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From a focus on security to diplomatic dialogue: should a negotiated stability be considered in the Sahel?

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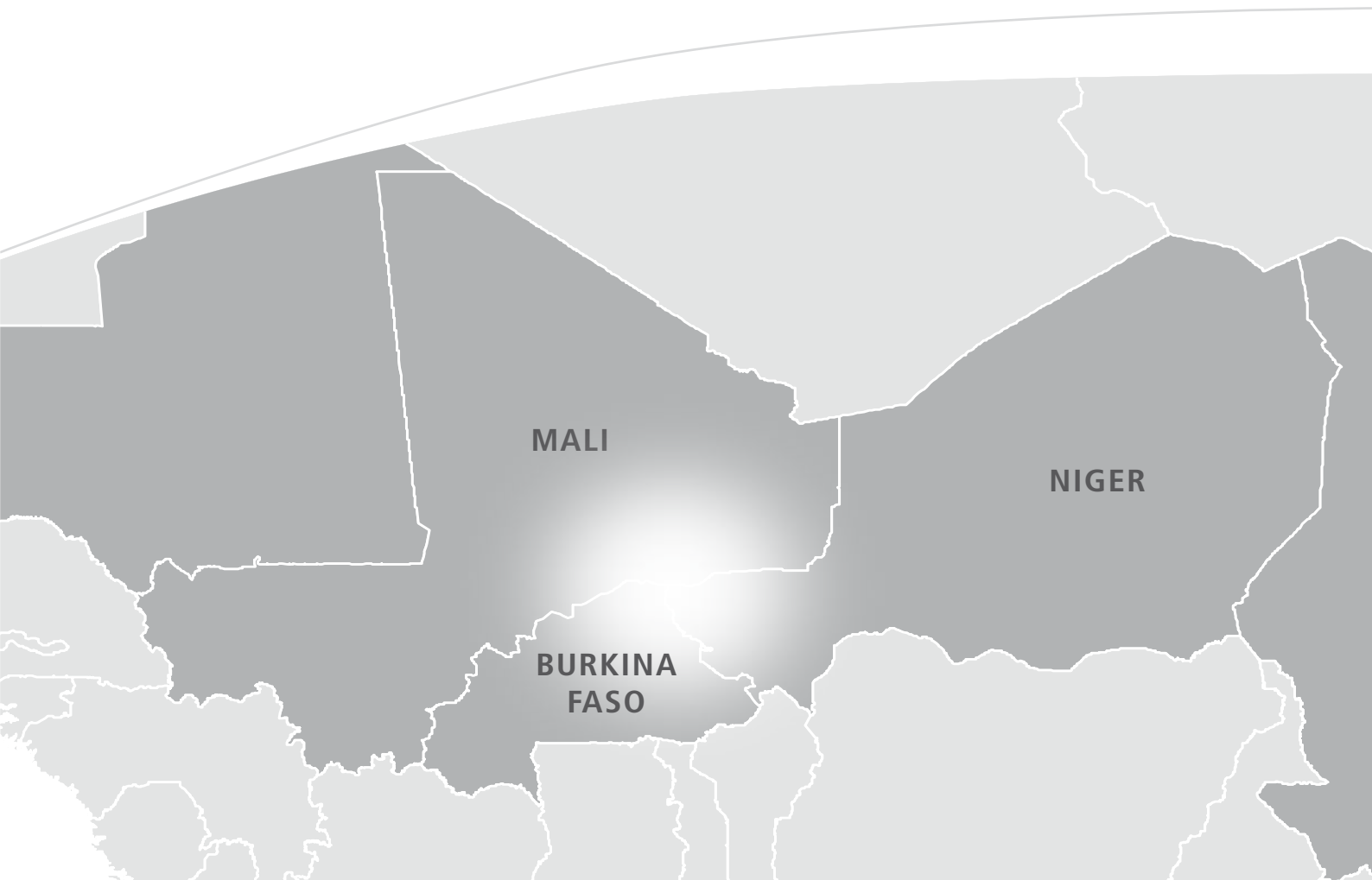**Baba Dakono**

From a focus on security to diplomatic dialogue: should a negotiated stability be considered in the Sahel?

About the Author

Baba Dakono is currently the Executive Secretary of the *Observatoire citoyen sur la gouvernance et la sécurité* (Mali's citizens' observatory on governance and security). Prior to holding this position, he was a researcher on the Sahel team of the Regional Office of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) for West Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, based in Bamako. Baba has also been a project manager at International Alert. He has worked on issues including governance, human rights, strengthening the rule of law, and the consolidation of democracy. As a trained jurist, he holds both a master's degree in law and a master's degree in political science.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AU	African Union
CCVC	National Coalition Against the High Cost of Living
CDP	Congress for Democracy and Progress
CNRDRE	National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State
CONOPS	Strategic Concept of Operations
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DNI	Inclusive National Dialogue
DSF	Defence and security forces
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
FC-G5S	G-5 Sahel Joint Force
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GSIM	Group to Support Islam and Muslims'
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HCI	High Islamic Council
IED	Improvised Explosive Devices
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin
MINUSMA	United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
MPP	People's Movement for Progress
M5/RFP	Movement of 5 June - Rally of Patriotic Forces
	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, High Council for the Unity of Azawad
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
P/CVE	Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism
PIP	Priority Investment Programme
PSC	African Union Peace and Security Council
PSCC	Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa
UN	United Nations
VDP	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland

ABOUT THE STUDY

For several years, the Sahel has been facing enormous security challenges due, in part, to the actions of jihadist groups that have taken root in the vast territories of the region, opposing all forms of government representation. The idea of negotiating with violent extremist groups seems to be increasingly appealing to political actors as a means of containing this phenomenon, which constitutes a real threat to stability and peace in the Sahel and elsewhere on the African continent. In an article published in the Swiss newspaper 'Le Temps', the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smaïl Chergui, called for *'exploring dialogue with extremists in the Sahel and encouraging them to lay down their arms'*, drawing a parallel with the agreement reached between the Americans and the Afghani Taliban in February 2020, which, according to Chergui, *'can inspire our Member States to explore dialogue with extremists and encourage them to lay down their arms'*.

Mali appears to share the vision of the African Union Commissioner, having initiated talks with Iyad Ag Ghaly, leader of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims), a jihadist alliance affiliated with al-Qaeda, for the release of hostages. In his first international interview on RFI and France 24 on December 3, 2020, Mali's transitional Prime Minister, Moctar Ouane, recalled that *'dialogue with terrorists is the will of the people of Mali'*, stressing the Malian government's willingness to use such dialogue as part of its arsenal in the fight against armed extremism.

It was against this backdrop that the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa* (FES PSCC) commissioned a study on the topic *'From a Strategy Focused on Security to Diplomatic Dialogue: Should a Negotiated Stability be Considered in the Sahel?'*. The primary purpose of this study was to analyse and examine the future of negotiation as a strategy for dealing with instability in the Sahel. The analysis focused on the three Liptako Gourma countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a decade, the Sahel region, which has long been beset by political and humanitarian crises, has been caught up in a spiral of violence against which the effectiveness of the security responses envisaged in the past appears to be dwindling. The insecurity in the Sahel, characterised by violent extremist activism, transnational organised crime and the resurgence of local conflicts, is above all a symptom of the fragility of the region's states. In most cases, it is caused by the governments' inability or sometimes merely the inefficiency of attempts to mainstream border areas into national policies. It is also due to the lack or low levels of productive investment in these areas.

The lack of protection, as well as inadequate access to basic social services, particularly in rural communities, has slowly eroded trust in governments and weakened the social contract between them and the people. This has made government presence and authority highly questionable and created an enabling environment for the emergence of 'alternative' forces such as violent extremist groups and self-defence militias.

