talibés*) and is therefore often heard in conversations with young people locally: “It's God who ordained jihad so it's a duty for every Muslim.”<sup>76</sup> According to the women of Ouro Guérou: “Some preachers encourage Muslims to go and fight jihad and many of them are against freedom for women. But it's good to take up arms to defend the Sharia.”<sup>77</sup>

In the Burkinabe Sahel, radical discourse – such as that of the imam Ibrahim Dicko – is highly popular, especially among marginalised groups. This is in reaction to the political control of the clerics, who have long been supporting the demands of territorial control and helped maintaining the power of the elites. However, the effect of the call to take up arms on the public has tended to deter rather than to encourage recruitment. Thus, all the respondents, including those in the villages where there has been a higher level of recruitment, explicitly rejected the notion that ideological motivation is a relevant factor to explain vulnerability to violent extremism. As emphasised by an observer based in Ouagadougou: “Radicalisation has nothing to do with the fact that the Islamists approach communities to convince them that their version of Islam is the best.”<sup>78</sup>

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75. Interview with a Nigerian political analyst, Niamey.

76. Focus group in Ouro Guérou.

77. Focus group in Ouro Guérou.

78. Interview with a European diplomat, Ouagadougou.

At most, the focus group participants concede that ideology can provide an opportunistic cover for drivers that are more fundamental but less often expressed. Information from Tillabéri region shows even more clearly the irrelevance of ideological drivers. There were virtually no radical preachers in the villages studied, with the exception of Daya, which nevertheless remains the least vulnerable village in the area. In places where young people appear to be more likely to join violent extremist groups, as in Petel Polli, young people recognise that: “Terrorist groups that act in the name of Islam and the Qur’an don’t know anything about religion.”<sup>79</sup> Similarly, one observer who was close to several jihadis in the area confirmed that: “No-one who went to fight has ever set foot in a Qur’anic school. They’re fighters who want to take on their neighbours, but there isn’t really a proper Nigerien jihadi leader, not like what’s happening in Mali and Burkina Faso. Ideology has nothing to do with it – it’s more a quest for independence than a quest for obedience.”<sup>80</sup>

“ Ideology has nothing to do with it – it’s more a quest for independence than a quest for obedience.

In fact, the existence of numerous links between armed groups aligning themselves with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State appears to corroborate the idea that, among Nigerien combatants, solidarity between Fulanis takes precedence over ideological or theological coherence. These observations could lead to the conclusion that, although ideological and religious radicalisation are found in the central Sahel, the link with taking up arms and joining violent extremist groups is random and is by no means a determining factor. The doctrinal assimilation of the members of these groups often seems superficial and the call to jihad might be seen as a ‘branding’ strategy, seeking to consolidate the legitimacy of the guerrillas.<sup>81</sup>

This is particularly true in the areas where the absence of an alternative and of an educational infrastructure mean that Qur’anic education is the only available cultural and moral framework. The central Sahel is experiencing a rapid withdrawal of formal education due to badly paid and poorly trained teachers, infrastructure that is poorly adapted to meet the needs of transhumant communities, and educational programmes based on the colonial model which are therefore not well suited to the local contexts. Religious education, often informal, has gradually come to fill this gap.

In the Mopti region, Qur’anic schools are present in the four villages studied, while only Boni has a state school. Consequently, literacy levels across the region are no higher than 40%. The respondents from Tillabéri region also criticised the virtual absence of state education provision and the poor quality of the teaching, which means that fewer than one in 50 students attain the baccalaureate. Despite major investment, the budget for the education sector in Niger is still less than that for defence.

The budget for the education sector in Niger is still less than that for defence.

The situation seems slightly less concerning in the Burkinabe Sahel, as well-functioning literacy courses are provided in the Fulfulde language. However, one civil society representative highlighted that: “Education for Fulani children is a challenge because they move around with their livestock, depending on seasonal conditions, and there are simply more Qur’anic schools than French ones”<sup>82</sup> and the marabouts move around with the herds and their pupils. Moreover, the lack of institutional supervision of the religious schools risks generating frustrations due to the poor level of institutional integration, which limits job prospects.

79. Focus group in Petel Polli.

80. Interview with a Fulani member of the elite, Niamey.

81. See also the debate on the radicalisation of the clerics (Kepel, G., *The roots of radical Islam*, London: Saqi Books, 2005) and its expression in Africa (Boas, M. and Dunn, K., *Understanding African guerrillas*, in Hentz, J., (ed.) *Routledge handbook of African security studies*, London: Routledge, 2014).

82. Interview with a civil society representative, Ouagadougou.

High-quality state education that provides good employment prospects and that is culturally appropriate and accessible to young men and young women has the potential to become a bastion of resilience against the rise of violent extremism.

