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To cite this article: Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde & Boubacar Ba (2022): Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2022.2058360](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2058360)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2058360>



Published online: 21 Apr 2022.



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# Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali

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## ABSTRACT

In West Africa's Sahel region, franchises of global jihadist groups like Islamic State and al-Qaeda proliferate. So far, the dynamics of jihadist groups in the Sahel have predominantly been studied through analyses of the material and strategic dimensions of the struggle. Curiously, little attention has paid to how religiously-informed worldviews inform their expansion. Drawing on the concept of "epistemic worldviews", this article explores how local leaders of al-Qaeda and Islamic State franchises frame their fight. It argues that transnational jihadist ideology matters; both for how different jihadist groups compete to mobilize new followers as well as for how they implement new models of jihadist governance. Contributing to ongoing debates about the transnationalization of jihad, the article shows that in the intra-jihadist contestation between the groups in Mali, global jihadist concepts are negotiated, contested, and constituted by the groups as they go along. Thereby global jihadist ideology comes to provide both a cause and an effect of contestations and conflicts between the expanding jihadist groups in the Sahel.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Accepted 20 March 2022

In West Africa's Sahel region, franchises of global armed jihadist groups proliferate.<sup>1</sup> Some of the world's most renowned terrorist organizations, like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ), are increasingly escalating local conflicts as they enter into new geographical spaces and areas of governance.<sup>2</sup> Since 2019 two local branches of IS and AQ have been clashing in central Mali's rural zones; namely the local branch of Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*, and *Katiba Macina*, which forms part of *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM, Group to Support Islam and Muslims), an alliance of al-Qaeda affiliated groups.<sup>3</sup> Up until 2019, due to the collaboration and lack of conflict between ISGS and JNIM, the relationship between them was referred to as "the Sahelian anomaly" in the global intra-jihadi fight between AQ and IS in war theaters around the world.<sup>4</sup> Around 2019, however, the Sahelian anomaly ended in deadly clashes between the two groups, revealing deep-seated ideological disagreements as well as competition to control social life, natural resources, and cross-border flows. In this context, what role does jihadist ideology play in the transnationalization of the armed struggle between competing local actors in Mali's epicenter of violence?

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This article is situated within recent scholarly debates on the transnationalization of local insurgencies across the world (see introduction this section).<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Sheikh and Juergensmeyer's concept "epistemic worldviews",<sup>6</sup> we argue that jihadist ideology matters for the transnationalization of local conflicts in Mali in ways that go beyond the mere tactical and material factors that most scholars suggest.<sup>7</sup> Sheikh and Juergensmeyer define "epistemic worldviews" as "a framework for thinking about reality and acting within a perceived understanding of the world", which enables an understanding of how the social reality looks through the eyes of religious activists without disregarding the social context within which jihadist groups are embedded.<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that we should see jihadist ideology as a fixed set of doctrines that diffuses uncontested from the global level to the local.<sup>9</sup> Rather, as we show, the content of jihadist ideology is translated, negotiated and hence defined, by competing local actors claiming the right to speak on behalf of jihadism. Specifically, through the empirical analysis of the rivalry between local AQ and IS franchises in Mali, we show that jihadist ideology is not just "cheap talk" but something that informs daily actions, strategy and claims to authority. That ideology matters, however, does not mean that we deny the importance of social, political, and economic drivers. But rather than seeing religiously framed worldviews as disentangled from the analysis of material and strategic dimension of jihadist conflict, we see them as integrated and with a potential to explain transnationalization processes.

To make this argument the article develops an analysis of how local franchises of AQ and IS in central Mali combine global jihadist narratives with localized, historically embedded repertoires of meaning,<sup>10</sup> and furthermore, how their competing "epistemic worldviews" inform and constrain their objective of replacing the existing (and in their view unjust) social order with jihadist informed local governance practices and institutions. Central Mali's border region with Burkina Faso and Niger (also known as the Liptako Gourma) is a case in point for exploring jihadist conflict escalation as processes of "transnationalization" for three reasons. Firstly because, since 2019, clashes between local IS and AQ franchises have revealed hardening ideological contestations over the right interpretation of Islam as well as the legitimate means to obtain radical politico-religious change. Such contestations reflect a larger pattern of AQ and IS clashes, for instance in Somalia, Yemen, and Syria,<sup>11</sup> which increases the relevance of the analysis beyond the region of the Sahel. Secondly, since 2016, the escalation of the region's historically embedded natural resource-related conflicts<sup>12</sup> has enabled jihadist groups to expand into new cross-border territories (widening the battlefield). Thirdly, in virtue of being seen as a new frontier in the war on terror it hosts some of the world's most influential military actors (including France, the EU, the UN, and the U.S.),<sup>13</sup> which illustrates processes of "macro-securitization" through which conflict narratives evolves from being a local-level concern to becoming a global/transnational concern, attracting new/broader audiences.<sup>14</sup> The article thereby adds to the growing understanding of the transnationalization of jihadist conflicts by including a careful examination of how the epistemological worldviews of Sahelian jihadist actors inform their struggle and models of governance.<sup>15</sup>

The article is structured as follows. The first section briefly sketches out the debate about the role of ideology in explaining jihadist conflict and introduces the notion of "epistemic worldviews". Next the article analyses how three different component parts

of jihadist groups' epistemic worldviews: *identity, historical repertoires of meaning, and jihadist governance* inform the way IS and AQ franchises compete for authority in central Mali. The conclusion summarizes the main arguments and points to how these derived analytical component parts can contribute to an understanding of the transnationalization of contemporary jihadist insurgencies.

