Mali's young 'jihadists'
Fuelled by faith or circumstance?

Key points

1 Factors that are not economic, religious or ideological explain the presence of young people in the ranks of armed jihadist groups in Mali.

2 The need to protect oneself and/or one's family members, community or income-generating activity appears as an important factor.

3 In most cases there is interaction between various factors; it is therefore pointless to search for a single underlying cause.

4 It is important to analyse in detail the local realities behind youth engagement and resist the temptation to apply the resulting conclusions to other contexts.

5 Concepts currently in vogue such as 'radicalisation', 'de-radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' should be used with caution, as they could lead to solutions that miss the point.

Summary

Unemployed, idle and fanatical – this is how young people in the ranks of the armed jihadist groups in Mali are portrayed. However, there is little empirical data to support this characterisation. Little research has been done in the Malian context where the young people involved in these groups have been interviewed directly to assess the role that both religion and unemployment play in the emergence of this phenomenon that allegedly affects young people the most. Based on interviews with more than 60 previously involved youths, this policy brief questions the conventional wisdom on an important issue that is crucial to stability in Mali and the security of its neighbours.

JIHADIST ARMED GROUPS entered Mali in the early 2000s with the arrival from Algeria of elements of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in search of a safe haven in the north of the country. The presence of the group was consolidated after it pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2007, becoming al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), with the creation of Sahelian *katibas* (combat units) and the establishment of rear bases.[1]

In 2012, following the outbreak of the armed secessionist rebellion led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*, or MNLA) and the coup d'état in Bamako on 22 March 2012, these groups took control of three northern regions (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal) and a portion of the centre of the country. During the occupation there were reports of young people joining the ranks of AQIM, the Movement for the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, or MUJAO) and Ansar Dine.[2]

In January 2013 a Franco–African military offensive aimed at recapturing the north, resulted in the retreat of these groups from the main northern cities.[3]

However, three years after this operation, and despite the presence of a United Nations stabilisation mission in the country the terrorist threat persists. Since 2015 two new movements associated with Ansar Dine have emerged: Katiba Macina[4] and Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid, active in the centre (Ségou and Mopti) and south of the country (Sikasso) respectively.

> '**They told us to follow them and work with them. They were armed. We did not know how to refuse**'
>
> *(Ansar Dine, Timbuktu, 13 July 2016)*

How and why do some young people become involved with jihadist groups in Mali?[5] This question is at the heart of the research that underlies this policy brief.[6] After an overview of the methodology used, the brief summarises the study's main findings and highlights the relevant policy implications.

Encounters with previously involved youths

Sixty-three previously involved youths were interviewed, including 19 in jail.[7] The ages of suspected jihadists in Malian prisons range from 17 to 75 years, illustrating that not only young people are members of armed jihadist groups.[8] The expression 'previously involved' used here does not mean that the involvement was necessarily voluntary.

In the absence of accurate data on the membership of the groups involved in the study and particularly on the proportion of young people present in their ranks, it is impossible to determine whether the number of youths interviewed during this study is a representative sample. For this reason this brief refrains from undertaking quantitative analysis.

Seventeen researchers, including 10 Malians, collaboratively developed a data collection methodology based on an adaptable open-ended and semi-structured interview guide. Field research was conducted between March and July 2016 in the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou, Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, as well as in the district of Bamako. Interviews were also conducted with authorities and citizens of the newly created regions of Taoudénit and Ménaka.

> '**Joining became the fastest way to marry a woman, especially if her family owns a lot of cattle**'
>
> *(Katiba Macina, Mopti, 19 July 2016)*

The armed groups this study focuses on are AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun,[9] Katiba Macina (also known as 'Kouffa's group') and Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid. These groups have all undertaken attacks that qualify as terrorist and adopt a rhetoric imbued with Islamist references, including on jihad.[10] However, the adjective 'jihadist' used to describe them is both questionable and controversial. It is used in this policy brief because this is how most of the interviewees referred to the groups to which they belonged.

15 CATEGORIES OF FACTORS

Personal/Individual

Educational

Protection

Social

Ethical

Influence/Obedience

Economic

Familial

'I ended up with the jihadists because ...'

The reasons why the young people who took part in this study became involved with these groups were grouped into 15 categories: coercion, community/cultural/ethnic/sociological, economic, educational, environmental/climatic, ethics, family, historical, individual/personal, influences/obedience, protection, religious, social and political.

