



Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence

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Principal Findings

What's new? Since 2016, the south and south east of Mali's Mopti region have seen unprecedented violence targeting Fulani and Dogon civilians. Communal armed groups have taken root, helping bring an ethnic dimension to the area's conflicts.

Why does it matter? As violence takes on a communal character, civilians, men and women of all ages, are more frequently targeted based on their ethnicity alone. The presence of the state is dangerously waning, with jihadists and armed self-defence groups controlling more and more territory.

What should be done? The transitional authorities that emerged following the 18 August coup should harmonise efforts to negotiate ceasefires and rebuild the state's local presence. They should use both carrots and sticks to encourage demobilisation of militias, and seek to resolve land conflicts that are often the root cause of violence.

Executive Summary

Since 2016, an unprecedented wave of violence has swept across an area of central Mali to the south and south east of Mopti. The attackers – jihadists, the self-defence groups mobilised against them and others – target civilians in acts of mass killing, theft and property destruction. While sporadic at first, the attacks have now become more frequent and widespread. They have also become increasingly communal in nature, pitting the Fulani against the Dogon. The Malian government is partly responsible for the discord, having focused on fighting terrorism without paying sufficient attention to communal reconciliation or the state's other vital functions. The transitional authorities that emerged after the 18 August coup should harmonise the efforts of various state entities and mediation NGOs to negotiate local ceasefires, which should also involve regional elites and security forces. In the long term, they should create the conditions for lasting reconciliation after the transition with ambitious reform of laws governing access to natural resources, especially land.

On 18 August, a group of army officers overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, after several months of demonstrations against his rule led by a coalition of opposition parties and civil society movements. The officers, who called themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), took over in Bamako. Less than a month later, the CNSP, though retaining significant influence, transferred power to transitional authorities who are to govern Mali for eighteen months. It is too early to say whether these transitional authorities will reform the country's governance or reproduce the Keïta regime's abuses. Either way, these authorities have inherited the former regime's problems, from social discontent to implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, which mainly concerns northern Mali. In addition, the transitional authorities must put an end to violence against civilians and halt the expansion of jihadist and self-defence groups in the centre of the country.

Transitional authorities will have to pay particular attention to the *zone exondée* south and south east of Mopti, an area in the Niger river basin that is not submerged by the river's annual floods. This region, representing less than 5 per cent of Malian territory, is the epicentre of the communal violence among Fulani and Dogon, who together make up the majority there. The arrival of jihadist groups in 2015–2016 set off a murderous spiral. Their attacks on prominent Dogon accused of collaborating with the state led Dogon figures to create a self-defence movement, Dana Ambassagou ("the hunters who trust in God"), which declared war on the Islamist militants. Some of the self-defence fighters attack civilians, most often Fulani, whom they suspect of aiding their enemy. In retaliation, Fulani armed groups, whether jihadist or not, are attacking the Dogon. None of the handful of local ceasefires has endured.

Although violence has intensified of late, the conflict is rooted in longstanding communal rivalries. These have been exacerbated over recent decades by a pastoral crisis that has impoverished the nomadic Fulani, pressure on natural resources – particularly land – and the inability of either the state or traditional authorities to provide viable answers to these challenges. Such tensions have made the area fertile ground for the growth of both jihadist and armed self-defence groups. The conflict's communal dimension has been reinforced by the establishment of these armed groups, which often recruit along ethnic lines. The involvement of Fulani and Dogon

activists in Bamako, as well as in the diaspora, has also aggravated the situation, as has political exploitation of the conflict, in particular during the 2018 presidential election and the legislative elections of March-April 2020.

Faced with outbreaks of violence, the Malian government and its international partners launched several initiatives, at first focused on counter-terrorism. Then, taking account of the communal nature of the tensions, they developed an approach articulated around four axes: dialogue between the conflict parties and their respective communities; protection of civilians; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combatants; and, lastly, efforts to end impunity. In 2019, the government established a special administrative entity called the “political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali” in order to coordinate political and military efforts. These measures have thus far proven inadequate, however. In particular, dialogue initiatives are intermittent and overlapping, without achieving lasting ceasefires. Security forces focus far more on fighting terrorism than on protecting civilians. Malian soldiers have been unable to disarm self-defence groups or to stave off the jihadist threat.

To make the dialogue and security measures more effective, Malian authorities should harmonise them and sequence them better. They should also consider using additional tools, as part of a three-phase response.

In the short term, the authorities must halt the spiral of violence, first by emphasising and harmonising dialogue efforts to negotiate local ceasefires, and secondly by establishing local peace committees headed by a regional committee. The Malian state and its partners, in particular the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali, should step up their security efforts while facilitating these dialogue initiatives and ensuring that any resulting truces are respected. Security forces should also prioritise the protection of people and property, increasing the number of troops and enhancing their rapid response capacities in hotspots. Forces should be redeployed in coordination with advances made through dialogue and the peace committees.

Then, to sustain this short-term stabilisation, Malian authorities and their international partners should consider a structured response aimed at restoring the state's credibility and promoting disarmament. The state should demonstrate its usefulness as a regulatory body as well as a provider of security. It should ensure a distribution of goods and services adapted to people's needs, and severely sanction corruption and favouritism to mark a break with past practices. To encourage disarmament, the state could both initiate legal proceedings against militiamen who have blood on their hands and offer an honourable way out to leaders who have not committed atrocities against civilians, for example by supporting their transition into the political arena.

In the long term, when the violence subsides, the state should tackle the structural causes of conflict in this part of central Mali, in particular management of access to natural resources. The present mechanisms for regulating land disputes are outdated at best. Traditional mechanisms have been overtaken by social change, while state land law is inconsistent, often giving rise to contradictory interpretations. Bamako should undertake in-depth study of land management in the *zone exondée*, bringing the actors involved to the table and drawing lessons from the inadequacies of current mechanisms, before overhauling land law and evening out its application.

Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence

I. Introduction

Since 2016, an exceptionally bloody conflict has shaken central Mali. Today, the areas to the south and east of Mopti town are the epicentre of violence in the country. Unlike what is observed elsewhere in Mali, notably in the north, this violence is hitting civilians hard, mostly Fulani and Dogon, and is characterised by mass killings, arson and theft or slaughter of livestock.¹ It is perpetrated by jihadists and communal armed groups. The deadliest attack occurred on the night of 23-24 March 2019, when an armed group stormed the Fulani village of Ogossagou, roughly 15km east of Bankass town. The group killed at least 157 people, including women, children and elders, slaughtered cattle, and set fire to at least 220 homes and dozens of granaries.² Since then, similar but smaller massacres have occurred periodically throughout the region, as well as almost daily assassinations.

The Dogon and Fulani are the two major ethnic groups in the *zone exondée*, representing approximately 6 and 9 per cent of Mali's population, respectively. While the Dogon are largely farmers, the Fulani are mainly herders.³ Political and economic tensions, especially concerning access to natural resources, have put them at odds for decades, even centuries. But never before have these tensions reached the levels of violence observed in recent years.

Several areas should be distinguished within the Mopti region. Jihadist groups are firmly established in the flooded part of the inner Niger river delta, the heart of historic Macina. As no one contests the jihadists' control over this territory, violence against civilians has thus far been rare. The *zone exondée*, however, and in particular the four *cercles* (districts) to the south and east of Mopti town (see the map in Appendix A), is much more disputed between jihadists and self-defence groups.⁴ Most of the violence against civilians is concentrated within this small area (around 54,000

¹ In the north, notably in the Kidal region, most of the casualties in armed conflicts are themselves combatants. Except in the Mali-Niger border area, clashes have not degenerated into communal violence. There are still significant numbers of civilian casualties in the north, however. See Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim and Mollie Zapata, "Regions at Risk: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Mali", Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, April 2018.

² See "Conclusions préliminaires de la mission d'enquête spéciale sur les graves atteintes aux droits de l'homme commis à Ogossagou le 23 mars 2019", press release, UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA), 2 May 2019. Other massacres occurred in 2019, notably in Koulogon in January (37 dead) and in Sobane Da in June (35 dead).

³ In 2009, the Mopti region was 43 per cent Dogon (people for whom Dogon is the mother tongue), with a large majority living in the *zone exondée*, 26 per cent Fulani, 10 per cent Bozo and 9 per cent Bambara. See National Institute of Statistics, "4ème Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat du Mali: résultats définitifs, Tome 1 série démographique", November 2011.

⁴ These are the *cercles* of Koro, Bankass, Bandiagara and Douentza. In 2009, these four *cercles* had a population of roughly 1.19 million and an annual population growth rate of 3 per cent. Based on this data, Crisis Group estimates the population of this area to be 1.6 million in 2019. See *ibid*.

sq km, or 4.35 per cent of Mali's surface area, and with a population estimated at 1.6 million inhabitants in 2019).⁵ Nearly 60 per cent of all conflict-related deaths in Mali in 2019 occurred in the *zone exondée*, and violence there is escalating.⁶ The state, its external partners and civil society have mobilised to bring calm, but the situation remains volatile and marked by frequent episodes of mass violence.⁷

This report analyses the conflict dynamics in the four *cercles* of the *zone exondée* where civilians are the victims of rampant violence. It makes concrete recommendations for halting this spiral in the short term, and it suggests other actions that can help stabilise the region in the long run. Crisis Group has already published two reports (in 2016 and 2019) on central Mali and the problem of jihadist groups.⁸ This report complements the earlier two by analysing violent actors other than jihadist groups, and the dynamics behind them, though the jihadists continue to play an important role. Research for this report spanned a period of over six months, during which more than 60 interviews were conducted, including in Mopti and Bamako.

⁵ Since 2015, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has documented nearly 500 attacks upon civilians in the *zone exondée*, of which around 30 claimed the lives of more than ten people.

⁶ In 2019, ACLED recorded 1,881 deaths linked to the conflict in Mali, including 1,130 in the four *cercles* of the *zone exondée*. The first half of 2020 was the most violent period since the start of the crisis in this area, with an average of ten attacks per week and a total of 877 people killed, more than double the number of deaths recorded in the second half of 2019 (416 dead). ACLED databases.

⁷ In early July 2020, suspected Fulani assailants attacked four Dogon villages in Bankass *cercle*, killing 32 people, including women and children. "Nouveau massacre dans des villages dogon dans le centre du Mali", *Le Monde*, 4 July 2020.

⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Reports N°238, *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?*, 6 July 2016; and N°276, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists*, 28 May 2019.

II. A Spiral of Violence

The situation that led to the spiral of violence in the *zone exondée* is well known. The region is populated mainly by Dogon and Fulani communities, and has been a powder keg for decades, due largely to social divisions, land disputes and sometimes violent clashes between herders and farmers. Jihadists from the area and its surroundings established themselves here as of 2015, sparking and fuelling an escalation of communal violence.

To assert themselves, jihadists attack those they consider hostile to their cause, in particular state actors, defence and security forces, and civilians whom they accuse of collaborating with the authorities. They target notable Dogon figures – but also Fulani dignitaries – as well as Dogon cultural symbols and places of worship that they consider idolatrous and prohibited by Islam. Thus, in October 2012 in Douentza, jihadists destroyed the Toguna, a Dogon meeting place.⁹ In 2016 and 2017, they assassinated two important Dogon hunters, deepening the frustration among the Dogon.¹⁰ Dogon formed a self-defence movement in response, Dana Ambassagou, recruiting mainly from the brotherhood of hunters and today including members of other ethnic groups.¹¹

The presence of non-state armed groups, both jihadists and self-defence movements, is fuelling a gradual escalation of violence against civilians. In retaliation for jihadist attacks upon Dogon, Dana Ambassagou militiamen have attacked Fulani civilians whom they accuse of supporting and protecting the jihadists, the majority of whom are of Fulani ethnicity. In Koro, where the violent spiral was set in motion, clashes intensified in mid-2017, especially in areas where Fulani and Dogon are in conflict over issues of access to land and land use.¹² These areas in Koro are the places where jihadist groups and the Dana Ambassagou camps first established themselves. The violence spread to neighbouring *cercles* in 2018, often coinciding with the arrival of displaced people from the two communities in Koro. In villages where Fulani and Dogon live side by side, the arrival of displaced people from one community gives rise to fears within the other, especially as the displaced often come with a desire for revenge.

Bankass *cercle*, to the south west of Koro *cercle* where Dogon and Fulani communities also live, in turn plunged into violence shortly after refugees from Koro arrived in 2018. Dana Ambassagou militia camps proliferated, including north of Koro and

⁹ The fighting in the *zone exondée* is not, however, a religious conflict between Dogon animists and Fulani Muslims. Many Dogon communities are of Muslim faith. Moreover, jihadists have attacked the mausoleums of marabouts considered sacred by many Muslims. For details of the Toguna's destruction, see Abdoulaye Diarra, "Douentza : Les islamistes détruisent le Toguna de la ville", *L'Indépendant*, 10 October 2012.