## The Role of Epistemic Worldviews in Explaining Jihadist Conflict

In the literature on terrorism, jihadist groups like AQ and IS are often portrayed as forming part of the same global phenomenon engaged in a violent war against the West and increasingly in a global intra-jihadist power struggle.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Ingram et al.<sup>17</sup> argue that IS can be seen as an evolving “global adhocratic insurgency” that exports its brand and a core set of unchanged ideological and strategic principles across its transnational enterprise. In similar vein, Hafez presents five core ideological disagreements between IS “puritanism” and AQ “populism” (including whether or not to allow for cooperation with ideologically distant factions) as a typology for understanding main causes of the global rivalry between the movements.<sup>18</sup> Such studies while mostly focusing on the groups' communication efforts can help identify broader patterns in the global rivalry between the organizations.<sup>19</sup> However, they tend to leave the impression that there exist a predefined set of doctrines that diffuses from the global level into the local conflict theaters while mobilizing actors through individualized processes of radicalization.<sup>20</sup> In this macro-level approach, jihadist ideology is seen almost as something unique behavioral (fundamentalist), that causes violent behavior in the name of Islam. Meanwhile, since the turn of the century, most peace and conflict research emphasizes material and strategic dimensions of conflict and violence, while suggesting only a limited or instrumental role of ideology in the way that it provides resources for motivating combatants and coordinating allies (the weak paradigm).<sup>21</sup> This broader trend of downgrading ideology for pragmatism also characterizes much literature on armed jihadist groups in the Sahel.<sup>22</sup> Highlighting the often frantic and changing alliances between armed groups, authors have argued that jihadist mobilization and governance practices are mostly driven by contingent strategic interests rather than ideological motives.<sup>23</sup> Others have looked at how jihadist groups offer assistance, protection and dispute resolution to local populations<sup>24</sup> and produce “hybrid orders” through political alliances.<sup>25</sup> Focusing on local drivers, several authors emphasize local grievances<sup>26</sup> and resource-related conflicts as reasons for joining jihadist groups, while downplaying ideological and transnational aspects of the jihadist expansion.<sup>27</sup> In his recent comprehensive book on the local politics of the Sahel jihadist groups, Thurston<sup>28</sup> does not rule out that jihadist can be both committed ideologues and political actors, but focuses the attention on coalition building and the local politics of the jihadist rebellion. While all these aspects are undeniably important for understanding jihadist insurgency, curiously, little attention has been paid to the role of global, religiously inspired worldviews in how local conflicts escalate as jihadist groups compete to expand and consolidate.

To unpack the way in which jihadist religiously-informed ideology informs daily understandings, strategy and claims to authority, the article draws on Sheikh and

Juergensmeyer's concept of "epistemic worldview",<sup>29</sup> which forms part of "a sociotheological approach" to religious violence that incorporates into social analysis the insider-orientated attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview. The aim of embarking on an epistemic worldview analysis is to study how religious worldviews provide structural conditions that enable conflict escalation. The analysis of how epistemic worldviews inform competing actors' claims to authority in a particular local setting, offers a "middle ground" between those who claim that jihadist ideology in itself causes transnationalization of conflicts, and those who disregard ideology and religious language as "cheap talk" that veils the real material and situational drivers of violent conflict.

But how do we deconstruct or operationalize abstract concepts like ideology and epistemic worldviews into something observable in concrete conflict settings? Here, inspired by Sanin and Wood,<sup>30</sup> we understand ideology as a more or less systematic set of ideas that include three elements: the identification of a referent group (*identity*); the historical embedded challenges or grievances the group face (*historical repertoires of meaning*); and the objectives to pursue of behalf of the group their program of action (*jihadist governance*). These categories derive from the empirical analysis of the jihadist struggle in central Mali drawing on various sources collected during different periods of the authors' long-term engagement with Mali. Firstly, jihadist narratives are explored in a selected number of original audio recordings of jihadist leaders' speeches.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the case study from the Mopti region, from where one of the authors originates, draws on information achieved through the authors' personal networks and archives. Thirdly, it draws from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted during earlier fieldwork with security professionals and Malian NGO workers and academics, addressing questions of local political drivers and key developments in hotbeds of violence. Finally, the article uses different types of documents (e.g. internal documents and media outlets) as well as secondary sources to triangulate the findings.