Yet, since the security crisis began in Mali in 2012 and spread across the region, particularly in Burkina Faso and Niger, numerous initiatives have been undertaken with a military focus. Thus, from the United Nations' Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), to the Barkhane operation, to the G-5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), there has been what some have referred to as a 'security logjam' in the region.

Today, several years after the beginning of the crisis, the security situation remains precarious, and more and more voices are being raised within civil society, and not only in the region, calling for a political solution to insecurity in the Sahel. The option of dialogue with violent extremist groups seems to be part of this approach.

This study aims to contribute to achieving a better understanding of certain security dynamics in the region and to examine the future of negotiation as a strategy for dealing with instability in the Sahel. It is based on a literature review and a number of informal, semi-structured, confidential interviews conducted with a wide range of informants in the region, including civil society representatives, journalists, diplomats, and international development cooperation officials in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The study presents an analytical overview of the security landscapes and highlights the major dynamics underlying the situations in the target countries. It analyses the issue of negotiated stability as a means of managing the security crisis and suggests alternatives where relevant.

The need to strengthen and broaden the options for a peace solution through dialogue was identified on the basis of this analysis. The option of dialogue should be viewed in its holistic dimension, i.e. taking into account all of the dynamics connected with the security crisis, including the structural factors behind the involvement of certain communities in violent extremist groups. The study also revealed that talks were already taking place with the groups at the level of certain communities, namely bottom-up dialogue. Currently, with the Malian authorities' focus on approaching the issue of dialogue with extremist groups solely from the top down (talks with Iyad and Kouffa) and

through the religious prism (placing the initiative under the aegis of the High Islamic Council of Mali), the chances of a negotiated peace are reduced, as this approach obscures the local dynamics that have driven the massive involvement of certain communities in extremist groups. Dialogue needs to be considered in its holistic dimension. Confining it to a performative, community-based register or to a single rung of the hierarchy (leadership) reinforces imbalances, creates new opportunities for violence and radicalisation, and limits its impact on the prospects of building genuine peace. Thus, opening up dialogue means agreeing to speak with extremist armed groups in order to increase the chances of assuaging the violence and frustrations that are generated every day.

Moreover, broadening the scope of the dialogue to different levels makes it possible to build bridges between conflict levels, to understand the expectations of the people, to move away from the state-centred approach and to draw inspiration from the lower levels of the conflict.

Dialogue should be seen as a continuous mode of action in the process. Differences in interpretation cannot be resolved when political dialogue is suspended or considered obsolete. Dialogue, which may or may not be successful, must be approached as one element of a broader solution.

Clearly, not all actors are or are likely to be open to dialogue. With this in mind, military responses are sometimes necessary, even if they are, in any case, insufficient on their own. In this context, the international actors engaged in the quest for stability in the region must be sensitive to each country's local specificities and stop making their support conditional on imported management models. However, historical and so-called 'traditional' motivations should not just serve as *ad hoc* window dressing for political interests while communities are denied the right to be heard. Imposed external development models should be viewed with caution. It is important to respond to local needs through endogenous mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

The observation that the Sahel is in crisis, far from being the product of media reports alone, appears self-evident, at least in the light of the upsurge in violence connected with the activities of so-called terrorist groups and criminal networks, as well as the re-emergence of local conflicts in the region. The upsurge in violence, which has been perceptible in the region for almost a decade now, is above all a consequence of the fragility of the Sahelian states. Weakened by a far-reaching governance crisis and population growth that increases pressure on resources, they have been profoundly destabilised by the breakdown of Libya and the ensuing proliferation of combatants, arms and trafficking. The resulting Malian conflict in 2012 led to the withdrawal of the administration from vast expanses of rural territory. This crisis in Mali was followed by similar dynamics in Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, in Niger. Thus, as of 2014 or 2015, locations in Burkina Faso and Niger were the setting of one or more terrorist attacks resulting in dozens of civilian and military casualties. With the emergence of armed jihadist groups, the best known of which are Hamadoun Kouffa's Macina katiba, operating mainly in central Mali; Ibrahim Dicko's Ansarul Islam, active mainly in the Burkinabe Sahel; and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara - led until recently by Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, who was killed by the French army in the Sahel - which has carried out attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger. As a result, the expansion of insecurity in the border areas of Liptako-Gourma was initially seen as the outcome of contagion from the Malian crisis. However, our study has revealed that the geographical expansion of the threat was also due to the use of local conflicts by terrorist groups to attract recruits; governments' inability or ineffectiveness in mainstreaming these border areas into national policies; and a lack or low levels of productive investment in these areas.

Key protagonists include various sub-groups of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the regional branch of al-Qaeda, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). These groups take advantage of poverty and feelings of abandonment to recruit massively from within certain communities. Due to the numerous attacks on military outposts, allegedly committed by violent extremist groups, the armed forces (mainly Malian and Burkinabe) are concentrating in larger bases and withdrawing from areas in urgent need of protection. Thus, taking advantage of the weakness or absence of the state, violent extremist groups, which control certain areas, introduce new, often violent, rules and 'institutions' to settle disputes and regulate access to key natural resources. The growing violence and insecurity in the region only increases entrenched vulnerabilities in the Sahel and, in particular, in Liptako-Gourma.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that armed groups have managed, in some cases, particularly in areas that are epicentres of communitarian violence, to negotiate local peace agreements in certain communities, as has been seen in the Tenenkou Circle in the Mopti region of Mali, the Niono Circle (Ségou region, Mali) and the Soum province in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso. Thus, in contrast to several peace agreements supported by the international community, and which are notable for excluding them, these groups negotiate local agree-

ments with specific communities that seem to last beyond short-term ceasefires. Such agreements have reduced violence in parts of the flood plains of the Mopti region, including Tenenkou and Youwarou. Based on these observations, whatever one might think of this dynamic, the idea of dialogue and negotiation as a way out of the crisis remains on the table in all three countries.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that a purely security-based approach and short-term solutions cannot deliver the responses needed to strengthen the resilience of communities in this joint space. Against this background, the research questions addressed in this study focused on current developments in the security situation in the Liptako-Gourma area: what responses have been brought so far by the different countries facing this situation? What has been the nature of those responses? Can an assessment be made at this juncture of the dilemma focussing on whether or not to undertake 'dialogue'? Can military force alone bring an end to terrorism in the Liptako-Gourma area? If not, what other types of action would be appropriate given the situation, either alone or in conjunction with the military solution? Should 'dialogue' only take place with the 'jihadists'?

In answering these questions, this paper will explore the following aspects.[1] Firstly, it will look at what the security situation in the region is telling us by analysing the current security landscape and trends. Secondly, it will examine the efforts being made to counter the threat of violent extremist groups, with a particular focus on the military alternatives that are attracting political and media attention. Then, it will address the issue of dialogue itself. Finally, recommendations will be made for a holistic (multidimensional) way out of

the crisis, which could lay the foundation for a negotiated peace in the region.