¹⁰ On 13 October 2016, Théodore Somboro, a renowned Dogon hunter who served as a guide for Malian army units tracking down jihadists, was killed by men believed to be Islamist militants. His assassination led other hunters to create the armed group Dana Ambassagou. Several months later, on 16 June 2017, the assassination of Souleymane Guindo, another famous hunter, sparked hostilities between the Fulani and Dogon in the north of Koro *cercle*. Crisis Group interview, former member of Dana Ambassagou's political bureau, Bamako, September 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Dogon activist defending Dana Ambassagou, Bamako, August 2019.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Fulani dignitary from the Mbana chiefdom and Dogon activist member of Guina Dogon, both from northern Koro, August 2019.

Bankass on the Bandiagara escarpment, the historic heart of the Dogon community which remained largely sheltered from violence until 2019. As soon as an armed group settles in an area, members of the opposing community organise to protect themselves or respond to possible attacks, which contributes to local violence.¹³

The violence is widening ethnic divides between people in the *zone exondée*. The Dana Ambassagou armed group thus prohibits the Fulani from going to certain villages with a Dogon majority, depriving them of access to markets, schools and health centres.¹⁴ 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 crops.¹⁵ The cycle of fear and revenge forces everyone to take sides. Fulani and Dogon withdraw into their communities' strongholds under the protection of their respective armed groups, thus creating a de facto separation between communities. Meanwhile, both sides engage in large-scale theft of animals, turning rustling into a weapon of war.¹⁶

Finally, the violence has resulted in a massive humanitarian crisis. In addition to the killings, food insecurity is growing at a worrying pace in the *zone exondée*. The violence has caused massive displacement, with entire villages and hamlets razed to the ground and the populations forced to flee. In February 2020, there were over 56,000 internally displaced people in the area, of an estimated total population of 1.6 million.¹⁷

Since June 2020, the levels of violence have dropped significantly.¹⁸ The lull can be partly explained by the rainy season, which usually corresponds to a period of relative calm. Jihadists have also gained the upper hand in several communes and imposed their own peace initiatives (see Section V), which communities have generally accepted in order to start the farming season that runs from June to October.

¹³ According to an elected official from Sangha, a predominantly Dogon commune located on the escarpment: "Our troubles started with the arrival of the Dana Ambassagou camp. At first, the villagers opposed the creation of the camp, but the hunters insisted. Now we have become a prime target, as shown by the attack on Sobane Da, in June 2019, when at least 35 Dogon were killed". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2019.

¹⁴ Since the start of the 2017 school year, these measures have also affected Fulani students at Lycée Abiré Goro in Koro, who have had trouble finding accommodation due to the blockade imposed by Dana Ambassagou. In the Mondoro area, at least five Dogon villages have been blocked off by Fulani armed groups. Crisis Group interviews, former elected official from Koro and Dogon activist, Bamako, August 2019.

¹⁵ Not only do these measures widen divisions between Fulani and Dogon, but they also adversely affect the local economy, including depressing the income of women in both communities. Fulani women go to the market to sell or barter milk for cereals, while Dogon women are generally responsible for collecting and selling firewood. Crisis Group interview, Fulani and Dogon activists, Bamako, August and September 2019.

¹⁶ Moïse Keïta, "Vols de bétails et destruction de greniers en pays dogon : Guina Dogon tire la sonnette d'alarme !", *Le Sursaut*, 21 October 2019.

¹⁷ See "Mali : rapport sur les mouvements des populations", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), February 2020.

¹⁸ With only 28 deaths, the month of August 2020 was the least violent in almost two years. Although the end of 2019 was marked by unprecedented peaks in violence, the last quarter (July-September 2020) was far more peaceful. ACLED database.

III. A Space in Crisis: Roots and Recent Developments

To understand how such levels of violence against civilians have become possible, the profound social, economic and political changes affecting this part of Mali's *zone exondée* must be examined.

A. *A Difficult Cohabitation*

The coexistence of Fulani and Dogon in the same region has long given rise to both confrontation and collaboration. In the 19th century, theocratic states dominated by Muslim Fulani imposed their rule over much of the region, creating strained relations with the Dogon, some of whom submitted, while most settled on the Bandiagara escarpment for protection.¹⁹ French colonisation led to the defeat of the theocratic states, disrupted power relations and ended the era of Fulani dominion. The colonial era also opened a long period of sub-regional migration, allowing Dogon groups from the Bandiagara escarpment to descend into the plains, where they settled with the support of the colonial administration, and with or without the consent of indigenous landowners, including Fulani.

Living in the same places created economic and social ties that eventually took precedence over ethnicity.²⁰ Local alliances often linked Dogon farming families to Fulani herdsman on the basis of complementary economic practices. A local saying was that “every Dogon has their Fulani, just as every Fulani has their Dogon”, highlighting the fraternal and reciprocal nature of the ties between the two communities.

Nonetheless, the period of confrontation in the 19th century left a deep imprint upon local memories, still fuelling resentment to this day.²¹ After decades of relative calm, the local equilibrium is once again being put to the test. Environmental and socio-economic changes, many of which relate to the land and its exploitation, are placing great strain on local societies and rekindling old communal antagonisms. Recurring droughts and population growth put ever-increasing pressure on natural resources, especially land, water and pasture. It has become difficult to combine different forms of production, such as farming and livestock breeding, in the same area. Since the end of the 20th century, these tensions have revived latent conflicts that have degenerated into open violence in recent years.²²

¹⁹ Military alliances crossed ethnic lines. Thus, the conqueror El Hadj Oumar Tall – of Toucouleur ethnicity, a Fulani subgroup – was defeated in 1864 by a coalition uniting the Fulani of Macina with the Dogon of the Bandiagara region. See David Robinson, *La Guerre sainte d'Al-Hajj Umar : le Soudan occidental au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1988).

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Fulani and Dogon representatives, Bamako, August–September 2019.

²¹ To justify his entry into war, Youssouf Toloba declared: “As long as I live, the Dogon country will not be enslaved!”, in reference to the era of Fulani dominion, when many Dogon were captured and enslaved. As for the Fulani, some are nostalgic for their theocratic states of the 19th century, which they consider a glorious era that colonisation brought to an end. For details of Toloba's declaration, see Aïssatou Diallo, “Mali : accusé du pire, le chef de milice Youssouf Toloba ne désarme pas”, *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2019.

²² According to data on land conflict cases handled by the Mopti Regional Court of Appeals in the period 1992–2009, the most frequent conflicts are between farmers, totalling 573 cases or 69.9 per cent. After that come disputes between farmers and herders, with 100 cases (12.2 per cent), and

B. *The Pastoral Crisis*

While everyone in the *zone exondée* is suffering from the consequences of environmental change, the herders – a large majority of whom are Fulani – are the worst affected. More than others, they suffered from the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, which decimated livestock in the *zone exondée*. The lack of adequate support from the state has made the process of rebuilding their herds both long and complex. For their part, farmers – many of them Dogon – also suffered from droughts, but since the 1990s the overall trend has been rising agricultural production.²³ The authorities have tended to support development policies that favour sedentary farmers over nomadic herders, the latter often being associated with an obsolete world of cross-border transhumance, a practice less compatible with state laws and regulations.²⁴

This lack of support from both the government and international donors is also explained by the weak representation of nomadic herders at the local and national level.²⁵ Although they have developed various mechanisms to cope with the crisis, such as becoming sedentary, practising agro-pastoralism or herding livestock over long distances, the economic situation for a large number of the region's mostly Fulani nomads has become precarious.²⁶ Having lost many of their livestock, many have become simple salaried herders, looking after the herds of sedentary people who, thanks to agricultural surpluses and disposable income, have invested in cattle.

The Fulani have gone from being the region's dominant political and economic force at the turn of the 20th century to its most marginalised group today. Children of nomadic herders receive less education than those of sedentary communities like

then conflicts between fishermen and farmers, with 63 cases (7.7 per cent). Conflicts between farmers and herders often pit Dogon against Fulani or Bambara against Fulani. Tor A Benjaminsen, Koffi Alinon, Halvard Buhaug and Jill Tove Buseth, "Does Climate Change Drive Land-Use Conflicts in the Sahel?", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2012).

²³ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°154, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, 24 April 2020.

²⁴ According to a study by the Association for the Promotion of Livestock in the Sahel and the Savannah (Association pour la promotion de l'élevage au Sahel et en Savane, APESS) between 2000 and 2010 in Mali, the livestock sub-sector received less than 8 per cent of budgetary spending in the agricultural sector. Yet livestock contributes between 25 and 33 per cent of agricultural GDP, depending on the year. "Élément de bilan du soutien public à l'élevage au Mali depuis Maputo", APESS, 2014.

²⁵ The Fulani populations of the *zone exondée* are very poorly represented in the Malian National Assembly. Between 2013 and 2019, only one deputy of twelve from the zone had a Fulani surname. In the 2020 legislative election, no Fulani candidate was elected in the *zone exondée*. Among the twelve deputies, ten have Dogon surnames and the other two have Tuareg and Songhai surnames, respectively. See Decision N°2020-04/CC-EL 30 April 2020 affirming the final second-round results for the election of deputies. The lack of support for livestock farming is relative, however. Several development projects have supported livestock farming in the Mopti region, including the Livestock Development Operation in the Mopti Region (ODEM) and the Liptako-Gourma Livestock Development Project. But these projects were insufficient to compensate for the drought's negative impact. For details of ODEM's failures, see Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Djik, *Arid Ways: Cultural Understandings of Insecurity in Fulbe Society* (Wageningen, 1995).

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of the precarious situation of nomadic populations, see Mirjam de Bruijn, "Rapports interethniques et identité : L'exemple des pasteurs peuls et des cultivateurs hummbeebe au Mali central", in Y. Diallo and G. Schlee, *L'ethnicité peule dans des contextes nouveaux* (Paris, 2000).

the Dogon, meaning that adults get fewer of the professional opportunities offered by economic diversification and the extension of public services.²⁷ These changes have deepened the divide between nomadic and sedentary communities, sowing mutual resentment.

C. *The Land Rush*

Competition for access to land intensified from the 1980s, particularly around the plains of Seeno-Gondo, vast areas suited to agriculture and livestock farming that extend from the foot of the Bandiagara escarpment to Burkina Faso.²⁸ These plains have always been highly sought-after due to their ample pastures and agricultural spaces. In the past, the abundance of land ensured more or less peaceful cohabitation. But with the combined effects of population growth, Dogon migration from cliffs to plains, agricultural mechanisation and the impoverishment of former nomads who became sedentary, the demand for land has increased considerably in recent decades.²⁹

The rush for land has had destabilising effects, notably fomenting tensions between farmers and herders.³⁰ The search for new spaces to cultivate has led farmers to occupy grazing reserves, animal corridors and areas surrounding wells. Their fields of crops hinder the movement of livestock trying to reach pastures and watering holes. Such land pressure threatens the pacts binding indigenous communities that own the land to the non-indigenous communities that merely exploit it.³¹ Thus, in the *zone exondée*, a growing number of indigenous landowners are seeking to evict non-indigenous communities that have occupied their land for generations, often going to court to do so.

These land disputes incite violence that is taking on a new dimension with the presence of armed groups, making conflicts more lethal. The conflict between the Fulani of Sari village and Dogon from Dinangourou (*Koro cercle*) is one of the most famous land disputes. In 2012, it led to the massacre of over 40 Fulani, the destruction of Sari and the exile of more than 200 villagers to Burkina Faso. Other conflicts

²⁷ In nomadic societies, schools are often shunned, in part because they are poorly adapted to the demands of a nomadic lifestyle, notably the transhumance calendar. Crisis Group interview, *zone exondée* residents, Bamako, August and September 2019.

²⁸ For details of early cases of land conflict, see de Bruijn and van Dijk, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

²⁹ For instance, many inhabitants of Sangha, on the escarpment, have been descending to the Gondo plain for decades in search of land to cultivate. One Sangha resident describes the situation as such: "We, the people of Sangha, had land all along the foot of the cliffs. But it was not enough. So, we tried to get more. In the 1960s, my father gave four granaries to a Guindo slave of the Fulani in exchange for 45 hectares in the plain, in what is today the commune of Madougou (*Koro cercle*)". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2019.

³⁰ It should be noted that a growing number of Dogon are investing in livestock and becoming de facto "herders", while more and more Fulani are working in agriculture. Crisis Group interview, residents of the *zone exondée*, Bamako, August and September 2019.