### **Intra-Jihadist Ideological Contestations in Central Mali**

Accelerated by the 2011 fall of the Gaddafi regime, a security crisis erupted in Mali in January 2012 when a loose coalition of Tuareg separatist rebels and jihadist militants with links to al-Qaeda took control of Mali's three northern regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. While the jihadist insurgency initially concentrated in the north, with the presence since 2013 of external military operations (notably France with support from the UN, the EU, the U.S., and regional security forces), eventually the jihadist groups moved further south into central Mali, a region bordering Niger and Burkina Faso. Situated at the bend of the River Niger's inner delta (also known as the Masina or the Dina), central Mali's Mopti region is known for its rich abundance of valuable natural resources (water, pastureland, agriculture and fish), conflicts over which have long historical trajectories.<sup>32</sup> Access to the water-grown fodder plant (*bourgoutières*) attracts herders from across the region. During the dry season more than three million cattle can be found grazing on the Delta's riverbanks. Here, despite multiple efforts of external and regional security actors to eliminate the jihadist groups, since 2016 the number of attacks has increased fivefold turning it into Mali's epicenter of violence.<sup>33</sup> After the 2012 jihadist occupation of the northern regions, where state representatives

also fled the Delta region, with the French operation Serval (2013–2014),<sup>34</sup> the army and other state representatives gradually returned to Mopti's urban centers. However, the quasi return of the state became immediately associated with arbitrary arrests, killings, and mistreatment of, in particular, Fulani groups suspected of being associated with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), one of the three major jihadist actors during the 2012 occupation.<sup>35</sup> Against this background, Katiba Macina started carrying out attacks against army posts, and subsequently took control of rural areas in central Mali's Mopti region. At the same time, the army supported ethnic Bambara (Donzo) and Dogon militias in non-jihadist areas, which enhanced the proliferation of various armed militias. As the state increased its presence (supported by France, the EU, and the regional G-5 Sahel Force), abuses, killings, and arbitrary arrests of civilians increased.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the presence of both jihadist groups and the military actions against them has escalated inter-and intra-communal violence in the region. To many local people, arbitrary abuses by state actors have contrasted strongly with the effectiveness of Katiba Macina's security provision.<sup>37</sup>

Simultaneously, in 2015, the Islamic State franchise Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) was established as a splinter group of the notorious al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) emir, Belmokhtar's group *al Mourabitoun*, and became a militant jihadist alternative to AQ affiliated groups. Until 2019 ISGS had only played a marginal role in central Mali's Delta region, while focusing more on collaboration rather than competition with AQ affiliated groups. Though some early defections of Katiba Macina fighters to ISGS were reported already in 2017,<sup>38</sup> JNIM and ISGS had an informal geographical division of labor where IS 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.<sup>39</sup> However, in 2018, high-ranking members of Katiba Macina started to defect to ISGS while challenging Katiba Macina's somewhat more pragmatic approach to jihad.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on original audio recordings made by the two groups, the following sections illustrate how ISGS challenges the ideological position of Katiba Macina, and how the three component parts of their worldviews (identity; historical repertoires of meaning and jihadist governance) inform the struggle.

### **Construction of Identity: *Les Murtardin* and *les Moudjahidines***

By identifying enemies with whom they are at war, jihadists simultaneously draw on ideological worldviews to establish their identity as a group. Not unlike states, jihadists construct "Others" through discourses of securitization that portray them as an existential threat, while certain extraordinary measures to destroy them are made possible.<sup>41</sup> In this case, the ability to blend the local and the global ideological repertoire is key for the establishment of jihadist group identity.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> Coming from a modest family in the village of Koufa just north of Mopti, in ambiguous ways Kouffa "has positioned himself both as a communal defender and religious voice of his Fulani ethnic community in central Mali – a defender against multiple enemies, from the hyper local to the world stage."<sup>44</sup> Initially Katiba Macina consisted mostly,

but not solely, of Fulani fighters who had previously been enlisted in MUJWA that were close to Ag Ghali, who officially supported and endorsed the formation of Katiba Macina in 2016. Kouffa initially based his local jihad on the support from his own ethnic group the Fulani. The Fulani society is characterized by highly hierarchized internal rivalries between elites and lower caste Fulani segments. Accordingly with time, Kouffa's ambition of presenting an all incorporating project that could unite the deeply divided Fulani society has become increasingly difficult. His social revolutionary talk about circumventing the unjust order of the state gained traction amongst lower caste Fulani groups in the Delta region. Gradually Kouffa obtained local support from two types of groups: the first mainly consisting of resident Fulani herders, *talibés* (Qur'anic students) and community leaders, and the other of allochthonous (nonresident) herders from the adjacent drylands (Seno, Tioki and Nampalari). To recruit local members to his organization, Kouffa evoked a mixture between a global war against France (and its recolonization of the Malian state) as well as the wish for a social revolution to remove former state-supported elites and their corrupt and egalitarian governance practices that have historically worked to the detriment of marginalized pastoral groups, often of Fulani origin.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the violent practices and abuse by Malian soldiers as part of counter-terrorist operations also strengthened Kouffa's position as community defender, and he soon became the most influential actor in central Mali's insurgency.