Not only are there multiple factors and dynamics but they usually also overlap and vary from one person, group, locality and time to another, as illustrated by the quotes in the text.[11] Moreover, the reasons why an individual joins a group are not necessarily the same as those that make him decide to remain in or leave the group.

Most of the previously involved youths interviewed claimed they occupied lower-ranking positions in the armed groups concerned. The study does not allow to determine whether the reasons for their involvement are the same as those of the leaders or of those who hold intermediate ranks in the groups.

The stories of those previously involved reflect the multitude of roles within the groups. They were not all fighters. For example, some drew water, prepared meals, provided information, directed prayers, or learned or taught the Koran. Others were in charge of refuelling, organised patrols or worked as drivers, secretaries, messengers, couriers, mechanics or motorcycle mechanics.

> 'The MNLA plundered, robbed and killed. I joined to save my people and my region against these bandits'
>
> *(MUJAO, Gao, 18 July 2016)*

Seven main findings emerged from the study. These hold important implications for understanding the phenomenon and developing policy responses to curb it.

1. Youth + unemployment = radicalisation?

The data collected confirms the existence of the widely accepted link between youth unemployment and the youth's involvement with armed jihadist groups. Yet it also demonstrates that the situation is more complex than it appears. Unemployment – a term that defies attempts at definition in the Malian context[12] – is one factor among many in a broader range of economic factors that include poverty, difficulties in meeting basic needs or the lack of prospects.

> 'Even if the work was not decent, I needed money for myself and my family'
>
> *(Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid, Sikasso, 27 July 2016)*

The study describes cases where young people ended up in those groups despite the fact that they had an income-generating activity they considered satisfactory prior to their involvement. Their involvement was

15 CATEGORIES OF FACTORS

Political

Religious referent

Psychological

Historical

Coercion

Environmental

Cultural/Communal/Sociological/Ethnic

Unknown

due to either a desire to protect their jobs[13] – legal (livestock farming) or illegal (drug trafficking) – or to concerns that had nothing to do with economic motivations.

> '**I joined to support my family. I had no salary but they helped me when I needed it**'
>
> *(Ansar Dine, Timbuktu, 19 July, 2016)*

Initiatives to create jobs for young people are valuable and may prove useful for those whose engagement is based on the desire to obtain a steady income. However, for those whose motivation is to protect an existing income-generating activity, such solutions may be of little interest. These initiatives will probably have no impact on young people whose motivations are not economic.

2. The religious trap

It is assumed that religion is a key factor in youths' involvement in armed jihadist groups. However, in most cases documented by this study, youth engagement did not hinge on religious factors and was not the result of religious indoctrination.

Religion seems to occupy a marginal position in the motivations of the youths interviewed in the study. When a religious dimension did play a role, it was with individuals who had little religious education. In rare instances individuals even joined based on the desire to benefit from a religious education. The study also documented some cases of young people whose involvement was motivated by an ideological predisposition. These are mostly young people from communities whose religious practices are close to the vision advocated by the armed jihadist groups.

> '**With videos of executions and fighting of other jihadists worldwide, and the group discussions, I found my way**'
>
> *(Ansar Dine/AQIM, Kidal/Timbuktu, 8 May 2016)*

When the phenomenon is analysed through an exclusively religious prism its complexity cannot be appreciated and the most appropriate responses cannot be identified. Projects promoting a 'moderate Islam' will not have the expected results with those young people whose engagement has no religious motivation.

3. Protection, first and foremost

Many of those previously involved expressed the desire to protect themselves, their family and/or community as a motivation for joining the groups. This includes protecting their property and any income-generating activities. This was the case with cattle farmers in the region of Mopti who wanted to defend themselves against cattle rustling.

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PREVIOUSLY INVOLVED YOUTHS WERE INTERVIEWED, INCLUDING
19 in jail

The need for protection could be explained by the Malian state's withdrawal from the north and part of the centre of the country since the beginning of 2012 – if it was ever present to begin with. However, this does not mean that the mere presence or return of the state's security apparatus will solve the problem. When the state is present, its abuses seriously undermine its legitimacy, according to the youths interviewed. Its inability to ensure the safety of the Malian population and their property is one of the reasons why some young people join these groups.

> 'Since the state left, we have had to protect ourselves as best as we can'
>
> *(Katiba Macina, Mopti, 19 July 2016)*

This demonstrates the need for Mali's defence and security forces to ensure respect for the rights of citizens, both in the normal performance of their duties and in the context of military operations against jihadist groups. An improvement in the security situation is subject to the state's increased and improved presence.