³¹ According to customary law, land belongs to the person or group who first settled on it (or is considered as such). Anyone who subsequently settles there must request permission from the first settlers to occupy and cultivate the land in the form of loans, often in exchange for a symbolic share of the harvest. Crisis Group interview, expert in Malian land law, Bamako, August 2019.

in the centre of Koro, notably in Karakindé and Bembé/Anagadia in Madougou commune, have also fuelled the violence.³²

In the north of Koro *cercle*, the Dogon of Gondogourou and the Fulani of Mbana have faced off for decades. Here, tensions between the two communities stem from the Dogon farmers' use of the Tolodié grazing reserve, which the Fulani control. These tensions escalated in 2002, prompting the Dogon to attack the Fulani village of Mbana, where they killed at least five people including the village chief.³³ Despite several court rulings, the conflict was never resolved. In 2017, tensions resurfaced when armed groups, composed mainly of Fulani and Dogon, established themselves in the area, giving rise to new clashes that resulted in the assassination of the hunter Souleymane Guindo, a fervent defender of local "Dogon interests". His death contributed to the outbreak of violence that eventually engulfed the entire region.³⁴

D. *The Governance Crisis*

If tensions around land and natural resources are worsening, it is also because neither traditional nor state mechanisms for regulating conflicts are sufficiently effective or legitimate. Not only has the state been unable to settle disputes over access to resources or provide adequate public services, but it has also abused its authority.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have become antiquated in the face of intense spatial and social transformation. Customary law is made up of unwritten rules that are subject to interpretation, and it sometimes lacks precision in its demarcation of land. It is also based on principles such as communal ownership of land that discriminate against the youngest or most vulnerable, like migrants and women.³⁵

The central authorities also seek to regulate access to land, but their interventions are often incoherent and do not reflect the realities of land ownership.³⁶ Adjudicating land disputes is particularly difficult because of the overlap between public law and customary law. In 2006, the government adopted an Agricultural Orientation Law, which sought to harmonise the two types of law through local land commissions responsible for settling land disputes. These commissions have had a mixed impact, since customary law, despite all its above-mentioned shortcomings, always prevails.³⁷

³² These conflicts, some of which go back several decades, have been the subject of legal proceedings but have resulted in no lasting solutions. Guina Dogon, an association that works for the promotion of Dogon culture, has drawn up a list of the most well-known land disputes in the *zone exondée*. Copy on file with Crisis Group.

³³ Crisis Group interview, dignitary from the Fulani chiefdom of Mbana, August 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, members of Dana Ambassagou, August and October 2019.

³⁵ Moussa Djiré and Amadou Keita, "Cadre d'Analyse de la gouvernance foncière au Mali", final report, Bamako, November 2016.

³⁶ Public land law recognises only landowners who hold deeds, yet very few landowners have these documents because acquiring them is a long and complicated process. The rights of the vast majority of landowners are guaranteed only by customary law. Hence, the systematic recourse to traditional authorities in the event of disputes, to the detriment of the public justice system. Crisis Group interview, expert in Malian land law, Bamako, August 2019.

³⁷ Téssougé Moussa and Dembélé N'dji, "Les organisations foncières coutumières à l'épreuve de la décentralisation : le cas du pays Dogon dans le cercle de Bankass (Mali)", Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa, September 2017.

More generally, the Malian state has never been sufficiently present in peripheral rural areas, including in the *zone exondée*. There are not enough public services, such as schools, clinics and courts, to meet local needs. Moreover, local populations do not place much trust in state actors and institutions, viewing them as predatory and corrupt.³⁸

The justice system is among the most criticised for its poor governance. Its dysfunction is due just as much to the predatory behaviour of magistrates as to a lack of resources and the complexity of certain legislation, including land law.³⁹ The ambiguity inherent in these texts helps explain judges' contradictory decisions, which local litigants view as corruption.

Not only is the state struggling to convince people of its usefulness, but its representatives, in particular those in uniform (gendarmes and water and forest officials), are responsible for numerous abuses against civilians. Law enforcement agents such as rural market police and environmental protection officers are often accused of collecting excessive taxes and fines. They are also said to wrongly enforce laws that local populations are largely unfamiliar with. These abuses lead to discontent that is at the root of the state's poor reputation and even rejection by citizens.⁴⁰

Since the start of the crisis in 2012, and even more so since the outbreak of violence after 2017, the state's presence in the *zone exondée* has waned. In rural areas where the state is passive if not entirely absent, various armed groups are expanding their authority in the areas of security, justice and even taxation. Village chiefs, mayors, prefects and sub-prefects are still present, but their powers are reduced or subjected to the "men with guns". The situation accustoms local populations to the presence of these new authority figures, and consequently to the absence of the state, whose return appears ever more complicated.⁴¹

³⁸ Mamadou Bodian et al., "The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali", SIPRI, March 2020; "6e tour de l'Afrobaromètre, Enquête au Mali 2014: Résumé et Résultats", Afrobarometer and GREAT, 2014.

³⁹ Each of the four *cercles* in the *zone exondée* has an arbitration court, in which a single judge is responsible for investigations, prosecutions and judgments across the jurisdiction, with very limited human and material resources. Crisis Group interview, former justice of the peace in Koro, September 2019.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Fulani activist from Dioungani, north of Koro, and local political actor from Baye, south of Bankass, Bamako, July and September 2019.

⁴¹ As a former prime minister asserts: "We see that with the current crisis, the state is gradually fading from the sight of local populations, and as the crisis continues, the authorities in Bamako are distancing themselves and losing touch with the ever-changing realities on the ground". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, December 2019.

IV. An Increasingly Militarised and Communal Conflict

Rising tensions in the *zone exondée* have created fertile ground for the emergence of armed groups: those affiliated with jihadist movements in central Mali, notably Katiba Macina; the Dogon Dana Ambassagou self-defence movement; and Fulani self-defence groups.

These groups were responsible for the first flare-ups of local violence, which then evolved into large-scale clashes between entire communities of Fulani and Dogon. Through their rhetoric and practices, armed groups fuel the communal dimension of the conflict. They isolate people on both sides by imposing embargoes on the opposing community, and increasingly target individuals based on ethnicity, including women, children and the elderly. They even attack people within their own communities who oppose the communal nature of the conflict, accusing them of colluding with the enemy.⁴²

The extent to which the conflict has become communal varies from one zone to another. The most prominent cases of ethnically motivated violence appear to be occurring in the north and centre of Koro, in Mondoro commune in the south of Douentza, in the centre and south of Bankass, and in certain areas around Bandiagara. In these zones, armed groups are often killing people on the basis of Fulani or Dogon ethnicity.⁴³ Most communities in these areas have withdrawn into their respective strongholds.

A. Jihadists: From Unifying Rhetoric to Communal Violence

As early as 2012, when jihadists from northern Mali were moving toward the centre of the country, many nomadic Fulani from the *zone exondée* were joining their ranks. The Fulani had several reasons for doing so: frustration with the state; tensions with other nomadic groups who had taken up arms within a largely Tuareg rebel group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad; and desire to reverse economic and political trends that were favouring sedentary over nomadic populations.⁴⁴

From 2015, the creation of the jihadist group Katiba Macina sped up the recruitment of Fulani from the *zone exondée*.⁴⁵ Firmly established in the inner Niger river delta, where the Fulani are a large majority, Katiba Macina attracts sympathisers from the *zone exondée*, in particular Fulani nomads, by exploiting local dynamics: intra-communal tensions; land disputes between nomads and sedentary groups; and the impoverishment of non-indigenous groups by the great Sahelian droughts.⁴⁶

⁴² For instance, when the Dogon village of Sogou, in the commune of Kassa, refused to have a Dana Ambassagou camp in their village, the militia imposed an embargo for 29 days and set the village a ransom of 1,800 million CFA francs (\$3,000). Crisis Group interview, Dogon activist from Kassa commune, September 2019.

⁴³ See "How Much More Blood Must Be Spilled?", Human Rights Watch, February 2020.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, former jihadist from Douentza circle, Bamako, 2016.

⁴⁵ For details of the establishment of jihadist groups, particularly Katiba Macina, in central Mali, see Crisis Group Report, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys"*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Mondoro, Koro and Bankass residents, Bamako, August, September and November 2019.

Although the majority of jihadists in the *zone exondée* are Fulani, a number of Dogon have also joined up.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, by exploiting local issues, jihadist groups are also drawn into conflicts that do not necessarily reflect their priorities.⁴⁸ Thus, combatants from the *zone exondée* who had joined the founder of Katiba Macina, Hamadoun Koufa, in the inner delta, pressured him to protect their co-ethnics threatened by Dogon hunters. Since 2019, Fulani jihadists, in particular those from Seeno (the sandy plains to the east and south east of the Bandiagara plateau, between Bankass and the south of Koro), have at least temporarily left Katiba Macina's stronghold in the delta to combat groups of hunters threatening their communities.⁴⁹

Although jihadist leaders claim to be opposed to communal violence, in reality they find themselves increasingly forced to engage in it. At first, they openly rejected ethnic discourse, stressing that their foremost ambition was the universal application of Sharia law.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, they do not have full control over the fighters in their ranks who take part in such discourse and violence, either to protect their communities or to attack Dogon villages. As a result, the jihadist leaders' rhetoric has evolved.⁵¹ Today, it takes on a more openly Fulani perspective, defending these communities against attacks by hunters, whom jihadists accuse of siding with the Malian state.⁵²

More recently, local conflicts have also influenced the composition of jihadist groups in the *zone exondée*. At first, most jihadists in this area operated within Katiba Macina, which is affiliated with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, GSIM) and, through it, the al-Qaeda network.⁵³ But in recent months, disputes have arisen between jihadists native to the Niger delta and those from outside it, notably Seeno, over access to the *bourgou* (special pastures in the delta which are highly coveted by herders). The disputes have led some of the lat-

⁴⁷ In April 2020, a video was broadcast on social networks and the media, in which a jihadist identified as Oumar Ongoiba is surrounded by armed militants and preaching to dozens of civilians in the Dogon dialect. See "Mali : Oumar Ongoiba, le nouveau visage dogon des djihadistes liés à Al-Qaeda dans le centre", *Nord-Sud Journal*, 24 April 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys"*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Fulani communal and associative leaders from Macina and Bankass, Bamako, August, September and November 2019.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys"*, op. cit.

⁵¹ Ibid. Between 2015 and 2018, messages from Koufa and his supporters suggested a desire to overcome ethnic divides and form a broad inter-ethnic coalition in central Mali promoting jihad and Sharia law. In September 2018, Koufa broke with this rhetoric and shifted toward an ethnic discourse, calling on all Fulani in Africa to join the jihad. He was likely influenced in this move by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, GSIM), which at that time wanted to enlist more Fulani combatants. Since March 2019, Koufa has supported the jihadists' growing involvement in the communal conflict in central Mali.

⁵² In an audio message, Koufa justified jihadist engagement against the hunters in the following manner: "The state armed traditional hunters to wage war against us in its place. When they failed, they started attacking the Fulani to exterminate us, since most of our fighters come from these communities. ... The hunters began attacking Fulani villages, and we have decided to support the latter since they are the victims of injustice". He added: "We are helping the Fulani, since they are being massacred because of us". Audio recording on file with Crisis Group, September 2019.

⁵³ Other jihadists in this area operate within the Katiba Serma and Ansarul Islam groups, two jihadist movements affiliated with or close to the GSIM, and whose respective bases are located in the south of Douentza *cercle* and in the north of Burkina Faso, bordering the *zone exondée*.

ter to leave Katiba Macina and approach a network affiliated with the Islamic State, which is asserting its presence in the area by profiting from the power struggles between leaders of Katiba Macina's local offshoots. This network is also drawing in local militiamen involved in attacks upon Dogon civilians and cattle theft.⁵⁴

B. *The Dana Ambassagou Self-defence Group*

The Dana Ambassagou Dogon self-defence group has played a central role in the escalation of violence in the *zone exondée*. Created in late 2016, Dana Ambassagou presents itself as a self-protection force, shielding the Dogon from attacks by armed groups, most of whom at first were jihadists.⁵⁵ It federated a number of sentry posts that Dogon had set up near their villages and established others. It mainly recruits among the *dozo* or traditional hunters, those whom Dogon culture considers “masters of the bush” holding occult powers they use to protect the community. But it also attracts many fighters from other backgrounds, including bandits and Dogon militiamen from elsewhere in West Africa, such as Côte d'Ivoire.⁵⁶ Although Dana Ambassagou criticised the Malian forces' inability to protect civilian populations, it initially positioned itself as an ally of the state against jihadist groups.⁵⁷

Dana Ambassagou was formed after jihadists assassinated a renowned Dogon hunter, Théodore Somboro, in October 2016.⁵⁸ At the time, a group of Dogon from Sévaré sought to unite Dogon hunters in a single movement that would protect what they called “Dogon country”. They were mostly businessmen and former militiamen from Ganda Izo (an armed group created around 2008 in the Gao region to fight the 2012 jihadist insurrection alongside the Malian army).⁵⁹ But Dana Ambassagou did not have unanimous support in Dogon villages.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Fulani activists from Koro and Bankass, Bamako, November 2019; and via WhatsApp messaging, April 2020.

⁵⁵ Between September and October 2015, jihadists attacked several Dogon villages in Koro *cercle*, including Douna-Pen, Saberé and Bih, mainly targeting defence and security forces and their local collaborators. Noting the growth of the jihadist threat, nearby villages including Am, Bonto, Bondo, Omo and Kiri decided to set up sentry posts. These were the first camps of what was to become Dana Ambassagou. Crisis Group interview, Dana Ambassagou member, Bamako, August and September 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Dana Ambassagou and Dana Atem members, August and September 2019.

