Radicalization Processes in the Sahel and the Trajectory of Militant Islamist Movements in Mali (2012-2018)

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Abstract

This paper traces the trajectory of the various Islamist movements in Mali since the outbreak of the crisis in 2012. The paper challenges the monocausal explanations of terrorism that present religion, and in particular Islam, as its main cause. Instead the paper will provide a focus on the local context to highlight multiple cleavages. The historical context provides the background to understand tensions and rivalries within various interpretations of Islam in Mali, between so-called moderate/traditionalists, reformist and salafi jihadists. In addition, the analysis of intra-ethnic, as well as inter-ethnic rivalries in relation to the Sahel-Saharan political economy will be key to understanding the volatile pattern of alliance formation and patterns of amity and enmity that seem counter-intuitive at first glance. Finally, both the state and external actors' responses have reconfigured the Malian political and religious landscape. Mali is still characterized by divergent political orders in the making that defy the state and perpetuate violent extremism in the region.

Resumo

Processos de Radicalização no Sahel e a Evolução dos Movimentos de Militantes Islamistas no Mali (2012-2018)

O artigo situa a trajetória dos vários movimentos islamistas no Mali desde a crise de 2012. O argumento central desafia as explicações monocausais do terrorismo que apresentam a religião, e em particular o Islão, como a sua principal causa. Em contraste, o artigo analisa o contexto local para identificar as múltiplas clivagens que permeiam a sociedade do Mali. O enquadramento histórico permanece essencial para entender as tensões e rivalidades nas várias interpretações do Islão no Mali entre os denominados moderados/tradicionalistas, reformistas e os jihadistas salafi. Uma análise das rivalidades intra-étnicas, bem como inter-étnicas em relação com a economia política da região do Sahara-Sahel é central para compreender o padrão volátil de formação de alianças, bem como os padrões de amizade e inimizade que se afiguram como inesperados à partida. Finalmente, tanto as respostas do Estado, como dos atores regionais e externos reconfiguraram a paisagem política e religiosa. O processo em curso de constituição de ordens políticas divergentes continua a desafiar o Estado e influencia a perpetuação do extremismo violento na região.

This paper aims at analyzing the crisis in Mali beyond the simplistic dichotomy that trims the armed groups into secular movements and salafi jihadists. It traces the trajectory of militant and extremist Islamism in Mali since the outbreak of the most recent crisis in 2012 and up to 2018, with the epicenter of the insurgency started in the North and expanded to the Central area with ramifications beyond Mali.

The paper starts by recognizing the complex and fractured local nature of the conflict in Mali (Boubacar Ba and Morten Boas, 2017, p. 26). The ethical, as well as the methodological challenges, of researching violence play an important role in the way we understand the context, the protagonists and the evolution of the crisis. Indeed, research under a fluid situation and in a context of violence is heavily dependent upon secondary data. First-hand empirical evidence is only obtained at great risk and as a result most analysis remain conditioned by the limited access of the researchers to the protagonists and the conflict settings (Mateja and Strazzari, 2016).

In order to understand the rise and fall of any Islamist movement we have to look into the state-society relations. The origins and the bases of such movements lie within the societies in which they originate and ''the form the revolt takes is primarily revolt against the local state'' (Halliday, 2005, p. 241).

While both the regional and global political arenas have played a role in the outbreak of the crisis, in its evolution and in the reconfiguration of the political landscape, the domestic regional arena remains the key to understanding the crisis and the new political order in the making (Hüsken and Klute, 2015).

More than looking into the names and acronyms of the armed groups, which have changed throughout the crisis, through splintering and fusion, the paper focus on key political protagonists and on the volatile pattern of alliance formation that has tended to characterize the changes of the insurgent groups' names (Ba and Boas, 2017). Indeed, the protagonists of armed violence tend to acquire a chameleonic character and will readily resort to new strategies to continuing mobilizing support and resources and will represent their aims in accordance with the most fashionable grammar of violence for external audiences, as well as domestic. By looking into the leadership of the movements and to the key protagonists we are not dismissing or neglecting the basis upon which they mobilize support and/or recruit their followers. Neither are we focusing on their individual traits of personality (departing explicitly from the strand of the literature that focus on profiles' characterization).

