Unpacking 'new climate wars':
ACTORS AND DRIVERS OF CONFLICT IN THE SAHEL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

As violence and insecurity increase and the Sahel situation deteriorates further, understanding the main causes and drivers of conflicts is of growing importance. Recently, the assumption that climate change is causing violence and displacement in the region has become prominent, and this has led to the emergence of notions such as 'climate wars' and 'environmental wars'. This report seeks to nuance this mainstream idea and argues that violence and conflict in the Sahel are caused not by climate change but by the presence of armed groups, jihadist insurgencies and military interventions with diverging political and ideological agendas. While acknowledging that conflicts can be exacerbated by climate change, the report challenges the predominant belief that these changes automatically lead to conflict. Focusing on Mali's epicentre of violence, the Mopti region, the report maps the actors and multiple, intertwined, causes behind the ongoing violence including, but not limited to, the role of the state. It concludes by pointing to the importance of understanding the relationship between climate change and conflict in order to design effective and adapted security, political and development responses, and the need for concerted dialogue with local stakeholders and community representatives as a prerequisite for any attempt to prevent and mitigate effects of climate change in the Sahel.

Over the past decade the relationship between conflict and climate change has been widely debated. Since the early 2000s, the growing concern of global warming has focused international attention on 'climate security', the term which scholars, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), politicians, think tanks, supranational institutions, and international organisations use to depict climate change as a 'threat multiplier' with potential multidimensional negative impacts on global peace and security (Werrell & Femia 2015). Given its arid climate, recurrent droughts and humanitarian crises, ongoing conflicts in West Africa's Sahel region are often portrayed in policy and media discourses as a result of climate change (Global Post 2013; Rasmussen & Wæver 2013; Muggah 2021). The escalation of violence in Mali since 2012 and the subsequent spread of jihadist militancy and transnational crime networks throughout the Sahel-Saharan regions, in particular, have rearticulated concerns about the link between climate change and terrorism. According to this so-called 'climate-conflict' nexus, conflict escalation and terrorism are seen as the result of intensified competition due to a climate change-induced decline in resources, which also leads to migration from the Global South. In recent years this understanding of the relation of climate change to conflict has led to the implementation of new climate security policies and programmes in the region.

Despite attention-grabbing headlines declaring the eruption of 'new climate wars' in the Sahel, most research indicates that the links between climate change or climate variability and conflict are complex and indirect (Mbaye 2020; Raineri 2020a; SIDA 2017). The mechanisms of climate-conflict linkages remain disputed and while climate change can affect armed conflicts, drivers such as poor socioeconomic development and low state capability contribute substantially more (Mach et al. 2019). Armed conflict is a multidimensional phenomenon which emerges as a result of the interplay of context-specific, institutional, economic, social and historical factors, together with which climate change impacts often intertwine (Snorek et al. 2014). Likewise, even though effects of climate change on peoples' economic lives do play a role in migration, evidence does not show that people migrate from West Africa because of rising temperatures and fluctuations in rainfall (Penney 2019). Building on and contributing to these debates, this report argues that violence and conflict in the Sahel are caused by the presence of armed groups with divergent political and ideological agendas, not climate change per se. In these circumstances, the absence of effective natural resource management has become a key conflict driver in the face of increased pressure on land and water, and of the aggravating factor of climate change (Clingendael 2020). Climatic change can lead to 'livelihood insecurity' due to seasonal irregularity that jeopardises natural resource-based livelihoods and, researchers claim, such insecurity can 'interact with political and economic factors to increase the risk of conflicts over natural resource access and use' (De Coning & Krampe 2021).

> **The brutal pushback by internationally-supported state security forces with ambiguous ties to local self-defence militias has aggravated violence and fostered a climate of impunity in Mali's conflict-ridden areas.**

This report focuses on a specific context in order to examine the complexities behind the 'climate-conflict nexus'. We look at Mali's current epicentre of violence, the Mopti region, where climate change, resource scarcity and conflict exist in complex relation to each other. In Mopti's rural areas, where local authorities have abandoned their posts due to insecurity, there is a growing presence and influence of armed groups. In a context where the state and local institutions have been unwilling and unable to provide adequate resource governance institutions and dispute settlement mechanisms, armed groups exploit the grievances of local populations, their lack of protection, and existing conflicts over access to and control of key natural resources (water and land). Furthermore, the widespread availability of weapons has intensified violence against civilians and left communities more exposed to inter- and intra-communal conflicts and relentless criminality. Not only the jihadists produce violence: armed banditry is widespread as well as score-settling between communities, and security officials which in the absence of official forms of justice produces endless cycles of revenge-related killings (Clingendael 2017). Lastly, the French-led international fight against terrorism has shaped foreign military interventions and determined domestic security priorities. The brutal pushback by internationally-supported state security forces with ambiguous ties to local self-defence militias has also aggravated violence and fostered a climate of impunity in Mali's conflict-ridden areas. The various localities identified in this report – including the communities of Mopti, Tenenkou, Djenné and Youwarou (wetlands) and the communities of Douentza, Bankass, Koro and Biandiagara (drylands) – remain occupied by armed groups and have experienced incessant episodes of severe violence. In this context it is vital to undertake an analysis of the perceptions and practices of local populations, the mechanisms of conflict resolution, and the occupation strategies of armed groups.

This report maps the actors and driving forces behind the ongoing violence, including but not limited to factors related to climate change and variability, by situating the current conflict in its wider political, economic and historical context. The report points to the importance of the role of government in mediating peace, based on concerted dialogue with local stakeholders and community representatives as a prerequisite for any attempt to prevent and mitigate the effects of climate change in the Sahel.

METHODOLOGY

The report is based on quantitative and qualitative research undertaken between September and December 2020 as well as follow up interviews in Mopti in 2021[1] including:

■ 200 quantitative surveys in the Mopti region (100 in the wetland zone and 100 in the dryland zone).

■ Approximately 50 semi-structured interviews and small focus group discussions were conducted with a broad range of interviewees representing the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the region (village leaders, customary and traditional leaders, local officials, imams, women, youth, paralegals, teachers and Government technical services employees). We employed local field assistants from the Mopti region who were familiar to and trusted by our target population. Through their previous experience of working as legal assistants (parajuristes) with the communities in the area, they were trained in mitigating potential dangers due to insecurity and in how to avoid harm coming to them, their associates and their informants.

■ Audio messages distributed on WhatsApp and recordings of jihadist leaders' speeches were used to explore jihadist narratives, aims and purposes.[2]

■ Case studies from the Mopti region are drawn from information gleaned through the networks of our principal Malian researcher, Boubacar Ba.

■ 18 additional interviews were conducted with civil society representatives, representatives of international and national NGOs, and various external security actors (including the European Union Common Security and Defence (CSDP) mission, Eucap Sahel and the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali [MINUSMA]) as well as researchers and experts in Bamako and the urban centres of Mopti.

■ 44 semi-structured interviews were conducted with internally displaced persons (23 women and 21 men) at the informal Faladié IDP camp, Bamako.[3]

■ A review of academic literature, policy and think tank reports was conducted.

Disinformation and the active manipulation of social networks have an impact on research into the engagement of armed groups (jihadists and local militias) in the conflict. Conducting research under these circumstances necessitates a continuous contextualisation of the informants' preliminary judgments of the conflict dynamics as well as an understanding the trajectories of the information processes. The data collection and analysis for this report was conducted before the announced withdrawal of the French Operation Barkhane and the French-led Task Force Takuba in February 2022.

Structure of the report

The report is divided into four sections. First, it outlines the nature and extent of the conflict in the Mopti region and situates this in the context of Mali's post-2012 security collapse. Second, it maps the key actors driving violence in this region (including jihadist groups, self-defence militias and Security and Defence Forces [SDF]). Third, it examines the role played by local conflicts over control of and access to land, drawing on specific case studies. This section is designed to enable a better understanding of the multiple, intertwined causes behind the intensification of armed violence, namely conflicts between different social groups and communities over control and access to land. Finally, the report discusses future scenarios of how climate change may affect and exacerbate conflict in relation to the governance of natural resources in a context of insecurity and armed violence.

Mali's multilayered conflict broke out in 2012 and has since killed tens of thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands, while an increasingly unpopular French military intervention and a 15,000-strong United Nations peacekeeping force (MINUSMA) have failed to stop the violence from spilling over to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso.

To understand how the conflict dynamics are currently playing out within the Mopti region, and how its actors relate to a larger network of militants, it is important to rewind to 2012 when the Malian security crisis gained its foothold. Accelerated by the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, a security crisis erupted in Mali in January 2012 when a loose coalition of Tuareg separatist rebels and three jihadist groups – al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine – took control of Mali's three northern regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal and chased the state and the national army from the north of Mali and declared it the independent state of 'Azawad'. The Tuareg separatists were soon defeated by jihadist militants, who moved further south and threatened to attack the capital, which spurred the French military intervention (Operation Serval) in January 2013. The territory of Azawad, claimed by the pro-independence groups at the start of the crisis, included the three northern regions (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal), but also part of the Mopti region (the districts of Douentza and Youwarou). However, up until 2017 the security, political and social responses to this crisis, as exemplified by the Algiers Agreement of 2015,[4] were primarily concerned with the northern regions or with the whole of the national territory, without paying particular attention to the escalating crisis in the central regions (Tobie 2017: 3). While the state was occupied with handling the security crisis in the north in 2012, tensions were rising between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers in Mopti in the border area between Mali and Burkina Faso (Youro, Dinangourou). But, before we enter into a mapping of the armed groups in the current security crisis, to understand these intercommunal tensions, a bit of local historical context of the social hierarchy between the Fulani and the Dogon communities is needed, as these historical trajectories are, in multiple ways, evoked and manipulated by the competing armed groups to recruit members and to legitimise acts of violence.

CENTRAL MALI'S MOPTI REGION IN CONTEXT

Central Mali's Mopti region is located in the cross-border territory with Burkina Faso and Niger, also known as the Liptako-Gourma.[5] The Mopti region is characterised by an abundance of natural resources and marked by the coexistence of different ethnic groups with complementary, but occasionally conflicting, socioeconomic traditions and interests.

The Mopti region encompasses two zones, distinguished by their contrasting ecologies and distinct social compositions, the wetlands and the drylands. The wetlands, situated at the bend of the River Niger's inner flood delta, have long been a site of local conflicts over the rich abundance of natural resources – including water, pastureland, agriculture and fish. The wetlands are locally known as the Masina or the Dina, referring to the name of a theocratic state established in 1818 by Islamic Fulani clergymen who mobilised a jihad and conquered the Delta region. In the nine month-long dry season herders from across the Liptako Gourma region

Map 1. Central Mali's Mopti region

Illustration: Allan Lind Jørgensen.

migrate to the Delta's riverbank pastures (bourgoutières) where their cattle can access the water-grown fodder plant called bourgu. To give an impression of the national importance of the Delta's resources, during the 2012 dry season 20% of the twenty million goats and sheep and 40% of the five million cows in Mali were concentrated in the inner delta and its surrounding plains (Altenburg & Wymenga 2012).[6]

The Fulani, semi-nomadic pastoralists, live side by side with Tuareg, Songhaï, Bozo, Bambara and Dogon communities. The Bozo are traditionally fishermen, while the other groups' livelihoods mainly depend on agriculture and livestock rearing. On the river Niger's adjacent plains – the drylands – the Dogon and Fulani (Peulh) communities share fertile land, which the Dogon mainly use for sedentary agricultural production while the Fulani are mainly engaged in nomadic livestock herding.