⁵⁷ Ibid. The card issued by Dana Ambassagou to each of its members bears the emblem and motto of the Republic of Mali, even though these cards are not officially recognised by Malian authorities.

⁵⁸ In an audio recording attributed to Somboro as he lay dying, he declares: “I died for the country, especially for the Dogon, the Dafing, the Bobo, the Bambara, all Blacks. Take revenge, my hunter family! Go into the Fulani villages and kill everybody. They are the accomplices. They are the ones who killed me. I put my trust in you”. Audio recording on file with Crisis Group, October 2016.

⁵⁹ The phrase “Dogon country” refers to the area where the Dogon population is concentrated, in particular the four *cercles* of the *zone exondée* (Bandiagara, Bankass, Douentza and Koro). Found in anthropological studies, today this phrase is a source of controversy. The Dogon use it to justify their claim to have historical rights to the territory. The Fulani reject it, saying it has no historical basis and ignores their own claim to the territory. As a Fulani from Bankass said: “By insisting on this name ‘Dogon country’, the Dogon want to do with our territory what the Tuareg have done with Azawad”. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, September 2019.

⁶⁰ Some villages experiencing land disputes between Dogon sub-groups refused to join Dana Ambassagou, like certain villages of Koporo-Pen south of Koro. Crisis Group interview, former elected official from Koro, Bamako, April 2019.

At first, Dana Ambassagou claimed to stand solely against jihadists accused of sowing terror among the Dogon. But since the majority of jihadists are of Fulani ethnicity, members of Dana Ambassagou began denouncing the complicity of Fulani civilians and associating them with jihadists. Since 2018, both Fulani civil society groups and several human rights organisations have accused Dana Ambassagou of deadly attacks on Fulani civilians.⁶¹

The movement's leadership is split in two: a military branch, whose general staff is headed by Youssouf Toloba, a *dozo* hunter and former Ganda Izo militiaman; and a political branch that is supposed to liaise with the outside world, led by Mamadou Goudienkilé, a former military man. Both the political and military branches are based near Bandiagara.⁶² The military branch holds most of the power. Its relations with the political branch are often strained.⁶³ Although Dana Ambassagou has successfully federated most of the village defence camps, the control it exerts over them varies from one camp to another.

Dana Ambassagou finances its activities mostly with the taxes and ransoms taken from villagers, and very likely also by looting the villages and hamlets that its forces attack. The movement frequently determines a sum of money and quantity of food that each village must provide in exchange for protection.⁶⁴ It also receives donations from other Dogon in Mali's big towns or in the diaspora. Beyond its mission to protect, the movement provides a rudimentary form of governance, meting out local justice and sometimes distributing humanitarian aid.⁶⁵

Links do exist between Malian authorities and Dana Ambassagou, but the latter was not created by the government, nor is it merely an auxiliary of the security forces. Its relationship with the authorities has gone through several phases. Until 2018, the two were collaborating closely.⁶⁶ Dogon hunters served as scouts and informants for

⁶¹ "Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-terrorism", International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), November 2018; "We Used to Be Brothers': Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali", Human Rights Watch, December 2018; "Situation of Human Rights in Mali – Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali", UN General Assembly, January 2019.

⁶² Youssouf Toloba comes from a family of traditional hunters. Mamadou Goudienkilé is a retired Malian army captain. He is a political leader and president of the National Coordination of the movement. Marcelin Guenguéré, a former leader of the student movement, was its spokesperson until recently. He was removed following a decision by Toloba on 6 January 2020. Copy on file with Crisis Group.

⁶³ Thus in 2018, tensions between the political and military branches led to the movement's split and the birth of Dana Atem, a smaller Dogon self-defence group. Crisis Group interview, founding member of Dana Atem, Bamako, August 2020.

⁶⁴ According to one villager in the commune of Kassa, between 2017 and 2019, Dana Ambassagou demanded payment equivalent to seven million CFA francs in cash and in kind from his village. He reports that the latest contribution was 250,000 CFA francs, five bags of millet and one bag of rice. A former leader of Dana Ambassagou justified these demands: "People must understand that warfare management is very expensive. Fighters must be fed, their wounds treated, ammunition provided. ... The role of fighters is to agree to give their lives to protect the community. It is up to this community to support the fighters with funds and resources". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, July and September 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, local elected official from Bandiagara, Bamako, November 2019.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, former leader of Dana Ambassagou, Bamako, September 2019. Crisis Group has not corroborated allegations that the state played a role in creating Dana Ambassagou.

Malian soldiers operating in the area. Ideas for further cooperation grew ambitious. It appears that the government of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga (December 2017–April 2019) drew up a plan involving Dana Ambassagou in security and counter-terrorism efforts. This plan was never made public, but Youssouf Toloba acknowledged its existence.⁶⁷

Starting in early 2018, however, tensions between the movement and the government mounted following international organisations' denunciations of Dana Ambassagou abuses directed at civilians. In July 2018, Malian soldiers burned dozens of motorcycles belonging to Dana Ambassagou fighters, accusing them of failing to respect the state's ban on carrying weapons and driving motorcycles.⁶⁸ Relations between Dana Ambassagou and the government became even more strained following the March 2020 massacre in the Fulani village of Ogossagou, in which the movement was reportedly involved.⁶⁹ Under pressure from international partners and Fulani associations, the government ordered the movement's dissolution. But Dana Ambassagou denies any responsibility for these attacks and refuses to dissolve until the Malian state can ensure the safety of Dogon communities.⁷⁰ The movement even accuses the Malian army of bombing its positions three times in 2018 and 2019.⁷¹

Paradoxically, the pressure placed on the group by the Malian government and the international community has prompted a large wave of support for Dana Ambassagou on the part of Dogon associative movements. Dana Ambassagou uses attacks upon Dogon villages by alleged Fulani assailants, including that on Sobane Dah in June 2019, as a pretext to justify its continued existence and expand its grassroots base.⁷²

Several members of the militia and senior state officials have in fact denied any such involvement on the authorities' part. Crisis Group interviews, former minister, former member of Dana Ambassagou's political bureau and former prime minister, Bamako, January, September and December 2019.

⁶⁷ In a recent interview, Toloba expressed his regret that the present government has abandoned the agreement to fight terrorism and secure the *zone exondée*, which his movement had signed with Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga's government. Bréhima Sogoba, "L'accord entre nous et Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga n'a pas été respecté", *Indicateur du Renouveau*, 4 May 2020.

⁶⁸ "Communiqué du mouvement Dan Na Amba Sagou", signed by Youssouf Toloba in Toungoulou, Bandiagara *cercle*, 14 July 2018.

⁶⁹ "Conclusions préliminaires de la mission d'enquête spéciale sur les graves atteintes aux droits de l'homme commis à Ogossagou le 23 mars 2019", press release, MINUSMA, 2 May 2019.

⁷⁰ Mohamed Naman Keita, "Dissolution de Dana Ambassagou : la réplique de Youssouf Toloba", *Le 22 Septembre*, 28 March 2019.

⁷¹ F. Coulibaly, "Mali : le bombardement de sa base, le Dan Na Ambassagou accuse le gouvernement", *Le Fondement*, 16 September 2019.

⁷² In a statement on 10 June 2019, the day of the attack, Dana Ambassagou said the Sobane Dah attack was "a declaration of war", which it duly acknowledges, going on to "reassure the populations that it is ever ready to ensure their safety" and "invite all the sons of Dogon country to show solidarity in order to succeed ... in safeguarding the survival of our populations and the freedom of Dogon country". "Mali: communiqué Dan Na Ambassagou", *Maliactu.net*, 10 June 2019.

C. *Fulani Self-defence Groups*

The violence perpetrated by Dana Ambassagou against Fulani civilians has led some of them to organise into vigilante groups to protect their villages, but not without difficulty.⁷³ Young Fulani who seek to join these self-defence groups are caught in the crossfire. On one hand, Malian soldiers are accused of viewing any Fulani carrying a weapon as a jihadist who can be arrested, forced to disarm and even executed without trial.⁷⁴ On the other hand, jihadists consider any armed Fulani living in an area under their control and who does not join them to be a potential threat: he could be an enemy collaborating with the army or counter-terrorist forces. Influential Fulani figures have launched initiatives to support former militiamen who fought in armed groups in Mali and abroad, with the aim of forming non-jihadist Fulani self-defence groups.⁷⁵

Since the Ogossagou attacks in March 2019, local Fulani leaders have been negotiating with both the military and jihadists in an attempt to get them to accept the presence of self-defence groups in Fulani camps and villages.⁷⁶ There are growing numbers of armed individuals in Fulani villages who are organising to protect their communities or to attack Dogon villages. Jihadist groups, also increasingly involved in conflicts in the *zone exondée*, are growing ever more tolerant of their presence. The two often operate side by side, to the point that it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart.⁷⁷ These Fulani armed groups are also often considered responsible for attacks upon Dogon civilians. Since 2019, their development has coincided with a significant increase in large-scale attacks upon Dogon villages.⁷⁸

In other words, the non-jihadist armed groups recruiting among the Fulani are less structured and constitute a lesser force than jihadists or the Dana Ambassagou movement. It is difficult to anticipate how they might evolve, and their future in a possible disarmament process is uncertain.

⁷³ Former militiamen, such as Oumar Aldjanna and Hama Foune, claim to have formed Fulani militias in central Mali, but they struggle to provide proof of their existence on the ground.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Fulani activist, Bamako, November 2019.

⁷⁵ The only non-jihadist Fulani militia in the *zone exondée* is led by Sekou Allaye Bolly, who represents the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad – a signatory of the Algiers Peace Agreement – in the Mopti region. Bolly defines his objectives in connection with DDR measures (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) and refuses to engage in offensives against Dana Ambassagou or to protect the Fulani. Crisis Group interview, Fulani militia leader in central Mali, Bamako, August 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Fulani community leader from southern Bankass involved in negotiations between jihadists and soldiers, Bamako, November 2019.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Fulani activist from Koro, Bamako, November 2020.

⁷⁸ A Fulani activist involved in setting up vigilante groups justified the attacks on Dogon civilians as follows: “We told our young people to act just like the Dogon militiamen: to attack Dogon women and children just like Dana Ambassagou kill our women and our children”. He added: “As long as the Dogon do not feel the pain that we feel when we lose our own, they will not stop attacking us”. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, November 2019.

D. *The Roles of the Diaspora and Political Actors*

Outside actors, be they politicians, members of civil society, or members of the Fulani and Dogon diaspora abroad, have contributed to giving the conflict a communal tinge. In addition, the political exploitation of the conflict, in particular during the 2018 presidential election and the 2020 legislative elections, polarised political discourse and underscored the communal nature of the violence.⁷⁹

Members of Tapital Pulaaku and Guina Dogon, two organisations that promote the Fulani and Dogon cultures, respectively, have played a controversial role. Although the two organisations officially advocate reconciliation between Fulani and Dogon, their leaders' discourse has often become more aggressive under the influence of their younger, hot-headed members.⁸⁰ Similarly, associations of young Fulani and Dogon have used social media networks to polarise the debate, notably by creating Facebook forums where participants leave unfiltered comments about each attack.⁸¹ Heated discussions and hate messages accumulate on the platform daily. The individuals taking part in these debates are not necessarily from the *zone exondée*. Far from the conflict and largely getting their information from social media, some spew ethnically motivated, warmongering rhetoric.⁸²

Political actors have also played the communal card for electoral purposes. During the 2018 presidential campaign, local politicians used candidates' ethnic identities to motivate voters.⁸³ More recently, during the legislative elections of March and April 2020, influential members of Dana Ambassagou, including the former spokesperson, Marcelin Guenguéré, and the activist Hamidou Djimdé, a fervent defender of the movement in the media and on social networks, stood as candidates in the Koro constituency on behalf of an independent list called *Le Mali qui bouge – Alliance Ama-Kéné* (Mali on the Move – Ama-Kéné Alliance). During their campaign, these candidates exploited antagonisms between the Dogon and Fulani to gain votes, presenting themselves as hunters who protect the Dogon from the Fulani.⁸⁴ This rheto-

⁷⁹ In the affected areas, local populations are generally able to differentiate between members of the opposing community with whom they are in conflict and those who are not involved or even those with whom they are friendly. These nuances disappear when more distant actors become involved in the conflict, notably through social networks. Crisis Group interview, representative of Tapital Pulaaku in Mopti, Sévaré, January 2019.

⁸⁰ Tapital Pulaaku officials have accused the Dana Ambassagou militia of perpetrating a "genocide" against the Fulani. On the other side, a leader of Guina Dogon told Crisis Group: "The truth is that the problem stems from them [the Fulani]. They are the ones against the Bambara in Djenné, against the Bozo in Macina, against the Tamashek in Ménaka". Crisis Group interview, Bamako, August 2019.

