

# LEARNING FROM THE ENEMY?

## Jihadist power in Mali, and implications for security and development agendas

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*This article explores how violent jihadist groups structure and expand their presence in Mali, and it suggests some policy implications for security and development. A theoretical framework is presented that combines rebel governance literature, with special reference to so-called jihadist proto-states, with an analysis of power revolving around three dimensions: cultural hegemony, political dominion, and force. This framework is applied to Mali. The complex galaxy of militant groups operating in the country is briefly introduced, with their coalitions and fragmentation, and the consequences of their activities on community security and livelihoods are outlined. An embryonic theory follows, that accounts for how militants project power and exert control over communities: not only with violence, but also through ideological struggles and service delivery. Jihadist successes, in Mali and beyond, largely result from skilful applications of these 3 dimensions of power, different yet mutually reinforcing. Policies aimed at countering violent jihad should likewise target all the 3 dimensions by going beyond armed counterterrorism, by engaging jihadists in ideological debates, and by promoting better forms of governance.*

### Key words:

Jihadism;  
insurgency;  
rebel governance;  
power;  
security & development;  
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Sahel.

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### 1. Introduction

In the last 10 years, Mali has become a hotspot of violent jihad. At the crossroads between North and West Africa, the country imported instability from Algeria and Libya between the early 2000s and 2012, and it has exported instability across the region ever since. Defeated in the Algerian civil war (1991-2002), the most radical elements of the disbanded 'Armed Islamic Group' (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) fled to Northern Mali, founded the 'Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat' (GSPC) and declared allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2007 under the new name of 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' (AQMI). A few years later, in October 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was killed in Libya. The fall of his regime sent shock waves through the region. To the surprise of many, it was not Niger, Libya's southern neighbour, that faced the harsher consequences, but Mali. Tuareg groups had been in Libya for decades in the aftermath of three main uprisings against the Malian government between 1963 and 2006. They benefitted from Gaddafi's support and oil largesse, and they were integrated in his army. When he was overthrown, they decided to move back to the land they had historically claimed in Northern Mali under the name of Azawad, bringing military training and equipment along.

The Tuareg formed the 'National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad' (MNLA),

allied with AQMI and two other jihadist groups: the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and the home-grown Ansar Dine. The secular-jihadist coalition attacked a garrison base in Aguelhok in January 2012, declared Azawad independence in April, then descended to Central Mali and came dangerously close to the capital Bamako. Urged by the government and backed by the UN, France intervened in January 2013 with Operation Serval, pushed the insurgents back to the north, then out of urban areas. The significance of the 2012 crisis is that the Malian state had reached a point of near collapse in less than a year, and even though a peace deal was signed in 2015, the country is still mired in persisting instability; this instability has also expanded beyond Mali's borders, from Niger and Burkina Faso (the new epicentre of violence) to West African coastal states like Togo and Benin. Senegal is also getting worried because jihadist groups have been trying to set foot in Mali's south-western region of Kayes, known for their gold reserves.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 Map of Mali, districts



Source 1: Wikimedia Commons

The context in the Sahel is now characterised by a “persistent, expanding, and escalating instability.”<sup>2</sup> This comes on top of significant investment in counterterrorism and security, that bilateral and multilateral donors – like France, the US, the European Union (EU), the UN and others – have undertaken in the last 10 years. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US had enlisted the states in the region in security cooperation programmes. They set up the Pan-Sahel Initiative in 2002, followed in 2005 by the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative, re-branded Partnership in 2009. The EU, pushed by France, adopted a first strategy for security and development in the Sahel in 2011, reviewed in 2021. The EU has also

- 1 Clionadh Raleigh, Héni Nsaibia and Caitriona Dowd, “The Sahel crisis since 2012,” *African Affairs* 120, no. 478 (2021); Susanna D. Wing, “Mali’s enduring crisis,” *Current History* 116, No. 790 (2017); Boubacar Ba and Morten Boas, “Mali: A political economy analysis,” *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, November 2017, [https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2468085/NUPI\\_rapport\\_Mali\\_Ba\\_B%C3%B8%C3%A5s.pdf?sequence=2](https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2468085/NUPI_rapport_Mali_Ba_B%C3%B8%C3%A5s.pdf?sequence=2) (accessed December 28, 2022); The Defence Post, “Senegal uncovers jihadist cell in East of country”, *The Defence Post*, February 09, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/02/09/senegal-uncovers-jihadist-cell/> (accessed November 19, 2022).
- 2 Héni Nsaibia, “10 conflicts to worry about in 2022. The Sahel. Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability”, *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)*, 2022. <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/> (accessed December 28, 2022).

deployed 2 missions to Mali (EUTM Mali, since 2013, and EUCAP Sahel Mali, since 2014) and another to Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger, since 2011). France was a major security provider between January 2013 and August 2022, first with Operation Serval, then with Barkhane. The pull-out of Operation Barkhane forces in 2022 followed tensions with the Malian military junta, who took power in Bamako through two coups in August 2020 and May 2021. Other security partners of the Malian government include the Russian mercenary Wagner group and MINUSMA, the UN stabilisation mission deployed since 2013. Security and counterterrorism aside, Mali has also been a significant recipient of development aid since the overthrow of the autocratic regime of Moussa Traoré in 1991.<sup>3</sup>

Military action against jihadist groups in Mali was clearly successful in removing them from urban centres in 2013, in disrupting their mobility afterwards, and in eliminating some of their leaders, like the founder of the 'Islamic State in the Greater Sahara' (ISGS or EIGS), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, in November 2021.<sup>4</sup> However, military action has so far contributed with little success to the strategic outcomes of eradicating jihadism and preventing radicalisation.<sup>5</sup> Quite the contrary, if the expanding instability is of any indication, then the jihadists seem on a winning streak. There is now a widespread consensus that militarised approaches of "hard" counterterrorism are simply not enough to defeat jihadist insurgents in the Sahel. However, while new approaches are urged and needed, their contours and characteristics are far from clear. In the meanwhile, the dominant mindset – in Mali and elsewhere – still favours hard, militarised, enemy-focussed approaches against jihadist groups.<sup>6</sup>

The aim of this article is to contribute to these reflections with the overarching idea (i) that jihadism is a complex social phenomenon, including but extending beyond military aspects; and (ii) that appropriate responses to terrorism require an appreciation of sophisticated strategies used by jihadist groups for political control, which include local bargains for order, peace and governance. The productive capacity of jihadist groups – used here to indicate so-called violent extremist organisations – to generate order and stability should not be seen in isolation from their confrontation against the state. Rather, their strategies aim at replacing the state and its claims to jurisdiction with opposite jurisdiction claims and governance frameworks. Seen from this angle, violence is a means to outbid the state as rule-maker, rule-enforcer and governance provider in the eyes of the population. Against this backdrop, the first question I try to answer is: how do jihadist groups structure and expand their presence in territories and among communities? Answering this question seems interesting for scholars but for practitioners and policy makers too, in particular those working across security and development. Explaining the title of this article, my second question is: which implications can be drawn from jihadist strategies, that can inform security and development policies?