The approach used to conduct this study was based on a triangular analysis in different places and at different levels of the conflict. The methodology based on the inclusion of different levels made it possible to draw on the perceptions and reflections of various actors from the 'top' (government, civil society, political actors, international actors, etc.), but also the perceptions and expectations of the local population. There was an emphasis on decentralisation throughout the research, as well as on highlighting the diversity of positions. The triangular approach adopted throughout all phases of the study meant that its perspective extends beyond the circle of national and international public institutions involved in peace and security. To ensure that this was successfully reflected, a decision was made to reproduce selected stories from each study area, which further enriched the analysis. However, it is important to note that this study did not aim to be exhaustive, nor did it seek to find a middle ground between the different

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1 The research questions that guided this study focused on current developments in the security situation in the Liptako-Gourma area. To answer these questions, interviews were conducted in the respective national capitals of Ouagadougou, Niamey and Bamako. The researcher met with government officials, local elected representatives, military officers, leaders of politico-military groups in Mali, international stakeholders - particularly in the fields of security and development - and representatives of civil society (youth and women's associations, religious and community leaders, academics, journalists, etc.) in the Liptako-Gourma areas (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) affected by the current insecurity. In total, 63 interviews were conducted between 3 July and 7 August 2021. These encounters made it possible to gather the opinions and perspectives of the above-mentioned actors on the nature of the current insecurity, the protagonists, the underlying dynamics and the ways and means of responding to it in a sustainable manner, as well as the option of dialogue with armed groups described as terrorists.

positions, but rather to report the most salient difficulties and expectations of the people interviewed, even if this meant that there were sometimes substantial differences between the different positions. In addition, quantitative data was compiled from the database of The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

I. TRENDS IN THE SECURITY LANDSCAPE IN THE LIPTAKO-GOURMA AREA

1.1 Persistence and spread of the terrorist threat

The year 2012 marked the beginning of a serious multidimensional crisis in Mali, with the outbreak of an armed rebellion in the North, the stalling of the democratic process following the military coup led against Amadou Toumani Touré, and the occupation of a significant portion (¾) of its territory by 'jihadist' groups. After the Franco-African military operation to expel those groups (ANSAR DINE, MUJWA, AQIM) from the North, a preliminary agreement for presidential elections and inclusive peace talks was signed in Ouagadougou on 18 January 2013 between the Malian government and the armed independence groups (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, High Council for the Unity of Azawad). At the same time, rising insecurity in the country led to the withdrawal of part of the civil service and the closure of schools and some social services. However, some attacks also involved settling of scores between local families, as has been observed, for example, in central Mali, particularly in the Douentza Circle. Since 2015, clashes involving the Fulani, Dogon, Bozo and Bambara communities have plunged the Ségou and Mopti regions in central Mali into a spiral of local conflicts. The escalation of these local conflicts, the persistence of organised crime and the activities of violent extremist groups have contributed to a deterioration in the security situation, creating a fertile breeding ground for the emergence of self-defence groups and militias, which are often community based.

From 2015 onwards, there has been what many have referred to as 'contagion of insecurity from Mali to neighbouring countries', notably Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso has lost its reputation as a peaceful and relatively stable country in a turbulent Sahelian region. It has gradually become a new hotbed for terrorist groups, with the November 2015 kidnapping of a Romanian expatriate working in a manganese mining project in the north-eastern town of Tambao, near the border with Mali, followed by the storming of a gendarmerie barracks in the south-western town of Samorogouan and the killing of three gendarmes and a civilian by gunmen in October of the same year. On 27 November 2015, armed men attacked a van carrying money from the Inata gold mine in the northern province of Soum. In 2019, Burkina Faso alone represented half of the 4,000 security events recorded in the region.

As for Niger, its geographical position places it at the crossroads of three threats: Boko Haram in the south-east, the collapse of Libya with the consequent proliferation of militias as well as the presence of groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) on the border with Mali. Faced with a wide-ranging and multi-pronged threat, the expansion of Boko Haram in the south-east of the country, particularly in the Diffa region, remains a concern for Niger. Initially present only in Nigeria, particularly its north-eastern Borno State, Yusuf's message has gradually spread beyond that country's borders to other areas in Lake Chad Basin countries, including Niger, especially the Diffa region. Thus, although they had long been confined to north-eastern Nigeria, from 2013 onwards Niger became a theatre of operations first for the Boko Haram group and later for the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) and ISGS.

Boko Haram's first recorded attacks in Niger took place in May 2013, when suicide bombers attacked a barracks in Agadez and the SOMAIR (uranium mining company) facilities in Arlit. In 2015, Boko Haram expanded its operations, with attacks on the communities of Bosso and Diffa. According to the UN humanitarian organisation OCHA, attacks on military positions and civilians in numerous locations, including Bosso, Toumour, Bilabrim and Diffa, caused the displacement of more than 61,000 people who took refuge in the Maradi region. In addition to the high human cost, the group's activities have created a disastrous situation in both socio-economic and humanitarian terms. In addition to the front operated by Boko Haram in south-western Niger, since 2015, the country has begun to experience an additional threat in the north, with the militant activities of groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These two groups are particularly active in the Tillabéry region.

Insecurity has become widespread throughout Liptako Gourma, an area straddling Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Beginning in 2015, the attacks marked a turning point in the armed groups' terror strategy aimed at the civilian population and the defence and security forces (DSFs). Indeed, there was a significant expansion of the scope of intervention of these armed groups. Their modus operandi also saw a diversification of violent actions: suicide attacks, hostage-taking, laying of mines or improvised explosive devices (IEDs), attacks on military bases with rocket launchers, individual clashes on motorbikes, etc., causing the deaths of thousands of civilians and members of national and international armed forces. The dynamics of the conflict have been further complicated by asymmetric attacks, which have had a negative impact on the lives of the civilian population.

The violence in the region is multifaceted and complex; it is perpetrated by isolated armed groups, movements that signed the 2015 peace agreement (in Mali), militias and self-defence groups. It is also perpetrated by national and, to a lesser extent, international armed forces who have committed abuses and human rights violations in the wake of the fight against terrorism. These multiple acts of violence have direct repercussions on the population, as well as on the strategies deployed to respond to insecurity. Incidents in the Liptako-Gourma area, which were sporadic between 2012 (one recorded event) and 2016 (six recorded events), have increased exponentially since 2017, with an average of 19 events per year. In 2018, according to data collected on the ACLED website, 89 events were recorded and there were a further 89 between 1 January and 15 September 2019, a fivefold increase compared to 2017. From January 2012 to 20 August 2021, more than 2,000 civilians were killed in 500 separate events.

In 2012, scant weeks before the presidential elections in Mali, in which the incumbent was not running, a mutiny by a group of members of the military calling themselves the National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE) triggered a coup. The events of 2012 plunged Mali into chaos until the Franco-African military campaign of January 2013 and the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (MISMA, followed by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali, MINUSMA) restored a semblance of stability. Since then, in addition to insecurity, the climate of distrust between the citizens and politicians has been greatly exacerbated, creating a toxic political and social atmosphere. This distrust, which is reflected in the non-participation of citizens in electoral processes, is emblematic of the gap that has existed for many years between civil society

and politicians. Participation rates in national elections remain very low. Since the presidential elections of 2013, the participation rate, which stood at approximately 50% according to the European Union observation report, has continued to fall, despite the intense fervour witnessed in July and August 2013.

In 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta won the presidential election with 77.6% of the votes cast in the second round, promising to restore state sovereignty and fight corruption. The signing of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in 2015 was an important step towards resolving the crisis in the northern regions. After his first term in office, IBK was re-elected in 2018 following a controversial election. This presidential election was the second since the security and institutional crisis interrupted the democratic cycle in 2012. In June and July 2020, a vast protest movement led by the Movement of 5 June - Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5/RFP), reached its peak and undoubtedly contributed to the fall of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. This movement was part of

a broader protest landscape in Mali, including repeated strikes in the education and justice sectors, demonstrations against insecurity and massacres in the centre of the country, and rallies against the presence of foreign forces such as Barkhane and the UN mission in Mali. The subsequent sequence of events led to the resignation of President IBK and the seizure of power by the military on 18 August 2020. A few months later, another change took place in the institutional architecture of the transition process ongoing in Mali with the appointment of a transitional President, Vice-President and Prime Minister, as well as the establishment of a national transitional council.

In terms of security, the situation has continued to deteriorate since 2012, although 2014 saw a relative decrease in incidents. Indeed, the more than 4,000 security events documented since 2012 have claimed nearly 10,000 lives.