⁸¹ For example, on Facebook pages such as "Jeunesse Tapital Pulaaku-Mali" and "Le Pays Dogon".

⁸² In an audio recording widely shared on social networks, a Dogon claiming to be Ibrahima Guindo, based in Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, says the following: "Since the start of the conflict, I said that we had to exterminate the Fulani in Dogon country. Or else there will never be peace. ... As long as a single Fulani hamlet remains in Dogon country, peace will be *haram* [forbidden]. We must know and understand this". Audio recording on file with Crisis Group.

⁸³ During the second round between Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Soumaila Cissé, supporters of the candidates brought into play the fact that Soumaila Cissé has a Fulani surname while Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta has a Manding name, perceived as being closer to the Dogon. Crisis Group interview, former member of Dana Ambassagou's political bureau, Bamako, September 2019.

⁸⁴ In a video widely shared on social networks, we see Marcelin Guenguéré speaking in Dogon during an electoral rally: "It's true that the hunters are your defenders, you should vote for this list.

ric paid off: the Mali qui bouge list was elected in Koro *cercle* after the second round of legislative elections in April 2020.⁸⁵

At the same time, a growing number of Fulani and Dogon villages are refusing to succumb to the communal rhetoric surrounding the conflict.⁸⁶ Not only are there areas where Fulani and Dogon continue to live side by side, but Dogon villages are increasingly rejecting Dana Ambassagou camps and even turning to Fulani fighters to protect them from reprisal.⁸⁷ There are also cases of Fulani who are returning to their villages to live among Dogon after they had fled due to the violence.⁸⁸

There is continued debate concerning the degree to which the conflict is communal in nature; some analysts reject the idea, stressing that violence is not linked to ethnic antagonisms. Local actors often repeat that “the communities have no problems with each other”.⁸⁹ Yet ethnicity has played a central role in the mobilisation of violent groups and the phenomenon of attacks upon civilians. While many rejected the ethnically charged discourse at first, the communal dimension of the conflict has gradually imposed itself.

This sparrow-hawk [referencing the emblem on their list] doesn't take chicks, it's a sparrow-hawk that takes Fulani. ... Vote for the sparrow-hawk! If you vote for anything else, you are a Fulani, and the hunters know what to do with the Fulani. May God preserve you”. Video recording on file with Crisis Group. Translation from Mamadou Sagara, “Appel au meurtre des peuls à Koro”, Facebook page of Jeunesse Tapital Pulaaku-Mali, 25 April 2020.

⁸⁵ Decision N°2020-04/CC-EL of 30 April 2020 affirming the final second-round results for the election of deputies to the National Assembly.

⁸⁶ Some Dogon villages with internal land conflicts refused to join Dana Ambassagou, like certain villages of Koporo-Pen in southern Koro. The villages of Berdossou, Sogou (in Koro *cercle*) and Borko (in Bandiagara *cercle*) have openly refused to join Dana Ambassagou. In response, the movement imposed fines and even attacked villagers. There were armed clashes between Dana Ambassagou and the Dogon villagers of Berdossou in July 2020. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former elected official from Koro, Kassa resident and Diankabou resident, Bamako, January 2019, August 2019 and April 2020.

⁸⁷ In Borko, villagers refused to pay Dana Ambassagou's fines. When threatened, the Dogon villagers turned to largely Fulani jihadist groups for protection. A clash between the two armed groups near the village in March 2020 left more than 100 dead. Crisis Group telephone interview, northern Koro resident, April 2020.

⁸⁸ Fulani from the village of Deh (Bandiagara *cercle*) fled the violence, but recently returned under the protection of the village's Dogon community. Crisis Group telephone interview, northern Koro resident, April 2020.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Guina Dogon and Tapital Pulaaku leaders, Bamako, August 2019.

V. Government and International Initiatives to End the Crisis

Mali's government and its international partners, notably the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA) deployed in the country's centre, have not remained passive in the face of rising violence in the *zone exondée*. Their actions have focused on four major axes: inclusive dialogue; redeploying the state and providing security; the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of self-defence groups and all other armed actors wishing to join the process; and lastly, efforts to end impunity. The government has created a special administrative entity called the "political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali". It is headed by the prime minister and aims to coordinate the political and military efforts of the government and international partners.⁹⁰ Thus far, however, these efforts have yielded few results.

A. Dialogue

Since 2017, promoting dialogue between Fulani and Dogon and between armed groups has been at the heart of the strategy to end the crisis in the *zone exondée*. Many actors, including the government, mediation NGOs, local organisations and associations from central Mali, have supported such initiatives. But the attempts to start dialogue initiatives are poorly coordinated and indeed often in competition.

Several government bodies, including the prime minister's office, the ministry of national reconciliation and the ministry of territorial administration, have pursued dialogue as a solution to conflicts in the *zone exondée*. In 2017, the ministry of national reconciliation set up the National Reconciliation Support Mission (Mission d'appui à la réconciliation nationale, MARN) to facilitate a return to peace. With the help of its Regional Support Team for National Reconciliation (Équipe régionale d'appui à la réconciliation nationale, ERAR) and local committees, the MARN intervenes in Mopti villages under attack to ease tensions between warring groups and the communities they claim to represent.⁹¹ The governor and prefects also help the ministry of territorial administration organise forums for reconciliation and communal dialogue. Between April and May 2019, around 40 such meetings took place across the region.⁹²

For his part, former Prime Minister Boubou Cissé (April 2019-August 2020), much like his predecessor Soumailou Boubèye Maïga, frequently visited the *zone exondée* to promote peace through inter-ethnic dialogue. His approach differed from that of the ministries. He launched reconciliation missions relying on elites originally from the area who were based in Bamako. From July 2019, these missions criss-crossed the Koro, Bankass, Bandiagara and Douentza *cercles* to seek concrete ways out of conflict in areas where it was raging.⁹³ An interval of peace in July and August 2019

⁹⁰ Decree N°2019-0423/PM-RM of 19 June 2019.

⁹¹ In March 2018, the ERAR from Mopti carried out several missions in Koro and Bankass to promote peace between the Fulani and Dogon. Crisis Group interview, ERAR member from Mopti, Bamako, September 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, senior ministry of territorial administration official, Bamako, October 2019.

⁹³ Cissé's reconciliation missions took place between July and August 2019. They were led by two influential figures from the *zone exondée*: the businessman Saydou Natoumé from the Dogon side

came in these missions' wake, but it seems largely due to the rainy season, which is usually calmer than others. In November, violence flared up once more.

The government has also mandated mediation NGOs to facilitate dialogue between Fulani and Dogon and between armed groups. In particular, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) organised several forums and consultations, some of which resulted in ceasefire agreements between (non-jihadist) Fulani and Dogon militias, as well as agreements between Fulani and Dogon village chiefs in Koro *cercle*.⁹⁴ Some of HD's initiatives are restricted to particular communes. They allow local actors to engage in extended discussions, until warring groups can sign local ceasefires. The Baye and Ouenkoro peace agreements (Bankass *cercle*), signed in July and August 2019, respectively, came about in this fashion. Other international actors, including MINUSMA and the NGO Search for Common Ground, have teams on the ground mediating between conflict parties.⁹⁵

Influential figures from the *zone exondée* have formed an Organising Committee for dialogue on the crisis in central Mali, through which they mediate between Fulani and Dogon armed groups. Thanks to their efforts, a ceasefire was signed in July 2019 between the Dana Ambassagou spokesperson at that time, Marcelin Guenguéré, and the Fulani militia leader Sekou Bolly.⁹⁶ This agreement was immediately rejected, however, by Dana Ambassagou's military leader, Youssouf Toloba, who had no part in concluding it, and it therefore had no concrete effect on the ground.⁹⁷

Despite the fact that so many stakeholders are involved in promoting dialogue, several obstacles stand in their way, and the overall impact is underwhelming. First of all, the dialogue initiatives are meant to be complementary, but they suffer from a lack of coordination and often seem to compete with one another.⁹⁸ For instance, the initiatives launched by the MARN and the ministry of territorial administration often concern the same localities and rely on the same local actors, yet there is little coordination between the two. It often seems that these initiatives are serving the competing political aims of the two ministers in charge, rather than inaugurating a real local dialogue.⁹⁹ The government is well aware of these coordination difficulties; through its political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali, it seeks to regain

and the banker Babaly Bah from the Fulani. They brought together mixed Dogon and Fulani groups made up of local and national elected officials, civil society actors and community leaders. These groups stayed in localities within the *zone exondée* to launch an inter-ethnic dialogue. But these missions only lasted a few days and were not followed up by concrete actions; they thus failed to have a lasting effect on the violence. Crisis Group interview, reconciliation mission members, Bamako, January, August and September 2019.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys"*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ MINUSMA, in collaboration with the ERAR, led mediation initiatives in the area, notably in Diankabou and Dioungani in Koro *cercle*. Crisis Group interview, MINUSMA actor, October 2019.

⁹⁶ Marcelin Guenguéré and Sekou Bolly, "Communiqué conjoint", Sévaré, 1 July 2019.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Organising Committee member, Bamako, August 2019.

⁹⁸ According to a member of the Mopti ERAR: "Dialogue has become a market. Many actors rush toward it, sometimes with no mandate or legitimacy, because funding is available, so 'there is food and drink there'. Today, every community meeting takes place in the name of dialogue and reconciliation". Crisis Group interview, September 2019.

⁹⁹ A senior official in the prime minister's office commented: "Each minister wants to shine. Each wants to be associated with one notable action or another." Crisis Group interview, Bamako, September 2019.

control and harmonise the dialogue initiatives. But the results of these efforts are still pending.

Furthermore, the initiatives are generally limited to discussions between conflicting actors with a view to suspending the violence. They are often sporadic and rarely followed by concrete actions to tackle the conflict's root causes. Even when they do lead to ceasefires, the lulls in fighting tend to be short-lived.

Finally, most agreements exclude jihadists or include them only indirectly. The rare local agreements, like those of Baye and Ouenkoro, which include jihadists – albeit indirectly – seem to have succeeded in reducing the violence at least temporarily, unlike the agreements that exclude them.¹⁰⁰ Until recently, the government officially rejected the possibility of a dialogue with jihadists, and the international community is reluctant to support such initiatives.¹⁰¹ In January 2020, the government opened the door to dialogue with Malian jihadists, but it is still too early to determine what will happen on the ground.¹⁰²

For their part, jihadists are not waiting for the state to take the first step; they are launching their own initiatives. After gaining the upper hand over Dana Ambassagou hunters, particularly in northern Koro, they initiated discussions with Dogon notables with a view to re-establishing a local peace. The jihadists set out conditions that Dogon villagers would have to agree to, notably: staying out of their fight with the Malian state; laying down arms; renouncing vengeance linked to past conflicts; and dropping demands for the return of stolen property, especially livestock. Several Dogon villages in the *cercles* of Koro and Bandiagara have accepted these conditions so as to initiate the farming season, but many others still reject what they consider to be a jihadist diktat.¹⁰³

B. *Security Efforts*

While the government is pursuing dialogue, it has made security a priority for its crisis exit strategy by means of the Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (PSIRC), rolled out in February 2018. This plan seeks to combine security efforts, the return of public services and development in the central regions. As part of the strategy, as of 2018, defence and security forces set up outposts in the areas most affected by violence, including Diankabou, Dioungani and Dinangourou in Koro *cercle*; Sokoura,

¹⁰⁰ After the agreements were signed, violence fell significantly around Baye and Ouenkoro in the second half of 2019. Crisis Group interview, mediation NGO staffer, September 2019.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group Report, *Speaking with the "Bad Guys"*, op. cit.

¹⁰² These agreements generally aim to find a *modus vivendi* to which both warring parties can agree in order to end the violence, but they do not confront fundamental problems. Mediation NGOs criticise Malian authorities for not fully backing these agreements: by redeploying state services and guaranteeing the impartiality and integrity of state officials, Malian authorities could help perpetuate the reconciliation process once a truce is established. Crisis Group interview, mediation NGO leader, Niamey, February 2020. For President Keïta's statement on dialogue with the jihadists, see Christophe Boisbouvier and Marc Perelman, "Le président malien IBK annonce un dialogue avec des chefs jihadistes", RFI, 10 February 2020.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Fulani activists from Koro *cercle*, via WhatsApp messaging, September 2020. For further information on peace initiatives led by jihadists, see Célian Macé, "Au Mali, les jihadistes se font parrains de la paix", *Libération*, 21 September 2020.

Baye and Diallasagou in Bankass; and Mondoro in Douentza.¹⁰⁴ These new bases come in addition to existing ones, notably in the municipal centres of each *cercle*.