3 Edoardo Baldaro, "Dalla War on Terror alla stabilizzazione: l'evoluzione delle dottrine internazionali di gestione dei conflitti nel laboratorio saheliano" [From the War on Terror to stabilisation: the evolution of international doctrines of conflict resolution in the Sahel laboratory], in *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e controterrorismo nel Sahel*, ed. Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022); Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert, "A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction," *African Security* 11, no.1 (2017).

4 For an overview, see Camillo Casola and Giovanni Carbone, "The Sahel crisis at 10," in *Sahel: 10 years of instability. Local, regional and international dynamics*, eds. Giovanni Carbone and Camillo Casola, (Milan: ISPI, Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2022), <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/sahel-10-years-instability-local-regional-and-international-dynamics-36174> (accessed December 12, 2022).

5 Baldaro, 2022, Camillo Casola, "Controterrorismo e rivalità strategiche: una lettura della cooperazione di sicurezza nel Sahel" [Counterterrorism and strategic rivalry: an analysis of security cooperation in the Sahel] in *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e controterrorismo nel Sahel*, ed. Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022).

6 *Ibid.*; Camillo Casola and Giovanni Carbone, "The Sahel crisis at 10."

The theoretical framework used in this study relies on rebel and hybrid governance literature, and on an analysis of power that relies heavily on the thinking of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937).<sup>7</sup> My methodology uses key informant interviews, conducted in Bamako between June and July 2022, and followed by online communication with some of these informants; these primary data are combined with an extensive literature review of academic and grey research on Mali. The article is structured as follows: the next section two introduces rebel and hybrid governance literature, and a power analysis combining the three dimensions of hegemony, dominion and force; section three provides an overview of jihadist groups in Mali; section four examines these groups in their efforts towards political domination and population control through power projection. The last section 5 concludes with reflections and policy recommendations.

## 2. Rebel governance, jihadist proto-states, and power

The production and delivery of public goods and services in contexts of limited state reach and capacities has attracted significant scholarly attention in the last two decades. Hybrid governance research, in particular, has investigated “arrangements in which non-state actors take on functions classically attributed to the state and, in the process, become entangled with formal state actors and agencies.”<sup>8</sup> In different contexts and circumstances, these dynamics can be cooperative and bring stability or, on the contrary, they can reproduce violence and abuse. Marleen Renders<sup>9</sup> and Ken Menkhaus,<sup>10</sup> for instance, show how coalitions of customary authorities, businesses, civil society actors and armed groups helped produce order and peace in Somaliland and Northern Kenya, respectively. Conversely, Adam<sup>11</sup> examines how elites in the Philippines subverted customary rules for exploitative practices, and Benjamin<sup>12</sup> points towards uneasy interactions between state and traditional authorities in Mali’s decentralisation reforms. Differences aside, these cases lay bare the “contested nature of the state,” that Hagmann and Péclard regard not as a given political or juridical unit but as an empirical arena, where multiple “power poles” – government officials, customary authorities, professional associations and trade unions, NGOs and multinational corporations, warlords and militias, foreign governments, etc. – coexist, bargain, clash.<sup>13</sup>

Interested in clarifying the conditions where hybridity generates order and peace, or instability and conflict, Goodfellow and Lindemann propose to distinguish between hybridity and multiplicity of institutions.<sup>14</sup> Hybridity denotes essentially cooperative arrangements between state and non-state rules and actors, for instance when the administration of customary justice is recognised by law. Multiplicity occurs instead when state and non-state processes remain on a parallel course, each claiming separate jurisdiction on issues, areas or communities without recognising the other. The conditions for violence become apparent not in multiplicity itself, but in

7 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2014).

8 Francesco Colona and Rivke Jaffe, “Hybrid governance arrangements,” *The European Journal of Development Research* 28 (2016), p.2.

9 Marleen Renders, *Consider Somaliland. State-building with traditional leaders and institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

10 Ken Menkhaus, “The rise of a mediated state in northern Kenya: The Wajir story and its implications for state-building,” *Afrika Focus* 21, no. 2 (2008).

11 Jeroen Adam, “If you are in government, you can still implement traditional law. Hybridity and justice delivery in Lanao, The Philippines,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7, no. 1 (2018).

12 Charles E. Benjamin, “Legal pluralism and decentralization: Natural resource management in Mali,” *World Development* 36, no. 11 (2008).

13 Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard, “Negotiating statehood: Dynamics of power and domination in Africa,” *Development and Change* 41, no. 4 (2010).

14 Tom Goodfellow and Stefan Lindemann, “The clash of institutions: traditional authority, conflict and the failure of ‘hybridity’ in Buganda,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 51, no. 1 (2013).

the overlapping of these jurisdiction claims, i.e. when they clash and compete in defining and enforcing rules of behaviour in a given context. Goodfellow and Lindemann analyse Uganda, and the conflict between the state and the Buganda kingdom, but their findings extend to other anti-state rebellions.

In fact, insurgencies can be seen as extreme efforts at challenging the state jurisdiction with parallel claims to rule, aimed precisely at replacing the authority of the state in given areas. Successful insurgencies, then, result *ipso facto* in situations of competing institutional multiplicity that are linked to their confrontation against the state. In the aftermath of the Cold War, research on civil wars tended to focus on economic motives and criminal networks, typified in the greed vs grievances debate.<sup>15</sup> Moving away from simplistic characterisations of insurgents as warlords or criminals, and reading insurgency theorists like Mao Tse Tung or Ernesto “Che” Guevara, scholars started to appreciate rebel groups as governance actors. In fact, for ideological or practical reasons, insurgents in protracted conflicts need to engage with the civilian population: the provision of public goods and services – security, justice, welfare – often responds to strategic considerations aimed at fostering broader military and political objectives in the rebellion.<sup>16</sup>

Rebel governance has been defined as “the creation of institutions and practices by rebels that intend to shape the social, political, and economic life of civilians during civil war.”<sup>17</sup> It bears noting how, in the process of setting up parallel governance frameworks, rebels interact indeed with a variety of local actors, or “power poles,”<sup>18</sup> who are active and influential in civilian life. The definition, then, correctly looks at both insurgent and civilian agency in the production of governance. It is interesting to mention here the work of Svensson and Finnbogason on civilian bargaining and contestation of jihadist impositions, including in Mali.<sup>19</sup> Also, Bouhel and Guichaoua find different levels of restraint in jihadist violence in Northern Mali, in Gao and Kidal in particular, based on various negotiated outcomes between two armed groups and local actors.<sup>20</sup> The rebel-civilian focus, however, risks overlooking the state as key actor, if not in rebel-civilian negotiations, certainly in the context where these negotiations occur. In this respect, the above definition should be complemented by an attention to “the ways in which armed non-state actors govern as a *direct component of their challenge to the state*”.<sup>21</sup> Putting together these concerns, Mampilly<sup>22</sup> argues that successful insurgents become *counter-state sovereigns*, defined both by their competition against the state and by their capacity to adopt governance functions that sovereign states typically undertake in providing public goods and services.