The focus on the leaderships and protagonists is important in relation to the contextual factors, such as political, economic, social and religious. Indeed, some of the protagonists have either a sophisticated understanding of the local context in which they operate or tend to mobilize support among their kin. However, a focus on the

ethnic, regional, religious and economic grievances alone will not explain why at a certain juncture, a group decides to embark upon a journey into violent extremism. The relationship between these groups and the local state is paramount to understanding their trajectory.

The paper starts with the theoretical framework, by reflecting upon the role of religion in violence, among other factors. It provides a definition of key concepts in order to clarify important analytical distinctions. Then it looks at the relationship between Islam, political participation and conflict and the processes of political radicalization, including an assessment of existing cleavages in Mali, in order to understand what were the causes that lead some groups to engage in armed violence and forms of violent extremism. Next, it sets up the context against which we should understand the rise and fall of Islamist movements in Mali, their trajectories and the unfolding of the crisis. Finally, it provides an analysis of the leaderships of some of the movements and groups, closing with an assessment of the state and regional actors' responses.

Terrorism, Radicalization and Violent Extremism

Since 9/11, terrorism studies outputs and counterterrorism policies have been marked by a set of problems. The field has been characterized by a lack of debate, over-reliance on secondary data and research outcomes based on one-time visits to the field, the lack of engagement with the historical and conceptual dimensions of terrorism, the lack of multi-disciplinarity and until the rise of ISIS (or Daesh) an over-concentration on Al-Qa'eda (Jackson et al., 2009, p. 5). One of the key challenges in this field is how to overcome mono-causal explanations of terrorism and its over-emphasis on religion and Islam (in particular) as its main cause. To this effect a focus on history, context and local knowledge is required (Dalacoura, 2009). Indeed, this approach allows to explore how Islam and Islamism's various interpretations are determined by social, political and economic factors (Dalacoura, 2009). Religion is used by the most extreme variants of Islamism but it is consensual that Islam does not incite violence and is not the main reason why these organizations opt for violent methods. A recent study carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows precisely the opposite: the individuals with a poor knowledge of Islam are more vulnerable to being indoctrinated and to follow the kind of dogma promoted by extremist Islamist organizations (UNDP, 2017). In contrast to the conventional perception, the UNDP study claims that the madrasas and an in-depth religious based education can be protective factors with regard to radicalization. Indeed, quality religious education ''served as source of resilience to recruitment'' of these interviewed in the context of the mentioned study (UNDP, 2017, p. 50).

Radicalization and violent extremism tend to be used interchangeably. Both radical and violent extremist organizations pose a challenge to the state. However, while

they do not aim to supplant the state, extremist violent organizations don't recognize the legitimacy of the state and aim to replace it (Joffé, 2012, p. 3). The state in its response to radical organizations can ultimately contribute to its transformation into violent extremist organizations.

In Africa, Islamist militancy has been on the rise for many decades (de Waal, 2004). In Africa, there are long established traditions of violent activism which inform their trajectories. Even though Wahhabi-style strands of Islamic inspiration and Salafi Jihadism have expanded internationally, domestic longer standing religious traditions still inform the movements' trajectories and practices in important ways in many places. However, it should be made clear that African Islamism is not homogeneous, and it is not more immune to extremist penetration due to an allegedly longer and well-established pacifist tradition associated with traditional Islam of Sufi inspiration (Bullejos, 2017, p. 322).

The rivalries, the violent action of jihadist groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and their connections to transnational networks of violent extremism pose a challenge to the security and stability of the states and societies in general and local groups in particular. The study of radicalization should include the motivations of radicalized youth and other groups in relation to the social, economic, political and the religious context. The next section covers the historical, as well as the contemporary context to understand continuities, as well as the radical changes since the 2012 crisis.

Understanding the Evolution of the Crisis

In 2012 the golden era of Mali as a praised example of democratization in Africa came to an end. A series of events precipitated the crisis. The Tuareg who had joined Qaddafi's Islamic legion returned with new military skills and weapons. Although the intervention in Libya did not trigger the insurgency in Northern Mali it catalised the re-emergence of a pattern of Tuareg-led armed violence in the North.