The deterioration of the school system in the countries of the Sahel is thus weakening the resilience of young people to religious radicalism and violent extremism. In the areas they control, the jihadis are clearly well aware of this. They close so-called ‘French’ state schools and harass the teachers, who are accused of disseminating a neo-colonial ideology under the guise of secularism. At the same time, they set up Qur’anic schools to impart their radical ideology, responding to the huge demand for education coming from the communities. In fact, in the villages of the Mopti region that are under the influence of violent extremists, women without access to education in the past have said they appreciate the access to religious education offered by the jihadis and express the desire to marry “a marabout or a Qur’anic master so he’ll teach [them] religion”.<sup>83</sup> At the centre of the battle ‘for hearts and minds’, high-quality state education that provides good employment prospects and that is culturally appropriate and accessible to young men and young women has the potential to become a bastion of resilience against the rise of violent extremism.

In the light of these observations, while the religious driver is, in itself, the least relevant of all the factors examined here to explain vulnerability to violent extremism in the central Sahel, it should be noted that the shortcomings of the education sector, the depletion of the cultural landscape and the poor management of the clerics are serving to erode young people’s resilience. The examples of good practice observed in the villages studied shows the value of public support for the clerics. Strengthening regulation should be more akin to supervision and monitoring than submission to strict regulation which, as has been seen, “[c]ould provoke precisely the outcome that the government wants to avoid: association with a state perceived as being in the pay of the west could discredit the official religion and thus contribute to the emergence of informal religions that could contradict official discourse”.<sup>84</sup> In this respect, the capacity-building programmes for ‘traditional’ imams financed by western funders (often described as the ‘Moroccan recipe’) run the risk of merely exacerbating the divisions linked to the politicisation of the religious sphere. In the area of education, the realisation by the international community that literacy programmes in local languages and Franco-Arabic schools are better placed to defeat growing hostility from communities than a (‘French’) school, which may be perceived as culturally imposed and politically foreign, could represent progress.

**Summary:** Ideological radicalisation

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	No
Sufficient condition	No	No

83. Focus group in Ouro Guérou.

84. ICG, Islam et politique au Mali: Entre réalité et fiction, Rapport Afrique, 248, Dakar/Brussels, 2017.

### 3.5 Factor 5: Moving beyond the appearance of inter-ethnic polarisation

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Some research studies<sup>85</sup> suggest that the dynamics of recruitment to violent extremist groups in the Sahel simply reproduce the socio-ethnic divisions which exist in the region, typically between farmers and herders or among herders. The widespread attention paid to the ‘Fulani issue’ only serves to reinforce this impression. The results of this study seem to confirm that inter-ethnic polarisations do have some relevance in explaining the tendency of young people to join violent extremist groups. This is particularly the case in Tillabéri region, where the majority of observers acknowledge the primary importance of “inter-communal conflicts between Fulanis and Daoussakhs”<sup>86</sup> and trace the genealogy of the local ISGS back to Fulani community militias, such as Ganda Izo, responding to the Tuareg rebellions of recent decades.

However, careful analysis shows that the relevance of inter-ethnic polarisation is neither decisive nor exclusive. In all the regions studied, there is no solid link between inter-ethnic conflicts and vulnerability to violent extremism. In the Burkina Sahel, for instance, the region’s relatively homogeneous population means that there is little incidence of inter-communal tensions, irrespective of the level of vulnerability in the local communities. In the Mopti region, the dynamics observed do not allow conclusions to be drawn as to whether inter-ethnic polarisation, albeit very evident, is an element in the causes or consequences of the conflict. Even in Tillabéri region, the animosity of the Fulanis appears only to be triggered by the Daoussakhs and does not include other Tuareg communities, such as those of Inates or Agadez. Moreover, purely ethnic ‘hatred’ only partially explains the dynamics observed: inter-communal polarisation is more likely to indicate underlying tensions of a different nature, which are probably better understood in conjunction with other factors.

In general, inter-ethnic polarisation tends to be more apparent in the areas where conflicts over access to natural resources are more acute. Even though these can be attributed to larger factors, such as governance or climate change, the respondents report serious tensions with rival groups – such as the Dogon and Bambara farmers in the Mopti region and the Daoussakh herders in Tillabéri region. These communities are therefore listed among the main threats to the security of Fulani villages. By positioning themselves as protectors, the violent extremist groups have taken the opportunity to exploit and exacerbate these divisions: “The jihadis settle camps near the Fulani herders’ settlements. They say they want to help them retaliate because only the Fulanis are truly Muslim and truly indigenous and they should be managing the land.”<sup>87</sup> In the Mopti region, for example: “The guys from the bush stopped the Dogons from hogging the land beyond a 4km radius of the village.”<sup>88</sup>

Inter-ethnic polarisation tends to be more apparent in the areas where conflicts over access to natural resources are more acute.