Since 2017 Kouffa has been deputy leader and field commander of JNIM through his close personal ties to JNIM's leader Iyad ag Ghali.<sup>46</sup> JNIM in particular targets foreign and Malian security forces, the support through which Kouffa also gain prominence as an active fighter against foreign occupiers. He also claims that France is an existential threat to the entire Fulani society, as France supports the Malian security forces who arbitrarily kill civilian Fulani's, as they take all Fulanis to be terrorists. This way Kouffa ambiguously and dangerously plays on the Fulani ethnic identity to navigate multiple others in the construction of group identity.<sup>47</sup> Both vis-à-vis local and Bamako based Fulani elites that opposes him as well as toward potential recruits of other ethnic groups. As Kouffa stated in a speech to the Peul civil society in Bamako, after their failed attempt to persuade the government to pursue dialogue with him in 2017<sup>48</sup>:

In your understanding even if our struggle is not for the Fulani cause, we are Fulani – Fulani rebels against France [...]. If France succeeds in separating our community, France alone will get rid of it. Failing to do so [to meet this objective], France will get rid of the entire community without distinction so that God's will does not apply. You leaders of the Fulani community, you know this. We are the same community – France cannot distinguish between us Fulani. [...] 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 that we have committed ourselves to go against. 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.

This way the identity formation relates to what Sheikh (introduction this issue) defines as processes of macro-securitization through which conflicts transform from



being a local-level concern to becoming a global/transnational concern, attracting new/broader audiences. This is also reflected in how the IS/AQ divide can gain prominence in the local context.

The rupture between AQ and IS affiliated groups started as central members of Katiba Macina defected to ISGS. This shows jihadist groups define their identity not only vis-à-vis a foreign military power and the Malian state. The jihadist groups are simultaneously engaged in distinguishing themselves as different from opposing jihadist groups, the destruction of whom becomes justifiable. More instrumentalist approaches to explaining the conflict would view the defection to IS as a failure of Kouffa's coalition building strategy. To restore state authority the Malian government and its external partners stepped up military operations against the jihadist groups in 2018. As the cost of war continued to rise, activists, politicians and religious leaders increasingly called for dialogue between the Malian government and the leaders of Katiba Macina,<sup>49</sup> which pushed Kouffa's pragmatic approach to the edge and made it easier for ISGS fighters to enter the stage.<sup>50</sup> Thereby the competition between local actors prepared the ground for the global ideological division between AQ and IS to manifest itself in the local conflict theater through the active translation by the jihadist actors. As explained in an audio message by an unnamed local ISGS branch leader, after a clash between his group and Katiba Macina which caused many deaths and injuries in the region of Dogo (Téneko circle) and Djalloubé (Mopti circle) in early 2020:

These people, who are bandits and who call themselves fighters of the Dina have become people who terrorize everywhere. People who have returned to the Dina, returned to jihad. They leave to mingle with the Mourtads [sic], they merge with all the friends of the Mourtads to fight against the Moujahideens. These are Ancars Dawaagaitu [conservative religious movement]. They are like that. They help the Mourtads. These are people who see themselves as part of the al-Qaeda network, a jihadist network started by Osama bin Laden to fight jihad against the non-believers and take Islam hostage. However, the bid'adah (blameworthy innovation) have transformed this network – only its name remains. They just come and join the Mourtads, and they kill the Muslims. They do not fight for Islam. They do not fight for justice. They are the ones who destroy Islam.<sup>51</sup>

In the message, the ISGS leader also denounces that Kouffa approached members of traditional Donzo hunter society to establish local peace agreements and instead started to fight ISGS.

They posted videos with Donzos who have their documents, papers, and equipment; they let the Donzo go and told them that there was an agreement between them. You let go of the Donzos and come and kill the Mujahedin. Is this Islam and justice? Find the answer yourself, okay? The Mourtads (disbelievers) in all countries, they have let them go, they are all in good harmony. They have let the Mourtads in Mauritania go. Mauritania is one of the G5 Sahel countries. They do not fight against the Mourtads and Dawutaaji (accompanists), but they fight against the Mujahedin.<sup>52</sup>

Resembling the ideological battle between AQ/IS in other war theaters, ISGS challenges Katiba Macina's collaboration with other (non-muslim) ethnic groups, local state representatives, whom they define apostates. Now it is difficult to determine whether Kouffa's attempt to collaborate with local leaders could be regarded as mere pragmatic attempts at making strategic winning coalitions or whether it is based on his commitment to ideologically informed worldviews. The point made here is that the global



repertoire informs his strategic choices and his claim to authority. Koufffa explicitly justifies his acceptance of local leaders according to his interpretation of Islam according to which local leaders forms part of the Ummah and hence cannot be defined as legitimate targets. In a message disseminated as a follow up after a clash between Katiba Macina and ISGS fighters in early 2020, Koufffa states:

The state representatives and local elected (mayors and village chiefs) are anchored in the local communities and cannot be rejected. They [members of ISGS] have defected because they do not want the Book to be in front of them. Scholars, who have extensively served Islam in our area, have been appointed to interpret our differences over understanding of the Qur'an, its application, and modes of governance in the conquered areas/villages. They were all tired, they were chased, beaten, expelled from their homes by the Dawlatoul Islamia [sic] group. In the Dina, people must be on the same page. God said in the Qur'an that He made a Dinah for you, the people of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).<sup>53</sup>