Rebel governance scholars have produced a rich variety of case studies from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, analysing insurgents with different motives, constraints, and ideological backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> A sub-field in rebel governance, “jihadist proto-states” received overnight impulse in June 2014, when Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the leader of the ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’ (ISIS), declared that a new

15 Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, eds., *Greed and grievance: Economic agendas in civil war* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Karen Ballantine and Jake Sherman, eds., *The political economy of armed conflicts: beyond greed and grievance* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

16 Zachariah C. Mampilly, *Rebel rulers: Insurgent governance and civilian life during civil war* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

17 Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, “Introduction,” in *Rebel governance in civil war*, eds. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

18 Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard, “Negotiating statehood: Dynamics of power and domination in Africa.”

19 Isak Svensson and Daniel Finnbogason, “Confronting the caliphate? Explaining civil resistance in jihadist proto-states,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 2 (2021), 572-595.

20 Ferdaous Bouhel and Yvan Guichaoua, “Norms, non-combatants’ agency and restraint in jihadi violence in Northern Mali,” *International Interactions* (2021).

21 Cyanne E. Loyle et al., “New directions in rebel governance research,” *Cambridge University Press*, September 8, 2021), 2. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/new-directions-in-rebel-governance-research/8096447B63AA59CD27C6382D22B888A7> (accessed August 14, 2022).

22 Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*.

23 Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*; Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, eds., *Rebel governance in civil war*.

caliphate was born, stretching from areas in Syria to Iraq. The experiment came to an end in 2017: it was short lived, but long enough to set up and maintain a structured and relatively effective administration. In his analysis of jihadist proto-states – defined as “emirates” according to Islamic traditions, or political entities ruled by an Islamic commander – Brynjar Lia includes very different examples, with major variations in size and territorial presence. He argues, however, that those organisations share four essential features: (i) heavy ideological imprint; (ii) internationalist outlook; (iii) aggressive behaviours towards the state and the international community; and (iv) commitment to effective governance.<sup>24</sup>

To a large extent, the literature on rebel and jihadist governance shares the view that territorial control varies according to conflict dynamics, yet it is a precondition for the structuring of governance arrangements between insurgents and civilians.<sup>25</sup> This assertion may reflect the historical examples of early Taliban rule in Afghanistan, ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or Al-Shabaab in Somalia. However, its validity has been criticised in other cases, most notably in the Sahel, where insurgents implement de-territorialised forms of governance and control.<sup>26</sup> This point is particularly relevant in the case of Mali, especially after the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad (2012-2013). Regrouping from military defeat, the insurgents scattered across the territory and started using Central Mali as the new epicentre of their operations, in particular with the formation of the group Katiba Macina in 2015. Katiba Macina quickly rose to prominence in the area, challenged since 2020 by the ‘Islamic State in the Greater Sahara’ (ISGS, or EIGS). Despite their differences, both groups use “immaterial” forms of governance that, as a rule, do not foresee large-scale and permanent physical presence; rather, they are largely managed “from the bush,” with a light footprint in villages.<sup>27</sup> This suggests that jihadist groups rule through *population control*, rather than territorial occupation, which makes their relations with local communities and power poles even more critical to study.

Against this backdrop, answering the question of how jihadist groups structure and expand calls for an analysis of how they project power and authority over targeted populations. In his research on rebel groups, Zachariah Mampilly employs the distinction between dominance and hegemony, proposed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937).<sup>28</sup> The former includes force and coercion, while the latter involves the ability to shape beliefs, sense of self and perceptions of legitimacy. Hegemony is a form of manufactured consent that serves to legitimise rebel order as right and natural, and that can be pursued by delivering public goods but also through narratives and symbolic actions, such as flags or anthems. I find this concept of cultural hegemony extremely useful to analyse jihadist strategies in Mali and the Sahel. Indeed, as I show below, jihadists build and struggle for legitimation on doctrinal grounds and against competing visions of Islam. The dichotomy hegemony/dominance, however, seems inadequate to account for political arrangements that are not always, or not only, maintained by violence. In other words, power can be exercised by more than violence and coercion, on the one hand, and cultural hegemony, on the other

24 Brynjar Lia, “Understanding jihadi proto-states.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015).

25 Nelson Kasfir, “Rebel governance – Constructing a field of inquiry: Definitions, scope, patterns, order, causes,” in *Rebel governance in civil war*, eds. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

26 Loyle et al. “New directions in rebel governance research;” Rida Lyammouri, “Literature paper: Jihadist armed governance in Mali,” *Policy Center for the New South*, November 2021. <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/literature-paper-jihadist-armed-governance-mali> (accessed December 6, 2022); Natasja Rupesinghe et al., “Reviewing jihadist governance in the Sahel,” *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/reviewing-jihadist-governance-in-the-sahel> (accessed December 2, 2022).

27 Rida Lyammouri, “Literature paper: Jihadist armed governance in Mali,” 4.

28 Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*; Zachariah Mampilly, “Performing the nation-state: Rebel governance and symbolic processes,” in *Rebel governance in civil war*, eds. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2014).

hand. In her study of mafia organisations, for instance, Letizia Paoli<sup>29</sup> argues that these differ from regular criminal actors in their ability to maintain rules and governance systems for their members and in their areas, in what she calls “political dominion.” In this perspective, dominion and violence are intertwined yet distinct, the former allowing an analysis of power focussing on rules and governance. Also, manufactured consent through hegemony seems less relevant in this context because the objectives of mafia and insurgent groups differ.

John Gaventa offers further nuances in his analysis of power and social movements.<sup>30</sup> He distinguishes between *visible power* (observable actors and processes in decision-making), *hidden power* (agenda setting, i.e. negotiation topics and who has access to the negotiation table) and *invisible power* (the influence over people's beliefs and on the legitimacy of the *status quo*). Gaventa does not address violent or criminal organisations, but his insights are useful to analyse rebel governance too. For the purpose of this paper, I will consider his concept of visible power as connected to acts or threats of violence; hidden power basically as synonym of political dominion through anti-state governance (i.e. as a sort of extreme exercise in agenda setting and stakeholder selection in defining rules of behaviour); and invisible power as cultural hegemony. The following sections will show how jihadist groups employ these 3 forms of power in sophisticated and integrated manners, using force and pursuing dominion and hegemony according to contexts and circumstances. An account of structural factors linked to insecurity and discontent will also complement the focus on jihadist agency, and I will argue that jihadists are constrained by these factors, which they also shape at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Jihadist groups in Mali: an overview of an evolving galaxy

The galaxy of militant groups in Mali has been in constant evolution in the last 20 years. Coalition and fragmentation among different movements follow not only ideology (e.g. so-called defensive vs offensive jihad), but also pragmatic needs, personal loyalties, and economic considerations. Local groups access funding and visibility through their allegiance to the global brands of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; these global actors, for their part, need local power brokers to expand their activities and compete against each other for the leadership of global jihad.<sup>32</sup> Also, an insecure environment creates commercial incentives for armed groups, including jihadists, to entertain illicit traffics (like smuggling in Northern Mali, or cattle theft and kidnapping in the centre) and to set up protection rackets much like ordinary criminal groups.<sup>33</sup> For a bit of context, in the early 2000s Algerian militants of the ‘Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat’ (GSPC) set foot in poorly monitored Northern Mali after their defeat in their country's civil war. They were more or less tolerated by the government in Bamako, who bet on stability through quiet and tacit acceptance of a few radicals in some far-flung provinces. This bet turned into a disaster when Gaddafi was killed in Libya in October 2011. Several thousand Tuareg moved back to their original land in Northern Mali, that they call Azawad, with the

29 Letizia Paoli, “What makes mafias different?” *Crime and Justice* 49, no. 9 (2020).

30 John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); John Gaventa, “Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis,” *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006).