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85. McGregor, A., The Fulani crisis: Communal violence and radicalization in the Sahel, CTC Sentinel, 10(2), 2017.

86. Interview with a Nigerien political analyst, Niamey.

87. Interview with a Malian journalist, Bamako.

88. Focus group in Ouro Guérou.

In Tchourkoundi, meanwhile: “Some people took up arms to avenge the wrongs done to their community or ethnic group ... because since the rebellion, the Tuaregs have been attacking villages, killing people and raping women, and thousands of Fulanis have lost their lives.”<sup>89</sup>

The recruitment of young Fulanis to violent extremist groups is also an outcome of inaction by or partiality from public authorities, including the DSF, within the context of these rivalries. Such perceptions are fuelled by a number of issues: the fact that Fulanis are poorly represented within the DSF in the countries concerned; frequent stigmatisation suffered by the Fulanis in the at-risk areas (maltreatment, indiscriminate raids, arbitrary arrests and abuses of all kinds); and informal recourse by governments to community militias who encourage the ethnicisation of the conflict. Consequently, the search for protection is combined with a feeling of victimisation and stigmatisation among the Fulanis, which in turn fuels the appeal of violent extremism.

In response to suspected complicity between the army and other ethnic groups organised into militias, young people from several villages see the jihadis as their only defence.

In Mali, respondents expressed their frustration at the impunity enjoyed by the armed groups that are signatories to the Algiers Accord and that often have a community base: “For a while now, the Arabs and Tuaregs have been able to get away with anything – the authorities close their eyes and only intervene if Fulanis are involved.”<sup>90</sup> In response to suspected complicity between the army and other ethnic groups organised into militias, young people from several villages see the jihadis as their only defence.

In Niger, the Fulanis’ perception that the government and the Daoussakhs are colluding through militias such as GATIA feeds their sense of abandonment. Local observers acknowledge that: “The Fulanis who joined MUJAO went off to protect their families and their wealth because the state wasn’t playing its role.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, they highlight that: “It’s because the state is failing that inter-ethnic conflicts are becoming recruiting drivers for violent extremist groups.”<sup>92</sup> Even in Burkina Faso, where inter-ethnic tensions are less acute, some civil society organisations believe that: “The government is in the process of transforming the fight against violent extremism into an ethnic conflict: self-defence groups made up of Mossi are supported and armed by the government to defend themselves against the Fulanis, which leads to suspicions that the state wants to take the land off the Fulanis to give it to the Mossi.”<sup>93</sup>

In conclusion, the contribution of inter-ethnic polarisation to young people’s vulnerability to violent extremism seems to be largely determined by other more instrumental factors, such as conflicts over access to natural resources and the perception of state abuses. Taken in isolation, the relevance of inter-ethnic polarisation as an explanatory factor is limited. The case of the central Sahel shows that polarisation around identity is less a cause than an effect in the dynamics of conflict. In this respect, abuses perpetrated by communities and militias can only exacerbate these tendencies and reinforce the vulnerability of communities to violent extremism.

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89. Focus group in Tchourkoundi.

90. Focus group in Yorbou.

91. Interview with a local authority representative, Petel Polli.

92. Interview with a prosecutor and expert on terrorism, Niamey.

93. Interview with a civil society representative, Ouagadougou.

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**Summary:** Inter-ethnic polarisation

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	No
Sufficient condition	No	No

### 3.6 Factor 6: Intra-ethnic cohesion strengthens resilience

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Within the Fulani communities in the Mopti, Sahel and Tillabéri regions, customary power is monopolised by a small number of families descended from the traditional chieftaincies, whose legitimacy is rooted in local Marabout Islam. The hereditary transfer of power undermines the aspirations and agency of marginalised groups and young people, even though they make up the majority of the community. The involvement of customary elites in the clientelist networks in power ultimately exacerbates the social polarisation between the land-owning aristocracies and the ‘social minors’ (*cadets sociaux*), which often overlaps with the polarisation between young and old. A number of reports have outlined the importance of intra-ethnic divisions to explain the vulnerability of communities to violent extremism, both in Mali<sup>94</sup> and Burkina Faso.<sup>95</sup> However, the results of this study seem to indicate that the relevance of intra-ethnic polarisation varies considerably, depending on the context. Moreover, its overall influence in terms of explaining the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel must be nuanced and put into perspective.

The relevance of intra-ethnic polarisation varies considerably, depending on the context.