The coup d'Etat led by a junior Captain Hamadou Haya Sanogo that led to the overthrow of President Aminata Traore in March 2012 was the first event to bring Mali into the radars of external powers. Shortly after, on 6 April 2012, the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared unilaterally the independence of a short-lived entity named Azawad. Azawad is the name given to the region north of Timbuktu but has become synonymous of the whole region of northern Mali. This is the area that the Tuareg claim to be their traditional territory (Klute, 2011, p. 14). The MNLA did not escape internal rivalries for the control of the movements within Tuareg sub-clans, and the rivalry between noble and warrior-oriented clans, noble and vassals led to a split.

In Mali's Northern region other violent dynamics had been at play fostered by the Al-Qa'eda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM is an off-shoot of the Algerian

civil war. Since 1993-94 onwards the Algerian regime within the Islamist eradication discourse labelled all the Islamists (both the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and the extremists) as terrorists (Dalacoura, 2009, 131). These groups found safe-haven in Northern Mali taking advantage of the absence of Malian state's agents and institutions. Their ability to mobilize support within the Malian northern society was not achieved immediately. They benefited from local support through strategically forging alliances based on marriage. As Scheele (2013) brings to our attention it is difficult to classify the Algerians as outsiders because they have been part of the socio-political landscape of Northern Mali since the 1930s. Indeed, those in Northern Mali without any kind of ties with Algerians are the exception rather than the rule. In addition to these long established connections, in the past two decades other *ulema* of various origins, including of Indian-Pakistani origins, have emerged in the Malian religious landscape.

We can trace the origins of AQIM to the Algerian Armed Islamic Groups (GIA) that came to Mali in the 1990s. In Mali they integrated as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Salvation created in 1998. Only in 2007 were the Saharan Salafi jihadist successful in establishing formal links with Al-Qa'eda and as a result created AQIM.

AQIM was not immune to internal rivalries between Arabs, Mauritanians and Tuaregs, those who the other Malians pejoratively call the '*teints clairs*' (a label based on race). The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) was the outcome of internal rivalries and emerged as one of AQIM's splintering factions. Progressively AQIM, MUJAO, as well as Ansar ed-Dine (the latter a former ally of the MNLA who became a rival in the new religious landscape), sidelined the MNLA and took control over the North.

To add a further layer of complexity, the Northern region has been a transit point for informal trade, of both licit and illicit goods. Since the pre-colonial era, various actors have used this region to link sub-Saharan Africa, to North Africa and to the Mediterranean through trade and transport. Intra-sahelian trade of salt, cereals, dates and livestock were even more valuable. The importance of Islam and informal trade (both licit and illicit) have evolved in tandem to the point that Scheele (2012) has provided an important account of the relationship between smugglers and saints, of the connectivity of the region and North Africa, and more significantly of the family ties between northern Malian and Algerians.

The illicit traffic of human beings and drugs benefited from these well-established routes through the Sahel but it is of a much more recent breed. The traders had smuggled counterfeited cigarettes since the 1990s (Grégoire, 2013, p. 211). The militant Islamists and other insurgent groups at times offered safe transit through the areas under their control, other times clashed with the informal traders and groups involved in the transnational organized crime across the region and, in other instances, were involved and benefited from informal trade and transnational orga-

nized crime. Indeed, the state's agents benefited from these activities as well. In this region, the pattern of alliance formation was volatile and the fluidity of the situation required a sense of adaptation and flexibility to look for alternate allies when the situation so required.

The Armed Forces of Mali (FAMA) were not able to control the insurgency in the North and as the Islamist insurgents neared the city of Mopti the French President François Hollande, in an unexpected move, in January 2013, launched Operation Serval on the basis that the militant Islamists were likely to take over the capital: Bamako.

The French-led intervention added another layer of complexity and reconfigured the political dynamics. This intervention was at first welcomed by Malian citizens and the outcome was the dispersal of the operatives of the manifold insurgent movements in the North. At first sight the militant Islamists if not entirely defeated looked weakened. The FAMA regained control of most of the territory under control of the Islamists, mainly Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. However, al Mourabitoun, one of the splintering factions of AQIM, managed to launch an attack against one of the government held positions in the North. This move had a symbolic undertone to it. On top of the casualties inflicted against the FAMA, the attacks showed that the militant Islamists still could create insecurity and hamper stabilization efforts. The attacks against the Malian armed forces and external actors have continued ever since and have expanded beyond Mali.

In the aftermath of elections in 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected President of Mali, replacing the President Dioncounda Traore who had assured the transition in the aftermath of the military coup.