31 In this sense, structure and agency are mutually constitutive. See Deepa Narayan, “Conceptual framework and methodological challenges,” in *Measuring empowerment. Cross-disciplinary perspectives*, ed. Deepa Narayan (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005).

32 Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The end of the Sahelian exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State clash in Central Mali,” *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020); International Crisis Group, “Mali: Enabling dialogue with the jihadist coalition JNIM,” Africa Report no 306 (2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/306-mali-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim> (accessed May 16, 2022).

33 Morten Boas and Francesco Strazzari, “Governance, fragility and insurgency in the Sahel: A hybrid political order in the making,” *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020).

weapons and military training they had received in Libya.<sup>34</sup>

They allied with the radicals, who in the meantime had evolved into 3 main groups: 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' (the successor of GSPC, known as AQMI in French), the more Sahel-focussed 'Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa' (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine. The latter was created by Iyad ag Ghaly, a historic Tuareg leader from the dominant Ifoghas clan who had fought and negotiated with the state since the early 1990s, had significant access to intelligence networks, and had radicalised in the 2000s. He is now a key figure in Mali's jihad as the leader of the 'Support Group for Islam and Muslims' (JNIM): formed in 2017, JNIM is an umbrella organisation including several Al-Qaeda affiliates. Among these JNIM groups, it is worth mentioning Katiba Macina. Amadou Kouffa, an ethnic Fulani preacher from Central Mali, set up the group in 2015 after fighting in the north with ag-Ghaly. Kouffa is currently ag-Ghaly's deputy in JNIM. Katiba Macina is extremely interesting for our purposes for the ways it structures its territorial penetration and population control, which have made it one of the most successful insurgents in Mali and the region. We will see below how the group employs sophisticated forms of domination through coercion, co-optation, dialogue and service delivery in targeted communities.<sup>35</sup>

Reflecting the global struggle for dominance between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, in Mali too the key fault line in the jihadist galaxy is between JNIM, affiliated to Al-Qaeda, and the ISGS. The latter developed under the leadership of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui. A refugee from Western Sahara, he rose to commander rank in MUJAO before setting up his own group in 2015, then declaring allegiance to the Islamic State. Not without hurdles and setbacks, like the killing of al-Sahraoui himself in November 2021 by French forces, ISGS has established its presence in North-Eastern Mali, around the Ménaka region and the "3-border area" between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, also known as Liptako-Gourma region. The relations between JNIM and ISGS have evolved from more or less tacit cooperation towards a violent competition for power.<sup>36</sup> At the time of writing, heavy fighting is reported in the Liptako-Gourma region, with victims on both sides, unspecified numbers of civilian casualties and large-scale cattle theft.<sup>37</sup> ISGS staged a show of force and a communication coup in November 2022, when a large group of armed militants was filmed declaring allegiance to the new ISIS leader, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Jihadist power: hegemony, dominion, and force

In his analysis of jihadist mobilisation and radicalisation processes, Raineri considers jihadist ideologies as "a horizon of meaning and a toolbox for action to articulate widespread, pre-existing discontent in a unitary front."<sup>39</sup> This definition allows to view violent jihad both as a demand-side and as a supply-side phenomenon:

34 For a background analysis, see Laurance Aidar Ammour et al., *Sahel : Éclairer le passé pour mieux dessiner l'avenir* (Brussels: GRIP, 2013).

35 JNIM associates employ joint governance frameworks to foster internal cohesion too. See Troels Burchall Henningsen, "The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021).

36 Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, "The end of the Sahelian exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State clash in Central Mali."

37 Online communication, Bamako-based researcher, November 22, 2022.

38 RFI, "Mali: démonstration de force en vidéo de l'État islamique au Grand Sahara," *RFI*, December 14, 2022. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20221214-mali-d%C3%A9monstration-de-force-vid%C3%A9o-de-l-etat-islamique-au-grand-sahel> (accessed December 20, 2022).

39 Luca Raineri, "La crisi che non c'era: analisi dei fattori di radicalizzazione e mobilitazione jihadista in Sahel" [A brand new crisis: An analysis of jihadist radicalisation and mobilisation factors in the Sahel], in *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e controterrorismo nel Sahel*, eds. Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022), 52, author's translation.



on the one hand, discontent offers jihadist propagandists a breeding ground for rebellion, a sort of untapped demand that insurgent narratives can try to capture in legitimation and recruitment strategies; on the other hand, the success of such narratives in meeting this demand is no easy task, as other suppliers compete to capture this discontent (e.g. jihadist rivals), or to counter jihadist narratives, for example advocating Islamist doctrines and jurisprudence that do not justify Salafist revolutions.

A situation of “widespread, pre-existing discontent” has been measured very clearly in opinion polls, recording a drastically poor reputation of the state across groups and communities. A recent *Mali-Mètre* – a survey active since 2012 – showed that 82% of Malians perceive corruption in the country as high or very high, especially in their relations with the police (42%), the formal justice (37%), health (29%), customs (25%) and the local government (24%). Also, 66% of respondents thought of impunity as frequent or very frequent.<sup>40</sup> Another survey, conducted in 2017, targeted the perceptions of public services and recorded a “duality of expectation and suspicion.”<sup>41</sup> On the one hand, respondents expected the state to provide security, justice, education, healthcare and sanitation; on the other hand, their satisfaction with public services and their trust in the state as service provider was very low. Likewise, the Afrobarometer finds lack of trust in the presidency, the National Assembly, political parties and local authorities.<sup>42</sup> Two separate survey experiments are also worth mentioning. They both asked respondents who they would turn to for help in case of a land dispute. Allowing more than one answer, Winters and Conroy-Krutz found that 68% of respondents would go to the village chief and 60% to friends, while only 12% considered the formal justice system.<sup>43</sup> The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue conducted a similar survey among community representatives from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger: 77% of overall respondents, and 91% of Malians, chose customary authorities over public officials.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on state-citizen relations, a governance NGO spoke of a “disconnection between a visible and a deep Mali” today, in which Bamako elites are poorly aware of what happens in communities and villages. “What people call multidimensional crisis is the result of a badly centralised governance, where the state has been unable to follow changes in society, has delivered poor services, and has responded to grievances with repression.”<sup>45</sup>

Jihadist groups are of course not only witnesses and passive beneficiaries of this crisis, but its committed promoters as well. In the aftermath of the 2012 crisis, the military retreated south and the civilian administration went along. The retreat of the state left communities to fend for themselves and cast further blow to its legitimacy and credibility. Feelings of abandonment were indeed recorded in large scale research by the Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix.<sup>46</sup> They emerged as a constant theme in my interviews too. Two informants pointed out how disillusion

40 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Mali-Mètre. Enquête d'opinion. "Que pensent les Malien(ne)s"* (Enquête: Avril 2022. Publication : Mai 2022), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2022, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/2022-13.pdf> (accessed July 17, 2022).