The Fulani entered the inland Niger Delta of Mali in the 15th century and established hegemony over the area through a flexible political structure led by an aristocratic class of warlords (ardube). In the 19th century the Fulani Islamic theocratic state, the Dina, introduced a model for the organisation of natural resources in the drylands. The Dogon are said to have settled in the Bandiagara escarpment and adjoining plains (the so-called Land of the Dogon) during the 13th or 14th century, though the exact details are contested. Some believe the Dogon escaped from conflict and from being converted to Islam by the Fulani. During the 19th century, as the Dogon gradually moved down from the escarpments to farm on the adjoining plains, they were raided by the Fulani military power of the Dina. The Fulani military chased the Dogon back to their cliffs while many became enslaved (Rimaybe) by the higher caste Fulani (Rimbe). In the 19th century, the Tuareg elites competed with their Fulani rivals for power to control territory. To gain protection from the Tuareg, other groups then had to accept the Fulani hegemony established by the Dina. With the French colonisation the Fulani hegemony established by the Dina ended. The colonial era allowed Dogon groups from the Bandiagara escarpment to descend into the plains again, where they settled with the support of the colonial administration, with or without the consent of indigenous landowners, including Fulani (ICG 2020a; de Bruijn & van Dijk 1995: 55; Marie 1975: 142). This history endures as an influential reference point:

Still today, the memory of the 'brothers captured by people on horseback' is very vivid amongst the Dogon and brought up each time the cohabitation between the two communities [Fulani and Dogon] is threatened. For the Fulani kings of the Dina, the arrival of the French colonisation put an end to the ancient project of expanding the Dina empire throughout Seeno.

<div align="right">(Field notes, 2020)</div>

Despite the fact that these broad identity categories are often instrumentalised for political and strategic purposes, there are long-term trajectories of both conflict and peaceful collaboration between community groups over use of and access to resources (Barrière & Barrière 2002; Cold-Ravnkilde 2012). Furthermore, century-old local alliances exist between Dogon farming families and Fulani herdsmen based on complementary economic practices.

Historically, conflicts have emerged over competing natural resource use, for instance when farmers start cultivating land formerly reserved for pasture (Moorehead 1991). Socioeconomic activities are regulated by a set of norms and traditions upon which national laws have been superimposed during different periods of state formation and reform processes. However, these norms are no longer capable of regulating land management among the different communities, as their legitimacy is often contested. Conflicts, occasionally violent, break out between the groups, often related to disputes over land management and the legitimacy of the historical agreements regulating the use of the land (Tobie 2017: 9). In the last two decades increased pressure on land due to, amongst other things, intensified agricultural production, coupled with weak legislation and corruption in the legal system have aggravated disputes in the delta (Benjaminsen & Ba 2009).

In Mopti, like many other regions in the Sahel, development policies favouring agricultural expansion have been implemented at the expense of the highly valued dry season bourgu pastures and livestock corridors (Benjaminsen & Ba 2009). After large-scale Sahelian droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, governments, supported by international donors, attempted to respond to climate change through misguided environmental policies and programmes that created the conflicts and local grievances that contemporary jihadist groups today thrive on and escalate (Raineri

2020a). These processes form part of a wider marginalisation of pastoralists in Mali, which was one of the major causes of the Tuareg rebellion in the north of Mali in the 1990s and that was also deeply embedded in regional politics and historical trajectories of the first 1963 Tuareg rebellion.[7]
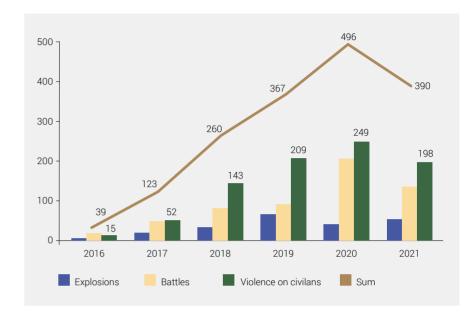
The rise in natural resource-related conflicts and violence within the Mopti region over the last five years is the result of several interwoven conflict dynamics, involving both pre-existing hostilities between and within communities and the exploitation of these grievances by non-state armed groups.

CONFLICT ESCALATION IN THE MOPTI REGION

Since 2015 the Mopti region has experienced a significant increase in violence and insecurity. There have been increasing numbers of attacks enacted by jihadist groups operating across the borders, including destroying security posts and ransacking of border settlements. Due to the significant presence of jihadist groups in the Liptako Gourma cross-border region, it has recently become the main intervention zone of French-led Western counterterror operations to support the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) in combatting jihadist groups and reinstating Government control in the area. However, so far FAMA and the regional G5 Sahel joint force's internationally backed counterterror operations, as well as the state's ambiguous ties to self-defence militias, have only aggravated violence against civilians and contributed to a climate of lawlessness and impunity. This points to how the intensified militarisation of international and national security responses has failed to contain violence in the region and forced local populations to collaborate with armed groups that both directly and indirectly threaten them. Indeed, the presence of both jihadist groups and of the international and national military operations fighting against them has escalated violence between and within communities in the region. Fights between self-defence militias of Fulani, Dogon and Bambara origin are becoming increasingly frequent.
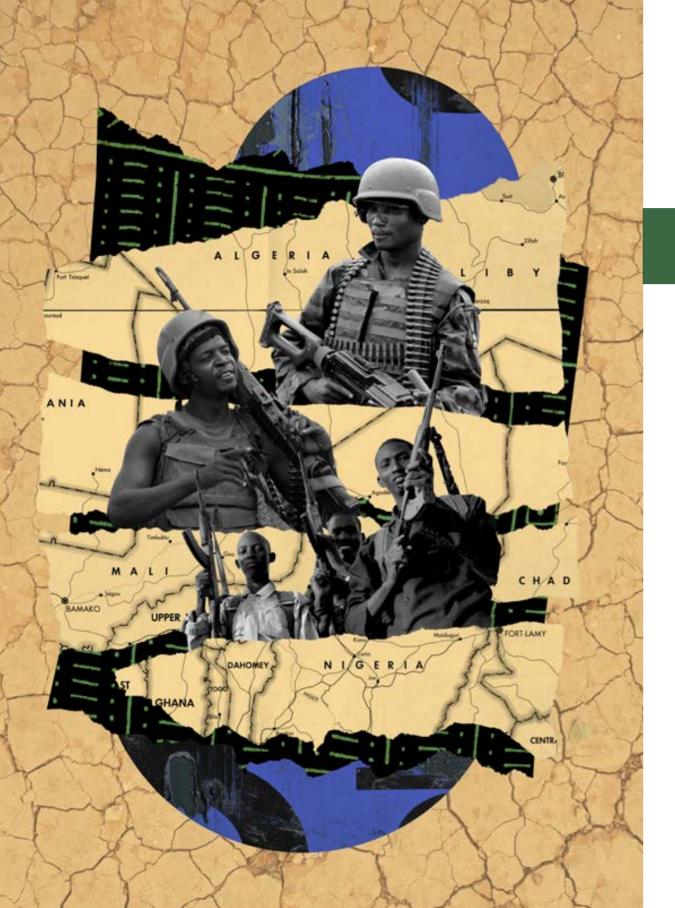
This graph charts general patterns of violence in the Mopti region. Since 2016, the total number of attacks has increased fivefold despite the efforts of external and regional security actors to eliminate jihadist groups.

Table 1. Number of violent events in the Mopti region, 2016-2021

Source: ACLED (2021) https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/

As the graph shows, between 2016 and 2021, the Mopti region experienced 1,675 violent events. Between 2012 and early 2019, 52% of violent events in Mali occurred in Mopti. These events resulted in the deaths of 896 people, 64% of whom were killed after 2017. Mopti has seen the largest number of violent events initiated by self-defence militias. Jihadist groups have likely perpetrated less violence (354 confirmed victims) than community-based militias (669 confirmed victims). High instances of jihadist attacks on Government representatives have resulted in the withdrawal of public officials from the most affected areas within the Mopti region and in the closure of schools targeted by attacks. Elected officials and representatives of the state are also regularly kidnapped (FIDH/AMDH 2018: 39). Only state-run health clinics necessary for the groups and their civilian support base escaped this purge. In December 2021 a total of 1,664 schools had been closed in Mali as a result of the growing insecurity. Of those, 953 were in the Mopti region. To put this into perspective, the second most affected region was Ménaka with 87 schools (UNICEF 2021: 5). This critical lack of security has restricted the economic and livelihood opportunities open to local populations.

WHO ARE THE ACTORS?
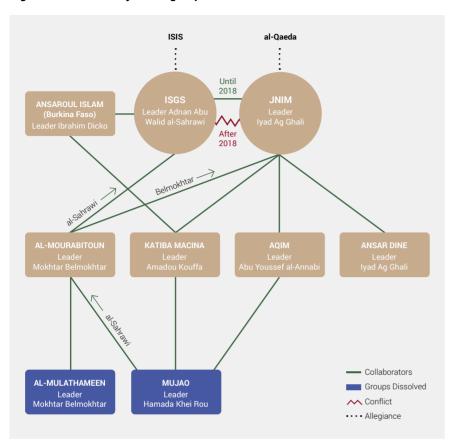
In this section we map the most influential armed groups in the complex web of actors involved in the Mopti region's violent conflicts. The mapping of the actors involved enables a better understanding of the logic behind the commitment of the armed groups and of the opposing doctrines of the jihadist groups JNIM (defensive jihad) and ISGS (offensive jihad) that make it even harder to find appropriate forms of dialogue and negotiation that all parties can accept.

Given the frequency with which these actors shift their alliances and reconfigure to form new group constellations, as well as ongoing developments within the region's broader security and political situation, it is important to note that any such mapping is by its nature inexact and highly time-bound (Lebovich 2019). This complexity is exemplified by the fact that, in regions such as Bandiagara, Bankass, Koro, Douentza and Djenné, almost every village has their own armed village brigade or militia formed by young local men. These groups are sometimes difficult to distinguish from each other and their followers do not fit neatly into one social category (Bagayoko et al. 2017).

JIHADIST GROUPS IN MOPTI

In response to intense French counterterrorist operations in the northern regions, the jihadist groups reconfigured during 2013–2014 into new constellations and moved further south into central Mali's Mopti region towards the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso. Here one of the jihadist groups, MUJAO, although led by Malian, Mauritanian and Sahrawi Arabs, also recruited a large number of young members of
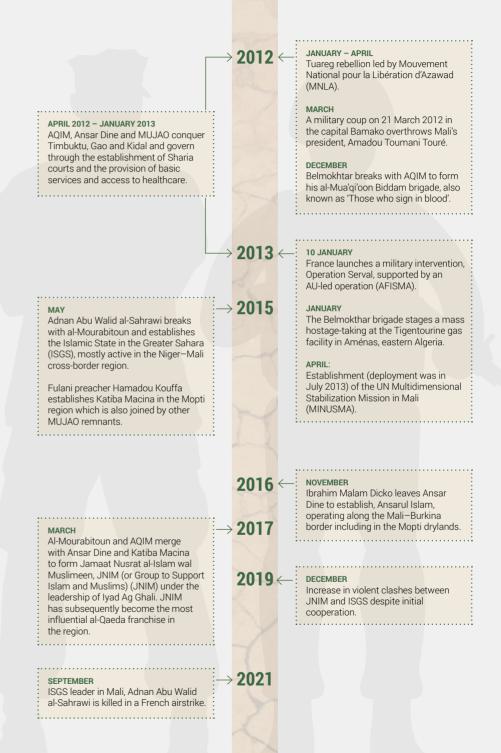
Figure 1. Overview of jihadist groups [8]

the Fulani community from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.[9] Because Tuareg separatists had looted communities in central Mali during the 2012 security crisis, some Fulani groups joined MUJAO for self-protection, which subsequently disturbed social relationships between local communities in the area (Sangaré 2016). The army and other state representatives (who had fled Mopti after the 2012 jihadist occupation of the north) gradually returned to Mopti's urban centres when the French Operation Serval (2013–2014) began.

However, the quasi-return of the Malian state and the armed forces' military operations in Mopti immediately became associated with arbitrary arrests, killings, and mistreatment of (particularly Fulani) groups suspected of being associated with the MUJAO. Against this background, the JNIM-affiliated jihadist group, Katiba Macina,[10] started carrying out attacks against army posts and subsequently took control of rural areas in the Mopti region.

Figure 2. The Malian security crisis and formation of jihadist groups 2012-2021

2012

JANUARY – APRIL
Tuareg rebellion led by Mouvement National pour la Libération d'Azawad (MNLA).

MARCH
A military coup on 21 March 2012 in the capital Bamako overthrows Mali's president, Amadou Toumani Touré.

DECEMBER
Belmokhtar breaks with AQIM to form his al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam brigade, also known as 'Those who sign in blood'.

APRIL 2012 – JANUARY 2013
AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO conquer Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal and govern through the establishment of Sharia courts and the provision of basic services and access to healthcare.