Only three villages (Boni and Ouro Guérou in the Mopti region and Arrayel in the Burkinabe Sahel) displayed acute intra-ethnic tensions, which does not necessarily mean that young people and marginalised groups are more likely to join violent extremist groups. In contrast, intra-ethnic polarisation is virtually non-existent in the Niger’s Tillabéri region. Respondents attribute this difference to the strong inter-ethnic pressure experienced by the Nigerien Fulanis, which has the effect of uniting communities internally against external foes.

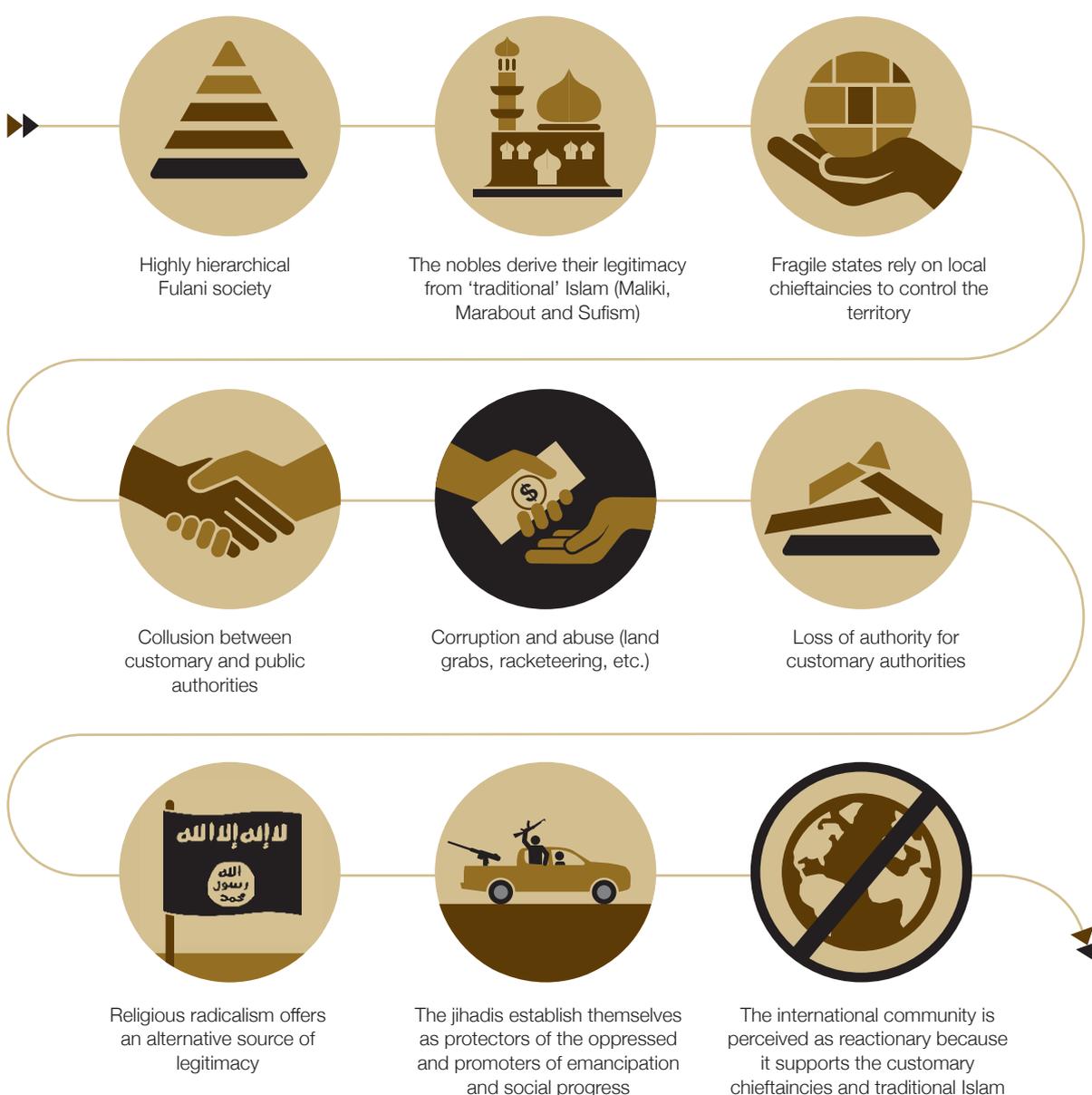
In Mali and Burkina Faso, the most severe intra-ethnic tensions are found within the communities that make their living from pastoralism. In fact, the djowros are accused of despising young people who devote themselves to rearing livestock to sell; of claiming ownership of land assigned to them through customary agreement; of imposing excessive fees for access to grazing land; and of plotting with the authorities to extort money from the communities. Furthermore, the ban on inter-caste marriage is an everyday manifestation of the omnipresence of customary hierarchies among the Fulanis. This has generated frustrations, which, with the advent of the jihadis, are now being openly voiced.