In parallel to the military response, the Algiers peace process was launched. The outcome was the 20 June 2015 peace agreement. Not all the protagonists were at the negotiation table and other regions in Mali, significantly the Central region, were left out of the Peace agreement.

The epicenter of the crisis moved from the North to the Centre. The Front for the Liberation of Macina (FLM) entered the stage. Some suggest that this armed group was a creation of the French intelligence (Sangaré, 2016), others suggest that it was a creation of Iyad Ag-Ghali's led movement – Ansar Dine.

The FLM in conformity with the volatile pattern of alliance formation that has tended to characterize the crisis in Mali has supported Fulani (Peuls) along the border with Niger in their clashes with Tuaregs suggesting that the alliance between Ansar Dine and the FLM is a matter of convenience where and when their interests tend to converge. Loyalty is a rare commodity in a context where survival under harsh conditions is at stake and deep-seated rivalries and grievances reassert themselves in unpredictable ways. The alliances swing between patterns of enmity and amity and kinship bonds.

So far the paper has selected a set of protagonists: the Malian Armed Forces, AQIM, the MNLA, MUJAO, al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine and the FLM. Some of these groups have formed coalitions when their interests have converged, namely vis-à-vis the peace process, but in their origins and trajectory the divergences with regard to strategies and aims tend to play a stronger role.
The next section will focus on the leaderships of these armed groups, to understand their strategies, aims, bases of support, the extent to which they enjoy a certain degree of legitimacy among the groups they claim to represent and their political and economic expediency.

Understanding the Leaderships and the Trajectory of Islamist Movements in Mali
The most well-known leader of militant Islamists in the Sahel is beyond doubt Mokthar Belmokthar. He gained the epitome, which was not sufficiently confirmed by empirical evidence, of Mr. Marlboro (Salem, 2014, pp. 42-45). He has gained, as well, the epitome of the uncatchable because his death has been announced several times and subsequently he has re-appeared. The importance of Mokhtar Belmokhtar to our understanding of the trajectory of Islamist movements in the region and its implications for Mali is related to his notorious role in expanding Salafi jihadism beyond his Algerian homeland. Like other *mujahidin* across the world he fought in Afghanistan and upon return he was involved in the Algerian civil war. In the aftermath of the war he sought refuge across the border in Mali and integrated through marrying Malian of various ethnic origins in the North. He thought of himself as the Sahel Emir of AQIM but due to divergences with the leadership in Algeria he was not officially recognized. Upon the designation of Abou Zeid as AQIM's Sahel Emir he mobilized support within his own Katibah and created al-Mourabitoun through an alliance with MUJAO.
The second is one of the Tuareg leaders – Iyad ag-Ghali – of the Ifoghan warrior sub-clan. He is from Mali. Iyad ag-Ghali in the past served as one of the intermediators in the release of hostages taken by AQIM (Boilley, 2011, p. 7). This has been the most lucrative businesses for the Salafi jihadists in the region. His trajectory allows us to confirm a volatile pattern of alliance formation as Iyad ag-Ghali has been both an ally and foe of most of the protagonists involved in the crisis, including the Malian state. His allegiance to Salafi jihadism has become more consolidated with the 10-month control of the North by the various radical and extremist Islamist groups and in the aftermath of his withdrawal of the peace process. This religious transformation has not obliterated his past and identification with the Tuareg's grievances and past insurgencies. His followers tend to identify with one of the noble clans of the Tuareg – the Ifoghas. AQMI has managed to recruit supporters among the vassal clan of the Tuareg – the Imghad. As we have seen, the MNLA represented as well Tuareg grievances and diverged from Ansar Dine in its

pro-separatist stance and in its rejection of Ansar Dine strict adherence to sharia. This confirms a past feature present in other Tuareg insurgencies: that of internal division and fratricidal war (Klute, 2011).