2013

10 JANUARY
France launches a military intervention, Operation Serval, supported by an AU-led operation (AFISMA).

2015

JANUARY
The Belmokthar brigade stages a mass hostage-taking at the Tigentourine gas facility in Aménas, eastern Algeria.

APRIL:
Establishment (deployment was in July 2013) of the UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

MAY
Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi breaks with al-Mourabitoun and establishes the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), mostly active in the Niger–Mali cross-border region.

Fulani preacher Hamadou Kouffa establishes Katiba Macina in the Mopti region which is also joined by other MUJAO remnants.

2016

NOVEMBER
Ibrahim Malam Dicko leaves Ansar Dine to establish, Ansarul Islam, operating along the Mali–Burkina border including in the Mopti drylands.

2017

MARCH
Al-Mourabitoun and AQIM merge with Ansar Dine and Katiba Macina to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, JNIM (or Group to Support Islam and Muslims) (JNIM) under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali. JNIM has subsequently become the most influential al-Qaeda franchise in the region.

2019

DECEMBER
Increase in violent clashes between JNIM and ISGS despite initial cooperation.

2021

SEPTEMBER
ISGS leader in Mali, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi is killed in a French airstrike.

Katiba Macina

During its early operations in 2015, Katiba Macina developed a strategy of expansion and territorial control of parts of the hard-to-reach wetland areas of the Niger Delta. The group carried out targeted executions and kidnappings of state representatives – including defence and security forces, water and forestry agents, municipal councillors, magistrates, teachers, village notables and religious leaders as well as so-called 'collaborators' suspected of having passed information to the Malian authorities. The aim of Katiba Macina was to force the withdrawal of the state and to replace its functions relating to security, justice, education and the economy.

BOX 1. KATIBA MACINA'S LEADER HAMADOU KOUFFA AND HIS TIES TO THE AL-QAEDA-AFFILIATED JNIM

Katiba's leader, a local preacher called Hamadou Kouffa, nom de guerre Hamadoun Hassana Barry, is a typical 'jihadist entrepreneur', who translates global jihadist discourses into a local setting. Coming from a modest family in the village of Kouffa just north of Mopti, Kouffa has positioned himself in ambiguous ways both as a communal defender and the religious voice of his Fulani ethnic community in central Mali – a defender against multiple enemies from the hyper-local to the global stage.

Since 2017 Kouffa has been deputy leader and field commander of Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, JNIM, through his close personal ties to JNIM's leader Iyad Ag Ghali.

Born into a noble Tuareg tribe of the Kidal region in Mali, Ag Ghali fought as a mercenary in the Foreign Legion of the late Colonel Gaddafi in the 1980s and as a rebel in his own country in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, Ag Ghali then worked as a negotiator for the Malian Government in a hostage release and was appointed as a diplomat in Saudi Arabia in 2008. Due to his established ties with Saudi Arabian Islamists, he was deported to Mali, where he established contacts with, among others, Hamadou Kouffa.

In 2011 Iyad Ag Ghali unsuccessfully tried to take the lead of the secessionist MNLA movement before founding Ansar Dine, a jihadist group that merged with other radical groups in 2017 to form JNIM under his leadership.

JNIM targets foreign and Malian security forces, and their support for Katiba Macina grants Kouffa prominence as an active fighter against foreign occupiers.

Sources: Walther & Christopoulos 2015; Thurston 2020; OECD/SWAC 2021.

'The modus operandi of the jihadists is almost always the same. When they abduct a person, they would keep him for a few days, or even two to three weeks in one of their camps to interrogate him, then most often they release him. If they kill the person – cut his throat or shoot him – they call his family to notify them, and they do not bury his body. They drop him somewhere near his village. To 'punish' possible resistance, the 'bushmen' sometimes use 'blockades' as a weapon, with sometimes tragic humanitarian consequences' (FIDH/AMDH 2018: 40).

Initially Katiba Macina consisted mostly, but not solely, of Fulani fighters who had previously been enlisted in MUJAO. The group's founder, Hamadou Kouffa was close to JNIM's leader Ag Ghali (see text box), who officially supported and endorsed the formation of Katiba Macina in 2016. Kouffa built the group from support within his own ethnic group, the Fulani. However, Fulani society is characterised by highly hierarchised internal divides between elites (often of noble origin) and lower-caste Fulani segments. Kouffa initially gained local support from both groups. The Fulani elites, who often accuse the post-colonial state and its international donor-supported development policies of depriving them their ancestral rights, dream of re-establishing the glorious past of the Dina. As some nostalgic Fulani nobles would express it:

> ‘
> When Kouffa spoke of the return of the Dina, we believed in the restoration of Fulani hegemony over the sedentary black populations of the region. And that excited us even more as the expansion of the Kingdom of Hamdallahi (birthplace of Shekou Amadou) ended with the arrival of colonisation […] the community even contributed to the war effort: some sent their children to jihad; some gave money and others gave cows. But we quickly became disenchanted because the Dina of Kouffa was opposite to the glorious era of Shekou Ahmadou, when the Dina was not only religion but also political power, which was what we dreamed of. ’
>
> (Interview with a Fulani elected official from the Mopti region, October 2020)

The second group consisted of allochthonous (non-resident) herders from the adjacent drylands (Seno, Tioki and Nampalari). Kouffa's revolutionary talk of overthrowing the unjust order created by state representatives and local Fulani elites, by whom they feel oppressed, gained traction amongst lower-caste Fulani groups in the Delta region. So, from the outset there was an inbuilt tension between lower-caste Fulani herders and the Fulani nobles in Kouffa's project.

Seeking to unify the internal divisions within the Fulani, a recurring theme in Kouffa's audio messages and speeches is that the state and its external allies, notably France, are an existential threat to the entire Fulani society. In his view, France supports Malian security forces who arbitrarily kill civilian Fulanis because they assume them to be terrorists. As Kouffa states:

'The day that France started the war against us, no Fulani or anyone else was practicing Jihad. You all know that previously we were destitute, insignificant; that we were nothing, had nothing, knew nothing. It is the intervention by France that has motivated us and we have committed ourselves to fight it. The coalition formed by MINUSMA, the European countries, Africa, Asia-America [sic] and Mali, which reinforced its military capabilities and recruitments – planes, other hyper-sophisticated means – came into action against us. After all of this, we embarked on Jihad' (audio message by Kouffa in response to Fulani elites' call for dialogue, August 2017).

Such a narrative speaks to local community members who distrust what they perceive to be a corrupt Malian Government engaged in a neo-colonial relationship with France, its international allies and security actors. To mobilise recruits Kouffa evoked the idea of France's recolonisation of the Malian state, expressed desire for a social revolution to remove former state-supported elites, and highlighted their corrupt and inegalitarian governance practices that have historically worked to the detriment of marginalised pastoral groups, often of Fulani origin (Benjaminsen & Ba 2019; Jourde et al. 2019). Kouffa soon became the most influential actor in central Mali's insurgency, with support for him strengthened by the violence and abuse enacted by Malian soldiers during counterterrorist operations like operation Seeno (see section on external security partners).

After having consolidated his power through strategic violence, Kouffa introduced governance practices in terms of security provision, tax collection and dispute settlement mechanisms; order-making practices which in a context of insecurity, to a certain degree, have been accepted by some segments of the local population (Rupesinghe et al. 2021: 23). However, after three years Kouffa's ambition of uniting a deeply divided Fulani society became more difficult. To restore state authority the Malian Government, with support from its Western external security partners, stepped up military operations against jihadist groups in 2018.

As the cost of war continued to rise, activists, politicians and religious leaders started to call for dialogue between the Malian Government and the leaders of Katiba Macina, which according to some observers pushed Kouffa's power position to the edge. As a consequence of, amongst other factors, Kouffa's ambiguous attempts to approach the state at the end of 2019, a rupture between al-Qaeda and IS affiliated groups began as central members of Katiba Macina defected to ISGS, challenging Katiba Macina's somewhat more pragmatic approach to jihad. This marked the end of the rather unusual collaboration between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Mali, that until then had been named the 'Sahelian exception' to the global rivalry between the two groups (Nsaibia & Weiss 2020; Baldaro & Diall 2020).

ISGS in central Mali
In 2015 the Islamic State franchise Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) was established as a splinter group of al-Mourabitoun led by the notorious al-Qaeda emir, Belmokthar. ISGS have subsequently become the main militant jihadist alternative to al-Qaeda affiliated groups.

Like Katiba Macina, ISGS also presents itself as a defender of the ethnic Fulani community and taps into hyper-local conflicts to attract recruits. Up until 2018, ISGS had only played a marginal role in central Mali's Delta region, instead focusing on collaboration with al-Qaeda-affiliated groups primarily in the Ménaka region bordering Niger in eastern Mali. Although some early defections of Katiba Macina fighters to ISGS were already being reported in 2017, the main al-Qaeda franchise, JNIM, (which Katiba Macina forms part of) and ISGS had an informal geographical division whereby ISGS insurgents were more active in areas around Niger and Burkina Faso and in the region surrounding Ménaka in Mali, leaving JNIM unchallenged in the Inner Niger Delta and the areas around Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu (Raineri 2020b; Thurston 2020; Sandor & Campana 2019).
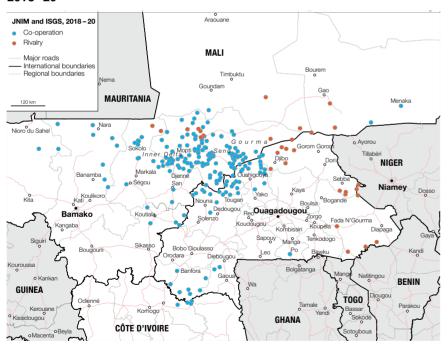
ISGS benefitted from its war with pro-Government Tuareg dissidents in the Ménaka region, as this helped to attract Fulani support following the reawakening of inter-ethnic tensions after the 2012 Tuareg rebellion (Raineri 2020b). Meanwhile, the activities of the French counterterror Operation Barkhane within the Niger-Mali border zone are believed to have pushed ISGS fighters towards the east, into the Burkina Faso-central Mali border zone. Eventually, however, as we will return to later, intra-community tensions between Fulani pastoralists in central Mali's Delta region also provided ISGS with opportunities to recruit.

Map 2. Rivalry and co-operation between JNIM and ISGS in the Central Sahel, 2018−20

Note: The map shows the events for which JNIM and ISGS were opposed or allied, not the attacks conducted by each organisation separately.
Source: OECD/SWAC (2021).

But before we enter into a detailed analysis of the conflict dynamics between ISGS and Katiba Macina, we will first rewind to 2016 again and look now at how armed self-defence militias engaged in fighting the jihadist occupation.

THE DAN NA AMBASSAGOU SELF-DEFENCE MILITIA

In 2016, as the army and other state representatives gradually returned to Mopti's urban centres, the army supported ethnic Bambara (Donzo) and Dogon militias in non-jihadist areas, which enhanced the proliferation of various armed militias. Thus, during 2016/2017 a new wave of militarised Dogon and Bambara self-defence militias emerged in the Mopti region, claiming to protect their communities against the jihadist militants. These included the Bambara militia in Kareri and the Dan Na Ambassagou ('the hunters who trust in God') militia in the Dogon controlled areas.

According to local sources, the creation of Dan Na Ambassagou was triggered by attacks on prominent members of traditional Dogon hunter brigades by Fulani herders, particularly the assassination of the renowned Dogon militia leader Théodore Somboro. In 2016 Somboro found himself alone, when the army he had collaborated with left. He was regularly harassed by terrorist elements at his home in Ségué, who accused him of complicity with the Malian army in the killings and

abuses of Fulani community members. On 13 October 2016, returning from the weekly market, Théodore Somboro was mortally wounded. But just before he died he managed to identify his killers and called upon his fellow hunters to avenge his death (field report, October 2020). Dan Na Ambassagou declared war on Islamist militants. In November 2016 the Dozo hunter, Youssouf Toloba introduced himself as the military commander of Dan Na Ambassagou. According to the political leader and main spokesperson of the movement, David Tembiné, the creation of the group was a reaction to the rise in violence against Dogon and associated communities, some of whose leaders and hunters had, like Somboro, been victims of targeted assassinations.

Dan Na Ambassagou's aims and organisation

While acknowledging that the group essentially recruited combatants from among Dogon milieus, Tembiné firmly denied from the outset that the group was communitarian, stating that 'our mission is not to nurture an ethnic war, it is to secure the Dogon territory/country where the state is, in certain areas, non-existent, as there is no sub-prefect, no administration and no army' (MaliJet 2017).