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94. Sangaré, B., *Le Centre du Mali: Épicentre du djihadisme?*, Note d’Analyse du GRIP, Brussels, May 2016; Thiam, A., *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d’une crise négligée*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, March 2017.  
95. ICG, *Nord du Burkina Faso: Ce que cache le jihad*, Rapport Afrique, 254, Dakar/Brussels, 2017.

In Boni, young people are reportedly rebelling against the monopoly on decision-making held by a minority of aristocratic families. In Konna, people are rising up against being called *rimaibés* (former slaves). In Arrayel, in Burkina Faso: “Young people are no longer listening to the djowro chiefs”<sup>96</sup> and the djowros see this social vendetta as the main driver of young people joining violent extremist groups. According to a Fulani member of the Malian elite: “Intra-communal conflicts are a fundamental element of this crisis, because the jihadis incite the poor by preaching land redistribution”<sup>97</sup> in the name of restoring the law (both Islamic and customary) of the Diina. Many of the interviewees also claim that the marginalised social groups (herders, former slaves and young people) are displaying greater sympathy for the discourse and practices of violent extremist groups.

**Figure 3: How intra-ethnic divisions feed violent extremism**



96. Focus group in Arrayel.

97. Interview with a Fulani member of the aristocracy, Bamako.

In contrast, the complete absence of intra-ethnic tensions appears to be a necessary condition for strengthening the resilience of young people to violent extremism. In view of the observation that “[t]he marginalised groups asserted themselves during the occupation”,<sup>98</sup> the current crisis provides an opportunity to abandon a hierarchical and clientelist model of governance, which generates frustrations, and to replace it with social inclusion and equal opportunities. In an evolving social context, simply restoring the previous status quo is not enough, even though this seems to be the desired outcome of the chieftaincy representatives. Given the deterioration in perceptions regarding the neutrality of traditional authorities, it may be time to rethink the peacebuilding structures focused on support for customary institutions. The international community should instead recognise the role of *cadets sociaux* as key interlocutors and ideal targets for peace interventions, since in this role they have the ability to strengthen the resilience of entire communities. This study shows that only united communities are resilient to the rise of violent extremism. Among the concrete measures that can contribute to this are the inclusion of Fulani *cadets sociaux* in the DSF and revitalising the regional authorities and land commissions on a truly democratic basis.

The complete absence of intra-ethnic tensions appears to be a necessary condition for strengthening the resilience of young people to violent extremism.

The international community should instead recognise the role of *cadets sociaux* as key interlocutors and ideal targets for peace interventions.

**Summary:** Intra-ethnic polarisation

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	 Yes ( <i>absence of</i> )
Sufficient condition	No	No

### 3.7 Factor 7: Stereotypical gender social relations indirectly drive recruitment of young people

Within the Fulani communities of the central Sahel, the social constructs around roles and gender attach considerable importance to the ‘warrior virtues’ of masculinity, symbols of protecting the home, of courage and of a sense of honour. In a very hierarchical society, marriage represents both protection and restriction for women, while the attributes of femininity generally involve constraints on freedom of

98. Interview with a European military adviser, Bamako.

movement, education, employment, property, choice and speech. The only area where women have considerable influence is over children – boys as well as girls.

The violent extremist groups aim to redefine gender relations, in terms of both traditional practices and modern discourse. Given the changing social expectations, the question of how much these factors influence young people's tendency to join violent armed extremist groups in the central Sahel is largely overlooked. The results of this study suggest that the intensity of the tensions associated with social and gender roles is not closely linked to the highest levels of vulnerability among young people to violent extremism. However, balanced gender relations contribute significantly to strengthening their resilience.

Direct and active involvement of Fulani women in violent extremist groups has been rarely observed, although isolated cases have been reported in the three regions studied. Although taking up arms generally remains the prerogative of men, women are active in providing supplies, shelter and information to support the fighters. In these cases, the personal bond of solidarity with the male combatants (husbands, sons or brothers) takes precedence over purely ideological motivations.

However, there can be little doubt that the women are among the main victims in the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel. As women in the focus groups reported, the advent of the jihadi groups has led to women's status and everyday lives becoming increasingly precarious through factors such as: the imposition of restrictive behavioural norms; barriers to mobility, work and income due to the insecurity; the recurrent practice of forced marriage; and exposure to abuse and the risk of sexual violence. In addition, the social stigma suffered by the victims of these abuses severely limits the possibility of disclosure and speaking out: the scale of these phenomena may therefore be far greater than the official data can document.

Gender relations have a significant indirect influence on encouraging young men to join violent extremist groups.

Beyond the relatively rare active contribution by and widespread passive victimisation of women in relation to the conflict, gender relations have a significant indirect influence on encouraging young men to join violent extremist groups. The social construct of masculinity resonates with the aim of trying to protect women from the systematic abuses of which they are victims. All the regions of the central Sahel provide pertinent examples of this.