The government is intensifying its security efforts. In July 2019, it announced that it would deploy an additional 3,500 defence and security personnel to the area.¹⁰⁵ In January 2020, the military also launched Operation Maliko to regain control of the centre of the country and reimpose the rule of law. But the additional military presence has come with accusations of extrajudicial abuses of civilians, in particular Fulani, whom soldiers often take to be jihadists or jihadist collaborators.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, since the launch of this operation, the armed forces have abandoned several outposts and gradually withdrawn to large garrisons, including in the *zone exondée*.¹⁰⁷ The withdrawal likely signals a strategic shift on the part of a government that no longer wishes to scatter its forces across static positions, which are difficult to defend, and instead favours offensives launched from larger bases.¹⁰⁸ Although Mali's armed forces are trying to return to some of the areas they abandoned, this change in strategy is an attempt to adapt to pressure from jihadist insurgents, who are multiplying their deadly attacks against military outposts.

The security plan has also proven to be poorly suited to tackling the crisis in the *zone exondée*. Developed to deal with the jihadist threat, especially in Macina, it does not take sufficient account of the problem of communal violence. The PSIRC is supposed to represent an integrative response from the government, yet even some of the civilian authorities in charge of its implementation criticise its excessive focus on security in the context of a multidimensional crisis.¹⁰⁹ The other ministries that were supposed to help improve governance and promote local development have been unable to coordinate local actions that concern the non-security aspects of the strategy.¹¹⁰

The government is not blind to these shortcomings. In December 2019, through the political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali, it developed a new approach, the Stabilisation Strategy for Central Mali (SSCM). The SSCM differs from

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Mopti governorate official, Mopti, January 2019.

¹⁰⁵ "Mali : Boubou Cissé annonce des mesures sécuritaires dans le centre", RFI, 8 July 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch and the International Federation for Human Rights have documented several cases of extrajudicial abuses committed by the Malian security forces. For details, see "How Much More Blood Must Be Spilled?", op. cit.; and "Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-Terrorism", op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ At the end of January, defence and security forces notably withdrew from their positions in Di-ankabou and Dioungani, two areas experiencing high levels of violence against civilians. In February 2020, the army's withdrawal from the village of Ogossagou allowed suspected Fulani assailants to commit a second massacre there. See "Le village d'Ogossagou dans le centre du Mali, cible d'une nouvelle attaque", *Le Monde*, 14 February 2020. Moreover, defence and security forces withdrew from outposts both in the centre and in the north.

¹⁰⁸ In November 2019, President Keïta announced the need for a strategic shift toward offensive action. See Aissatou Diallo, "Mali : la nouvelle stratégie militaire annoncée est-elle à la hauteur des enjeux ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 15 November 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior official in the prime minister's office, Bamako, September 2019.

¹¹⁰ According to a senior official in the prime minister's office, the PSIRC is more a program than a strategy. But the major problem is that it focuses too much on security, its main goal being to fight terrorism. That is why the ministry of security was at the core of its implementation. Crisis Group interview, Bamako, September 2019.

the PSIRC in that it places more emphasis on the political aspects of the crisis. It particularly focuses on improving governance to re-establish trust between populations and the state.¹¹¹ Unlike the PSIRC, it places less priority on providing security. The SSCM is more promising than the PSIRC, but in view of recent events and the many unfulfilled promises authorities have made to redeploy services, it remains highly uncertain whether the government can convert the new strategy into concrete actions.

Emerging from the 18 August coup, the new transitional authorities have yet to unveil their plan of action for central Mali.¹¹² For the time being, they have limited themselves to general statements from the Transition Roadmap, which outlines the following ambitions for the north and centre of the country: disarming self-defence militias; redeploying the state; promoting communal dialogue; and launching a dialogue with “Mali’s radical groups”.¹¹³ Previous governments have issued such statements. It is still too early to know in which directions transitional authorities will move, especially as their attention is still largely focused on the division of political responsibilities in Bamako. These transitional authorities have a chance to take a new turn; to do so, they must rapidly focus on the central region, and the *zone exondée* in particular, where nothing has been lastingly resolved despite a drop in violence in recent months.

As concerns international involvement, the UN stabilisation force has increased its presence in the *zone exondée*.¹¹⁴ In 2019, the UN Security Council adopted a mandate for MINUSMA, with one of its priorities being the protection of civilians in central Mali. MINUSMA launched several operations in 2019 that covered the *cercles* of Bandiagara, Bankass and Koro, often in coordination with the Malian army.¹¹⁵ These operations combine the installation of temporary operational bases and mobile patrols. They aim to ease local tensions, discourage warring parties, retaliate in the event of attacks, and protect humanitarian and other convoys.

MINUSMA officials believe that their efforts have brought greater calm to the affected areas.¹¹⁶ But while the second half of 2019 was indeed less violent than the first, several circumstances, besides MINUSMA’s presence, appear to have contributed to the pacification. MINUSMA’s operations have certainly had dissuasive effects on the armed militias, but the calm was also due to factors such as the reconciliation

¹¹¹ “Stabilisation Strategy for Central Mali”, Permanent Secretariat of the political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali, December 2019.

¹¹² After several months of demonstrations against Keïta’s rule, led by a coalition of opposition parties and civil society movements, a coup toppled the president on 18 August 2020. A group of army officers calling themselves the National Committee for the Salvation of the People took power. Less than a month later, the officers, though retaining significant influence, transferred power to transitional authorities.

¹¹³ Transition Roadmap, adopted on 12 September 2020, document consulted by Crisis Group.

¹¹⁴ As of June 2019, MINUSMA has a Centre Sector in the Mopti region. Thus, the region of Mopti, like Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, has its own command aimed at better coordinating civilian protection operations. See “La force de la Minusma crée le Secteur Centre pour rendre efficace sa présence dans la région de Mopti”, MINUSMA, 25 June 2019.

¹¹⁵ These include Operations Folon 1 (January-March 2019), Oryx 1 (March-June 2019), Oryx 2, (launched in July 2019) and Buffalo (inaugurated in December 2019). For more information, see the MINUSMA website.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior MINUSMA official, Bamako, September 2019.

missions launched by Prime Minister Boubou Cissé and the rainy season, which hampers movement.

MINUSMA's intervention is complicated for several reasons. First, it is challenged in Dogon areas, particularly since the publication of its judicial investigation reports on the Ogossagou massacres, which place blame partly on Dana Ambassagou combatants. In January 2020, several associations from Bandiagara and Bankass asked MINUSMA to evacuate its personnel from the region.¹¹⁷ These associations accuse UN forces of having double standards, of committing rape and of colluding with jihadists, though they provide no credible evidence for these claims.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited MINUSMA's deployment capacities; if it lasts, it could compromise the level and stability of the forces' deployment within Mali.

The last dominant security player is Operation Barkhane. Led by the French army, it conducts ad hoc counter-terrorism operations in the *zone exondée* but has no base there.¹¹⁹ Working alone or with Malian and Burkinabé forces, the French have carried out several missions during which dozens of suspected jihadists were eliminated, although these operations have not eradicated the jihadist presence or the local violence stemming from it.¹²⁰ Operation Barkhane intervenes strictly in response to France's self-granted mandate to fight terrorism, identifying jihadists as the sole enemy.¹²¹ This mandate deliberately limits the French forces' involvement in communal conflicts. Yet their position is difficult to defend when all armed groups are guilty of violence against civilians.

Thus, Barkhane's lack of engagement with Dana Ambassagou is interpreted by some as a bias against the Fulani.¹²² France wants to stay away from communal conflicts, which it knows are particularly difficult to resolve and which fall outside Barkhane's counter-terrorism mandate. If large-scale violence resumes, however, France may find it difficult to justify the deployment of a force solely focused on counter-terrorism operations near an area where other actors are perpetrating major civilian massacres.

¹¹⁷ "Letter from the local and communal youth council of Bankass *cercle* to the prefect of Bankass *cercle*", 3 January 2020. See also "Manifestation contre les Casques bleus au Mali: le gouvernement appelle au calme", RFI, 4 January 2020.

¹¹⁸ The demonstrations against MINUSMA's presence reflect a broader and growing anti-French sentiment in Mali and the sub-region. See Paul Lorgetrie, "Au Mali le sentiment anti-français gagne du terrain", *Le Monde Afrique*, 10 January 2020.

¹¹⁹ Operation Barkhane's closest base is in Gossi, in Gourma, an area bordering Douentza. Not only is the *zone exondée* outside Barkhane's scope of intervention, but it seems that Malian authorities have long sought to limit the involvement of foreign forces in central Mali. Crisis Group interview, member of Operation Barkhane, Dakar, November 2018.

¹²⁰ "Barkhane : Opérations dans la région de Mopti", French Ministry of the Armed Forces, 20 February 2020.

¹²¹ The Barkhane mission also involves supporting Malian forces in their fight against jihadist groups. Crisis Group interview, former French official who served in the Sahel, via WhatsApp messaging, September 2020.

¹²² A Fulani activist views the French intervention against jihadists as an attempt to weaken the Fulani in favour of Dogon militias: "If the French are fighting terrorists, there's hardly any group more terrorist than Dana Ambassagou, which massacres women, children and the elderly!" Crisis Group telephone interview, Fulani activist, May 2019.

C. *Disarming Militias*

Aside from initiating dialogue and redeploying security forces, the government has also led efforts to disarm militant groups, with no real success thus far. In December 2018, the government asked militias and traditional leaders to register combatants who might be willing to disarm. Three months later, it announced that 5,000 fighters from the various armed groups in central Mali had declared themselves prepared to disarm, and that 400 of them had already laid down their weapons.¹²³ Many were confined in the Soufouroulaye camp, 15km from the town of Sévaré, awaiting the start of a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process that only began in February 2020, more than a year after the operation's launch. The delay prompted many of those who had laid down their arms to take them back up and rejoin the armed groups.¹²⁴

In October 2019, the government launched a community rehabilitation program for individuals willing to disarm on a voluntary basis. Its goal was to accommodate 3,387 combatants or armed persons likely to join the militias.¹²⁵ Amid the permanent insecurity, however, with neither national nor international forces seemingly able to guarantee the safety of people and property, the armed groups refused to disarm, presenting themselves as the sole protectors of their communities. Consequently, at the end of November 2019, when the first phase of the program was coming to an end, only 352 people had registered to take part in the reintegration process.¹²⁶

In the aftermath of the Ogossagou attacks in March 2019, the government ordered the disarmament of all militias, if necessary by force.¹²⁷ Authorities have refrained from acting on the order so far, mainly because they fear tensions or clashes with groups that may refuse to disarm. Their inaction is understandable, but it comes across as an admission of impotence.

The government has not specified what the future holds for disarmed combatants. It plans to offer economic support measures to allow former fighters to retrain. It also plans to integrate some of them into the Malian security forces, as it already does with former combatants from northern Mali after the 2015 peace agreement. More than any economic support initiatives, such promises of integration could convince armed groups in central Mali, and especially those close to the state, to demobilise. But this solution will not work miracles: the defence and security forces have limited absorption capacities, and this integration could also destabilise the fragile balances created with armed groups in northern Mali as part of the 2015 peace process.

¹²³ "Mali: 5000 combattants enrôlés dans le DDR", RFI, 7 February 2019.

¹²⁴ Under Sekou Bolly's leadership, other mostly Fulani combatants established themselves in Douentza, Diallassagou and Ogossagou in Bankass *cercle*. Crisis Group interview, Fulani armed group leader who participated in the DDR process, Bamako, October 2019.

¹²⁵ "Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General", UN Security Council, S/2019/983, December 2019.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration official, Bamako, August 2019.

¹²⁷ Morgane le Cam, "Au Mali, le difficile désarmement des milices", *Le Monde*, 10 April 2019.

D. *Strengthening Justice Mechanisms and Ending Impunity*

The Malian government is well aware that the shortcomings of its justice system have played a role in the outbreak of violence. With the support of its international partners, it has made efforts to end impunity, but with little to show for it so far.

The efforts to eliminate impunity come up against several obstacles. First of all, magistrates are quickly overwhelmed by the number of cases.¹²⁸ Then, it is complicated to send investigators to the scenes of violence due to safety concerns. Many judicial officers have fled the *zone exondée* because of the insecurity. In addition, locals frequently oppose the arrest of militiamen suspected of perpetrating violence, whom they often viewed as protectors.¹²⁹ Finally, while on one hand the state seeks to end impunity, on the other it tries to facilitate dialogue with certain protagonists in the conflict, who are sometimes guilty of violence against civilians. The state is caught between its aspiration to promote peace and its desire to deliver justice.¹³⁰

The Mopti Regional Court (*tribunal de grande instance*) is responsible for investigating violence against civilians in the *zone exondée*. In 2019, the state also extended the powers of the judicial division in Bamako specialising in counter-terrorism and organised crime to include serious cases of violence against civilians.¹³¹ These two judicial bodies conducted several investigations after the outbreaks of violence in 2019, notably in Koulogon, Ogossagou, Sobane Dah, Yoro and Gangafani. Most investigations seem to have stalled, however, and few trials have taken place.¹³²

¹²⁸ In May 2019, this division took on more than 450 cases, including over 200 cases relating to terrorism, 47 relating to transnational crime and 206 criminal cases. See UN Security Council, "Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General", op. cit.