According to a researcher with Dogon affiliation based in Bamako, Dan Na Ambassagou's main aim is to convince people of the danger of a Fulani quest for domination within the Dogon country, which would allow them to re-establish the Fulani kingdom of the Dina / Macina. The Dina reminds the Dogon people of the abduction and enslavement of their ancestors. It is against this background that the Dogon militias' fear of Fulani hegemony must be read. Dan Na Ambassagou uses the discourse of defending its homeland – the Dogon country – against Fulani aggressors who attack its culture and want to turn its land into a vast area for pasture. This discourse is regularly repeated by Youssouf Toloba himself: 'As long as I am alive, Dogon country will not be dominated by anyone'. As Tembiné put it in a newspaper interview:

> '
> We want our parents to freely continue their ancestral practices as it is they – the hunters – who are targeted by small attacks and continue to be eliminated one by one. We want to put an end to this. Our fundamental mission is to secure the people and the property in the Dogon territory. Leader of the political wing, David Tembiné [in an interview with Le Canard de la Venise]. '

(MaliJet 2017)

The movement is organised into a military and a political branch. Interviewees explained that many members of the political branch are young, unemployed graduates who were formerly employed within the hotel and tourism industry, the main source of income in the villages of the Dogon country (see map) prior to the security crisis, whereas the military branch is mainly composed of illiterate people and school dropouts. Furthermore, it is organised into decentralised units, one in each of the four districts of the Dogon country (field report October 2020).

According to local sources the movement, which counted around 5,000 fighters [unverified number], recruited primarily among traditional hunters but also from among the ranks of former mercenaries who had fought in the civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire (2002 and 2011) and Liberia (1999–2003). Soldiers who had returned to the villages also made up some of this number, as well as people involved in organised crime such as thieves and highway robbers (field notes October 2020).

The movement maintains its contact with sedentary Burkinabé self-defence movements (the Kogwelegos) operating in the Soum and Yatenga provinces of Burkina Faso (see Hagberg 2019) and with the Tellem groups (first Dogon inhabitants of the area) who appear to operate independently between the Yoro and Dinangourou communities in the Koro district of the Mopti region and in the Yatenga province in Burkina Faso. Similarly, although situated outside of Dogon country, the relations between the groups operating around Somadougou, Sofara and in the Tominian areas of the Mopti region are important.

Dan Na Ambassagou's ambiguous relationship to the state

Although Dan Na Ambassagou is not an auxiliary of the state security forces nor was it created by the Government, according to International Crisis Group (2020) the links between the group and Malian authorities are well established, and they have evolved over time. While criticising Malian forces for not being able to protect civilian populations, Dan Na Ambassagou nevertheless initially positioned itself as the state's ally in the fight against jihadist groups. The two collaborated closely up until 2018 and there are examples of Dogon hunters serving as informants and scouts for the authorities. Moreover, it appears that a plan involving Dan Na Ambassagou in security and counterterrorism efforts was drawn up by the government of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga (December 2017–April 2019). Clearly, ambitions for cooperation were growing, and even though it was never made public, Youssouf Toloba acknowledged the existence of such a plan (ICG 2020a: 13–14).

After the Ogossagou attacks (see box 4) this relation changed, as Dan Na Ambassagou was suspected of perpetrating the attacks. The group had thus far had the status of a formally recognised civil society association and could therefore claim legal recognition by the state. However, after the attacks the Government announced the 'dissolution' of the militia, and thereby implied that it had the authority and power to regulate it (Quidelleur 2022: 53–54). This episode clearly illustrates the troubling and risky nature of the Government's outsourcing of security; a tactic built on fragile relationships with militia groups that have their own agendas. Indeed, the formation of Dan Na Ambassagou and its relations to the Government marked a continuation of a past and still prevailing Government policy of resorting to using self-defence militias less accountable to central government than the national security forces were. Thereby local militias like Dan Na Ambassagou served as proxies for ineffective or unreliable military structures (Pérouse de Montclos 2021).

> **The militia's going against the state while playing politics behind the scenes reveals a dangerous 'double jeu' through which the groups can portray themselves as legitimate community protectors and still receive support through their ties to the Government.**

Dan Na Ambassagou's critique of the Government's inability to provide security should not be regarded as being anti-Government but rather as a claim to authority based on filling that void. The militia's going against the state while playing politics behind the scenes reveals a dangerous 'double jeu' through which the groups can portray themselves as legitimate community protectors and still receive support through their ties to the Government. Their aim is not to fight the state system but to negotiate power and access to resources from within it.

Violence and state-like practices
Some of the militia's state-like practices resemble those carried out by jihadist groups such as Katiba Macina in the areas they control (Jourde et al. 2019; Rupesinghe et al. 2021). As described by Quidelleur (2022), for example the hunter-militiamen extract resources (tax collection in money and kind, and steal livestock) in the areas where they operate, with or without the consent of population:

'Yes, they protect the populations, but there are many excesses too… They set up popular courts (…) they also engage a lot in cattle theft… If they are hungry, they go to an enclosure, they take a cow, and say it belongs to them because they are hunters who fight'. [IDP from a Dogon community in a zone where Dan Na Ambassagou is active] Cited in Quidelleur 2022: 63.[11]

> **Fulani and Dogon withdraw into their community strongholds under the protection of their respective armed groups, thus creating a de facto separation between communities.**

This predatory form of protection is combined with the establishment of checkpoints on roads, that both strategically and symbolically demarcates the group's ability to control territory; through them the militia can stage its power relations with other communities, the state and international actors. For instance, to access certain areas NGOs are obliged to pay fees which in turn finance the activities of the group. The checkpoints also allow them to control the passage of people and goods as well as to authorise or prohibit commercial activities (ibid).

In retaliation for jihadist attacks upon Dogons, Dan Na Ambassagou militiamen have attacked Fulani civilians whom they accuse of supporting and protecting the jihadists.[12] The Dan Na Ambassagou armed group prohibits the Fulani from going to certain villages with a Dogon majority, depriving them of access to markets,

schools and health centres. The armed group also forbids the Dogon from entrusting their cattle to Fulani herders or from hosting Fulani in their homes. In retaliation, Fulani armed groups impose blockades on certain Dogon villages, prohibiting their inhabitants from going into the bush and depriving them of access to their fields. A cycle of fear and revenge forces everyone to take sides. Fulani and Dogon withdraw into their community strongholds under the protection of their respective armed groups, thus creating a de facto separation between communities. In parallel with the armed struggle, some militiamen from Dan Na Ambassagou have been involved in forms of 'social cleansing':

'They don't talk about it openly, but they have removed quite a few people, even Dogons, who were suspected of collaborating with jihadists. Similarly, Dogons considered too close to the Fulani community or who have criticised them [Dan Na Ambassagou], have been threatened very seriously, even in Bamako'. [Inhabitant of Koro] cited in Quidelleur 2022: 62.[13]

Such practices have also contributed to the fragmentation of the group (i.e. the creation of Dana Atem, see below) and pushed elected officials or local Dogon notables to leave the region and take refuge in Bamako (ibid).

In response to the growing violence perpetrated by Dan Na Ambassagou, in 2019 dissidents within Dan Na Ambassagou created a separate movement called Dana Atem ('Guardians of the Tradition') in an attempt to bring together Dogon and Fulani against jihadist insurgents.[14] Their political branch presented itself as: 'an alternative and credible partner on the ground in the quest for peace'. The emergence of Dana Atem appeared to be a challenge to the authority of Dan Na Ambassagou, as its leaders claimed to respect the authority of traditional leaders and the power of state authorities and local elected officials. Furthermore, in 2018, in response to the violence perpetrated by both jihadist insurgents and Dan Na Ambassagou, bankers and other Fulani executives from the Mopti region created a new Fulani militia, the Alliance for the Salvation of the Sahel (ASS), to 'protect the Fulani against the abuses of the Malian and Burkinabè armies and their Dogon, Bambara and Mossi allies'. Its stated objective was not to oppose Kouffa's Katiba Macina, but to work hand in hand with the jihadist movement. According to local sources, ASS, although very little publicised, is considered the main Fulani militia and serves as a line of communication between the Fulani notables and executives and the more fundamentalist segment within Katiba Macina (field notes, 2020).

Both ASS and Dana Atem remain active today (Pérouse de Montclos 2021). Their creation marked a less violent stance than that of previous, community-based militias within the Delta, which could pave the way for more negotiated settlements between the rival groups.

BOX 5. NEW AREAS OF CONFLICT IN CENTRAL MALI

Armed groups (jihadists and donsos) have taken control of territory and resources in strategic areas of central Mali, particularly in the following geographic areas:

- The Kourmari area (Niono district) located along one of the two canals that feed the Office du Niger irrigation scheme for rice cultivation in the Ségou region of Mali, the epicentre of the Malian economy. The rural area from Farabougou to Nampalari is controlled by Katiba Macina fighters. Some peri-urban areas in the communes of Dogofry, Siroufla Boundy, Pogo, etc. are controlled by Donso militias.

- In the Mopti and Djenné districts located in the Mopti region, in four communes (Kewa, Soye, Fakala and Femaye) violent fighting between Donso militias and jihadists occurred in May, June, July and August 2021, resulting in dozens of deaths and many injuries. The villages of Sare Heyre, Megou and Moupa were destroyed, and granaries were ransacked, as were livestock. The population fled to Djenné and Mopti city centres.

- In the Dogon escarpment in the communes of Sangha, Doucombo, and Diamweli (Bandiagara and Douentza districts), known to be controlled by Dan Na Ambassagou fighters, violent episodes are frequent.

- The central Gourma area (Hombori-Mondoro-Gossi communes bordering Burkina Faso and Niger) has seen multiple clashes between jihadist groups, notably between Katiba Macina and ISGS. Conflicts have been concentrated in this area since 2019 following clashes over the application of Sharia law, village administration, transhumance, and the management of war booty in the flooded central Delta area. The conflict between the two groups has moved into central Gourma, particularly the tri-border area (Mali–Burkina Faso–Niger). The death of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in August 2021 reignited tensions between the two groups resulting in several deaths and injuries.

Source: Interviews conducted by paralegals in Mopti in September 2021.

STATE SECURITY FORCES

Internationally-supported national security forces deployed to fight terrorism in Mopti's rural areas have increasingly been harming civilians. At the beginning of 2016 the Malian state initiated the military operation, Seeno, covering the plains of Bankass and Koro. According to our sources, the operation dismantled hidden arms stores, destroyed training camps, and neutralised dozens of terrorists while arresting several presumed terrorists in the Ségué forest. The operation was supported by renowned Dogon elected official and hunter, Théodore Somboro (later, as we have seen, to be assassinated), who was used as a scout. Among the neutralised terrorists (deaths and arrests), were several foreign fighters from Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad who were identified by tracking the SIM cards of their phones and by the IDs they carried. In response to these operations, Fulani defence associations stepped up and denounced the abuses and extrajudicial arrests of 'simple' herders. This has been denied by the army: 'They host the terrorists. Some cooked for these foreigners and gave them food in the bush. They are accomplices and collaborators or informers' (field report, October 2020). At the end of operation Seeno, the trust between the military leaders and the rank-and-file soldiers was seriously damaged. Many soldiers denounced releases of suspected terrorists under pressure from community associations and Fulani political and military figures from the Mopti region.

> **During Operation Dambé the military executed 67 people during six operations in six villages in 2018 that resulted in six mass graves. (FIDH 2018: 56)**

In 2017 the Malian Government announced an Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre, PSIRC). In support of Mali, its partners in the Group of Five for the Sahel – Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad – deployed the G5 Sahel Joint Force in the area to strengthen the security presence. The European Union (EU), through the Programme of Support for Enhanced Security in the Mopti and Gao regions (Programme d'Appui au Renforcement de la Sécurité dans les régions de Mopti et de Gao, PARSEC) and the Programme for Youth and Stabilisation in the Central Regions of Mali (Programme Jeunesse et Stabilisation dans les régions Centre du Mali, PROJES), is supporting Government initiatives in the development and security sectors, while the United

Nations peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) also redirected some of its resources towards the Mopti region. However little of this amounted to an effective response to the escalating crisis (Tobie 2017: 2).