According to local observers, during the Battle of Konna in 2012, women were among the main victims of the violence and abuses perpetrated by the DSF, including rape, abduction and forced marriage. In Ouro Guérou and Boni, women also cite the DSF as being among the main threats to security for the community. These women also speak of their impotence in the face of mistreatment by the armed groups that were signatories to the Algiers Accord and by 'armed bandits' more generally. According to the respondents, the desire for revenge to redeem the women's honour has incited many young people to become organised and to take up arms.

In the Burkinabe Sahel, increasing violence has led some women from Arrayel not to seek protection from the DSF but instead to look for refuge in Mali, where they know violent extremist groups exist. Similarly, the women of Firguindi clearly express the desire "not to see our men being arrested, mistreated and imprisoned any more". They consider that "the men who take up arms may not be role models, but they may do it out of a duty to defend their family and their honour".<sup>99</sup>

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99. Focus group in Firguindi.

The DSF are accused of perpetrating abuses against alleged terrorists in the presence of their families. In Tillabéri region, and particularly in the village of Petel Polli, gender relations are a factor in persuading young people to join armed groups, including those that align themselves with jihadism: “The communities understand that the young people who are involved in the armed groups do it for their families. They think it’s normal that these young people come back to claim *zakat*<sup>100</sup> or taxes ... All the young Fulanis have left for the front. When a young man stays at home, the others come to persuade him to join up: ‘We’ve gone to defend our parents and you’re here.’ Young people risk a lot by staying at home. The women make up songs mocking young men who haven’t gone to the front.”<sup>101</sup>

The social pressure from their young comrades, girls and mothers compels the young men to conform to the social role expected of them, including joining violent extremist groups if necessary to protect their community. However, this study has also revealed that the vast majority of women do not want the men from their neighbourhood to take up arms, either on the side of the extremist groups or with the DSF.

The relatively positive social image which the jihadis enjoy in the eyes of some women appears to be adequate to overcome the frustrations generated by the restrictions placed on their freedom. In the Mopti region, for example, some of the women remark that: “For people who say they’re religious, taking up arms is a good thing. I’m in favour of people who call themselves Muslims because anything that supports Islam is a good thing.” The demand, as widespread as it is ambiguous, to increase religious education for the benefit of communities may be interpreted in the same way – when the customs and failings of the state prevent any chance of education for girls and young women, even Salafist indoctrination may be seen as progress.

In conclusion, the link between gender relations and vulnerability to violent extremism is neither solid nor systematic. However, where this link is evident, it can be significant. It could be concluded that it is not so much the existence of this factor which contributes to vulnerability to violent extremism but rather its absence which contributes to resilience among young people. The results of this study suggest that improving social and gender relations is a necessary condition – although not sufficient in itself – to ensure greater resilience among young people faced with the persistent appeal of joining jihadi groups. This reveals the enormous potential of engaging women as change agents, since it would appear that, without their contribution to redefining social gender relations, resilience among young people is impossible.

In this respect, some examples of good practice observed in the field may help to ease the tensions and strengthen the resilience of communities. In the face of trauma from conflict, access to justice and psychosocial support may reduce the tendency for people to become acquiescent and drift into seeking protection outside the state framework. Increased support for women speaking in public actually helps to discourage aggressive choices because their message is often one of peace. Therefore, the international partners should, now more than ever, be nurturing partnerships with women’s groups in the regions where they are most exposed to violent extremism to encourage women’s inclusion and their contribution to community resilience.

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100. The third pillar of Islam, *zakat*, is the compulsory charitable giving that all Muslims are obliged to undertake for the benefit of the poorest in society.

101. Interview with a local authority representative, Petel Polli.

Finally, the symbolic celebrations organised for the fighters by some women, especially in Tillabéri region, are not fundamentally different from those held in honour of young people returning from a successful migration ‘adventure’, whether abroad or to the city. This demonstrates that socio-economic success contributes equally to the realisation of the ideal of masculinity. Thus, once again, taking to the road may, in the eyes of some, be a valid alternative to taking up arms. In a context characterised by structural unemployment, facilitating young people’s opportunities for migration rather than preventing them could alleviate the tensions linked to social gender relations and help to build community resilience to violent extremism.

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**Summary:** Tensions linked to social gender relations

	Vulnerability	Resilience
Necessary condition	No	 <b>Yes (<i>absence of</i>)</b>
Sufficient condition	No	No



People gather for the weekly market in the town of Djibo, Burkina Faso. PHOTO: © IRENE ABDOU/ALAMY

## 4. Conclusions

The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the way in which the Fulani communities of the central Sahel have reacted to the rise of violent extremism and provide a more comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to resilience or vulnerability of young people in this context.