The third one is Amadou Koufa, an Islamist preacher, and a Fulani, who is from Mali as well. His emergence to the scene as the leader of the FLM happened in 2015. The Fulani took up arms to guarantee their protection from the excesses committed in the extremist Islamist controlled-areas, namely in those under the MNLA control. After the French intervention, when the Malian armed forces made their come back the Fulani were targeted as extremist Islamists and terrorists. Koufa through an unexpected alliance with Iyad Ag-Ghali moved beyond the traditional rivalry between Tuaregs and Fulani and converged in opposition to the state and to the external actors. Amadou Koufa capitalized on local grievances and recruited followers among young Fulani herdsmen (Ba and Boas, 2017, p. 21). The reference to Macina is not a mere coincidence and is related to the jihad waged by the Fulani of the Dina of Macina, a Fulani Empire of the nineteenth century, who were initially connected to the Sokoto Caliphate (Schmitz, 2013, p. 215). At that time the Arab Kunta, who adhered to Sufi orders, were well respected *ulema* in the Azawad region, north of Timbuktu. They had an important role as mediators in the conflicts between Songhais and the Tuareg Iwillemmeden. Their influence waned with the expansion of the Fulani of the Dina of Macina but that was conjectural. With colonialism they forged an alliance with the Tuareg Ifoghas to fight against the hegemony of the Tuareg Iwillemmeden. These latter were labelled as warriors merely interested in looting and ignorant of justice and *sharia*, placing them in the same category of those targeted during the nineteenth century Jihad. The legacy of that first *jihad* was the establishment of a connection between ignorance and infidelity to the ways of the Prophet to slavery. Slavery was not justified in terms of race or skin color but in relation to ignorance of Islam. The resilience of slavery among the Tuareg and Fulani deserves to be mentioned and the adherence of descendants of slaves to Salafi jihadist groups in the Sahel has a double meaning: of gaining access to critical resources and of effacing their inferior status (Schmitz, 2013, p. 219).

MUJAO's leadership was composed of an Arab Mauritanian – Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou – and an Algerian of Malian origins – Abou Ali. This movement managed to recruit local followers in Gao's region among the Arabs of the Tilemsi Valley, Fulani and Songhai and among these groups' kin across the border in Niger (Bullejos and Sangaré, 2015, p. 56). Indeed, the rivalries between the Tuareg and the Fulani are not recent. For that reason several young Fulani pastoralists aligned themselves with MUJAO to obtain protection, arms and to guarantee access to a critical resource: water (Ba and Boas, 2017, p. 20).

Ansar Dine, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun all converge in their aim to replace the state with an alternative political order and one based upon the strict application of

sharia (Islamic law). Since March 2017 AQIM's Sahara/Sahel branch, Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front and al-Mourabitoun have forged an alliance and have created the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin.

Life in the areas under control of the extremist Islamist was difficult and the application of *hudud* (punishments) was carried out by both locals and Salafi jihadists from other places. Those targeted included Malian who identified themselves with the same ethnic group as the Salafi jihadists. The destruction of lives and historical sites and manuscripts, including Sufi tombs in Gao, has traumatized a society who was already surviving under extremely demanding and harsh local conditions. Any peaceful resolution of the conflict will need to engage with local initiatives of reconciliation. Justice will need to be included in the equation. However, the Salafi jihadists continue their insurgency and attacks against the state and external actors. For those who lived under their control, who appreciated their style of applying justice and who benefited from illicit trade, their influence is not over. We now turn to the state and other regional and external actors' responses to the different protagonists.

Understanding the State and Regional Actors' Responses (State-society Relations)

As Joffé reminds us, state and opposition, radical or extremist, must be understood in a dialectical relationship. The revolt in the first place is directed against the local state reflecting a reaction to the state's actions or lack of it. The state's reaction to the opposition will be determinant in the radicalization processes and radicalism can mutate into extremism (Joffé, 2012, p. 3).

The crisis in 2012 needs to be understood against the structural crisis of the past four decades. This region has been marked by recurrent droughts and food insecurity (Bonnecase and Brachet, 2013). The fears of religious radicalization and violent extremist are more recent and have changed the political and religious landscape.

Within Mali the northern region is characterized by a higher incidence of poverty. The average poverty rate in Mali is 64 per cent, in Timbuktu is 77 per cent, in Gao 78.7 per cent and for Kidal is 92 per cent. The youth unemployment rate in Gao was 80 per cent (Solomon, 2015, p. 68). The region is further marginalized in terms of state's institutions and agents. The road stops in Gao and the 350 kilometers route that links Gao to Kidal is no man's land sand.