¹²⁹ In April 2019, residents of Koro town assembled to prevent the Malian defence and security forces from arresting a Dana Ambassagou Dogon hunter suspected of being involved in the Ogossagou attack in March 2019. See "Des soldats empêchés d'arrêter un homme soupçonné d'un massacre", *Le Figaro*, 14 April 2019.

¹³⁰ See "Mali: New Law Will Reinforce the Culture of Impunity for Human Rights Violations", Amnesty International, 12 December 2018.

¹³¹ In 2015, the government set up a judicial division specialising in counter-terrorism and transnational organised crime to deal with these issues. In July 2019, the government extended these powers to cover cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the types of violence taking place in the *zone exondée*. See Law N°2019-050 of 24 July 2019 amending Law N°01-080 of 20 August 2001, as amended, on the Code of Criminal Procedure.

¹³² According to Human Rights Watch, in December 2019 the Mopti Criminal Court pronounced judgment in just six of the hundreds of cases relating to local violence in the *zone exondée*. In these judgments, at least 60 people were accused and no fewer than 44 found guilty. See "How Much More Blood Must Be Spilled?", op. cit.

VI. De-escalating and Defusing the Crisis

Communal violence is becoming entrenched in the *zone exondée*. Meanwhile, the military coup against Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the COVID-19 pandemic have diverted the attention of many actors to other priorities linked to the political and health crisis.¹³³ To keep the situation from deteriorating once again, the Malian state must take the conflict's management back into its own hands and instil a new momentum to end the crisis. This is all the more necessary since attacks intensified in the first half of 2020.

Faced with outbreaks of violence, the Malian authorities have launched several initiatives: dialogue, security efforts, disarmament and eliminating impunity. These measures are not working to contain the violence, not because they are unsuitable but because their implementation is inadequate (see Section V). To make them more effective, Bamako's new transitional authorities should strive to better harmonise and organise the various interventions under way in the central region. They should also consider using complementary and under-exploited tools, notably in terms of dialogue.

At present, their priority should be de-escalation. This step is necessary; without it, a structured response to the crisis is almost inconceivable. In the medium term, the area must be stabilised, both by facilitating the return of a regulatory state and by demobilising armed militias. In the longer term, the state should work toward a sustainable reconciliation by addressing the root causes of the conflict, particularly access to natural resources such as land.

A. *Stopping the Spiral of Violence: Dialogue and Security*

In the short term, the authorities must halt the spiral of violence by better coordinating dialogue and security efforts.

1. Setting up local peace committees

Dialogue efforts have been met with enthusiasm on the part of several actors involved in finding solutions to the conflict in the *zone exondée*. Very early on, dialogue emerged as a central instrument in attempts to end the crisis. So far, however, it has largely been ineffective. Government initiatives such as the social cohesion missions, launched in July 2019 by Prime Minister Boubou Cissé, were far too brief (only lasting about a week for the most part) to help restore trust among deeply divided communities. By contrast, local initiatives such as those of Baye and Ouenkoro have proven better at calming the situation, since local actors are more invested in them in the long run. Unfortunately, such initiatives remain local and remote from one another. They are unable to generate impetus for a broader dialogue that could lead to widespread peace.

To produce a more lasting and far-reaching impact, dialogue should occur as part of a long-term mechanism, one that is better structured and covers the entire *zone exondée*. The Malian state should invest all the more in this area since jihadists are

¹³³ According to John Hopkins University, there were 2,475 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Mali (including 121 deaths) as of 20 July 2020.

now challenging its role as “peacemaker”. The authorities could develop a two-tiered system: first, peace committees at the village level that can take into account the conflict’s local specificities; secondly, a regional committee made up of elites from these communities, including those based in Bamako, which would deal with broader dynamics and consolidate the results achieved locally.

To do this, the state should first help to gradually establish peace committees in all localities in conflict or, when possible, revive those that already exist.¹³⁴ The idea is not to add new committees on top of the many existing initiatives, but to rationalise them by making sure that they are coordinated with one another and incorporated into a larger system. Local committees should be inclusive and open to Fulani and Dogon figures who have influence at this level. These committees could be made up of traditional and religious leaders, local elected officials, association leaders and representatives of armed groups, including jihadist elements or those close to them. Both the authorities and jihadists will be reluctant to integrate local jihadist actors into these discussions, but in reality local jihadists already take part in the more informal discussions that are taking place at the local level. Moreover, this approach is less controversial than entering into negotiations with jihadist groups at a higher political level.

Such committees should allow these different representatives, including members of armed groups, to meet safely and discuss the problems fuelling the violence. The goal would be to restore trust between actors and to create a favourable climate for mediation that could produce effective ceasefires. These types of peace committees have been tested with some success in several countries affected by violence against civilians, including in the Central African Republic.¹³⁵

Authorities should also set up a regional peace committee, including members of the national organisations Guina Dogon and Tapital Pulaaku, to complement the local committees. This committee would tackle the broader issues of the conflict. For example, while local peace committees allow for discussions between local branches of armed groups, the regional committee could facilitate talks between the authorities and leaders of Dana Ambassagou, Fulani militias and even individuals close to the jihadists. Together, they could discuss issues related to the removal of checkpoints, the demilitarisation of certain areas, the deployment of soldiers to protect civilians, and the demobilisation of combatants. This regional committee could also try to halt the trend toward communal violence by encouraging Fulani and Dogon elites – including those who contribute to ethnic divisions, whom it would be dangerous to exclude from attempts at dialogue – to find more constructive conflict resolution mechanisms.

The Permanent Secretariat of the political framework to manage the crisis in central Mali could set up these various committees with the logistical support of MINUS-MA, which is deployed in central Mali and has the means to accompany such efforts

¹³⁴ The ministry of national reconciliation has set up local reconciliation committees in a few localities, but they struggle to function properly, in part due to a lack of funding for members to travel to places where the attacks occur. Crisis Group interview, Mopti ERAR member, Bamako, September 2019.

¹³⁵ For details on local committees in the Central African Republic, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°277, *Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick*, 18 June 2019.

at coordinating dialogue. The Permanent Secretariat and MINUSMA could draw inspiration from the experience of the UN Development Program (UNDP), which helped implement local peace committees in several conflict zones, including in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Kenya and South Africa. These experiences highlight both the successes and the failures of such peace committees.¹³⁶

The peace committees should serve as a frame of reference for all those who want to support dialogue efforts in the *zone exondée*. International actors, including mediation NGOs, could thus incorporate their projects into these committees' activities and avoid launching parallel initiatives. The Permanent Secretariat should involve these NGOs in setting up local committees and convince them that these bodies should be the sole framework for dialogue initiatives in the *zone exondée*. The idea would be to favour a bottom-up approach that empowers local actors to find the solutions best suited to each place.

2. Improving civilian protection

Dialogue must remain a priority, but the Malian state and its partners, in particular MINUSMA, should also step up efforts to protect people and property. The Malian armed forces and MINUSMA should take further steps to pool their resources. Malian forces have been accused of serious negligence and abuse against civilians in the region.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, MINUSMA's mandate is to support the army's redeployment in the north and centre of the country, and its presence during joint patrols will likely reduce the risk of further such abuses.

Together, these forces should aim to extend their security measures by deploying better-equipped troops in sufficient numbers and ensuring a greater rapid response capacity in the main hotspots. While some observers question whether Malian and UN forces can achieve this goal, they should remember that the conflict zone is small, making up only 4.35 per cent of the national territory.

There are several ways to help secure and demilitarise communities. First, the Malian army should reoccupy the outposts it abandoned following the launch of Operation Maliko in January 2020. The authorities should reinforce these outposts, or even create others, when they deploy another 3,500 soldiers, as announced by the former prime minister in July 2019. A local military presence admittedly leaves soldiers more exposed to jihadist attacks, but it also has a dissuasive effect on assailants. Conversely, the withdrawal of troops allows armed groups to establish themselves as commanders over the area and exposes civilians to more violence, as evidenced by

¹³⁶ For further details on the UNDP's experience in setting up local peace committees, see Andrius Odendaal, "An Architecture for Building Peace at the Local Level: A Comparative Study of Local Peace Committees", UNDP, December 2010.

¹³⁷ Between 1 April and 30 June 2020, MINUSMA's Human Rights and Protection Division documented 126 human rights violations that it attributed to Malian defence and security forces, including 94 cases of extrajudicial execution, eight cases of forced disappearance and 24 cases of bodily harm. A significant proportion of these abuses took place in the *zone exondée*, notably in the *cercles* of Douentza and Koro where an increase in these types of violations was recorded. See "Note on Trends of Human Rights Violations and Abuses in Mali: 1 April-30 June 2020", MINUSMA, August 2020.

the second attack on Ogossagou.¹³⁸ Concretely, security forces should focus not on counter-terrorism operations but rather on their role as protectors of people and property. The fight to defeat jihadism can only be effective if the communal tensions that fuel militancy are defused.

Next, the armed forces should do more to demonstrate their neutrality by ceasing all forms of collaboration with militias and all extrajudicial abuses of civilians. Since they are worried about jihadist attacks, the defence forces might oppose the disarmament of militias, with which they have certainly experienced strained relations but also on-the-ground collaboration. It is still possible to convince the armed forces that disarming militias will not expose them to more jihadist attacks. To do so, it is necessary to improve their operational conditions on the ground, revitalise intelligence gathering and demand that the military hierarchy start severely punishing the most flagrant abusers in the ranks.¹³⁹ At the same time, local notables and mediation actors should continue striving to get communities to better understand and accept the role of the defence and security forces. The army can regain its credibility if it can prove its effectiveness.

For its part, MINUSMA also has a crucial role to play in securing and protecting civilians. In June 2020, the UN Security Council renewed MINUSMA's mandate and its priority focus on crisis management in central Mali. Its temporary operating bases and significant mobility compared to the Malian army could be decisive in preventing attacks in remote villages through rapid response missions. To date, MINUSMA has four temporary operating bases: in Douna Pen and Madougou in Koro *cercle*; in Ogossagou in Bankass *cercle*; and in Ouou Sarré in Bandiagara *cercle*. To be effective, the UN force should not only establish additional outposts in other hot-spots, especially in southern Bankass and Douentza, but also support these bases with armed reconnaissance helicopters that can deter assailants before they commit an attack.¹⁴⁰

MINUSMA should continue to support the Malian security forces and aim to gradually hand them back full control of security missions. To this end, it would be wise to step up the joint military patrols of the Malian army and the UN mission. The force capacity in central Mali remains limited, however. For instance, the mission here does not have the support of armed helicopters.¹⁴¹ If the mission cannot be granted additional material and human resources, it should at least benefit from tools that are better adapted to its operations in this region.

Security efforts should not aim to systematically confront armed groups, but rather to deter attacks upon civilians and avoid obstructions to dialogues initiated by

¹³⁸ In February 2020, assailants dressed as Dogon hunters attacked the Fulani village of Ogossagou for a second time, killing at least 35 people. This attack allegedly took place a few hours after the withdrawal of Malian armed forces that had deployed there following the first attack in March 2019, which claimed more than 160 victims. While the soldiers' presence allowed the Fulani to return to their homes, their withdrawal exposed villagers to a new attack. See "Mali: Army, UN Fail to Stop Massacre", Human Rights Watch, 18 March 2020.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group made similar recommendations in a report on neighbouring Burkina Faso. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°287, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 24 February 2020.

¹⁴⁰ MINUSMA officials support the idea of setting up additional temporary operating bases in the *zone exondée*. Crisis Group correspondence, MINUSMA official, May and June 2020.

¹⁴¹ In his quarterly report in March 2020, the UN Secretary-General laid out a mission adaptation plan that requires armed helicopters to support operations in central Mali.

peace committees. The defence and security forces' goal should be to support efforts toward a negotiated peace rather than impose it by force. It will be easier to ensure security if this is built on the work of local peace committees and the ceasefires they negotiate.

Finally, since a worst-case scenario cannot be ruled out, in the event of further escalation it is essential to have an emergency plan in place that would allow the Malian army and MINUSMA to take robust action to protect civilians. These forces could benefit from the logistical support of France's Operation Barkhane. Despite a mandate limited to counter-terrorism, the French forces would be well advised to support the Malian army and MINUSMA if the situation were to quickly deteriorate. They would be hard pressed to justify an exclusive focus on counter-terrorism near areas beset by large-scale massacres.

B. *Consolidating Peace*

Dialogue and security efforts may lead to temporary calm, but long-lasting peace will require further measures that include reinstating more effective governance, demobilising combatants and regulating access to resources.

1. Building a more effective governance

Since the administration and public services have withdrawn from the region, the state's influence over events here has dwindled. The authorities' inability to stem the violence, and their ambivalent ties to self-defence groups, have further diminished their credibility in the eyes of many residents of the *zone exondée*. The government has committed to adopting a new form of governance that can re-establish bonds of trust and build new relationships with communities; it must now reinforce the state's legitimacy by delivering on this commitment. Governance reform is undoubtedly Mali's biggest and most complex undertaking, given the persistent shortcomings it has faced. Its design and implementation will take a long time.