The first point to note is the importance of local variations and multiple causality. The significant variation in determining factors, depending on the context, shows that violent extremism is more a response to specific local issues than to global dynamics. Even on the ground, there is only fairly limited coordination between the constellation of groups and actors associated with violent extremism. Violent extremism in the central Sahel is not a coherent, uniform monolith, but is instead a label attributed from outside combining disparate responses to a range of circumstances. In reality, the appeal of global jihad carries much less weight than the unlawful detention of a loved one, the struggle for access to grazing areas or the quest for recognition within the village.

Rejecting the complexity of the issues influencing violent extremism could pave the way for failure.

In addition, in each context, village or region, there are many factors that influence how people respond to violent extremism. As seen in the Mopti region, these factors are compounded and aggravated as the conflict progresses, creating a disturbing 'snowball' effect. Thus, the desire to identify the cause or the lever for violent extremism appears to be broadly misplaced. Rejecting the complexity of the issues could lead to failure and the adoption of uniform and unilateral responses in different regions and countries is inadequate.

Generally speaking, however, certain factors prove to be more significant than others. Thus, conflicts over the control of natural resources, economic and material motivations and, above all, real or perceived abuses by state authorities, are more prevalent and experienced more widely by the Fulanis of the central Sahel. In contrast, purely ideological drivers and intra-ethnic divisions are less relevant factors among those considered here to explain the vulnerability of young people to violent extremism. The results of this study also suggest that inter-ethnic conflicts are, in most cases, by-products which develop in parallel with conflicts over land linked to access to natural resources (of which there are many in the Mopti and Tillabéri regions and almost none in the Burkinabe Sahel). While in Burkina Faso the social homogeneity of Soum Province reduces the instances of inter-ethnic conflicts over access to natural resources, inter-ethnic conflicts in Tillabéri region in Niger have had the effect of making communities more internally united.

In all the regions studied, the experience (perceived or actual) of abuse and maltreatment by different government institutions appears to be the most influential factor in relation to vulnerability to violent extremism among young Fulanis.

In all the regions studied, the experience (perceived or actual) of abuse and maltreatment by different government institutions, including the political authorities, public services, the justice system and, above all, the DSF, appears to be the most influential factor in relation to vulnerability to violent extremism among young Fulanis. Of the factors examined, real or perceived state abuse and poor governance emerge as the only necessary condition for young people becoming involved in violent extremism, since its absence is one of the sufficient conditions for resilience.

A second key finding about the factors influencing vulnerability to violent extremism among young Fulanis in the central Sahel is how large-scale economic deprivation, of which the villages of Tillabéri region provide pertinent examples, inevitably involves a certain degree of vulnerability to violent extremism. In other words, total resilience to violent extremism is structurally impossible when communities are exposed to severe poverty, unemployment and scarce social services. In contrast, the absence of

economic grievances and secure access to employment – albeit extremely rare in the central Sahel – constitute a sufficient condition to guarantee young people’s resilience to violent extremism.

More generally, the results suggest that when there is an acute manifestation of just one of these potential vulnerability factors, community resilience will be only partial and precarious. While a moderate degree of exposure to the factors examined can generally be tolerated without affecting or weakening community resilience, young people have been shown to be particularly sensitive to intra-communal tensions, especially those between castes or linked to gender. Healing communities, alleviating tensions linked to gender roles, and recognising young people’s role in society are all necessary conditions for supporting resilience to rising violent extremism.

Total resilience to violent extremism is structurally impossible when communities are exposed to severe poverty, unemployment and scarce social services.

Healing communities, alleviating tensions linked to gender roles, and recognising young people’s role in society are all necessary conditions for supporting resilience to rising violent extremism.



# 5. Recommendations

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**By understanding the factors that shape young people's resilience and vulnerability, it is possible to identify the most appropriate measures to tackle the rise of violent extremism in the central Sahel. The following recommendations seek to provide better direction to national and international actors in strengthening the resilience and reducing the vulnerability of young people to a threat that has now become an established, long-term phenomenon.**