Thus, through this intra-jihadist contestation we see how the competing jihadist groups respectively construct an understanding of who they are as a group through the identification of an enemy framed by an us/them logic. In the escalation of the conflict between the groups, the global dispute between IS and AQ in other theaters of war, start to manifest in the narratives of the jihadist entrepreneurs. The different ideological interpretations presented by the competing jihadist franchises give their adherents reasons to act, and a repertoire of meaning through which they can frame their fight against the competing jihadist groups. Thereby, jihadist ideas do not diffuse uncontested into a local setting; they draw upon the second element: namely historical repertoires of meaning through which jihadist entrepreneurs can invent discourses that resonate with local demands for social and political change. To understand how historical repertoires are reinvented by competing jihadist groups, we now turn to their ambiguous relation to the historical Dina theocracy established in the nineteenth century.

### ***Historical Repertoires of Meaning: The Contested Land of the Dina***

In central Mali, in ambiguous ways, the glorified historical past of the nineteenth-century Islamic theocratic Dina Empire (1818–1862) blends into transnational jihadist discourses of AQ and IS affiliates. The Dina was established by Islamic Fulani clergymen who mobilized a jihad and conquered the Delta region through the leadership of Cheikou Amadou. As reference point for a religiously-informed, pre-colonial social order based on custom and tradition, the Dina constitutes a central point of contestation in the “glocalized” jihadist epistemic worldview.<sup>54</sup> To a large part of Katiba Macina’s followers (mostly resident herders), the Dina era is regarded as a golden age of Fulani hegemony in central Mali, which Koufffa’s project was initially seen as a way to restore. However, the historical imaginary of the Dina is contested, particularly in how it relates to questions of access to land, belonging and identity in the Delta.<sup>55</sup> So, although the Dina may be seen as a product of African pre-colonial state formation, the application of its principles has been a contested issue for decades, also by Fulani pastoralists themselves.<sup>56</sup> The Dina formalized many of the resource management principles and rights in a system introduced by invading Fulani warriors, the *Ardobé*, who in the fourteenth century introduced local chiefs called the *jowros* to manage the pastoral

rangeland in designated territorial units. After the fall of the Dina empire, the authority of the *jowro* has waxed and waned during various periods in Mali's state formation until it was formally recognized as part of customary law in 2002.<sup>57</sup> Today, the management system is perceived as being biased toward Fulani elites, reproducing a past when a few pastoral leaders controlled land, resources, and people.<sup>58</sup>

Katiba Macina's relationship with influential *jowro* families in the Delta has been ambiguous. Initially, Katiba fighters attempted to undermine the *jowro* families' authority by attempting to cancel the royalties collected by the *jowro* from nonresident herders seeking access to pastures in the Delta. Thereby, subaltern Fulani pastoralists also benefited from the presence of jihadist groups to revolt against Fulani elites, whom they accuse of being complicit with corrupt state agents.<sup>59</sup> But the *jowros* pushed back. Fulani elites who Kouffa initially opposed also benefited from the presence of external military operations to reinstate their authority and point to stigmatized, lower caste Fulani groups as terrorists, which in turn drew these marginalized groups toward Kouffa and broadened his audience.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, Katiba Macina became more accommodating toward the *jowros*. However, Kouffa's attempt to establish coalitions with local customary Fulani leaders has been regarded by ISGS as a defense of their unequal power position – which they contest from an ideological point of view claiming that, according to Islam, all Muslims are equal. In this way the rules of access to the Delta's pastures inherited from the Dina are now being challenged by ISGS adherents, most of them belonging to so-called "lower castes", locally defined as *allochthones*, who do not possess land, and must seek access to the pastoral grazing areas from the autochthonous *jowro* families.

At a meeting in 2019 amongst Katiba Macina members of the *Shoura* (Islamic council), Kouffa proposed to reintroduce the regulation of the access to pastoral resources based on the Dina code. Meanwhile, to accommodate the needs of the *allochthones*, the *jowros* were commanded to reduce the tax paid by the nonresident herders and to halt previous corrupt practices.<sup>61</sup> The memorandum of understanding coming out of the meeting can be seen as Kouffa's attempt to reconcile with the *jowro* (and customary families), the economically powerful elites of the Delta.

The management of *bourgoutières* is the responsibility of customary families who have appointed *jowros* within them. We ensure scrupulous respect for royalty payments to avoid speculation, respect for the precedence of herds and the rights of herders in the modes of access to transhumance and *bourgoutières*.<sup>62</sup>

In contrast to Katiba Macina's accommodating approach to the *jowros*, ISGS wishes to disrupt the authority of traditional, customary, and religious leaders (*marabouts* and *qadis* installed to manage local conflicts) through means of violence. Hence, some ISGS members have denounced the memorandum of understanding by refusing to pay the access fees for the *bourgoutières* in the flooded area by referring to the Qur'an in the sura: *Inal moumouminina Ikwatou* (all Muslims are brothers) based on which they demand free access to the *bourgoutières* often by use of force. Furthermore, they tried to convince the nonresident 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* (the fees paid to the pastoral families for access to the *bourgou* fields). Supporters of ISGS believe that water, grass, and fire are common goods which belongs to God and that

no one has the right to sell it to anybody.<sup>63</sup> Building on this, Abou Mahmoud aimed to show that Kouffa has abandoned his early revolutionary jihad, which defended the rights of the poor, to benefit from the political economic powers of the *jowro*.