Corruption during Aminata Traore's rule was rampant including complicity of high-level government officials in drug trafficking (Solomon, 2015, 71). Aminata Traore's government further divided and polarized Malian society through the tactic of co-opting Northern elites and along ethnic lines, including in the military.

The events that precipitated the crisis were manifold but in the aftermath of demonstrations in Azawad, the *coup d'etat* in Bamako, and the defeat of the armed forces in the North the various insurgents took control of most of the northern cities.

When the militant Islamists reached Mopti French President upon request of Mali decided to intervene and launched Operation Serval on January 2013. The United Nations Security Council resolution 2071 of 12 October 2012 had authorized ECOWAS to prepare an international peacekeeping force and be ready to intervene without further delays. This did not happen and in the aftermath of the French intervention the regional organization finally send in a 4000 force to join the French military. UN Security Council Resolution 2100 of April 2013 authorized a United Nation peacekeeping operation and ECOWAS initial force was transformed into the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The French transformed Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane in August 2014 to fight terrorism beyond Mali with a focus on Sahel as a region.

As the peace process has failed to stop the extremists from attacking both the Malian armed forces and the external forces, the government has made use of pro-government militias composed of the Tuareg Imghad against secession, the Ganda Izo (Songhai) and the Ganda Koy (Fulani) in their fight against the insurgents in the North. The European Union Training Mission in Mali, which predated the French intervention, has continued providing training to the Malian army and has sought to work with a regional coalition called G5 Sahel composed of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Tchad. However, the absence of Algeria is notorious. The Tuareg and other pastoralists carry their daily lives regardless of borders and the seasonal search for grazing pastures is a strategy of survival in a harsh environment. The peril is that efforts to curb drug traffic and the illicit traffic of human beings will further deprive pastoralists of a key strategy of survival: mobility across borders.

Without a long term engagement and without addressing the set of legitimate grievances that the extremists have managed to capitalize the current predicament of instability and insecurity is likely to prevail.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the complexity of the phenomena under study and the fluid situation it is possible to close the paper with a set of well-substantiated claims put forth in the theoretical section of the paper.

First, the case study shows that radicalization is a process. Second, the relationship between ideological radicalization and radicalization of action (resulting in violent extremism) is not linear and it is not clear whether ideological radicalization is a necessary pre-condition for youth, or other groups, to engage in violent extremism. Indeed, the Fulani youth's engagement with MUJAO was not motived primarily by indoctrination or identification with the groups' dogma and violent actions. We need to follow a more nuanced understanding of this relationship as the evidence from the Malian case shows. In the case of young people who joined the militant

and more extremist Islamist movements in Mali research suggests that ideological radicalization was not the key motivation to join and engage on violent action. Indeed, the link between views and behavior is far more complex. Third, the understanding of how the militant and extremist Islamist organizations in Mali mobilized support among youth groups with a more limited access to social media is of great heuristic value and confirms other studies that show that the role of social media in youth's radicalization tends to be overstated in comparison to face-to-face contacts, other everyday practices and contextual factors. Finally, while it is important to acknowledge that many Salafi inspired movements have not resorted to violent extremism and the diversity of Islamist organizations in Mali which operate within a secular order, the paper challenges a strand of the literature that presents Islamism in Africa as exclusively tributary of a pacifist tradition. The emergence of the FLM when taken in its historical context shows that jihadism was already among its strategies of expansion in the pre-colonial era.

Mali has seen an increase in insecurity throughout the country, initially in the North and then in the Centre. The groups that have resorted to violence include Tuareg separatists, self-defence militias and militant and extremist Islamist groups. Since the outbreak of the crisis the groups have changed, and external interventions have contributed to a reconfiguration of the competing political orders in the making. The jihadist phenomenon has been on the rise among the local population, at times fueled by local grievances, all within the context of a weak Malian state. Categorizing the different violent actors in Mali is problematic due to the porous nature of the boundaries between them and the flexible identity of the organizations operating in the field as this paper has shown. The complexity of radicalization processes and the categorization of groups constitutes a severe problem in terms of the state, regional and external actors' responses to these processes. International and national actors are attempting to address this phenomenon, but results are yet to be seen. Only through a long-term engagement with local groups and through coming to grips with the legitimate grievances of some of the groups will order be restored in Mali. In the meantime, those who have been captured between the state's and extremist Islamists' attempts at creating competing political orders will remain denied of living in a more stable and just order in Mali.

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