## *Peacebuilding*

- As the military response to the crisis is proving insufficient to react to the conflict and reduce the threat posed by violent extremism, it is imperative that the three most concerned states develop a national and regional peacebuilding strategy to complement military efforts.
- The power relations on the ground, the demands of the communities and the weakness of the ideological driver in the current conflict should encourage national and international actors to adopt a less rigid position in their relations with the rebels (Mali and Niger provide examples of the opposite approach, which, in the case of Mali, has been particularly detrimental). Given that only dialogue currently seems capable of leading to an inclusive and realistic peace process, the members of the UN Security Council should re-examine their position on this issue in light of the solid conflict analyses and strategies that are relevant to the specific context.
- Due to the place of traditional chieftaincies as stakeholders in and targets of the conflict, their legitimacy has been undermined. Unlike the case in previous crises, this means that the role of the customary authorities in the peace process must be limited, especially in Mali, and that the partnership with marginalised groups or *cadets sociaux* must be strengthened.
- Tillabéri region presents the best conditions for launching pilot projects for the reconciliation and reintegration of former combatants who have been demobilised from violent extremist groups into their communities of origin. The lessons learned from this process could facilitate the extension of a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme throughout the central Sahel.
- Given the deficiencies of the judicial system, strengthening transitional justice programmes and policies would facilitate the promotion of understanding between the parties and ensure psychosocial support to mitigate the after-effects of the conflict.

## *Governance*

- To strengthen dialogue, healing and inclusivity in the communities, it is imperative that support be given to community organisations representing women and young people, especially in rural areas, through partnerships and training. Frameworks must be strengthened to make community organisations sustainable and facilitate the implementation of concrete projects.

- Urgent support is needed to improve mechanisms that ensure the accountability of the authorities, both public and customary, and access to justice for communities.
- The governments of the countries concerned should be committed to curtailing the use of states of emergency and providing mitigation strategies for the most detrimental effects on people's everyday lives, such as movement restrictions.
- Improving governance in the religious sphere, particularly in Mali, should be the focus of specific efforts. In particular, efforts should include better control of sources of financing, and an evaluation of the impact of capacity-building programmes for 'traditional' imams financed by western donors (named the 'Moroccan recipe', described above), which risk leading to a loss of legitimacy for traditional authorities and to social polarisation.
- The education sector should be improved, with more relevant schooling adapted to the needs of the communities through measures such as mobile schools, literacy courses in local languages, and Franco-Arabic schools. Better schooling should be provided for girls and significant improvements made to training and employment conditions for teachers. In addition, transition programmes should be established between school (including in the informal sector) and work.

## **Development**

- Development strategies, plans and projects for the central Sahel should be conflict sensitive, and at a minimum they should do no harm. Conflict sensitivity involves systematically carrying out conflict analysis before implementing any action, looking at risks of inadvertently exacerbating conflicts and developing strategies to minimise those risks.
- The governments and the international community must promote the participatory adoption of land laws that guarantee that customary titles are secured and ownership of rules governing access to natural resources is promoted. The legitimacy of conflict resolution bodies should also be assessed and strengthened. The land reform process developed in Mali over recent years could provide useful lessons in this respect.
- Better management and support should be ensured for the pastoral sector, in particular by constructing livestock wells, establishing cattle markets, setting up grain banks, and marking out land and plots. It is crucial that any new infrastructure is built where there is the potential to create more jobs and revenues for marginalised, poorer populations with a higher percentage of semi-nomadic pastoralists: this has not been the case in the past and is a source of grievance for many.
- Job creation programmes need to be based on analyses of young people's ambitions, as well as cultural and social norms that allow *cadets sociaux* to gain access to adulthood and financial independence in line with their ambitions.
- In order to demonstrate the state's proximity to communities, national and international actors should consider negotiating humanitarian and development interventions, even in areas controlled by violent extremist groups. The experience of the High Authority for Peacebuilding in Tillabéri region could be capitalised on.

## Security

- International actors should be committed to improving the representativeness of the DSF, especially in Mali, through transparent and inclusive recruitment procedures that promote access for all ethnic groups (including the Fulanis) and all groups in society (including *cadets sociaux*).
- The deployment of local DSF, overseen by the state but recruited locally, should be prioritised. This could help to stem the recruitment of ethnically-based militias and prevent communalisation of the conflict, which should be avoided at all costs.
- To re-establish public trust in the DSF – and the state more broadly – international partners supporting the military efforts in the countries concerned must ensure the accountability and justiciability of those responsible for mistakes. This can be enabled through such measures as diligent monitoring of DSF activities and ensuring civilian oversight, including supporting national and international civil society monitoring.
- The international partners of the FC-G5S should move beyond training and equipping security forces to instead supporting the creation of spaces for security and defence services, citizens and local authorities to jointly analyse conflict trends and design joint responses that can foster accountability and deliver more sustainable outcomes.
- Given the challenges linked to the deployment of the FC-G5S, international partners should base their continuing support on the implementation of the recommendations above.
- The international partners should work to improve communication with local communities about the objectives of the international military missions deployed in the Sahel and especially in Niger. Improved dialogue and sharing of responsibilities within inclusive civil and military coordination structures, in partnership with local and international civil society actors, could contribute to this goal.



Rural men using a truck as a form of public transport, Burkina Faso.  
PHOTO: © IRENE ABDOU/ALAMY



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