Conflicts over access to the pastoral resources of the Delta region have previously been analyzed from a political ecology perspective, foregrounding how different interest groups seek to secure their respective resource rights.<sup>64</sup> According to this approach, the argument could be raised that the allochthonous herders only break with Kouffa for material gains. However, as our analysis shows, such contestations also reveal a struggle to define history and belonging, which mixes with Islamic principles for envisioning the right social order; aspects which a purely strategic materialist analysis does not give insights into. Jihadism, thus, does not form a static set of scripts and rules that diffuse unfiltered from one jihadist hotspot to another. To gain traction in the Delta, jihadist entrepreneurs must creatively draw on and recombine existing historical repertoires of meaning that, in turn, inform daily understandings, strategy, and claims to resources and authority. In this case we see how global jihadist religious repertoires, in different ways, blend into long term historical conflicts over land, identity, and belonging. It is through the practices of these different groups dealing with each other, all claiming the right to speak on behalf of jihadism, that the actual content of jihadism is defined. As we will turn to next, jihadist epistemological worldviews also inform the competing jihadist practices of governance.

### **Jihadist Governance**

In the Delta, Katiba Macina has organized the implementation of *sharia* through the establishment of *shoura* councils, committees, and provision of justice in the form of organized trials based on *sharia* law, which to some extent has forged local acceptance of jihadist dominance in the areas they control.<sup>65</sup> This is a clear example of how jihadist groups perform micro-practices of governance (e.g. security and justice) based on jihadist jurisprudence to constitute local legitimacy. Similar to how Ansar Dine established dispute settlement during their take-over in the north,<sup>66</sup> Katiba Macina resolve local disputes through the institution of not just their own, often harsh, version of the *sharia* but by appointing their own *qadis* – who many civilians see as being more fair-minded, or at least more efficient, than state judges.<sup>67</sup> Kouffa has also recruited several young men from prominent religious families as his lieutenants, using their religious legitimacy to bolster his own.<sup>68</sup> More recently, in attempts to broker peace with e.g. Dogon and Donzo militias, Kouffa has accepted that women can maintain their freedom of movement and do not have to be completely veiled.<sup>69</sup> However, this pragmatic approach to governance is increasingly contested by local ISGS defectors. This shows how global jihadist worldviews also inform competing jihadist actors' aim of establishing a new, alternative, vision of social order based on Islamic terms. In an audio message transmitted by Abou Mahmhoud, former deputy leader in Katiba Macina, he explains why he and his followers defected to ISGS in 2019.

We have now understood that Hamadoun Kouffa is no longer who he was before. It was he who said a mayor was a disbeliever. He said that a mayor was equal to IBK [former president of Mali]. But he does nothing against a mayor because he [the mayor] is a local authority. It is he, and his *cadi* who is called Abou Mokhtar. He even said that a mayor's

secretary is a disbeliever; but, how do you say that someone who writes for mayors is a disbeliever, while the mayor himself is not a disbeliever?<sup>70</sup>

ISGS adherents contest how Kouffa, in his second period of controlling the Delta, has gradually reinforced his power by working through existing local governance structures (customary leaders, village chiefs and religious leaders).

At the end of each meeting, they said (Kouffa's supporters) that they would not fight against any mayor, let alone help anyone who was going to fight against a mayor. This was one of the priorities of our meetings before we took our distance from them. Today, we have decided not to say certain things so as not to contradict ourselves and not be stuck by our own words. [...] We will stop working with the mayors, we will share *zakat* (solidarity alms), and we will punish those who will disobey Allah (Soubhana watallah) As the prophet did.<sup>71</sup>

By contrast Abou Mahmoud's branch, consisting mainly of nonresident herders, wants to replace existing local governance institutions with ISGS-headed structures. Notably, the ISGS rejection of Kouffa's strategy is both informed by transnational ideology; as well as it based on ISGS constituents' preferences. Specifically, as stated in the messages below the distribution of the booty of war and the income generated from the religious tax *zakat* (a tithe of production, normally paid in kind) have given rise to divergence between Katiba Macina and ISGS. As a source of revenue Katiba Macina has introduced the collection of the *zakat* through violent means of oppression. According to ISGS, the Katiba Macina leadership has not distributed the *zakat* according to Islamic principles.