On the contrary, in fact new military operations continued to harm civilians. In 2017, 'to stop terrorism, restore military and Government control, and help rebuild social and economic life' the Malian Government initiated Operation Dambé, whereby FAMA returned to the Mopti region which they had otherwise left abandoned since operation Seeno ended. Regular troops and special forces performed missions lasting several days under FAMA or G5-Sahel Joint Force command (FIDH/AMDH 2018: 56). However, during Dambé, subsequently named the 'caravan of death', the military executed 67 people during six operations in six villages in 2018 that resulted in six mass graves. Some of those who were detained were tortured but not killed (ibid: 56). According to FIDH (2018) between February and July 2018, these actions resulted in Fulanis being stigmatised as terrorists, the loss of state legitimacy and the alienation of locals. 'By multiplying abuses, FAMA elements have also pushed many people to join the ranks of jihadists or community militias to ensure their defence and security', the report states. In response to killings and targeted operations against Fulani hamlets, Fulani civil society organisations have claimed that the state is involved in an ethnic cleansing of all Fulanis, who are taken to be jihadists or supporters of jihadists.

Most recent figures from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicate that security forces caused more civilian fatalities in Mali in 2020 than violent extremist groups or communal violence. In 2020, 336 civilian fatalities were attributed to defence forces in Mali compared to 233 civilian fatalities by violent extremist groups (issafrica.org 2021). Developments like these lessen the population's will to cooperate, as they lose trust and become unwilling to support counterterrorism operations given the high number of civilian losses. At the same time, local populations face brutal attacks on entire villages, while protection from Malian and international forces, like MINUSMA, often comes too late. Civilians interviewed for this report criticised the national authorities who, according to them, display complacency in relation to armed groups, or are actively complicit in their atrocities. They said that national authorities have failed in their role of protecting citizens and their property throughout the national territory. Impunity, bad faith and neglect were repeatedly mentioned as the root causes of the increase of insecurity in the central region of the country (interview, internally displaced people in Bamako, October 2020).

In the context of frequent attacks on army posts that have killed thousands of security forces (though exact numbers are unavailable), and in an environment where jihadists blend into local communities, state security forces often have the impression that 'anybody could be a potential terrorist'. Others describe the national security forces as being in a state of 'psychosis' and fear, as it is often younger, low-ranking officers that are sent on patrol in the most high-risk areas, with little support (interview, Malian security personnel, Bamako, December 2020).

The (often unpunished) violence and crime enacted by armed groups demonstrates the insufficient presence of national forces and the lack of a judicial system able to prevent and contain it. Local communities across the country regularly express their discontent and lack of understanding of the procedures and behaviour of Malian security forces. The weakness of the rule of law and the lack of accountability mechanisms imposed on security institutions fosters a sense of the impunity of these bodies. As the state security forces cannot offer or guarantee them protection in a disastrous and dangerous situation, local populations are forced both directly and indirectly to collaborate with the armed groups.

EXTERNAL SECURITY FORCES

In addition to the pre-existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, since 2013 a 'security traffic jam' of external military interventions has emerged in Mali aiming to rebuild a 'failed state' as well as to stabilise entire regions (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jakobsen 2020) (see table p. 40). Until January 2022, French military forces often accompanied the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and regional G5 Sahel Joint Forces on patrols in the Mopti region (part of the so-called 'international military intervention zone' within Liptako Gourma). Furthermore, the Common Security and Defence (CSDP) mission EUCAP and EUTM support the capacity-building of Mali's Security (EUCAP) and Defence (EUTM) forces, though both missions are non-executive (Cold-Ravnkilde & Nissen 2020). These multiple foreign interventions have deeply affected and transformed Sahelian state formation and the region itself (Charbonneau 2021: 1805). Unfortunately, the multiplication of international and regional actors aiming to stabilise Mali and the Sahel, counter violent extremism, and enact capacity-building among local actors has not improved the security situation on the ground (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jakobsen 2020).

While the French blame the Government for not stepping up, France also stands accused of arrogant politics, and of not providing what is needed. The UN Human Rights Council continuously reports on allegations of human rights violations committed in the context of counterterrorism operations. The G5 Sahel Joint Force has also been implicated in human rights violations. On 19 May 2018, in retaliation for the murder of a FAMA soldier, FAMA elements under the command of the G5 Sahel killed at least 12 civilians during an operation in Boulikessi. At the request of the Chief of Staff of the Joint Force, MINUSMA assisted the Joint Force in investigating the case (FIDH/AMDH 2018). On 15 June 2020, MINUSMA shared with the G5 Sahel Joint Force a list of five possible cases of serious human rights violations allegedly committed by the battalion operating in Boulikessi, involving the alleged killing, in some cases the possible extrajudicial execution, of 47 civilians, including three women.[15] Similarly, Human Rights Watch has reported killings, mistreatments and forcible displacements carried out by the Malian security forces during counterterrorism operations (HRW 2017; 2021).

> The multiplication of international and regional actors aiming to stabilise Mali and the Sahel, counter violent extremism, and enact capacity-building among local actors has not improved the security situation on the ground.

According to the ACLED database collected by OECD/SWAC (2021: 145), FAMA is the biggest collaborating partner of France with 61 recorded collaboration events between 2013–2020. In Mopti some local sources confirm that FAMA soldiers seem to be less heavy-handed when accompanied on patrols by the French forces (interview, local consultant, Bamako, 2020). HRW also reports witnesses saying that French soldiers told their Malian counterparts not to arrest villagers with insufficient proof including, as one witness said, 'one who had a video of a terrorist on his phone and another for having short pants and a long beard'. He said, 'the Frenchman advised that there needed to be more solid evidence to arrest someone' (HRW 2021). Meanwhile, French targeted operations aiming to kill jihadist actors often take place during airstrikes at night. Furthermore, French forces increasingly make use of unmanned drones during operations. On 3 January 2021, a French

drone airstrike on Bounti village in central Mali allegedly mistook a wedding party for a terrorist gathering, killing at least 19 civilians (issafrica.org 2021). A similar misguided attack was reported in Talataye (RFI 2021). The French forces have denied these attacks on civilians (UN 2021). The lack of redress for human rights abuses by local partner forces continues to discredit France's efforts to combat militancy in the Sahel. All of this has deepened anti-French sentiment among Mali's civilian population, and it feeds into support for jihadist objectives, which present themselves as opposing 'imperialist foreign' forces in the protection of local communities in the region.

Having elaborated on several of the multiple actors and driving forces behind the conflict in central Mali's hotbeds of violence, how are we to understand these conflicts as 'climate wars'? The next paragraphs provide some background on how historical conflicts over natural resources in the Mopti region have become central to the current production of violence and the armed groups' competition for authority.

Table 2. Western-led foreign intervention actors

Country	Year	Troop deployments	Type of intervention	Where?
US	2001	1,000 (since 2007)	Bilateral security collaboration	Sahel countries
Operation Serval (France)	January 2013 – July 2014	4,500	French counter terror operation	Mali
AFISMA	January – April 2013	6,000	African Union Support Operation	Mali
EUCAP Niger	2012	85	EU Common Security and Defence Mission	Niger and Mali
EUTM	2013	600		
EUCAP Mali	2015	200	Non-executive capacity building	
UN, MINUSMA	April 2013	12,200 Military 2,880 Civilian	UN peacekeeping mission	Mali
Barkhane	August 2014 – June 2022 (gradual withdrawal)	5,100	French regional counter terror operation (post Serval)	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali Mauretania, Niger
G5 Sahel Joint Force	July 2017 –	5,000	Regional force	Mostly operational in Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali
Takuba	2021 -	900 (January 2022)		Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali

CLIMATE-RELATED CONFLICT DRIVERS
IN THE MOPTI REGION

The conflict in central Mali is often portrayed as driven by ethnic and community-based divisions, or 'herder-farmer' divisions (as the Fulani are primarily identified as pastoralist and the Dogon as farmers). Furthermore, inspired by the environmental security school (see e.g. Homer-Dixon 1999; Ohlsson 1999), resource conflicts are often perceived to be driven by dynamics relating to supply and demand. According to these narratives, climate change-related rainfall fluctuations and the region's population growth produce either demand- or supply-induced resource scarcity that leads to conflict (see Benjaminsen & Ba 2021 for a discussion). These arguments assume that there is an 'ineluctable connection between resource degradation, population growth, alleged resource scarcity, and the proliferation of small wars that haunt the post-Cold War planet' (Watts & Peluso 2001: 7). This approach has had a significant impact on the conceptualisation of resource conflicts in both policy and academic thinking (UNEP 2011; Turner 2004). However, this interpretation of Mali's 'climate wars' is challenged by the fact that conflicts often take place within the same community and do not map neatly onto community-based nor ethnic divisions (see box below). As such, the conflicts and violence produced by the actors described in this report can be aggravated by, but are not produced by, climatic changes per se.

> **BOX 6. IN THE WETLAND REGION OF TENENKOU, EXAMPLES OF CONFLICTS OVER NATURAL RESOURCES EXIST BETWEEN THE FOLLOWING GROUPS:**
>
> 1. Herders-farmers (around areas of agriculture and pasture)
>
> 2. Herders-herders (generally in grazing areas)
>
> 3. Herders-fishermen (around water points)
>
> 4. Farmers-farmers (around fields and cultivation zones)
>
> 5. Fishermen-fishermen (tied to exploitation rights and inheritance)
>
> 6. Farmers-fishermen (around cultivation and fisheries areas)
>
> These conflicts take diverse shapes. They can be intra-communitarian, opposing members of the same community, of the same clan or same family, or intercommunitarian, opposing members of different socio-professional or socio-cultural groups, but they all are conflicts of interest.
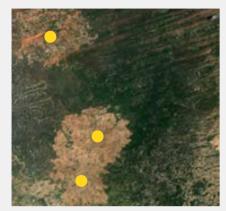
Source: Field notes, October 2020.

ARMED GROUPS – NOT CLIMATE CHANGE – ARE CAUSING FOOD SHORTAGES

In addition to violent killings, food insecurity is growing at a worrying pace in the region. In the policy circles informed by supply-demand driven logics, climate change-induced food shortage is believed to be a major trigger of insecurity. However, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has used new satellite imagery technology to document land use changes in the Mopti region's most inaccessible areas (published in the French newspaper Le Monde 2021). A pilot study prepared by WFP presents strong evidence of how violence precipitates famine and food shortage. It shows a decrease in cultivated land area was detected for 25% of Mopti localities in 2019, compared to pre-conflict years. Localities affected by medium to severe cropland loss are situated in the south-eastern part of the region, where the worst intercommunal violence occurs. Violent events were reported in most localities where agricultural decline was detected in 2019 (Le Monde 2021). Between 2018 and 2020, four seasons of harvests in the inner delta of the Niger river were dramatically reduced, threatening the food production of hundreds of thousands of Malians. As explained in Le Monde (2021), when hundreds of cultivated hectares disappear in one place at the same time, it is not due to flooding or decisions by farmers to let the land lie fallow; it is because farmers have been forced to leave their land.

Significantly, the WFP aerial photographs from 2017 show that agricultural production has developed around the villages. Two years later, in 2019, satellite images show that natural vegetation has replaced the previously cultivated fields. The agricultural fields surrounding the villages are now severely diminished or have completely disappeared, causing a severe drop in food production. The causes of the drop in food production are visible when zooming in on the hamlets in the images. The houses are destroyed, and fires have left black marks on the ground. In this region taken over by jihadist and inter-community violence, people have deserted the villages one by one (Le Monde 2021). For several years since 2018 entire villages have been cut off from access to the outside world as jihadists and militias actively block them. Furthermore, since October 2020, west of Mopti in Farabougou and Songo in the Ségou region, jihadist sieges have prevented villagers from cultivating their land around the villages (Deutsche Welle 2021; Sindebou 2021). Indeed, the massive displacement due to violence has a negative impact on food production.

Satellite images and photo showing impact of violence on land use patterns around three villages in the Mopti region (Koro district)

2017

2019

The satellite image from August 2017 shows natural vegetation in dark green, while cultivated fields appear as the many beige rectangles, visibly spread all around the villages.