Burkina Faso has been experiencing a tense political climate over the past five years, marked by a troubled transition following the popular

Graph No. 1. Summary Table of Security Events in Mali from 2012 to 2020

Number of Fatalities	Year	Number of Events
538	2012	278
883	2013	311
382	2014	152
428	2015	178
320	2016	167
950	2017	478
1762	2018	754
1489	2019	663
2848	2020	1100
Total : 9,600		**4,081**

Source : ACLED https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard

Graph No. 2. Summary Table of Security Events in Burkina Faso from 2012 to 2020

Number of Fatalities	Year	Number of Events
32	2012	68
08	2013	39
36	2014	123
23	2015	116
81	2016	204
116	2017	203
306	2018	395
1551	2019	704
2370	2020	652
Total : 4,523		**2,504**

Source : ACLED https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard

uprising of October 2014 and the ensuing fall of long-time President Blaise Compaoré due to his attempt to change the constitution and extend his term in office. The attempted constitutional amendment led to a split in the then ruling CDP party in January 2014, with some 53 prominent figures forming a new party, the People's Movement for Progress (MPP). They included former Prime Minister and former Speaker of the National Assembly Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who had also held various ministerial and leadership positions within the CDP, including that of party chair. This paved the way for the emergence of a political landscape in which the long-standing dominance of the CDP was eroded, and the MPP was the best organised opposition. Kaboré was elected President in November 2015. Since then, the insecurity driven by violent extremism in Burkina Faso has been interpreted through the prism of alleged manoeuvres by the former regime. Key informants interviewed in Ouagadougou observed that although this interpretation had evolved, it continued to have considerable influence within the current government. According to the independent analysts and political figures interviewed, the lack of trust between the two

parties made dialogue and reconciliation difficult in the short term. As a result, the country has seen an increase in local clashes over the past four years. Between 2012 and 2020, Burkina Faso experienced more than 2,500 security events involving more than 4,000 fatalities.

As in Burkina Faso and Mali, the security situation in Niger has deteriorated significantly. The Diffa region, which has been in a state of emergency since February 2015, continues to experience recurrent attacks by Boko Haram. Several departments have also been placed under a state of emergency in the Tillabéry (Abala, Bankilaré and Ayorou, Say, Torodi and Téra) and Tahoua (Tassara) regions, in response to insecurity mainly caused by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Between 2012 and 2020, Niger recorded more than 1,000 security events, resulting in over 3,700 fatalities.

Across the region, attacks labelled as terrorist attacks, led against increasingly ambitious targets[2] have proliferated and grown in complexity. Armed groups have claimed responsibility for several attacks against the national armies

Graph No. 3. Summary Table of Security Events in Niger from 2012 to 2020

Number of Fatalities	Year	Number of Events
0	2012	4
33	2013	24
38	2014	20
992	2015	72
367	2016	82
258	2017	58
513	2018	169
517	2019	279
1060	2020	415
Total : 3,778		**1,123**

Source : ACLED https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard

of all three countries and the partner forces of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the G-5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) and Operation Barkhane. Local elected officials, traditional and religious leaders and teachers have also been victims of intimidation, threats, kidnappings and even assassinations. More than 2,000 schools have been closed in Burkina Faso; 1,533 in Mali (data collected from the OCHA MALI website, under the Education cluster), and 100 in the Tillabéry region of Niger.

1.2 Stabilisation efforts with a Military flavour

The increase in armed violence against a backdrop of rising violent extremism, renewed local conflicts and the growth of organised crime in the border areas between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, known as the Liptako Gourma area, is of great concern. Yet military presence in this region has never been stronger than over the past eight years. Quite the contrary. Despite what some analysts have referred to as a 'security logjam', the threat is taking new forms and gaining new ground.

The starting point of the 'security-oriented' response to the security crisis was 'Operation Serval'. Indeed, it could be pinpointed to the time of the request by the Malian authorities for air support to stop the columns of 'jihadists' who, after nearly ten months of occupation (from April 2012 to January 2013) of the main regions of northern Mali (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal), were descending towards the south of the country. This military presence, particularly the French presence, eventually materialised in the form of troops committed to Mali, initially

2 The attacks target military camps, such as the attack on the Boulikessi and Mondoro camps in Mali in September 2019, the attack on the Inates camp of the Nigerien armed forces in December 2019, and the attack on the general headquarters of the Burkina Faso armed forces in March 2018, in the very heart of the capital city of Ouagadougou.

under 'Operation Serval' and later as part of the 'Operation Barkhane' military mission in the Sahel. Launched in January 2013 and conducted as part of French military intervention in Mali, Operation Serval ended in July 2014 when the forces engaged in the country became part of a regional operation: Operation Barkhane. The cost of Operation Serval to the French defence budget amounted to €880 million in 2020. According to the French authorities, it was one of the largest military operations in that country's recent history. It suffered 45 casualties and a significant number of injured. The mission was planned as part of a Franco-African intervention to support the Malian armed forces in reclaiming the territory, part of which had been occupied by a mixture of armed terrorist and independence groups. Thus, France took action through 'Serval' and the African Union through Chadian troops in the framework of the African Union Support Mission (MISMA).

While the objective of the Franco-African military campaign was achieved (the advance of the 'jihadist' groups was halted), the threat remained and took new forms. The major groups at that time, including AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJWA, may have been driven out of the main towns in northern Mali, but they continued to pose a significant threat and recruited massively from communities not only in Mali but also in neighbouring countries. As a result, the groups remained active in Mali and beyond, in Burkina Faso and Niger. In response

Graph No. 4. Toll of Operation Barkhane in 2020
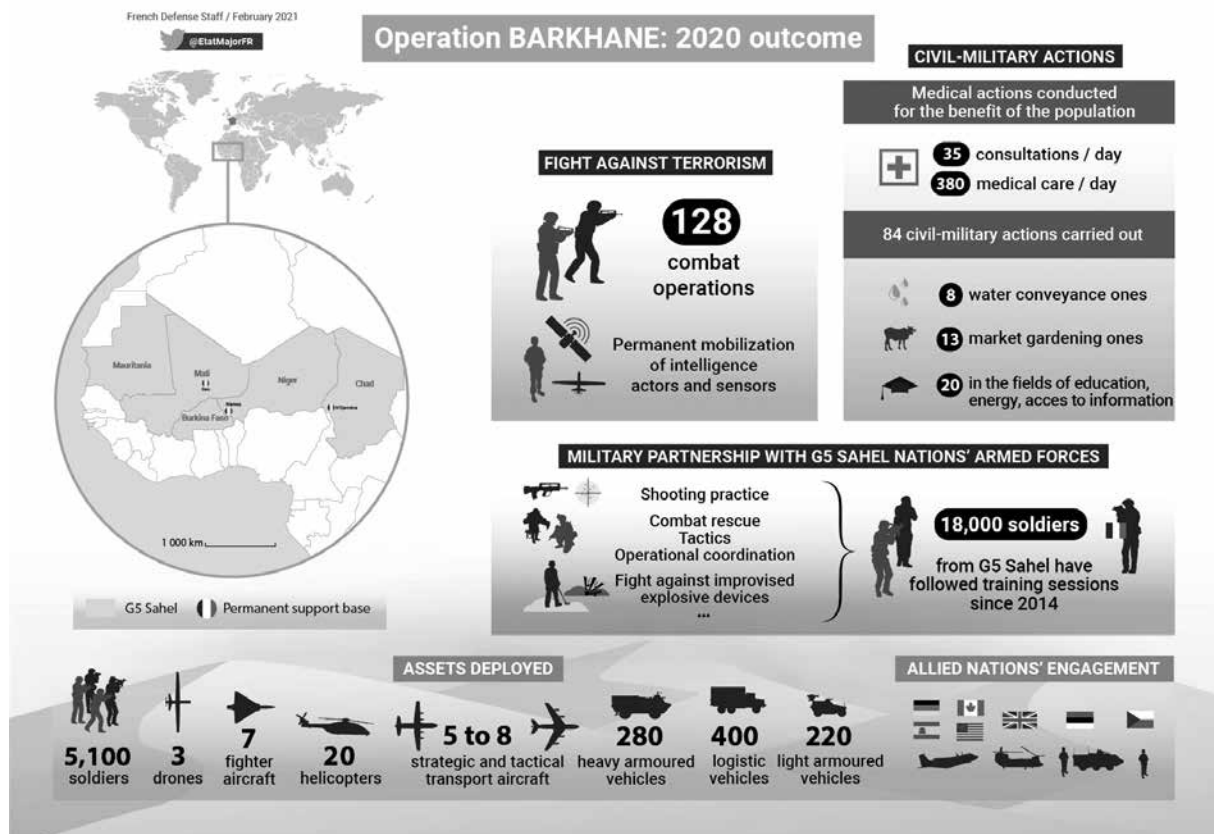
Source: French Ministry of Armed Forces