Although many observers remain pessimistic given the enormity of the task, additional avenues remain to be explored.¹⁴² As a first step, the state should be more severe in condemning injustice, corruption, favouritism and exclusion. In particular, the Malian authorities should apply disciplinary sanctions against state actors who abuse their power or divert public resources. They should notably punish soldiers who commit abuses of civilians and actively fight the corruption that undermines the justice system.

The lack of state resources is even more worrying after the August coup and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some external partners have suspended aid to Mali until it has a new government elected by popular vote, while other donor countries facing economic recession may well reduce their financial support.¹⁴³ The government should therefore rely on its own resources, and try to step up budgetary efforts in the *zone exondée*, particularly in the areas of health, education, infrastructure and hydro-power. Of course, the transitional government has many priorities, and the affected

¹⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, EU country ambassador and international donor, September 2020.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, international donor, September 2020.

area is small, but the communal violence there is threatening national cohesion. It is encouraging to note that in its draft Transition Roadmap, the military junta has identified the resolution of “communal tensions and conflict” as the transitional authorities’ third priority.¹⁴⁴

To improve its effectiveness, the state should delegate more powers to the governor of Mopti, so that he can coordinate the actions of the decentralised services at the regional level. Amid the present violence, local administration in the *zone exondée* is absent or ineffective. It should therefore rely on the governor, a representative of central power, rather than on locally elected authorities with far fewer resources than the governorate. When decentralised services are under the direct authority of ministries in Bamako, it is difficult to coordinate their actions at the local level. These services tend to act autonomously and report only to their line ministry. To avoid such dysfunction, the governor could create the right conditions for regional cooperation between decentralised services.

In addition, the authorities could do more to involve local populations in the process of defining and implementing public policies. This participation should not be limited to local authorities and elected officials; rather, it should include the people who would directly benefit. For example, the authorities could enlist the aid of local committees that already exist in villages to manage schools and health centres. Studies have shown that populations in the *zone exondée* tend to be more satisfied with public services when they partake in their management.¹⁴⁵

2. Demobilising armed groups

Demobilisation is an absolute prerequisite for achieving a stable peace. There cannot be long-term stability in the region if combatants remain armed. The advantage of central Mali compared to the country’s northern areas is that civilians here have armed themselves only in the past decade. The trend can therefore be more easily reversed. The government has demanded the disarmament of all militias operating in the *zone exondée*. But these militias refuse to disarm voluntarily, and the government is understandably reluctant to engage in forced disarmament that could fuel further conflict. To break the deadlock, the state should use a carrot-and-stick approach. Of course, this approach will be possible only if political dialogue accompanies disarmament, as explained in the previous section.

Malian authorities should wave the stick at militias by eliminating impunity. They should arrest and prosecute those responsible for violence against civilians, thus helping strengthen the rule of law, weaken armed groups and create the conditions for lasting reconciliation. If it cannot provide a legal ruling in every case, the state could carefully select certain cases to send strong messages regarding the most intolerable forms of violence. Of course, it is possible that the accused will seek to sabotage the peace process, but legal action is nonetheless a way of maintaining pressure on groups. The goal is neither to criminalise all combatants nor to give them all amnesty, but to select cases significant enough to send a strong signal.

¹⁴⁴ See the Transition Roadmap adopted by the participants in the national consultation on the transition, 10-12 September 2020. Copy on file with Crisis Group.

¹⁴⁵ See Mamadou Bodian et al., *op. cit.* See also *ibid.*

At the same time, authorities must offer an honourable way out to militia leaders – particularly those who have committed no atrocities – by encouraging their transition into the political arena, for example. In the March 2020 legislative elections, influential members of Dana Ambassagou, including the movement's former spokesperson, Marcelin Guenguéré, were elected deputies for the Koro constituency. Their conversion should be encouraged during the next municipal elections, as long as safeguards are in place to prevent hateful rhetoric. These elections were scheduled for November 2019 and then postponed indefinitely, in part due to rising insecurity in the centre and north, and to delays in implementing the territorial reform. The state should take advantage of the fact that part of the Dana Ambassagou and Fulani armed militias, notably that of Sekou Bolly, are still interested in DDR, provided that security improves.¹⁴⁶ In addition, Fulani and Dogon leaders who are aware of the stakes of the DDR process (particularly the integration of combatants into the army which could determine the future balance of power between the communities) are pushing their militias to participate.¹⁴⁷

Demobilisation poses the thorny question of disarmed combatants' fate. The classic option of integrating them into the armed forces does not seem feasible. The Malian army is already struggling to accommodate former rebels from the north following the Algiers peace agreement; there is likely neither the will nor the capacity to integrate thousands of additional combatants from central Mali. As for reintegrating combatants into the civilian work force, which is the government's recommendation, echoed by some of its partners, this option is less appealing to fighters who would prefer to join the army.¹⁴⁸

The Malian state could consider intermediate options, like integrating these fighters into local security forces such as the municipal or territorial police. This option has the advantage of combining the need for demobilisation with that for local security. But it is not without risk. These demobilised combatants could go on to commit further violence against civilians if they do not receive adequate training, if their mission is not well defined and limited to community policing, or if there are no rigorous controls on their actions. In Burkina Faso, after Koglweogo fighters were enrolled as defence volunteers without sufficient supervision, some of them went on to attack Fulani civilians, whom they accused of having links with jihadists.¹⁴⁹

Before reviving any DDR process, the Malian authorities should put measures in place to mitigate risks associated with proposals to integrate the security forces. Partners such as the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali and MINUSMA's police component could support them in making the right decisions in this area.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Fulani militia leader, Bamako, August 2019; and former Dana Ambassagou leader, Bamako, September 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Fulani activist belonging to Tapital Pulaaku and Dogon dignitary belonging to Guina Dogon, August and September 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration official, Bamako, August 2019.

¹⁴⁹ See Crisis Group Report, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, op. cit.

3. Regulating access to land

In the longer term, Malian authorities should address the root causes of the conflict, notably competition for access to natural resources, and land in particular. While this competition is increasing and generating tensions, neither public land laws nor traditional regulatory mechanisms seem adapted to resolve them. Local land commissions that are supposed to provide an appropriate response to land-related conflicts are often monopolised by traditional authorities whose decisions are frequently contested (see Section III). The state should therefore overhaul land law and especially its application.

Still, it is necessary to first wait for the violence to cease or decline significantly, since reviewing access to land when communities remain armed is a risky undertaking that could intensify the conflict. Once calm has returned, the authorities should initiate a thorough reform of land management in the *zone exondée*, bringing the actors involved to the table and drawing lessons from the failures of current mechanisms. A solution should be found to the legal pluralism (between state laws, customary law and the land commission) that characterises current land management. New legal texts must be drafted to reflect local realities. The input of local actors, who are the first to be concerned by the land code revision, is essential.

The Malian authorities should ensure that land law decisions are less technical and centralised. At present, draft legislation is not generated by discussions between local actors. Instead, bills are the result of a process whereby experts in land law propose texts, which are then examined by ministerial staff, submitted for review mainly to national farmers' organisations and, finally, presented for parliamentary debate in the National Assembly. Even if deputies introduce amendments, the resulting laws reflect the opinion of experts and ministry officials more than a locally negotiated political consensus. This process should be reversed by designing land law based on consensus between local political actors and communities before proceeding with technical validations. Local peace committees could play a role at this level, serving as a forum for discussions about access to natural resources. Moreover, this legislative framework, which gives local officials more autonomy to adopt and enforce land laws, could be useful in other places where land is a source of conflict.

The state's role in this process would largely be to define the main principles and guidelines, such as imperatives of national unity, equity, solidarity and equality. Its role would also be to promote local consensus by setting up dialogue mechanisms through which populations can find compromises and express preferences.

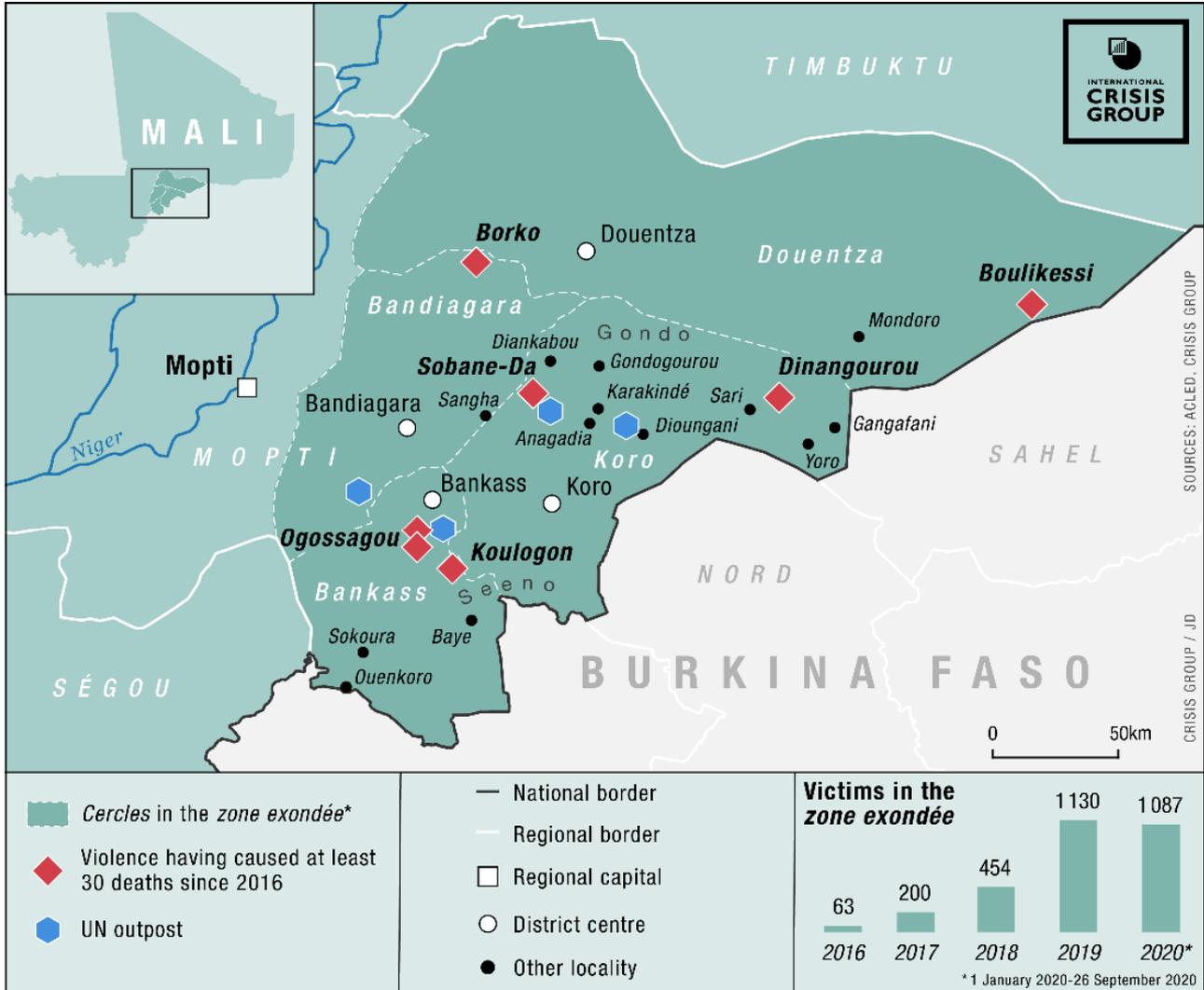
VII. Conclusion

Since 2016, the *zone exondée* to the south and east of Mopti town has seen outbreaks of communal violence whose victims are mainly Fulani and Dogon civilians. This upsurge in violence is unprecedented in the country's history. Significant social, environmental and political transformations have exacerbated divisions and increased competition for resources, especially land. In addition to a crisis of governance and the authorities' poor handling of local conflicts, these changes have created fertile ground for armed groups to take root in the region. Their presence has provoked a sudden rise in violence against civilians, while also amplifying the ethnic dimension of local conflicts.

Faced with this alarming trend, the state and its partners have not remained passive, but their efforts have been slow to bear fruit. The new transitional authorities should seize the opportunity to remedy the situation. In particular, they should harmonise and better organise their efforts to end the crisis, while introducing under-exploited tools, such as peace committees, that can help rekindle dialogue and cease-fires. Furthermore, they should improve governance and the rule of law, and begin demilitarising the region. In the longer term, the Malian authorities must address the root causes of the conflict through an in-depth reform of resource management mechanisms that will help resolve land disputes.

Bamako/Nairobi/Brussels, 9 November 2020

Appendix A: Violence Hotspots in Central Mali's *Zone Exondée*



* Cercle = administrative district; Zone exondée = area located in the South and South East of the Mopti region, not submerged by the annual floods of the Niger river's inner delta.

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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November 2020

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