4. Women and girls: the invisible actors

The limited and second-hand information collected does not allow a clear idea of the extent of the participation in these groups of women and girls. They are mainly perceived as victims of the armed jihadist groups. Nevertheless, discussions with previously involved male youths about their presence, role and factors of engagement in armed jhadist groups indicate that women and girls were not only victims. They act as informants, cooks or laundresses.

> 'I joined Hamadoun Kouffa's group to protect myself from the Bambaras. When you are in it, no one dares touch you'
>
> *(Katiba Macina, Mopti, 19 July 2016)*

The data does however stress the importance of taking gender into account in psycho-socio-economic reintegration programmes, so that the specific needs of these women and girls are not sidelined, especially when they become mothers during or after their involvement. The data also highlights the pressing need for a study

with a tailored methodology on the engagement of these 'invisible actors'.[14] A greater understanding of their roles and of the factors behind their involvement is necessary to identify adequate responses to their specific situations.

5. When the *katiba* replaces the state

The absence or weakness of the state, experienced by the population as a sign of neglect or disinterest, often motivates young people to get involved in those groups that attempt to replace the state by providing certain basic social services. Yet the return of the state alone will not necessarily resolve the issue. A corrupt administration and biased law enforcement can make its presence harmful.

It is crucial to rethink the state's place, role and practices, given that restoring its authority is one of the priorities of the June 2015 peace agreement. Such an approach should aim to make the necessary changes not only in the mode of governance but also in the state's relationship with its citizens.

6. Resist the temptation to copy and paste

The search for solutions involves first understanding the phenomenon in all its complexity. This calls for a detailed analysis of the local realities behind youth engagement. Yet, it is important to resist the temptation to generalise findings and apply them to other contexts.

> 'They demanded that our whole faction join them in order to save our traditional chief brother's life'
>
> *(Ansar Dine, Kidal, 8 May 2016)*

Policy responses to 'violent extremism' tend to look for a global or regional strategy in the short, medium or long term. Meanwhile, depending on the opportunities available, the jihadist groups rely on local realities but wield a global rhetoric that places their actions at an international level while rooting their thinking in a long-term logic. If it is impossible to find solutions to all the potential local dynamics at work, the quest for generic top-down solutions may also prove to be vain. The immediate reaction to this challenge is to search for priority areas of action to achieve the maximum impact. However, this may be ineffective, given the

interdependent and dynamic character of the various underlying factors and these groups' adaptability.

> **'I joined MUJAO because I really liked their way of convincing people, their justice and their integrity'**
>
> *(MUJAO, Gao, 28 July 2016)*

The multitude of realities that feed the phenomenon requires the involvement of different actors according to their respective added values (civil society, state actors and international partners). This approach, if well coordinated,[15] may ensure that those aspects of the phenomenon that can be covered are effectively addressed.

7. 'Radicalisation': a useful concept?

The young people whom it was possible to interview were rarely radicalised in the sense that they adhered to a religiously inspired ideology or the objectives of the groups in which they found themselves.

> **'I lost my land in a court case because I did not have money to pay the judge. Justice here is corrupted'**
>
> *(Katiba Macina, Ségou, 19 July 2916)*

'Radicalisation' is a contested concept that lacks a consensual definition. The use of the concepts of 'radicalisation', 'de-radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' obscures important local dynamics and may lead to the development of incomplete, inadequate or counterproductive solutions.

It is probably more appropriate to seek to understand youth's armed mobilisation as it manifests rather than assuming an alleged 'radicalisation'.

Conclusion

The desire to better understand the reasons why many young people join armed jihadist groups is not a gratuitous intellectual exercise. It is only through understanding this multifaceted and complex phenomenon, which varies from one individual, group and region to another, that responses that can address the problem can be proposed and implemented.

However, it is important to remember that young people are primarily a means to an end for the leaders of these groups. In the event that solutions are found to counter the different reasons for the youths' engagement in these groups, it is not certain that the problem of the armed groups' existence will be solved. They will most probably continue to exist as their leaders develop new mobilisation strategies.

Ultimately, it is crucial that alternative approaches are developed focusing on these groups' leadership; and on ways (including non-military approaches) to reduce their capacity for action.

BETTER
UNDERSTANDING

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BETTER POLICY
RESPONSES

Notes

1 MM Abu al-Ma'ali, Al Qaeda and its allies in the Sahel and the Sahara, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 1 May 2012, http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2012/4/30/2012430145241774734Al%20Qaeda%20and%20its%20allies%20in%20the%20Sahel%20and%20the%20Sahara.pdf.