41 Aurélien Tobie and Grégory Chauzal, “State services in an insecure environment: Perceptions among civil society in Mali,” *SIPRI*, December 2018, 9, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/state-services-insecure-environment-perceptions-among-civil-society-mali> (accessed April 28, 2022).

42 Afrobarometer, *Résumé des résultats. Enquête Afrobarometer Round 8 au Mali, 2020*, [https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/afrobarometer\\_sor\\_mli\\_r8\\_fr\\_2020-10-21.pdf](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/afrobarometer_sor_mli_r8_fr_2020-10-21.pdf) (accessed July 18, 2022).

43 Matthew S. Winters and Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz, “Preferences for traditional and formal sector justice institutions to address land disputes in rural Mali,” *World Development* 142 (2021).

44 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, *Gestion des ressources naturelles au Sahel : les us et coutumes au services de la résolution des conflits. Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritanie, Niger & Tchad*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2021), <https://hdcentre.org/insights/natural-resources-management-in-the-sahel-uses-and-customs-at-the-service-of-conflict-resolution/> (accessed November 15, 2022).

45 Interview, governance NGO, Bamako, June 20, 2022.

46 Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix, *Autoportrait du Mali. Les obstacles à la paix*. IMRAP, Interpeace (2015). <https://www.interpeace.org/resource/self-portrait-obstacles-topeace-in-mali/> (accessed March 4, 2022).

towards the state could quickly turn into anger and resentment, that jihadist groups could exploit with messages like “the state works for the money, not for the people. We’re going to get rid of this administration.”<sup>47</sup> And indeed, Katiba Macina has become the dominant force in Central Mali by capturing deep seated grievances of pastoralist communities against the state, in particular related to (i) decades of land policies that favoured industrialised farming, (ii) a predatory Forestry Service, and (iii) a corrupt justice administration. Moreover, while the state acted against the insurgents in 2012, Katiba Macina systematically sided with the herders in land conflicts, and protected them against the attacks of criminal and armed groups. In combination with these actions, the group has skilfully employed righteous and egalitarian narratives to present the jihadist project in liberating terms, that resonate among disadvantaged groups.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, researchers have spoken of 2 phases in Katiba Macina’s rise to dominance in Central Mali.<sup>49</sup> The first one was marked by outright violence and assassination campaigns against government officials, customary authorities and opposition voices to their Salafist maximalism. The President of a pastoralist Fulani association – highly critical of his community’s collective identification with jihadism – explained that “people forget that Fulani are the first victims of the jihadists. Fulani leaders and marabouts [religious scholars] who opposed jihadist ideas were taken prisoners, killed, or had to move south.”<sup>50</sup> The objective of this assassination campaign, in the words of Henningsen, is “to shape the existing power structures and marginalise non-Salafist understanding of Islam.”<sup>51</sup> A researcher in Bamako added that not only did Katiba Macina eliminate competitors with less radical positions on religion and politics: they also control market access of books and literature wherever they operate.<sup>52</sup> Once their hegemony was somehow established in Central Mali, they started to nuance their revolutionary zeal and narratives, and they started co-opting local customary authorities more decisively in their own governance system. They also allowed some public services to be carried out by local authorities. This softening of their revolutionary stance created a window of opportunity for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to challenge Katiba Macina on doctrinal and ideological grounds. More and more violently since 2020, they criticise the group for their collaboration with traditional and state elites against the “right” interpretations of Salafism, and against the interest of the poor.<sup>53</sup>

Henningsen shows that Katiba Macina and their JNIM coalition associates employ two different yet integrated communication strategies to spread their ideology and reinforce their position as jihadist leaders: one targeting a local audience with oral means; the other online, meant for a global audience. In both cases, local conflicts and grievances are framed in global jihadist narratives, and JNIM members are presented as righteous alternatives to a corrupted state. This explains the attention to governance that Lia found across different jihadist proto-states:<sup>54</sup> challenging

47 Interview, governance NGO, Bamako, June 21, 2022.

48 Natasja Rupesinghe and Morten Boas, “Local drivers of violent extremism in Central Mali,” *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/local-drivers-of-violent-extremism-in-central-mali> (accessed April 7, 2022); Boubacar Ba and Morten Boas, “Mali: A political economy analysis;” Tor A. Benjaminsen & Boubacar Ba, “Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019); Giovanni Zanoletti, “Violenza politica e (ri)strutturazione sociale: il ‘jihad bovino’ in Mali,” in *Jihad in Africa. Terrorismo e controterrorismo nel Sahel*, eds. Edoardo Baldaro and Luca Raineri (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2022).

49 Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The end of the Sahelian exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State clash in Central Mali.”

50 Interview, Bamako, June 28, 2022.

51 Troels Burchall Henningsen, “The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021), 14.

52 Interview with researcher, Bamako, July 8, 2022.

53 Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The end of the Sahelian exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State clash in Central Mali;” Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba, “Jihadist ideological conflict and local governance in Mali,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022).

54 Brynjar Lia, “Understanding jihadi proto-states.”

the state is not only done on the battlefield but on people's mind too, that is by targeting popular beliefs and sense of legitimacy of political rule. In the word of a human rights NGOs, "jihadists are fine psychologists. They want to prove that the state is useless."<sup>55</sup> To demonstrate this point, state governance frameworks, perceived and presented as corrupted and unfair, are replaced by jihadist governance frameworks, shown as pious, fairer and more effective. Even though the type of jihadist governance services in Mali may seem quite basic and rudimentary at first sight, they have to be compared to those previously delivered by a state administration seen as absent and self-serving.<sup>56</sup>

Jihadist governance in Mali corroborates Mampilly's hypothesis that rebel governance is both less structured and more innovative in contexts where the state was poorly present before the conflict.<sup>57</sup> In fact, jihadists in Mali employ largely de-territorialised and "immaterial" forms of governance,<sup>58</sup> together with significant innovations in service delivery. For instance, in 2012, AQMI set up a helpdesk in Timbuktu to report harassments and abuses by armed groups and criminals; in Central Mali, Katiba Macina offers justice administration through mobile courts, moving from village to village on motorbikes; Katiba Macina also brought electricity generators in villages suffering from power outages.<sup>59</sup> Much like mafia organisations, jihadists are both sources of insecurity and security providers in protection rackets, that they entertain as part of their political dominion.<sup>60</sup> The Katiba Macina acted as peace broker in farmer-herder conflicts in 2020.<sup>61</sup> Jihadist groups also negotiate humanitarian access in their areas.<sup>62</sup> A humanitarian NGO explained how these talks typically occur through intermediates at the sidelines of public meetings in nearby villages. Jihadists tend to value the health and nutrition focus of humanitarian aid "because they also get sick," even though NGOs can sometime extend their programmes to social cohesion sectors, "that jihadists see as abstract." Once access is agreed, communications seem to cease with the jihadists, unless NGOs are seen as stepping out of line, "for example in a sport tournament we organised and we had to cancel, which received a categorical no."<sup>63</sup> The overall objective of all these initiatives is to foster and preserve a "counter-state sovereign"<sup>64</sup> – both in reality and in perceptions – in the form of a competing system of governance that is accepted by the population instead of the state-linked one.