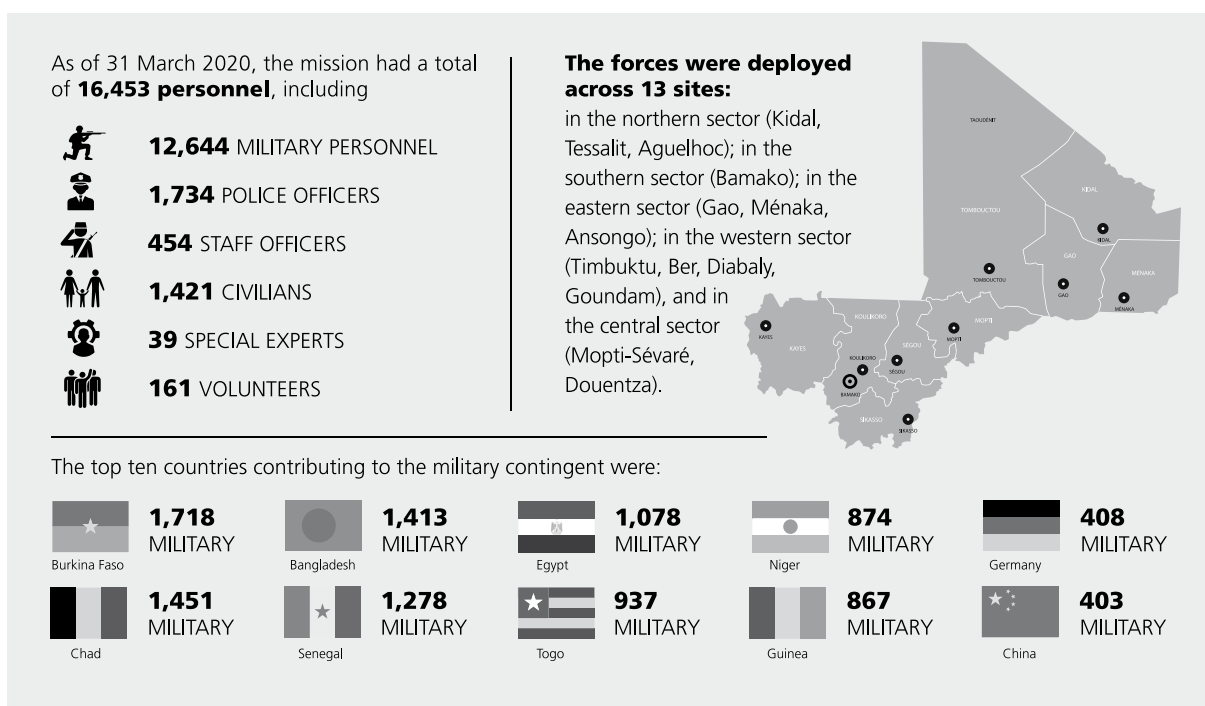to this new dynamic, many other initiatives were launched in addition to the missions of the national armies in the framework of counter-terrorism and the stabilisation of Mali, which is perceived to be the epicentre of the security crisis in the Sahel. To this end, the African-led International Support Mission for Mali (MISMA) was created on 20 December 2012 by UN Resolution 2085. MISMA was later replaced by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), through Resolution 2100, on 25 April 2013. The UN peacekeeping operation in Mali intervenes to stabilise the country, while committing Mali to a political dialogue with a view to holding elections and conducting 'credible' negotia-tions with the groups in northern Mali.

Despite these initiatives, the security context continued to deteriorate in central Mali, in the Sahel region of Burkina Faso and in the Tillabéri region of Niger. A new regional security response was initiated: the creation of a joint

G-5 Sahel force. The draft Strategic Concept of Operations (CONOPS) of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force was adopted by the AU PSC at its 679th meeting on 13 April 2017. The creation of the Joint Force in February 2014 emerged from a desire to find political responses to security issues in the region.

The G-5 Sahel is a cooperation mechanism between Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad aimed at strengthening economic development and security ties in the region. However, there is a growing tendency to con-centrate on security issues, while development issues find it difficult to mobilise partners. In December 2018, in Nouakchott, at the confer-ence for the coordination of G-5 Sahel partners and donors to finance the Priority Investment Programme (PIP 2019-2021), attended by the G-5 Sahel Heads of State, the partners made funding announcements amounting to more than two billion euros. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also announced fifty (50) million euros for

Graph No. 5. Breakdown of the MINUSMA Forces in 2020

As of 31 March 2020, the mission had a total of **16,453 personnel**, including

12,644 MILITARY PERSONNEL

1,734 POLICE OFFICERS

454 STAFF OFFICERS

1,421 CIVILIANS

39 SPECIAL EXPERTS

161 VOLUNTEERS

The forces were deployed across 13 sites:
in the northern sector (Kidal, Tessalit, Aguelhoc); in the southern sector (Bamako); in the eastern sector (Gao, Ménaka, Ansongo); in the western sector (Timbuktu, Ber, Diabaly, Goundam), and in the central sector (Mopti-Sévaré, Douentza).

The top ten countries contributing to the military contingent were:

Burkina Faso	**1,718** MILITARY	Bangladesh	**1,413** MILITARY	Egypt	**1,078** MILITARY	Niger	**874** MILITARY	Germany	**408** MILITARY
Chad	**1,451** MILITARY	Senegal	**1,278** MILITARY	Togo	**937** MILITARY	Guinea	**867** MILITARY	China	**403** MILITARY

the Joint Force. Several years after the meeting, the issue of financing of the priority actions is still pending. The 'Priority Investment Programme' has existed for several years. Although it takes into account the underlying factors promoting the expansion of insecurity in the Sahel, it has difficulty mobilising resources from financial partners. There are several reasons for the low level of mobilisation, the first of which relates to the way financial resources are managed. In the understanding of the states, the resources mobilised should be managed by the state where the investment is made, whereas the Permanent Secretariat of the G-5 Sahel has the intention of managing the funds on a fiduciary basis within the Secretariat. This is doubtless not the only obstacle, but without an adequate response, it will be difficult to disburse funds to financial partners who have their own ideas on how to manage the resources mobilised.