2 *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, Les islamistes du MUJAO recrutent en masse parmi les jeunes du Nord du Mali, 9 July 2012, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20120709-islamistes-mujao-recrutent-masse-parmi-jeunes-nord-mali.

3 L-A Théroux-Bénoni, Mali in the aftermath of the French military intervention: new opportunities or back to square one?, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Situation Report, 25 February 2013, https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/SitRep2013_18_03Mali.pdf.

4 These movements claimed responsibility for the attacks perpetrated in Segou and Mopti on behalf of Katiba Macina and those in Sikasso on behalf of Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid. See *Jeune Afrique*, Mali: derrière l'attaque de Nampala, une coalition inédite?, 27 June 2016, http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/344127/politique/mali-derriere-lattaque-de-nampala-coalition-inedite%e2%80%89/ and *RFI Afrique*, Arrestations de sept jihadistes maliens présumés en Côte d'Ivoire, 3 September 2015, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150903-arrestations-sept-jihadistes-maliens-cote-ivoire.

5 In Mali, as in most West African societies, 'youth' refers to 'a transition period marked by steps leading to adulthood', rather than a specific age range. These steps include, in no particular order, the end of studies or professional training, moving out of the parental home, marriage, and integration in the economic cycle. Thus, even older persons who have not reached these steps can be considered as youths or social minors (*cadets sociaux*). See T Sissoko (ed.), *La jeunesse malienne: entre autonomie, mobilisation et exclusion*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015.

6 R Cassim Cachalia, U Salifu and I Ndung'u, Exploring the drivers of youth radicalisation in Africa (forthcoming ISS publication).

7 Only 19 out of the 83 persons interviewed in prison admitted to having been involved in the concerned groups. Interviews in prisons were facilitated by the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, and took place thanks to the cooperation of the National Directorate of Penitentiary Administration and Correctional Service.

8 Interviews, Bamako and Koulikoro, 13 May and 19 July 2016.

9 This group was founded in 2013 from the merger between members of MUJAO and those who signed by the blood of Mokhtar Belomokhtar. After distancing itself from AQIM for a short while, the group took the name of Al-Qaeda in West Africa, confirming their reconciliation. None of the people interviewed in this study acknowledged having belonged to this group.

10 These groups are not always separate units. Over time, not only did alliances exist between these groups, but some elements of these groups would also detach to establish a distinct group – 'jihadist' or politic – that would benefit from being designated as franchises. See I Maïga, Armed groups in Mali: beyond the labels, *ISS West Africa Report*, 17 June 2016, https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/WestAfricaReport17.pdf, and A Boutellis, Armed groups in Mali and implications for the UN stabilization mission, in United Nations (UN) System Staff College, *Understanding a new generation of non-state armed groups*, 2015, 61–71, https://www.unssc.org/home/sites/unssc/files/non-state_armed_groups_-_dialogue_series_2014.pdf.

11 The same factor can be found in several categories. For example, the engagement of a young person in a group can be motivated by a desire for revenge for a wrong done to him (category personal/individual), and/or a wrong done to a member of his family (category familial) and/or his community (category community).

12 In Mali, the word 'unemployment' is used to describe off-peak periods of seasonal activity, underemployment, or the period during which one is searching for a first job. These uses refer to realities that go well beyond the definition adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which defines an unemployed person as someone who, during a reference period, is without work, available for work and seeking work. See Resolution on the statistics of the working population, employment, unemployment and underemployment, adopted by the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 1982.

13 None of those interviewed who had been involved in Katiba Macina admitted to having received a salary. However, they did reveal that they had access to food, could protect their cattle and those of their family members, and had the opportunity to earn money by escorting pastoralists who wanted to be protected. Some also racketeered or robbed using the means put at their disposal by the groups.

14 A study by the Mali Country Office of UN Women focusing on the role of women and girls in the Malian conflict could serve as a baseline study. See UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, Les femmes et les filles dans le conflit au Mali: analyse factuelle et recommandations pour une paix durable, 2016.

15 Coordination among partners in Mali and in the Sahel remains an important challenge. See D Helly et al., Sahel strategies: why coordination is imperative, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) & ISS, Policy Brief, 76, March 2015, https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/PolBrief76Eng.pdf.

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The Institute for Security Studies is an African organisation that aims to enhance human security on the continent. It does independent and authoritative research, provides expert policy analysis and advice, and delivers practical training and technical assistance.

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