🟡 Villages marked in yellow

Satellite image from August 2019 shows how only the fields that are close to habitations (within a 2-kilometre zone around the villages) seem to be cultivated. Beyond this buffer zone, natural vegetation covers the fields that farmers used to cultivate.

Photos: European Space Agency – ESA (Copernicus Sentinel data 2017, 2019. Processed by ESA. Retrieved from Google Earth Engine by the World Food Programme on 30 November 2019).

2021

A field picture, taken during a MINUSMA mission conducted in February 2021 shows a village in Koulogon Peulh, Minima Maoude after an attack by armed groups.

Photo: MINUSMA/Marco Dormino / Flickr.com.

Armed Groups – not climate change – are causing internal displacement

The violence in Mopti has caused massive displacement, with entire villages and hamlets razed to the ground and populations forced to flee. In September 2021 there were over 159,000 internally displaced people in the Mopti region, of an estimated total population of 1.6 million. This is an increase of more than 100,000 IDPs since February 2020.

Map 3. Internally displaced people in Mali

The internal displacement context in Mali remains complex and fluid. According to IOM, in September 2021 there were **401,736** IDPs.

156,757 are registered refugees in the neighbouring countries.

6.3% increase of IDPs since July 2021

55% are female

64% are children under 18

Source: Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), IOM (September 1, 2021). Numbers may be underestimated as not all people wish to be registered as IDPs.

Illustration: Mark Gry Christiansen.

The presence of armed groups has undermined peaceful cohabitation between communities within the region. Faced with the disruption of daily life and increasing insecurity, the civilian population has decided to flee and seek refuge elsewhere. Some have sold their cattle to be able to travel, while others have taken out loans or used their savings. As a result, thousands of IDPs have ended up residing in informal campsites on the outskirts of Bamako.[16]

Testimonies collected for this report from IDPs from both Dogon and Fulani communities in the Mopti region support the claim that food shortage and displacement were induced by the violent conflict rather than climate change.

These people were based in the informal IDP camps of Bamako, and their perceptions of the conflict tended to revolve around three themes: ethnicity, religion, and the local economy. Most interlocutors emphasised the economic impacts of the conflict. This emphasis is perhaps unsurprising, given that all perpetrators of crime in the region are guilty of looting (be it the security forces, the jihadists or the self-defence militias). Since 2015, people living in the Mopti region have experienced incessant hostility and violence. Their relatives have been murdered, kidnapped or have gone missing. Their material goods have been stolen and entire villages have been set on fire by armed groups. The perpetrators of these abuses are the defence and security forces, jihadists and 'hunter associations' (self-defence militias). Interviewees were highly aware of the involvement of all three of these actors in the conflict (Sangaré & Cold-Ravnkilde 2020a). The overall trend of climate change was an added strain on an already food-insecure area and it did contribute to competition over land. The nature of the violence as perceived and experienced by the IDPs indicates that the political and historical conflict dynamics cannot be reduced to climate-related variability in the availability of natural resources.

Policy discourses often mention the category of the 'climate refugee' in relation to Mali's conflict, anticipating mass permanent displacement from the region induced by climate change or variability. In contrast to this policy narrative, the IDPs interviewed for this report all aspired to see their region stabilise and to be able to return as soon as possible to their respective localities. One 52-year-old internally displaced man from Mondoro in the Mopti region said he fled after the Dogon militias burned down Fulani villages in October 2019. He and his community tried to obtain assistance from the jihadists who refused to help them. His story was far from atypical among the sample of IDPs we interviewed.

> ' Action must be taken to organise the return of civilians. My only dream is to go home. I pray that our country will regain its former peace. The solution is dialogue. We wish to return as soon as possible. '
>
> (Interview, IDP, Bamako October 2020)

It is essential to observe how the role of jihadists, self-defence militias and security and defence forces is perceived by the communities they are supposed to support and protect. To disentangle the complex ways in which resource-related conflicts interact with the presence of armed groups in the Delta, the next section presents an analysis of recent conflicts in the region.

Fulani-Dogon disputes over land

As previously mentioned, despite examples of peaceful coexistence and cooperation over management of natural resources, in the absence of sufficient dispute settlement mechanisms land disputes and conflicts between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers have long historical trajectories.[17] While resource disputes also previously led to violence and at times killings between the groups, with the rise of insecurity since 2012, these conflicts have now reached unprecedented levels and the extent of the violent killings has escalated dramatically (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021).

> Before 2012 most local conflicts were resolved through traditional mechanisms. But even then disputes over land were already being aggravated by the absence of adequate dispute settlement mechanisms pointing to a long-term fragmentation of governance institutions in the Delta.

During the nineteenth century jihad in the Delta, some groups became more or less 'enslaved' to gain protection from others. At present the distinction between nobles (free in the past) and non-nobles (unfree in the past) persists in local conceptions of the social hierarchy (de Bruijn & van Dijk 1995; 2001: 223). These complex relationships still resonate in the conflicts today, with populist appeals to ethnicity used by self-defence militias in claims to authority as defenders of their community's culture and tradition. However, the militias' strategic use of cultural identity is not representative of the majority of the communities' perceptions of each other (interview with Dogon and Fulani youth groups from Mopti, Bamako 2020).

According to IDPs in Bamako, life before the conflict broke out in 2012 was stable. Social relations between communities were based on mutual aid and solidarity. They gave examples of how cohabitation was largely peaceful, albeit occasionally interrupted by disputes between farmers and herders or between herders themselves (Sangaré & Cold-Ravnkilde 2020a). While before 2012 most local conflicts were resolved through traditional mechanisms, even then disputes over land were already being aggravated by the absence of adequate dispute settlement mechanisms pointing to a long-term fragmentation of governance institutions in the Delta.

In the last two decades, climate change and sociocultural developments have changed the economic activities of local groups. Population growth, land division, herd growth and the development of intensive farming, promoted by successive governments with the support of international partners, have interrupted the application and relevance of social, cultural and historic norms and shifted the power balance between pastoralists and farmers. Pastoralists in particular have suffered from a reduction in grazing areas (see box) disrupting the traditional harmonisation between mode of production, position in the social hierarchy and access to local power.

> **Hence, the Fulani have gone from being the region's dominant political and economic class at the turn of the 20th century to its most marginalised group today.**

Although for decades pastoralists have developed various mechanisms to cope with an almost perpetual livelihood crisis, such as becoming sedentary, practising agro-pastoralism or herding livestock over long distances, the economic situation for many of the region's Fulani nomads has become precarious.[18] Hence, the Fulani have gone from being the region's dominant political and economic class at the turn of the 20th century to its most marginalised group today (ICG 2020a: 6).

Furthermore, the superimposition of state laws on traditional modes of regulating access to and use of resources has been an important factor in the declining legitimacy of traditional mechanisms of resource regulation. Since the decentralisation reform in the 1990s, the emergence of electoral competition and the (relative) authority granted by the state to a new class of locally elected representatives have enabled some groups to challenge the traditional authorities who uphold the ancestral customs (Tobie 2017: 9). Although the state has incorporated some customary regulations into its legal framework, these regulations are being contested through new avenues such as those of formal justice, which is renowned for being corrupt, and this constitutes a source of conflict (see Benjaminsen & Ba 2009). State representatives such as gendarmes and water and forest officials have a long history of collecting excessive taxes and fines in a context where the state's provision of public services is almost non-existent.

BOX 7. LAND USE POLICIES AND MARGINALISATION OF PASTORALISTS

Historically, ideas of resource decline and desertification have impacted government policies to the detriment of pastoral land use patterns. The French colonial administration introduced strict forestry policies and control of local natural resources which continued into Mali's First Republic. At independence in 1960, pastoralists from the Delta did not participate in the newly established political relations and were consequently removed from the political scene; a process which had started during the sedentarisation policies of the Dina but became even more apparent during the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and 1980s.

In these droughts Mali's pastoralists lost most of their cattle. Western governments became increasingly concerned with the degradation of the Sahel, which also revived the 'desertification' narrative and heavily influenced donor and government policies. Emergency aid and food for work programmes were offered by the international donor community, although a large part of this drained away through corruption within the administration. According to prevailing ideas of agricultural modernisation, pastoralists were considered backward, unproductive, an obstacle to development and modernisation and unwanted unless they converted themselves into 'productive' citizens by taking up farming.

The strict natural resource policies benefitted i) the national government through gaining control over land and resources; ii) the urban elite who acquired positions in the donor-supported state forestry departments, and iii) the international donor agencies who received large-scale funding from the international community. However, the rural population of pastoralists and farmers were often the losers and had to pay the price of the stricter environmental policies, which introduced extremely high fines relative to the income level in Mali.

Sources: de Bruijn & van Dijk 1995; Benjaminsen & Ba 2009; Benjaminsen 2000.

As explained by Benjaminsen and Ba (2021), the formation of armed Dogon militias is embedded in historical land use conflicts between Fulani and Dogon communities around the control of agro-pastoral resources in zones used for dry season transhumance. Fulani pastoralists' extensive land use requires pasture 'corridors', passages which allow the cattle to access water and pastures for grazing. In the events leading up to the formation of Dan Na Ambassagou in 2016, Dogon farmers had allegedly been encroaching on Fulani pastures reserved for dairy cows. Already in 2002, Dogon encroachment on the same pastures had led to the assassination of one Dogon farmer who did not respect the court decision to reserve land for pastures. In response to the killing, a Fulani village chief and seven others were killed, leading

to the eviction of the Dogons from the village by the Fulani, which was tacitly accepted by the administration (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021). In other villages in dryland areas, similar conflicts over cattle corridors erupt when access for the animals is blocked by agricultural farming. Meanwhile, access to diminishing pastures in the wetlands is also a source of conflict between herders in the Delta, to which we will turn next.

The ISGS/al-Qaeda divide over access to pastures
This section explores a different conflict related to natural resources – namely disputes over the prevailing land tenure system regulating the fertile and flood-prone lands of the Inner Niger Delta. It illustrates how jihadist groups in the Delta establish authority by introducing or improving inadequate mechanisms for regulating natural resource use and settling disputes.

> **In the ongoing ideological battle between the local ISIS and AQIM, ISGS members base their critique of Kouffa's form of governance (in terms of how resources are divided) on a disagreement about Qur'anic principles versus customary law under the Dina.**

In 2018 high-ranking members of Katiba Macina started to defect to ISGS. The defections related to how Kouffa, in his second period of trying to control the Delta, had gradually reinforced his power by collaborating with existing local governance structures (customary leaders, village chiefs and religious leaders) instead of trying to replace them. Kouffa's new, accommodating, approach towards the local elites was contested by ISGS adherents, consisting mainly of non-resident herders who wanted to replace existing local governance institutions with ISGS-headed structures. In the ongoing ideological battle between the local ISIS and AQIM, ISGS members base their critique of Kouffa's form of governance (in terms of how resources are divided) on a disagreement about Qur'anic principles versus customary law under the Dina (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022).

In terms of access to pastures, the management principles were established during the Dina empire (see text box below), the application of which has been a contested issue for decades, also sparking disagreements between Fulani pastoralists themselves (Turner 1999; Benjaminsen & Ba 2009; 2019). It is perceived as biased towards Fulani elites and serving to sustain a past when only a few pastoral leaders controlled the land, resources and people (Benjaminsen & Ba 2009; Vedeld 1997).

> **BOX 8. NATURAL RESOURCE REGULATION DURING THE DINA EMPIRE (1818–62)**
>
> The Dina formalised many of the resource management principles and rights into a system introduced by invading Fulani warriors, the Ardobé, who in the 14th century instated local chiefs called jowros to manage the pastoral rangeland in designated territorial units. The warlords (ardube) constituted the ruling elite, whereas the slaves (the riimaybe) were considered a pagan class to be exploited. Slavery was legitimised in the Dina theocratic state, in which ethnic and religious identities became markers of social status. In the case of the Dina, the Fulbe who led the jihad became the ruling class in control of land and slave labour, and values, norms and ideologies associated with pastoralist life were closely connected to the concept of nobility. After the fall of the Dina empire, the authority of the jowros waxed and waned during various periods in Mali's state formation until it was formally recognised as part of customary law in 2002.