The second reason is connected with the alignment of priorities between security and development. While all the actors are unanimous, in theory, that the right balance must be struck between military-security responses and development actions in combating insecurity in the Sahel, in practice, security measures seem to attract more interest. In fact, the launch of the joint force, which came into being almost three years after the G-5 Sahel's priority investment initiatives, has drawn considerable attention from partners and has also been more widely campaigned on by the region's heads of state. In 2017, the G-5 Sahel created the Joint Force, which was to consist of 5,000 troops from the armed forces of the five member countries, with the mission of combating violent extremist groups. Joint Force operations are focused on the border regions and are divided into three zones: a western zone, with a command post in Mauritania, a central zone, with a command post in Niamey, and an eastern zone under the

command of Chad. The initiative has received the support of France and the international community through the Alliance for the Sahel, the Coalition for the Sahel, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN) via the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), but it is still struggling to reach its full operational capacity, let alone produce satisfactory results, while terrorist groups continue to push forward, as evidenced by the upsurge in attacks, kidnappings and hostage-taking in the region. In addition to the funding challenges it faces, the force is deployed in a complex environment combining poor governance, local conflicts and violent extremism. For example, Mali, which is viewed as the epicentre of the crisis affecting the region since August 2018, is experiencing a political crisis marked by a coup against the President of the Republic who was re-elected in 2018. Ultimately, initiatives are only truly relevant if they take into account the multidimensional nature of the security crisis in the Sahel and if the states develop the internal financing capacities for so-called priority actions. As of June 2020, according to data collected on the MINUSMA and French Ministry of Armed Forces websites, there were 12,438 UN peacekeepers and 1,712 police officers deployed in MINUSMA, 4,500 French soldiers in Operation Barkhane, 5,000 to 10,000 soldiers planned for the G-5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), 580 soldiers in the European Union Training Mission (EUTM Mali) and a significant number of American and European forces in more or less direct support of counter-terrorism efforts.

This proliferation of security actors is set against a backdrop of international mobilisation for development, humanitarian aid or the P/CVE (Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism)

agenda. Despite some military successes on the ground, notably the 'neutralisation' of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel in northern Mali, which was made possible by collaboration with the Americans, the results of Operation Barkhane remain mixed in the eyes of the population.

1.3 Popular discontent and reconfiguration of the Military presence

As the security situation continued to deteriorate, from 2017 onwards, voices were raised within civil society in Mali and Burkina Faso protesting the presence of foreign forces. These protests have found favour with certain segments of the population, and the French military presence is increasingly criticised in the region. The situation came to a head in 2019 and January 2020. A summit bringing together the heads of state of the region and the president of France, Emmanuel Macron, was organised in order to 'clarify positions' on the French military presence in the Sahel. After the summit of 'clarification' and 'renewed confidence', the reconfiguration of the French military presence in the Sahel was announced. From an operational perspective, the extension of the French military presence was intended to achieve counter-terrorism objectives, and it later undertook the launch of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force as well as support for the Malian armed forces and MINUSMA. It also announced the creation of a European special force, called 'Takuba'. This initiative was designed to support the armed forces of the G-5 Sahel. On 27 March 2020, 13 European and African countries launched the 'Takuba Task Force'. Its first phase, in 2020, will consist of a build-up, followed by a second phase in 2021 for its full operationalisation and autonomy. The operation was built around a partnership with national armed forces, par-

Graph No. 6. Organisation of the 'Takuba' Task Force
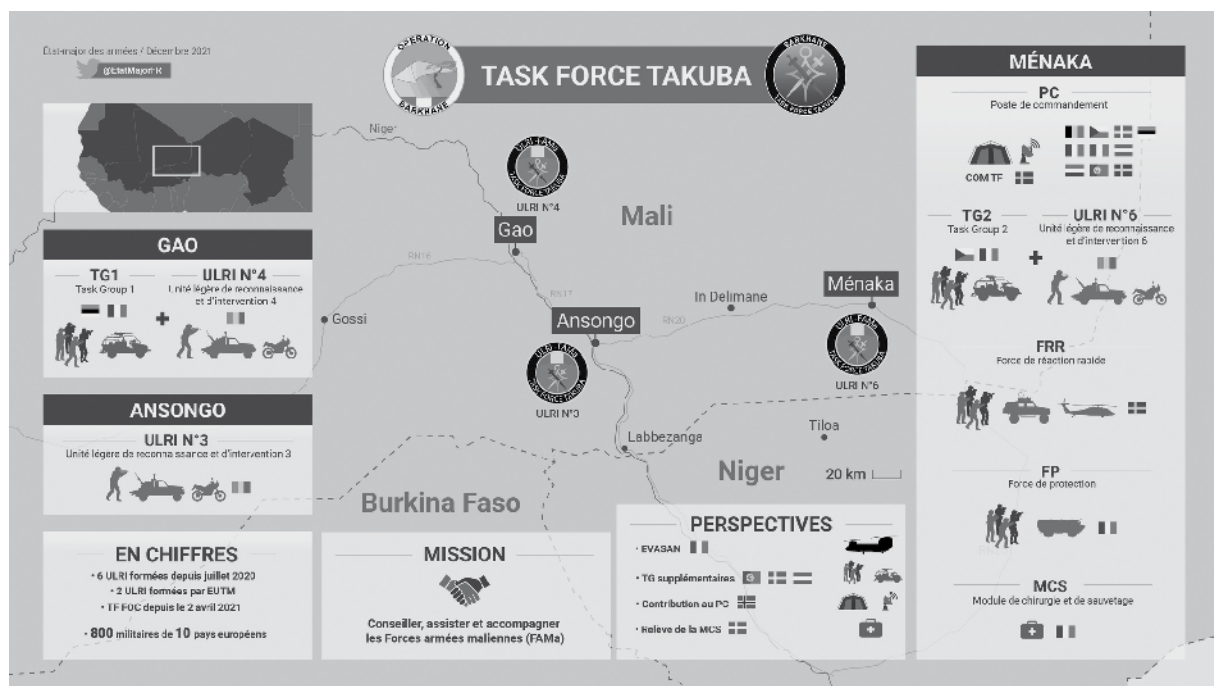
Source: French Ministry of Armed Forces

ticularly those of Mali. According to the French Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, 'many partners have already joined the Task Force: Estonia, the Czech Republic, Sweden and Italy, which will join in the summer of 2021. Portugal, the Netherlands and Belgium have deployed officers to the Takuba head-quarters.' Following the Pau summit, another meeting of the G-5 Sahel heads of state and France was held on 9 July 2021. The purpose of the meeting was to assess the security situation in the Sahel and define the new shape of the fight against terrorism. During the event, the French President stressed that the French military presence in the Sahel would be based on two fundamental missions: the first was to continue neutralising and dismantling the ISGS and AQIM high command and their allies, including the GSIM; the second was to support the development of the region's armies and the Takuba Task Force. The 'Takuba Task Force' was launched on 27 March 2020, by thirteen European and African states, to support the armed forces of the G-5 Sahel. This military operation is composed solely of troops from European countries and is designed to absorb elements of Operation Barkhane.

From a strictly military point of view, it should be noted that the uncontrolled withdrawal of French troops is liable to further weaken the armed forces of the Sahel countries, particularly those of Mali, which are certainly determined to win this long-running war, but which do not have the defence tools to do so, such as those of the Barkhane force.

1.4 Counterproductive Military efforts in a context of high social expectations

If there is one common trend with respect to insecurity in the countries of the region, it is the meteoric rise in military spending to the detriment of productive investments in the social sectors since 2013. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2018, the combined budgetary allocations of the G-5 Sahel countries for defence reached 1.2 billion euros. Mali's military expenditure was $495 million, Burkina Faso's $312 million, Chad's $232 million, Niger's $229 million and Mauritania's $159 million in 2018.