They [KM] say that the *zakat* is not to be shared, but the Prophet shared and all the *Sahabas* (partisans of the Prophet) shared it.<sup>72</sup>

Instead, they have developed a form of treasury system to sustain their war expenditures in the long run. This critique relies on how Katiba Macina has not been able to secure the livelihoods of the poor population based on their Islamic principles of social equity.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, according to Abou Mahmoud, Kouffa plays a double game by subcontracting local cattle thieves (*les Terere*) to loot the population. Afterwards he distributes the war booty among the cattle thieves, which Abou Mahmoud considers a legitimization of cattle theft against the holy text.

Kouffa has adopted a Fatwa which authorizes theft of cattle, sheep, and goats as well as donkeys during periods of combat against their opponents. This Fatwa admits that afterwards the sale of the war booty should be redistributed in three parts. One part goes to the thief and two parts go the *Ummah*. Look, he gives permission to all the thieves to steal. Wherever they can steal, let them do it.<sup>74</sup>

Thereby we see how jihadists attempt both to destroy the state and to replace it with competing forms of jihadist governance. To become ingrained in a local context, jihadist ideas meet a host of conditions that both constrain and facilitate their potential institutionalization. Such work may easily prove unsuccessful or be undermined because of the deliberate efforts of others to resist the nature of the jihadists' organization of economic and social life in the Delta which is increasingly framed in terms of the global AQ/IS rivalry.<sup>75</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has argued that in the transnationalization of contemporary jihadist insurgencies, religiously-informed ideology is not a mere smokescreen that hides more important opportunistic or contingent drivers, but something that matters; both for how different jihadist groups compete to mobilize new followers as well as for how they implement and justify new models of jihadist governance. Based on a case study of conflict escalation in Mali's Delta region, the article explored how competing local franchises of AQ and IS translate global religiously-informed ideology into a local context and how such "epistemic worldviews" inform and condition their micro-practices of governance. Thereby the case illustrates the multidimensional processes through which jihadist conflicts transnationalize that this special issue explores. Firstly, it shows how AQ and ISGS franchises, through othering processes, respectively construct enemies, which in turn, defines them as a group in ways that resemble AQ and IS intra-jihadist conflicts in other places like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan. Secondly, in the local context, IS and AQ franchises, in each and their own ways, reinterpret historical repertoires of meaning to convey followers in a context where local communities are fragmented and divided. The AQ and IS franchises thereby offer competing interpretations of history that speak to different groups' opposing demands for socio-political change. In the Delta region Katiba Macina's initial social revolutionary project was, to some extent, compromised by Kouffa's ambiguous relationship with the local *jowro* elites. This created maneuvering room for ISGS to mobilize among sub-altern, nonresident pastoralist groups framed in terms of Islamic-based justice. This ties into how, thirdly, jihadist epistemological worldviews also inform the groups' competing practices of local governance. In particular, the redistribution of war booty and the revenues from religious tax collection, as well as justice provision have been sources of conflict between Katiba Macina and ISGS, which each in their own ways call upon different interpretations of global jihadist ideology to justify their claims.

Thus, to understand how jihadist movements gain traction in different conflict-settings around the world we need to incorporate the ideological dimension into the strategic analysis of the power struggle between local affiliates of the competing global jihadist movements. As such the transnationalization of jihadist conflict cannot necessarily be disentangled from the social and political context of the armed jihadist struggle. Global jihadist worldviews, we show, is a frame via which reality and actions are understood and legitimated that is subject to contextualized interpretations and continuous contestation. Thereby, the processes through which local conflicts transnationalize in Mali cannot be seen as the mere result of global jihadist outreach. Local jihadist actors actively must engage in creating and reshaping discourse and narratives that enable violence and create new markers of identity and belonging that, in turn, inform their way of governing. Indeed, it is through such contestation and interpretation, that the content of global jihadist ideology is defined. As such jihadist ideology provides both reasons for action as well as it is the effect of contestation and conflicts between expanding jihadist groups. Put differently, epistemological worldviews produce certain ways of seeing, knowing, and acting, that, in turn, frame jihadist actors' being in the world – and hence their expansion. So, global jihadist ideology is important for understanding the transnationalization of jihadist conflicts– but it is neither homogeneous nor fixed. It is a social fact, which means that it is constantly in the making.