Dialogue and services are among the tools in the struggle for ideological hegemony and political dominance. However, jihadist groups remain deeply violent organisations for which force and credible threats of violence underpin the other two dimensions of power. In fact, not only is military strength necessary to fight the state, militias and rival jihadist groups, but it is also directly employed against non-combatants, especially when these are perceived as breaching out of jihadist

55 Interview, Bamako, July 15, 2022.

56 Troels Burchall Henningsen, "The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region;" Natasja Rupesinghe et al., "Reviewing jihadist governance in the Sahel."

57 Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*.

58 Rida Lyammouri, "Literature paper: Jihadist armed governance in Mali," 4.

59 Interview, humanitarian NGO, Bamako, July 5, 2022; Isak Svensson and Daniel Finnbogason, "Confronting the caliphate? Explaining civil resistance in jihadist proto-states;" International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists," Africa Report no 276 (2019), <https://www.crisis-group.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists> (accessed May 16, 2022); International Crisis Group, "Mali: Enabling dialogue with the jihadist coalition JNIM," Africa Report no 306 (2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/306-mali-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim> (accessed May 16, 2022); Boubacar Ba and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, "When jihadists broker peace. Natural resource conflict as weapons of war in Mali's protracted crisis," Danish Institute for International Studies, January 20, 2021, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/when-jihadists-broker-peace> (accessed April 23, 2022); Boubacar Ba and Morten Boas, "Mali: A political economy analysis."

60 Letizia Paoli, "What makes mafias different?," *Crime and Justice* 49, no. 9 (2020).

61 Rida Lyammouri, "Literature paper: Jihadist armed governance in Mali."

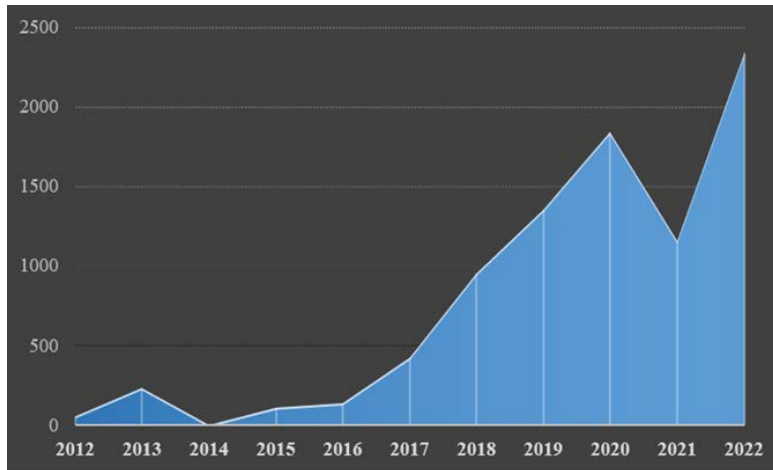
62 International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists;" International Crisis Group, "Mali: Enabling dialogue with the jihadist coalition JNIM."

63 Interview with a humanitarian NGO worker, Bamako, July 5, 2022.

64 Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*; Troels Burchall Henningsen, "The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region."

frameworks. Figure 2 offers a glimpse into the spiralling scale of violence that has engulfed the two central regions of Mopti and Segou, which account for over 50% of all fatalities recorded in Mali between 1 January 2012 and 9 December 2022. Adding to this, the first semester 2022 recorded a 273.5% increase in fatalities in those regions compared to the same period in 2021 indicating, once again, a worsening state of instability and insecurity.<sup>65</sup>

Figure 2 Fatalities, Mopti and Segou, January 2012 - December 2022



Source 2 Author's graph created from data extracted from ACLED's database

With a view to providing a more general picture, these figures do not disaggregate between jihadist and non-jihadist acts of violence; however, the extent to which the jihadists are key drivers of insecurity emerges from the way they generate both violence and opportunities to escape from it. In fact, actual and structural violence lead to loss of life, but also large-scale displacement and food insecurity: out of a population of approximately 20 million, UN figures record 7.5 million Malians are in need of humanitarian assistance, 1.8 million are food-insecure and 370,548 are internally displaced.<sup>66</sup> Livelihoods and socio-economic opportunities are of course heavily impacted too. The secretary for conflict issues of an ethnic Dogon association explained how all economic sectors and communities in Central Mali have been suffering from the fighting, tensions and blockades, from traditional sectors of farming and herding to the tourism industry, which used to be a key source of revenue across ethnic groups.<sup>67</sup> In these circumstances of permanent disruption, it is not surprising to observe jihad as a vector for status and socio-economic advancement.<sup>68</sup> In fact, researchers and informants found that jihadist recruits receive a weapon and FCFA 500,000 (EUR 780) when they enrol, then FCFA 50,000/month; also, successful improvised explosive devices lead to payments of up to EUR 6,000.<sup>69</sup> Finally, ISGS attracts recruits and defectors from other groups (mostly

65 Héni Nsaibia, "10 conflicts to worry about in 2022. The Sahel. Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability."

66 OCHA, Mali: *Rapport de situation*, June 13, 2022, <https://reports.unocha.org/fr/country/mali/> (accessed July 4, 2022).

67 Interview with a Dogon association member, Bamako, June 30, 2022.

68 Aly Tounkara and Bassirou Gaye, *Le Djihad à Ké-Macina dans le centre du Mali. Prosélytisme religieux ou enjeux socio-économiques ?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019).

69 Interview, with a Dogon association member, Bamako, June 30, 2022; Interview with a human rights NGO worker, Bamako, June 23, 2022; Emmanuel Tronc, Rob Grace and Anaïde Nahikian, "Realities and myths of the 'Triple nexus.' Local perspectives on peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian action in Mali," Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, Jun 2019, [https://hhi.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/humanitarianinitiative/files/haf\\_-\\_mali.pdf?m=1606247448](https://hhi.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/humanitarianinitiative/files/haf_-_mali.pdf?m=1606247448) (accessed July 22, 2022).

Katiba Macina) by allowing its militants to keep loot.<sup>70</sup> Akin to their protection racket, jihadist groups profit here from a political economy of insecurity, in which they disrupt livelihoods and offer socio-economic opportunities at the same time. This illustrates the extent to which jihadist agency and the broader structure where they operate are mutually constitutive, as the rebels are constrained by structural conditions of conflict, tensions and insecurity that they also directly shape.