In the case of Mali in 2015 and Burkina Faso in 2017, military programming laws establishing multi-year planning of state expenditure for the armed forces were adopted to address shortfalls and regenerate their weakened forces. According to the same source, Burkina Faso's national defence and internal security expenditure rose almost continuously over the entire 2008-2018 period, reaching CFA Francs 245 billion in 2018. The increase was particularly marked from 2012 onwards. In Mali, spending on national defence and internal security rose steadily over the entire period (15.5% average annual growth), with a sharp acceleration after 2012. In 2018, it reached CFA Francs 354 billion, by far the highest level among the five G-5 Sahel countries, whereas, in 2008, the level of spending in Mali was relatively low. In Niger, national defence and internal security spending grew at a very high average annual rate of 17%. The country quintupled its national defence and internal security expenditure between 2008 and 2018. Growth remained steady until 2015, when it reached its peak, at CFA Francs 204 billion. 2012 and 2015 were two years of high growth (respectively +68% and +43%),

and the level of spending remained high over the following years. In contrast, in Mauritania, which has not experienced a terrorist attack on its soil since 2011, spending on national defence and internal security has increased steadily at an average rate of 5.6% per year over the entire period, with two sharp increases in 2010 (+23%) and 2012 (+17%). In 2018, it reached CFA Francs 111 billion, the lowest level reported in the five G-5 Sahel countries. The corollary of the growth in military expenditure coupled with the low mobilisation of internal resources has been reduced social sector investment and budgetary imbalances. According to an OCHA newsletter published in October 2020, 'the security crisis limits or disrupts access to vital services in many of the affected communities, in turn further driving insecurity and exacerbating inequalities. More than 150 health centers are non-functional, and some 3,500 schools are closed, depriving violence-affected communities of most essential care and education. The disruption of basic services is deeply affecting an entire generation of youth in a region struggling to reap a window of opportunity for a demographic dividend.' (Source: Central Sahel: Revised Needs and Requirement Overview, October 2020). According to that same source, the trend has continued in 2021. Nearly 5,000 schools are closed in affected areas in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, depriving hundreds of thousands of children of an education and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Millions lack access to healthcare. In the Central Sahel, 137 healthcare centres have been closed due to insecurity, and most of those that are still open are not fully operational.

By focusing spending on the military aspects of the crisis, governments have overlooked the structural dynamics promoting insecurity, particularly access to basic social services. Thus, while these countries face difficulties in pro-

viding quality social services, scarce resources are used for military expenditure. In Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, the deterioration of the security situation in recent years has led to steady increases in security and defence budgets, while it has brought about a decline in mining production, the main source of income for the countries. In Burkina Faso, according to an official from the national coalition against the high cost of living (CCVC): '…tight finances forced the Government to increase fuel prices by 12% in November 2018. This triggered mass protests by fuel workers in Ouagadougou and forced it to lower prices in early 2019.' Resources already committed by the government and development partners for poverty reduction, health, education and other forms of social action are not being spent due to continuing insecurity. In some cases, the situation has resulted in ineffective or inadequate implementation. For example, in Mali, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, elected in 2013 amidst high expectations and subsequently targeted by a coup d'état in 2020, was widely seen as having failed to deliver on his campaign promises, including restoring security and improving the standard of living of the Malian people. A similar sentiment is shared with regard to Burkinabe President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, elected in 2015. The situations in Mali and Burkina Faso have heightened tensions between citizens and the state, resulting in persistent protests and strikes. At the same time, difficulties persist, despite all the resources committed to the military sector.

Military operations carried out in recent years in the fight against terrorism, which have been stepped up since 2020, have led to thousands of arrests (nearly 2,000 according to official information gathered in Mali and Niger). Presented as 'the ramping up of the national armed forces', these tough operations have led to the arrest of several suspected terror-

ists, some of whom allegedly participated in attacks, but they have also been accompanied by abuses: arbitrary arrests and violence. This climate contributes to the rekindling of the cycle of violence in which each abuse or failure to protect the freedoms and lives of the civilian population increases feelings of injustice and weakens progress towards peace and the fight against violence; violence which, for some, is presented as the last resort of self-defence, in the absence of rights, consideration and an alternative through genuine political dialogue. This cycle of violence undoubtedly contributes to the manufacture of 'radicalisation'. Relations between the population and the army continue to be problematic and, in many communities in both Mali and Burkina Faso, the defence and security forces are generally perceived as predatory. Far from the image of an army at the service of the community, it is viewed as one whose members engage in racketeering and various actions to the detriment of the population. This is the dominant perception at the community level. This partially explains why collaboration between the army and the people has been so difficult in the context of the current security crisis.

Against this backdrop, the increase in violence has contributed to the emergence and crystallisation of numerous self-defence groups claiming to protect the communities. These groups, which were initially created to defend the communities, have gradually become veritable war machines. Moreover, the future of their combatants, whether they are independence fighters, self-defence militiamen or terrorists, must be taken into account in the pacification of the country. Indeed, in recent years, local conflicts have been one of the main catalysts of violence affecting the civilian population in particular. Beyond their proliferation, the threat is also rooted in pre-existing local problems.

Conflicts between farmers and herders linked to access to land and disputes over grazing areas demarcated by local authorities had already strained the relationship between the population and the state. Between 2012 and 2019, incidents linked to local conflicts resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of displaced people. These incidents, which are one-off events and in some cases triggered or aggravated by older conflicts, drew attention in the first half of 2019. The underlying causes of these conflicts have both structural and more immediate dimensions. Firstly, climate change has led to upheavals in production systems. Secondly, tensions between herders and farmers are mounting and tend to develop into community conflicts over time. On the one hand, local struggles for access to power have sometimes been amplified by the presence of violent extremist groups. On the other hand, they are exacerbated by the instrumentalisation of military counter-terrorism operations by certain self-defence groups to settle scores with rival communities. Since 2014, the trend has been for violence to intensify and become more complex against a backdrop of erosion of social regulation mechanisms, instrumentalisation of popular frustration by violent extremist groups, and 'militiarisation'. In many areas of Mali and Burkina Faso, governance gaps and weak public authorities are also factors in the spread of threats, as observed in central Mali and the Sahel region of Burkina Faso. To overcome their sense of being abandoned, some communities implement strategies of alliance with armed extremist groups, which causes growing divisions within and between them. Some are rallying behind national and foreign forces and others, in alliance with extremist groups, perceive military campaigns as a collusion of national and foreign armed forces against them, in league with hostile communities.

II. THE EMERGENCE OF NON-MILITARY INITIATIVES

Like Mali, Niger is experiencing difficulties to varying degrees. Niger's solution appears different from Mali's hesitations on the issue of dialogue and repentance. Since 2016, the public authorities in Niger have been able to end the proliferation of militias and assorted armed groups, following which the country embarked on a vast project aimed at dealing with armed combatants through dialogue and repentance. Repentance applies to the individual combatants and not to the groups they belonged to.

2.1 The Nigerien solution focusing on repentance

The government of Niger has created a camp for repentant armed combatants (*'repentis'* in French) in Goudoumaria, with the aim of contributing to the peaceful reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters into their families and communities. The ex-combatants, who have surrendered to the authorities, will not face trial, but will have to follow a 'de-radicalisation' programme based on the pillars of a national reintegration strategy predefined by the government of Niger: (1) de-radicalisation of individuals who participated in the actions of the Boko Haram organisation; (2) social and professional reintegration of repentant fighters and ex-detainees; (3) community awareness-raising and communication on the return of repentant fighters and ex-detainees.

The Goudoumaria camp has been taking in former Boko Haram returnees since 2017. According to the national authorities, at the opening of the camp, more than 240 former

Boko Haram elements joined the initiative, whose objective, according to the High Authority for Peacebuilding (HACP), is to implement the 'de-radicalisation' programme through vocational training and reintegration of former fighters from violent extremist groups. To that end, the programme is designed to provide repentant fighters with the tools they need to ensure their personal development. It is also aimed at mitigating the threats and risks linked to violent extremism on the stability of Niger. This counter-terrorism strategy is also a means for Niger to draw large numbers of fighters back into civil society and thereby weaken violent extremists. In some respects, the initiative is in line with the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. Indeed, with a view to promoting better management of the terrorism problem, both at international and national level, the plan recommends that each state take the necessary steps to equip itself with a coordinated framework of action to organise the prevention and fight against violent extremism throughout its territory.