## Notes

1. Jihadism is a slippery and politically charged concept. The term “jihad” derived from Arabic means to strive or exert and is understood as a struggle or exertion of one’s power in the path of Allah (God) and includes both armed and non-armed forms of practice.
2. These different groups are jihadist in the sense that they consider armed jihad to be a legitimate and instrumentally efficient means to achieve radical political change. See Mark Sedgwick, “Jihadism, Narrow and Wide: The Dangers of Loose Use of an Important Term,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 34–41.
3. JNIM formed in 2017 under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghali, a prominent Tuareg notable who established Ansar Dine in 2012. See Troels Burchall Henningsen, “The Crafting of Alliance Cohesion among Insurgents: The Case of al-Qaeda Affiliated Groups in the Sahel Region,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021): 371–90, for a further discussion of JNIM alliance formation and cohesion.
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7. See e.g. Cairtriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh, “The Myth of Global Islamic Terrorism and Local Conflict in Mali and the Sahel,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 498–509; Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
8. Juergensmeyer and Sheikh, “A Sociotheological Approach,” 627.
9. Ferdaous Bouhleb and Yvan Guichaoua, “Norms, Non-Combatants’ Agency and Restraint in Jihad Violence in Northern Mali,” *International Interactions* 47, no. 5 (2021): 855–72; Signe-Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, Lars Engberg-Pedersen, and Adam Moe Fejerskov, “Introduction: Global Gender Equality Norms and Heterogeneous Development Organisations,” *Progress in Development Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 77–94.
10. Adib Bencherif, “Unpacking ‘Glocal’ Jihad: From the Birth to the ‘Sahelisation’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2021): 335–53.
11. See Mohammed Hafez, “The Crisis within Jihadism: The Islamic State’s Puritanism vs. al-Qàida’s Populism,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 9 (2020): 40–5.
12. Between 2012 and early 2019, 52 percent of the total violence in Mali occurred in Mopti making it Mali’s most dangerous place. See Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*.
13. Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, “Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 855–74.
14. See introduction this issue.
15. Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali,” *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 69–83; Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali,” *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 249–71; Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*; Adam Sandor and Auriélie Campana, “Les groupes djihadistes au Mali, entre violence, recherche de légitimité et politiques locales [Jihadist Groups in Mali, between Violence, Quest for Legitimacy and Local Politics],” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des études africaines* 53, no. 3 (2019): 415–30.



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22. Adib Bencherif, "From Resilience to Fragmentation: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jihadist Group Modularity," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 1 (2020): 100–18; Djallil Lounnas, "The Transmutation of Jihadi Organizations in the Sahel and the Regional Security Architecture," *MENARA Future Notes* no. 10 (April 2018); Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," *Institute for Security Studies Monographs* 144 (2008); Andrew Lebovich, "The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 6, (2013): 4–10.
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39. Sandor and Campana, “Les groupes djihadistes au Mali.”
40. See: Hafez, “The Crisis within Jihadism,” 41.
41. See intro this issue.
42. Bencherif, “Unpacking “Glocal” Jihad.”
43. Benjaminsen and Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?”
44. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 155.
45. Benjaminsen and Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?”; Cédéric Jourde, Marie Brossier, and Modibo Ghaly Cissé, “Prédation et violence au Mali: élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti,” *Revue canadienne des études africaines* 53, no. 3 (2019): 431–45.
46. Since the 1990s both Iyad ag Ghali and Kouffa have been members of conservative transnational religious networks like the Saudi *Da’wa* and the Pakistani *Jama’at al Tabligh*, which inspired them ideologically. Kouffa also joined Ansar Dine during 2011–2013 and was one of the main architects behind the battle for Konna in 2013, which triggered the French military intervention.
47. Thurston, *Jihadist of North Africa*, 184–5.
48. Audio message by Kouffa in response to Fulani elites’ call for dialogue, August 2017.
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50. Interview, Malian researcher, Bamako 2019.
51. Audio message by Abou Mahmoud, January 2020.
52. Ibid.
53. Kouffa’s reply to ISGS, audio recording, April 2020.
54. Bencherif, “Unpacking “glocal” jihad.”
55. See Vedeld, “Village Politics.”
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61. The *jowros* made a memorandum based on *Tarik* (documents written in Arabic) which granted them the right to exploit the pastoral resources of the delta and to charge the *Tolo* (an access tax) from the allochthonous herders from the Seno, Tioki and Wuwarbé who come to the delta each dry season to exploit the *bourgoutières*. The *jowro* were asked not to exceed the amount of 500,000 Fcfa for the payment of *Tolo* in areas called *rundé* (a pastoral space). They were also asked not to pay the *dappè* (a fee paid when the animals arrive in a pastoral area and exploit it).
62. Audio recording of message from Amadou Kouffa to ISGS, 24 April 2020.
63. Audio recording of message by ISGS representative, January 2020.
64. Jourde et al., “Prédation et violence au Mali”; Benjaminsen and Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?”
65. International Crisis Group (ICG), “Speaking with the ‘Bad Guys’”
66. See Jami Forbes, “Revisiting the Mali al-Qàida Playbook: How the Group Is Advancing on Its Goals in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (2018): 18–21.
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69. Telephone interview with Mopti-based NGO worker, Bamako, October 2019.
70. Ibid.
71. Audio message by Abou Mahmoud, March 2020.
72. Audio recording of message by Abou Mahmoud, March 2020.
73. Telephone interview with Mopti-based NGO, Bamako, November 2019.
74. Audio recording of message by Abou Mahmoud, March 2020.
75. In Mali Muslims have been present since the eleventh century and the region has been centre of several Islamic empires and states established through a succession of Sufi jihads in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, contestation of violent jihadist movements comes from various sides, including the religious community in Mali (See Lebovich, “Sacred Struggles” for a discussion of Islam and politics in Mali).

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Aïcha Ba for assisting the translation of the original audio files from Arabic and Fulfulde to French and Olivia Hammershøy for assisting the translation from French to English. The authors are also grateful to Luca Raineri and the two anonymous reviewers for providing useful comments to an earlier draft of this article.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).