Local peace deals between militants and villages, mostly represented by village chiefs, provide another area in which jihadist groups project actual force or credible threats of violence. In these agreements, the jihadists exchange non-aggression against the payment of *zakat* (Islamic tax), the respect of Islamic laws, and the commitment to refrain from collaborating with the state.<sup>71</sup> The structural imbalance of power is obvious here, as chiefs are forced to negotiate with armed actors from fragile, unarmed positions. Researchers have underlined how civilian actors do possess some leverage in these negotiations.<sup>72</sup> However, the consequences of the underlying power imbalance can be brutal: during my fieldwork in Bamako, on 18-19 June 2022, jihadist groups – linked to JNIM or ISGS in different accounts – entered Diarrassagou and other villages in the Bankass district and massacred 200 people.<sup>73</sup> Researchers and NGO informants, with programmes in the area, said that the villages had not agreed to jihadist deals, and were used to avenge the killing of 300 villagers in Moura – an area under jihadist influence – by the military and Russian mercenaries in March 2022.<sup>74</sup>

The Diarrassagou massacre is unfortunately not an isolated case and is symptomatic of how jihadists see local communities as instrumental in their violent designs and operations. Also, even when non-aggression pacts do result in local peace and stability, the significance of these deals should not be overstated. A religious leader, with experience in facilitating these talks in Central Mali, explained that these agreements are short-term in nature.<sup>75</sup> A researcher pointed out that, even when the deals achieve some kind of peace locally, they move the violence elsewhere. Besides, jihadists tend to renegotiate the deals towards stricter rules of behaviour: "If the deal says you will pray five times a day, then why don't you cut your trousers too, and why don't your women cover more? They go on progressively."<sup>76</sup> Force and violence, in sum, remain intrinsically linked to the way jihadist groups pursue ideological and political objectives of hegemony and dominion.

Figure 3 below summarises the discussion and shows the 3 dimensions of force, dominion and hegemony as distinct yet mutually reinforcing. Following the analysis in this section, the figure disaggregates the 3 dimensions according to their respective areas, targets, and the modalities in which jihadist power is projected. The combination of these dimensions gives a joint framework of power, executed using material, human, and financial resources available for the jihadist project. This focus on jihadist agency is complemented by structural factors of insecurity and discontent, that jihadists both use and shape. The key argument of this article

70 Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, "The end of the Sahelian exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State clash in Central Mali."

71 Philip Kleinfeld and Mamadou Tapily, "We accept to save our lives: How local dialogues with jihadists took root in Mali," *The New Humanitarian*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2022/05/04/we-accept-save-our-lives-how-local-dialogues-jihadists-took-root-mali> (accessed June 2, 2022).

72 See e.g. Isak Svensson and Daniel Finnbogason, "Confronting the caliphate? Explaining civil resistance in jihadist proto-states," and Ferdaous Bouhleb and Yvan Guichaoua, "Norms, non-combatants' agency and restraint in jihadi violence in Northern Mali," mentioned above.

73 MINUSMA, *La MINUSMA enquête après le massacre de Diarrassagou*, June 27, 2022, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/la-minusma-enqu%C3%AAt-apr%C3%A8s-le-massacre-de-diarrassagou> (accessed July 2, 2022).

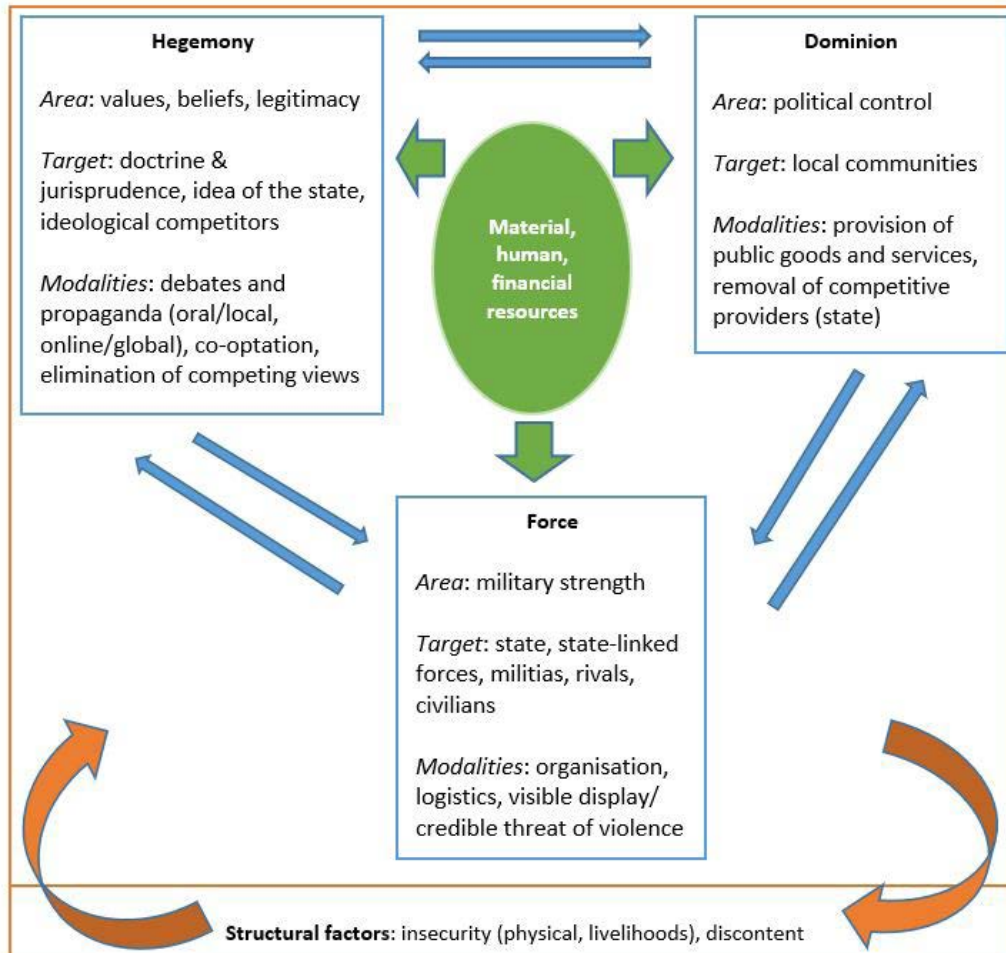
74 Interviews with researchers and NGOs, Bamako, June-July 2022; Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Massacre by army, foreign soldiers," April 5, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers> (accessed May 1, 2022).

75 Phone interview with a religious leader in Central Mali, July 5, 2022.

76 Interview with a researcher, Bamako, July 3, 2022.

is that such an integrated form of power projection largely explains how jihadist groups have been able to transform Mali into a jihadist hotspot, with consequences for neighbouring states and the broader region.

Figure 3 Jihadist power in Mali: hegemony, dominion, force



## 5. Conclusion and policy implications

This article addressed the question of how jihadist groups structure and expand their presence in Mali's communities and territories. The interest of this topic goes beyond research alone. In fact, there is a widespread consensus that hard, militarised counterterrorism is not enough to fight jihadism in Mali and the Sahel; however, the nature and trappings of different approaches are far from clear. The article offered these reflections and debates some food for thought. After an introduction on the context, section 2 presented a theoretical framework informed by rebel and hybrid governance literature, with special reference to so-called jihadist proto-states, and by a power analysis revolving around 3 key dimensions: hegemony, dominion, and force. Section 3 outlined a complex and evolving galaxy of militant groups in Mali, including their coalitions and fragmentation; it also linked these actors to the global competition between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, on the one hand, and to local dynamics, on the other hand. Section 4 delved into the research question, and it applied the theoretical framework to the case of Mali. Groups were seen as struggling on doctrinal grounds and for ideological hegemony, both among themselves and against the state. They also nurture their political dominion by offering governance and service delivery in opposition to those associated to the state. While these dimensions of power do underline rebel capacity for order and stability, force and violence remain key components of their power too, used not only against the state and rival groups, but also against civilians. The article argued that the success of jihadism in Mali and the region largely rests on the skilful application of these 3 dimensions of power: hegemony, dominion and force. Moreover, structural factors of insecurity, widespread discontent and lack of socio-economic opportunities stand in a binary and mutually constitutive relation with jihadist agency, in the sense that these structural factors both constrain and are very deliberately shaped by jihadists.