As stated earlier, among a large number of Katiba Macina's followers (mostly resident herders), the Dina era is regarded as a golden age of Fulani hegemony in central Mali, which the project of Katiba Macina's leader, Kouffa, was initially seen by Fulani elites as a way to restore. However, the historical imaginary of the Dina is contested by ISGS adherents. Most of them belong to so-called 'lower castes' locally defined as allochthones, who are excluded from possessing land, and must seek access to the pastoral grazing areas from the autochthone (meaning 'born from the soil') jowro (masters of land and pastures) families of noble Fulani origin.

Since 2018 Katiba Macina has been forced to become more accommodating towards the jowros due to their important power positions in the Delta. This approach marked a shift in Kouffa's original social revolutionary jihad in the Delta. When Katiba Macina initially established their power in the Delta in 2015-2016, Kouffa attempted to alter the power position of the influential jowro families who control access to land and grazing areas. For instance, Katiba fighters attempted to cancel the royalties collected by the jowro from non-resident herders seeking access to pastures in the Delta. Thereby, subaltern Fulani pastoralists also benefitted from the presence of jihadist groups in their revolt against Fulani elites, whom they accuse of being complicit with corrupt state agents (Benjaminsen & Ba 2019; Jourde et al. 2019). But the jowros in turn benefitted from the presence of external military operations (Barkhane) which helped them reinstate their authority and stigmatise lower caste Fulani groups as terrorists, which then pushed these marginalised groups towards Kouffa. In this way the rules of access to the Delta's pastures inherited from the Dina are now being challenged by ISGS adherents.

ISGS adherents use the language of global jihad to undermine Kouffa's attempts to install power through collaboration with local elites, by claiming that according to the Qu'ran water, grass and fire are common goods, access to which should be equal for all Muslims. According to them, God says that the land belongs to Him and that no one has the right to sell it to a citizen of the same country or planet (audio message by Abou Mahmoud, January 2020). Hence, some ISGS members refuse to pay the access fees for the bourgoutières and claim a right to free access based on their reading of the Qu'ran. Furthermore, ISGS have attempted to convince other non-resident herders from the region's drylands (Seno, Tioki, Namapalari) that if they agreed to join them, they would no longer have to pay the Tolo. Building on this, the local ISGS leader Abou Mahmoud tried to show that Kouffa has abandoned his early revolutionary jihad, which defended the rights of the poor, to benefit from the political and economic power of the jowros.

These internal disputes between Fulani herders have provided ISGS with opportunities to recruit among marginalised herders, often those of lower social status who do not possess land themselves but depend on Fulani elites for access to the Delta's pastures. As this report sets out to explain, despite being situated in a context of endemic poverty and increased competition over access to land, such conflicts cannot be reduced to climate change or demand-induced scarcity. They are deeply embedded in hyper-local power disputes and long-term grievances of non-resident herders over access rules which enhance inequality. Katiba Macina's attempt to mediate between the ISGS members and the jowro families on the price of access to the bourgu fields may hold the key to a temporary peace agreement between the herders of the Delta. Whether or not that can resolve the disputes and competition in the long term will depend on the pastoralists' ability to benefit from economic activities and diversify their livelihood strategies. In the current context of high insecurity, joining armed actors for economic opportunities and protection may be the only pathway left for young herders in the region. However, the death of the ISGS leader in Mali, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and several other ISGS leaders as a result of French counterterror operations and confrontations with JNIM are believed to have weakened ISGS's position. These events could lead to further violent retaliation and efforts to enlarge or retain its strongholds.

NEGOTIATING WITH JIHADISTS?

How can the violent conflicts over dwindling natural resources in the Delta be resolved? As described, many community leaders and former leaders of armed groups disagree with the violence that is costing the lives of civilians. Some jihadist groups and leaders also try to give their struggle a more 'human face' by brokering peace agreements with local populations, including between Fulani herders and Dogon communities in disputes over natural resources, through appeals for long-term cooperation and reciprocity between the groups.

> **Locally brokered peace agreements have so far received scant attention from international actors in Mali. According to our sources, the agreements brokered by the jihadists tend to last longer than those in which international NGOs are involved, which typically exclude jihadist groups.**

In July 2020 Dogon villagers in the Koro district mobilised to negotiate with the jihadist leaders who control large parts of the area with support from Ansaroul Islam fighters from Burkina Faso. To convince the jihadists to lift the embargo, the community representatives invoked the historical links and blood pacts between the Dogon and Fulani communities. Finally, the jihadists implemented a peace agreement that has ended inter-community violence and to which, so far, both Fulani and Dogon parties have adhered. The jihadists set several conditions to allow farming, logging and herding, namely: to expel Dan Na Ambassagou; a ban on arms; introduction of sharia-based family law and taxes; a ban on any contact with the Malian state and army; and respect for customary agreements governing the use of land and resources. Local community members have diverging opinions about the agreement: some speak of an obvious power imbalance between the Dogons and the jihadists, while others believe that the agreement is an opportunity for peace.

Another example of locally brokered peace agreements occurred some 300 km from the escarpments of Dogon country, in the wetlands, where a jihadist settlement was established in 2018. This settlement followed the deployment of the Malian Army (FAMA) in the village of Djalloubé to strengthen security in the Delta region. Jihadists managed to turn the population against the armed forces by imposing embargos and blocking movements to and from the villages. They also kidnapped and assassinated several people and banned traditional fisheries and access to

agricultural fields. After a year, the village notables negotiated a lifting of the jihadist embargo. The agreement was premised on a total break with FAMA and the implementation of sharia. In return the population was allowed access to food supplies and to resume their economic activities. Such locally brokered peace agreements have so far received scant attention from international actors in Mali. According to our sources, the agreements brokered by the jihadists tend to last longer than those in which international NGOs are involved, which typically exclude jihadist groups (Ba & Cold-Ravnkilde 2021).

INTERNATIONALLY-SUPPORTED LOCAL PEACE AGREEMENTS

Meanwhile, international support has also been given to local-level dialogue and peace negotiations. The University of Edinburgh peace agreement database[19] has registered seventeen local peace agreements signed between various parties including armed groups, militias and representatives of Fulani and Dogon communities in central Mali since 2018.[20] These agreements are often brokered with the support of international NGOs like the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, who train and support local community representatives in conflict mediation. In January 2021 alone, three local agreements were signed in the districts of Koro and Djenne. These agreements often provide temporary appeasement, but their durability is not guaranteed. The armed groups can decide to break the agreements when opportune, and their violent practices may continue under the radar. For example, in 2018, the former leader of Dan Nan Ambassagou, Youssouf Toloba, signed a peace agreement to 'declare a unilateral ceasefire for the peaceful coexistence of the area's communities' (Edinburgh University 2018). Around a year after the agreement Dan Nan Ambassagou were accused of carrying out the first attacks on Ogossagou in the Bankass district which cost the lives of more than 170 civilians. On other occasions peace agreements have been broken because armed self-defence militias do not accept the jihadist dictates (including the collection of religious taxes, forcing the militias out of the zone, and the implementation of sharia law).

Locally-brokered peace agreements with jihadist groups are premised on the condition that local communities accept the jihadists as de facto authorities and break with any kind of interaction with state national security forces. In this way such agreements sideline the state and limit its role in guaranteeing and evaluating the agreements. This highlights an unresolved political dilemma at the national level regarding how to negotiate with jihadist groups. Mali's Government has expressed willingness to negotiate with the al-Qaeda affiliated JNIM representatives who are considered more moderate than ISGS, which has shown no signs of willingness to negotiate with the state (ICG 2021a). In the dispute between Katiba Macina and ISGS members in the Delta, a key point of contestation was the question of each party's willingness to collaborate with local state representatives, which illustrates how political agendas, not climate change, are obstacles to peace and triggers of violence.

> **Immediate de-escalation of conflicts is needed through disarmament of militias and rebuilding of trust between local communities and Mali's armed forces, with a strong focus on protecting civilians.**

Mali's interim government which has been in power since the country's first coup d'état in August 2020 is yet to present a roadmap for peace in central Mali. However, the interim military government is currently outlining a new strategy for dialogue with armed non-state actors. To support this process, it is vital that Mali's international donors identify already-existing peace agreements and support local-level dialogue involving all parties. Notably, France has had a clear redline policy when it comes to negotiation with jihadists (partly due to the political sensitivity of the issue after having lost more than 50 French soldiers in combat). This stands in contrast with the Malian Government's openness to building dialogue with jihadists. Furthermore, while some civil society actors, religious leaders and politicians are in favour of negotiating with jihadists to end the violence, others are concerned that this could give them too much influence over national legislation and an opportunity to push for sharia law at the national level, adding to decades of discussions about the question of the role of religion in Malian politics (ICG 2021a). While this question is far from being resolved, the urgency of the escalating conflicts requires an immediate, pragmatic and coordinated approach to local conflict resolution which includes principles for inclusive, contextualised, sustainable land use management in the Delta. Immediate de-escalation of conflicts is needed through disarmament of militias and rebuilding of trust between local communities and Mali's armed forces, with a strong focus on protecting civilians. For Mali's external actors, finding pragmatic solutions to ending violence and maintaining influence on Mali's national affairs is a balancing act.

A FUTURE OF CLIMATE WARS IN THE SAHEL?

It is easy to imagine a future of climate wars in the Sahel. An abundance of media images seems to confirm the direct link between climate change and rising violence: military convoys in the desert, pickup trucks with armed groups waving the iconic jihadist black flag printed with white Shahada texts, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people and refugees struggling to survive while people are marching on the streets to protest rising food prices and lack of immediate security and protection.

An increasing number of experts and decision-makers are suggesting a direct link between rising violence and changing climate (ICG 2020b). It is assumed that higher temperatures in the Sahel are producing more droughts and floods, which in turn jeopardise agricultural production, increase poverty and fuel ethnic violence. Armed groups, particularly jihadists, are said to exploit these tensions to draw in recruits. A 2014 report by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification secretariat argued that terrorist attacks are more frequent in countries experiencing desertification, including in the Sahel. These assumptions inspire international and regional actors' strategies and programme plans for combatting climate change in the Sahel. In what follows we set out why it is important to avoid such generalised assumptions that climate change will automatically lead to conflict.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT IS INCONCLUSIVE

While some studies, on an aggregated scale, support the idea that in Africa climate change is positively associated with conflicts, most seem to be inconclusive regarding the relationship between conflict and climate change (Mbaye 2020: 12). Climatologists tend to agree that the Sahel's climate is one of extremes, meaning that exceptional weather and climatic events are the norm, especially when examining longer timespans (Raineri 2020a). Increasing unpredictability of rainfall, drought and flooding patterns seems to be a key characteristic of climate change (Rasmussen & Wæver 2013). Most likely regions will be differently affected, with some areas due to experience increasing overall rainfall, and others a decrease (Stern 2006). Thus, predicting the nature of climate change in individual Sahelian countries and specific locations like the Mopti region is notoriously difficult.

That said, throughout the Sahel yearly rainfall has increased since the large-scale droughts of the 1970s and 80s. In relation to the natural vegetation cover, satellite images from the region show that there are local variations in tree coverage, and the

quality and diversity of plants varies. For that reason, scientists reject the idea that climate change and the emergence of conflicts (however broadly defined) can be correlated in any straightforward way (Rasmussen & Wæver 2013). The question of climate change-induced impacts on vegetation cover links to the widely disputed topic of whether the Sahel is undergoing a process of desertification which could negatively affect agricultural output and food production. Although the Sahel seems to be regreening, this does not necessarily lead to more staple food production (Mbaye 2020; Faye et al. 2019).

NO CLEAR CORRELATION BETWEEN SCARCITY AND CONFLICT

Research also indicates that we should be wary of simplistic assumptions about scarcity induced conflicts. Several studies point to how in some places (including in the Mopti region in central Mali prior to the security crisis of 2012), more conflicts and killings take place in the wet season times of relative abundance, and fewer in the dry season times of relative scarcity, when people may try to reconcile their differences and cooperate (Mbaye 2020; Ravnborg et al. 2012). Periods of scarcity have also often resulted in collaborative actions and arrangements rather than conflict. This has been documented in studies of water governance, at both transboundary and local levels (Wolf et al. 2005; Ravnborg et al. 2012).