In this account, jihadist power offers a complex and sophisticated picture of jihadism that contrasts with limited, time-bound, enemy-focussed approaches of hard counterterrorism. This analysis does not discard counterterrorism programmes as useless in their aims to curtail jihadist mobility, to eliminate militant commanders or to disrupt terrorist finance. In fact, these operations tackle the material, human and financial resources that jihadists employ in all the 3 dimensions of power. However, the limits of hard counterterrorism alone emerge in its overreliance on the force dimension of power in countering violent jihad, with insufficient regard to the other 2 dimensions. What should also be a source of concern, is that jihadist propagandists can use this overreliance by state or state-linked forces in their own legitimisation strategies based on anti-state narratives. They can use human rights abuses by the military to stir up grievances and discontent, or they can show the state as absent and self-serving in its lack of attention to public goods and services. Militarised counterterrorism without a broader political agenda can then not only be limited in its effects, but counterproductive as well.

This article suggests that a broader agenda should target the same dimensions used by jihadist rebels in their power projection, that is cultural hegemony and political dominion. These dimensions are intertwined because political institutions are often legitimised with reference to values, and on doctrinal or ideological grounds. Jihadist narratives should be challenged on these grounds that address values, beliefs and sense of legitimacy. Actual and online audiences should be targeted with different interpretations of Islam, jihad preven Salafist ideologies, that share doctrinal sources but differ in their political implications, in particular when it comes to the use of violence. Mauritania offers very interesting experiences of doctrinal dialogue that helped the de-radicalisation of prisoners and potential recruits: the independence and moral authority of the scholars who engaged militants in this

dialogue was a key factor in what is generally regarded as a success.<sup>77</sup> Comparing differences and similarities with Mali seems very promising for policy and programmatic purposes, including on a possible role for the Malian High Islamic Council.

The dominion dimension of power is probably the hardest to tackle, as it extends to large and complex governance and developmental gaps. In fact, jihadist narratives capture deep seated discontent against a state system of governance seen as systemically corrupted, absent, poorly interested in the livelihoods and well-being of the population. Changing these perceptions cannot be achieved overnight, especially after decades of neopatrimonialism and institutional dysfunction. However, long-term strategies of jihadist legitimation should be matched by long-term state building strategies that address good governance, development, and state-citizen relations. This is a daunting task in a context that has been heavily fragmented by more than 10 years of war, which underlines the primacy of local analysis and design in the delivery of local solutions to development and governance gaps. What's more, political realities in Mali cannot be grasped by state building models built on large-scale public administration, that delivers uniform public goods and services across the national territory. A more modest, yet, more useful mindset to approach state building and development in Mali is one of an emerging hybrid political order, where the state coexists and is forced to interact with a variety of non-state actors and power poles, once again on a local level.<sup>78</sup>

In this respect, security and development should not abandon the objectives of responsive and inclusive governance to meet the interests and needs of the population, but they will adapt these objectives to hybrid governance realities. Negotiated statehood and governance will then include non-state authorities, such as traditional and religious leaders, and will address the local needs and circumstances at community and village level, more than as by-products of large, nation-wide programmes and reforms. The hybrid nature of this form of security and development is of course full of risks and dilemmas. First of all, in a context affected by violence, non-state authorities can be governance partners, but they can be linked to human rights abuses or to violent militia. Secondly, they can become the target of jihadist groups who pursue radical governance objectives, and who may see any collaboration with anti-jihadist forces as a threat to their dominion strategies. Development partners may also be reluctant to engage with non-state actors due to fiduciary risks in insecure environments.

Finally, the question of whether and how to engage jihadist groups in governance and development talks appears here in the context of hybrid governance and its stakeholders. The perspective of these talks is shocking to Western capitals and to the current government in Bamako, much less elsewhere in Mali. Not only did my informants advocate pragmatic and prospective approaches in these talks with JNIM (not ISGS), but these talks had already been explored by the High Islamic Council in 2020 before the military coup, with presidential blessing.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, informal talks with militants have never stopped at the local level, and they seem currently more structured in the north.<sup>80</sup> This article lends credit to those who, in

77 Hassane Koné and Ornella Moderan, "Dialoguer avec les djihadistes : enseignements mauritaniens pour le Sahel," Institute for Security Studies, March 28, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/fr/iss-today/dialoguer-avec-les-djihadistes-enseignements-mauritaniens-pour-le-sahel> (accessed May 4, 2022); Ferdaous Bouhlel, "Al-Tawba, expérience mauritanienne de redéfinition de la violence légitime," in *Sahel : Éclairer le passé pour mieux dessiner l'avenir*, Laurance Aidar Ammour et al. (Brussels: GRIP, 2013).

78 Morten Boas and Francesco Strazzari, "Governance, fragility and insurgency in the Sahel: A hybrid political order in the making."

79 For an overview, see Ferdaous Bouhlel, "(Ne pas) dialoguer avec les groupes « djihadistes » au Mali ? Entre contradictions normatives, « manqués » de la médiation... et nécessité heuristique," Rapport d'étude de cas, *Berghof Foundation*, May 7, 2020 (Berlin : Berghof, 2020), <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/ne-pas-dialoguer-avec-les-groupes-jihadistes-au-mali-%C3%A9tude-de-cas> (accessed November 11, 2022). erghof

80 Africa Intelligence, "Northern Mali: the junta's secret dealings with jihadists and local kingpins," December 23, 2022, [www.africaintelligence.com](http://www.africaintelligence.com) (accessed December 29, 2022).



Mali and elsewhere, advocate to explore dialogue with some militant movements, without any naïve expectation on the motivations and reliability of heavily ideological groups.<sup>81</sup> Standard tools like power sharing agreements, or the transformation of rebels into politicians, may not succeed with Salafist maximalists. However, common grounds should at least be explored in the interest of peace, livelihoods and the well-being of ordinary Malians, who are suffering the most in current conditions. These talks should not be seen in isolation to fighting violent jihad on the hegemony, dominion and force dimensions; on the contrary, jihadist setbacks in these dimensions could create some leverage in talks for peace and governance. Akin to jihadist power, security and development actors should adopt an integrated and evolving approach: such an approach will balance the 3 dimensions of power according to circumstances and opportunities, and it will invest decisively on local governance and livelihoods to shape structural conditions for peace and development. ●

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81 E.g. International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists;" International Crisis Group, "Mali: Enabling dialogue with the jihadist coalition JNIM."

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