> **Periods of scarcity have also often resulted in collaborative actions and arrangements rather than conflict.**

Rainfall fluctuations and extreme weather conditions are not a new phenomenon in the Sahel, but a condition that people have been adapting to in various ways. For instance, there is substantial evidence that the seasonal movement of livestock constitutes the most resilient form of livelihood, as it is adapted to preserving and re-greening damaged ecosystems in fragile and climate change-affected drylands. However, pastoral mobility is under ever-increasing pressure. Historically Mali's governments have favoured settled farmers over nomadic populations, and inter-national donors often prefer to deliver aid to demographically dense farmland areas than to projects that might reach only a few beneficiaries in remote and difficult-to-reach areas. Furthermore, throughout the sub-region, pastoralists' seasonal migrations southwards, changes in herding routes and practices are sources of friction that risk intensifying rural warfare in other conflict-ridden zones across the

Sudano-Sahara belt, e.g. in Chad, Cameroon and the Central African Republic (See IPIS/Concordis 2020; ICG 2014 for a discussion). Indeed, resource-sharing arrangements require a large degree of trust and mutual reciprocity between user groups, which the proliferation of arms and armed actors disrupts. Under these circumstances, climate change may aggravate and extend the scope of the existing conflicts, or trigger underlying and latent conflicts to break out into the open.

CLIMATE CHANGE AMPLIFIES CONFLICTS

As illustrated in this report a complex mix of intersecting conflict drivers have triggered and exacerbated Mali´s security crisis. They include: the presence of various armed actors with different political agendas; long-term injustice and corruption by state officials and local elites; and changing regional insecurity dynamics. The local jihadist groups Katiba Macina and ISGS have exploited existing local grievances linked to land rights and herder marginalisation to win local support. Armed groups have offered economic incentives and food to rural communities in exchange for loyalty, recruiting heavily among marginalised pastoralist Fulani youth. As the state and local institutions have proven unable or unwilling to protect property rights and implement equitable and legitimate legal mechanisms for regulating resource use, jihadist groups have benefitted from government absence by mediating resource disputes, providing protection and support to farmers and herders, and defining rules for livestock migration (Mbaye 2020).

> **Land conflicts in the Delta are not the result of climate change. They are the outcome of historically embedded government policies and practices that have discriminated against some population groups, like the Fulani pastoralists, leading to increased inequality and a sense of injustice.**

As such, the conflicts also confirm other studies showing that access and user rights to land are a key feature in most situations where climate change has contributed to natural resource conflicts (Funder et al. 2012). But land conflicts in the Delta are not the result of climate change. They are the outcome of historically embedded government policies and practices that have discriminated against

some population groups, like the Fulani pastoralists, leading to increased inequality and a sense of injustice that in turn has increased the risk and intensity of conflict (Benjaminsen 2000; Benjaminsen & Ba 2019; 2021).

In Mali, internal displacement and regional migration have sky-rocketed due to violence in the centre of the country, which may lead to temporary or long-term local displacement. In some cases where there is scarcity of and competition over access to water and arable land, this may strengthen conflicts between host societies/communities and migrants looking for access to new land and resources. However, migration is also a long-term, historically embedded livelihood strategy. Hence the idea of climate change as a push for migration also needs to be put into the context of historical, political, cultural and socioeconomic factors.

ENTRY POINTS FOR DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Given the complex interplay between conflict drivers and climate change, how can Mali's external partners in development cooperation help prevent climate change from adding to existing tensions and conflicts?

In this context, a further and sometimes overlooked way in which climate change can contribute to conflict is through the adaptation and mitigation efforts themselves. The assumption that conflicts in the Sahel are directly related to resource scarcity – in part caused by climate change – could lead to development policies that aim at increasing natural resource availability (ICG 2020b). Following this logic, a response to droughts with potential harmful effects on farmer–herder relations has been to support large-scale projects such as digging wells and implementing irrigation schemes to increase the volume of available natural resources like crops and water. Yet, past experiences in several Sahel regions suggest that increasing access to resources and resource availability can enhance local tensions and sometimes spark violence when existing conflicts of interest between different user groups are not adequately considered in project planning and implementation.

Development projects and programmes need to take their point of departure in a nuanced rather than a simplistic understanding of the relationship between climate change and conflict that sees climate change as a conflict multiplier rather than

as a major direct cause of conflict in itself. To avoid conflict over land ownership and land use change, seasonal land-users' access rights to land need to be carefully analysed as part of development project planning (Cold-Ravnkilde & Schouten 2020).

Past experiences in the Sahel suggest that increasing resource availability can enhance local tensions and sometimes spark violence when existing conflicts of interest are not adequately considered in project planning and implementation.

The Malian Government and its partners should develop policy frameworks for responding to changing migration and mobility patterns, to support climate mitigation and adaptation strategies that reinforce the resilience of farming and herding communities and prevent violent conflict. Pastoral migration is an important adaptation strategy in Mali and the Sahel region, requiring climate- and conflict-sensitive policy responses that consider the needs of pastoralists and farmers alike – particularly in areas experiencing increasing in-migration and intensive resource use.

International development projects should continue to support dialogue between pastoralists and local and national governments to prevent the further marginalisation of vulnerable pastoralist groups. Programmes should focus on strengthening social institutions and improving resource-sharing between pastoralists and other resource users to ensure peaceful co-existence.

CONCLUSION

The escalation of violence in Mali and the spread of Islamic extremists and transnational crime networks in the Sahel-Saharan regions of Africa have rearticulated concerns about the link between climate change and terrorism. The so-called 'climate-conflict' nexus also informs recent policy narratives on 'new climate wars', where conflict escalation and terrorism are seen as results of competition over declining resources that is intensified by climate change. Mali is witnessing a growing presence and influence of armed groups. The widespread availability of weapons has intensified the violence against civilians and left communities more exposed to inter-community conflicts and relentless criminality. Furthermore, the fight against terrorism has shaped military interventions and determined security priorities. The recent rise in conflict related to natural resources within Mali's central region (Mopti) constitutes a social, economic and political challenge that is particularly important for several reasons:

■ The fusion of several conflict dynamics (hostility related to access to natural resources and security challenges) is reflected, among other things, in the inter-ference of non-state armed groups in social relations and, above all, by the strong instrumentalisation of conflicts over access to natural resources.

■ The severe challenges related to poor governance and limited employment and income opportunities are further weakening rural societies and creating conditions that can lead young populations into violence and conflict.

■ The inability to find equitable and sustainable solutions favours an identity-based breakdown of social ties between certain rural communities as well as the weakening of social cohesion.

An examination of the climate-conflict nexus reveals three salient elements:

First, the preoccupation with equity concerning access to land is important because current legislation on land ownership is sometimes poorly supervised or not enforced, which allows all kinds of abuses in its management – particularly in rural areas.

Second, social inequality and inequity concerning access to natural resources creates fertile ground for non-state armed groups to exploit feelings of frustration for political or religious purposes.

Third, Government involvement in human rights abuses and the outsourcing of security to local militias as proxies for the armed forces have deepened the local populations' anti-French and anti-Government sentiments and served to further jihadist objectives, allowing jihadists to present themselves as alternative sources of protection to local communities in the region.

Beyond allegiance to local branches of global terrorist organisations like Islamic State and al-Qaeda, these groups attract certain segments of the population due to their capacity to alter the unequal political and economic relations between the local elites and families of a lower status. Armed groups seek to reinforce their local roots by taking advantage of the withdrawal of the state to ensure services that are necessary for the communities to function. As well as legitimising their presence, this also allows them to obtain the logistical support that they need. To deal with the recurring security crisis, any response strategies that could be implemented in the Mopti region will have to be based on the premise that economic development and peace are not possible without actual Government involvement. The adopted strategies and the related support must focus on the return of public administration to the rural areas that are plagued by the conflict.

What can a decade of security crisis in central Mali and the Sahel teach us? In Mali, many social and community actors are wondering what the state envisions as a solution to the conflict. This question is particularly pertinent considering the emergence of new threats related to organised crime and asymmetric warfare as well as the presence and intensified influence of a range of non-Western external security actors including Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The state's responses to these types of threats and how they engage with these actors will determine whether people will consider the state a legitimate and relevant actor in the resolution of conflict and in the provision of peace in the future. Furthermore, will the Mali coups d'état of 2020 and 2021 and that of Burkina Faso in January 2022 bring about a paradigm shift in terms of military action and dialogue with armed groups? Future strategies for dialogue and negotiation will be dictated by the dynamics created by coups d'état and the demands of national public opinion.

After Mali's recent political turbulence (including the diplomatic crisis with France and the international and regional bodies of ECOWAS and the African Union over the arrival of the Russian private military company, Wagner, and the delayed plans for parliamentary elections), the crisis is proving uncontainable within the still existing, if fragmented, framework for peace. The situation we have set out to present in this report begs the question of where to start the dialogue – from the bottom up or top down? New foundations for reflection and analysis are required, and they must draw on the contribution that research can provide.

NOTES

1 The interviews were conducted in French and are translated by one of the report authors.

2 The translation from Fulfulde and Arabic to French/English has been done by the authors.

3 Interviews conducted by Malian researcher Boukary Sangaré for a DIIS concept note by Boukary Sangaré and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde in October 2020.

4 June 2015: The 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement was established between the Mali Government, the ex-rebel Tuareg-led alliance called the Coordination of Azawad's Movements (CMA) including MNLA; the 'Plateforme', a coalition of pro-government, ethnically-based, self-defence militias. The agreement excludes the jihadist groups.

5 The Liptako-Gourma region – composed of border areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – is considered the epicentre of insecurity and escalating intercommunal violence in the Sahel. Consequently, the Liptako-Gourma region has become the centre of attention of national, regional and international stakeholders in the Sahel, including military, development and humanitarian actors. While the geographic definitions of the region vary, we include Mali's sub-national region of Mopti as part of the Liptako-Gourma region.

6 According to official FAO data, the cattle population in Mali had grown to about ten million head in 2014, with an average growth rate of 1.9% (1961–2018). Cattle numbers in the Mopti and Timbuktu region numbered at least five million head in 2014, which means that these regions accounted for at least 50% of the cattle stock in Mali.

7 The hostile attitude of the newly independent Malian state was the breeding ground for the first Tuareg rebellion led by the Ifoghas clan in Kidal in 1963. The uprising was a reaction to the Government's modernisation policies, which focused on enforced education and settlement of the nomadic groups (Lecocq 2004). Subsequent rebellions occurred in 1990, 2006, 2009 and 2012 (see Lecocq 2010; de Sardan 2013; and Boilley 2012).

8 As explained in the report, these groups constantly change, merge, and break with each other and their main goals vary. This graph oversimplifies some of these changes in order to clarify the more detailed description provided in the text and should therefore not be seen as a comprehensive overview, but as a constantly evolving situation subject to change.

9 MUJAO appeared for the first time in October 2011, claiming responsibility for the abduction of two Spaniards and an Italian in Algeria. The group was led by mainly Mauritanian and Malian Arabs from the Gao region with close ties to AQIM. It represented a hardcore of jihadist and criminal elements, but quickly became a front for drug smugglers from Gao where they ruled in May and June 2012.

10 The name Katiba Macina can be translated as 'the battalion of the Macina'. The term Katiba was used to refer to the fighting units of the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN, National Liberation Army) during the Algerian War (Baldaro & Diall 2020: fn 2, p. 69).

11 Translated by the authors.

12 This conflict is also the consequence of old resentment between the Fulani and Dogon after the assassination in 2002 of Issiaka Bawourde Barry, village chief of Mbana peul.

13   Translated by the authors.

14   This includes leaders such as David Tembiné, Augustin Témé and Amadaga Niangal as well as other young Dogons.

15   UNSC Report (2020) S/2020/1074: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/s-2020-1074.php

16   This section draws on a concept note by Sangaré and Cold-Ravnkilde (2020a), based on 44 semi-structured interviews with displaced persons (23 women and 21 men) at the informal Faladié camp site (Bamako), Interviews were conducted by Boukary Sangaré for DIIS.

17   During pre-colonial wars and raids, relations between the Fulani and the Dogon as well as other groups such as the Songhay and the Tuaregs were largely antagonistic. Shifting alliances, intermarriage and resource collaboration have also always existed between the groups (Baudais 2006; de Bruijn & van Dijk 1995; Gallais 1975; Rouch 1953).

18   see also de Bruijn & van Djik 1995.

19   https://www.peaceagreements.org/search

20   The actual number of agreements is much higher, but their status varies and some consist only of oral agreements.

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