The Goudoumaria administrative centre in Diffa is part of this action to make Niger more secure. It is implemented by the High Authority for Peacebuilding, which supervises the programme and the coordination of all of its projects. At the same time, Niger maintains an informal dialogue with armed groups as part of its conflict-resolution strategy. The Centre's activities are organised around a CFA Francs 5 billion programme financed by the European Union to prevent crises around the world. The first programme component focuses on supporting the judicial processing and reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters who have defected or been imprisoned. In the long term, the aim is to work towards the reintegration of repentant Boko Haram fighters and former Boko Haram detainees into local communities

through dialogue between the government of Niger, the affected populations and these former Boko Haram members. The second component aims to ease tensions between and within local communities in the peripheral regions of the North-East by promoting dialogue and mediation. The local dialogue approach has also been favoured for some time by the Nigerien authorities, who have chosen to act through traditional or religious authorities. Noting the limitations of this approach and based on the Diffa experience, the Nigerien government has finally decided to open up channels of dialogue, particularly through community leaders. The aim is, on the one hand, to enable the authorities to better understand the motivations of individuals who have joined this group and, on the other hand, to convey messages about the possibility of disengagement.

So far, apart from a few isolated cases, these dialogue initiatives have produced mixed results. However, the authorities in Niger have gone so far as to put an amnesty offer on the table and envisage a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process. According to a religious leader interviewed in Bamako, *'We are religious people and if someone confesses to having committed such and such an act and sincerely regrets having done so, that appeases the tension, and generally he will be forgiven. It eases tensions significantly. But you have to acknowledge the truth of the crime, so that the victims feel that their rights are respected. I don't know if transitional justice does that. If the idea is to stifle the truth with consensus once again, we will never find a solution.'*

2.2 Civil Society pressures in Mali

In Mali, in the face of the continuing deterioration of the security situation, some voices in civil society and the Malian political class have called for dialogue, in addition to the military efforts of the country and its partners. The issue of dialogue had already been raised in 2012. The option of dialogue with violent extremist groups has enjoyed popularity since the Pau summit in France, where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), affiliated with Al-Qaeda, was identified as a key enemy, unlike JNIM.

The announcement of talks with the groups is a significant development. For example, in March-April 2017 in Mali, when the Conference of National Understanding called for dialogue, the good offices mission entrusted at the time to Imam Mahmoud Dicko found itself at the centre of divergent views on the option of dialogue between the Malian authorities and the armed groups. This was not a new phenomenon since, as far back as 2013, Dioncounda Traoré himself, then Transitional President, was opposed to the possibility of dialogue with armed terrorist groups. The regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta officially held to that line for quite some time, although there have been frequent reports of covert negotiations leading to the release of civilian and military hostages. In 2017, a survey conducted in Bamako and other regional capitals by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) found that 55.8% of Malians were in favour of dialogue with so-called jihadist groups. A call for dialogue was issued in December 2019, during the Inclusive National Dialogue (DNI). On 10 February 2020, questioned in Addis Ababa by two French media on the potential for dialogue with Malian extremist groups, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta declared: *'It is my duty and my mission to create all possible spaces and to do everything possible so that,*

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by one means or another, we can achieve appeasement. It is time for certain paths to be explored [...]. We are not stubborn, obstinate or obtuse people.' The President's response came at a time when the delicate issue of dialogue with armed groups was back in the spotlight, after his High Representative for the Centre regions, Dioncounda Traoré, announced on 23 January 2020 that he would send emissaries to the jihadist leaders Iyad Ag Ghaly and Hamadoun Kouffa. Although the Malian President went so far as to acknowledge that channels of communication already existed, he had always refused to accept them, aligning himself with the position of certain of Mali's partners, particularly France. For the first time, on 8 March 2020, Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) also announced that it was in favour of dialogue, while making the departure of French troops from the Barkhane Operation a precondition for participation in talks.

2.3 The divide over the issue of dialogue with armed groups in Burkina Faso

The Burkina Faso side of the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region, which straddles northern and eastern Burkina Faso, central Mali and western Niger, is the epicentre of violence related to attacks ascribed to violent extremist groups. In this country, as in other Sahelian nations, the nature and quality of governance has led to chronically strained relations between the government and the people. In this context, communities rely on violent extremist groups for justice and protection, including groups labelled as terrorist groups. This was notably demonstrated by a study published in 2020 by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on the links between violent extremism, local conflicts and transnational organised crime. The study found that

individuals in the northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso confirmed that they were better governed under the control of violent extremist groups after being allowed to carry out hunting, gold mining and other activities that had been restricted by the government. In this context, in February 2021, the Prime Minister indicated during his policy speech that consideration should be given to the possibility of talks with terrorist groups. A few months later, the tone changed. In a message to the nation, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré stated that an effort was being made in the fight against the escalation of armed groups: *'The gains achieved on the ground by the Defence and Security Forces, with the significant contribution of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland, are clear, and have made it possible to inflict significant losses on armed terrorist groups, leading them to change their tactics and cravenly attack the civilian population.'* It should be recalled that the authorities had already envisaged an approach based on military response with community involvement. For example, in November 2019, following the attack on a convoy of employees of a mining company in the eastern region that left 38 dead, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré announced the recruitment of *'Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland'* (VDP) in areas under threat from violent extremist groups. The law authorising this measure was passed by a unanimous vote in the National Assembly on 23 January 2020. The law defines a volunteer *'as a person of Burkinabe nationality, working as an auxiliary to the defence and security forces, voluntarily serving the security interests of their village or sector of residence, by virtue of a contract signed between the volunteer and the national government'.* This decision by the authorities was hardly met with unanimous approval. Indeed, the politicians interviewed (particularly members of the opposition) regarded their support for the law less as a commitment to the idea than as a

desire not to be seen as obstructing a measure taken by the government to address the security challenge facing the country. The law aims to provide a legal framework for a process allegedly already undertaken by some quarters at the highest level of government to support the establishment of self-defence groups so that they played a more active and direct role in the fight against extremist groups. The groups apparently received financial and material support.

Currently, the number of volunteers who have actually been recruited is unknown. However, the enactment of the legislation raises questions, including the risks to the civilian population should they become more actively involved in the fight against terrorism. They could lose their neutrality in the eyes of violent extremist groups and become one of the major targets of such groups. Violence against civilians appears to be mounting, especially since the rise of ISGS in northern Burkina Faso. However, the option of dialogue or even negotiation with extremist groups seems to be favoured by the grassroots and even traditional and local elites in the country. In October, several bus companies resumed their connections with a city located 200 km from the capital after a suspension of more than a year. Cargo and food trucks are once again travelling on the *'axe de la mort'* or *'highway of death,'* as the Burkinabe have dubbed the road on which the mayor and the grand imam of Djibo were executed in 2019 and 2020.

According to Lionel Bilgo, a Burkinabe analyst, *'The lack of government, the lack of security, the lack of support and even in terms of responsibility, the lack of vision, the lack of hope, mean that they are forced to turn to other solutions, particularly negotiation. Local elected officials are caught between enemy fire and an inactive partner, the government, which should be responding and stepping up.'*

III. SEEKING STABILITY THROUGH LOCAL AGREEMENTS

In a context of violence where various armed groups (including both 'jihadists' and self-defence militias) have become undisputed masters in territories over which government has no control, people seem to have found a way to coexist peacefully. In the past few years, from 2016 onwards, violent extremist groups have managed to negotiate local peace agreements after inflicting terror on the local population. After the creation of numerous militias in the region, such as the Dan Na Ambassagou ('hunters who trust in God') and the Koglweogo in Burkina Faso, local populations are increasingly turning to negotiated solutions to violence. In response to these tensions, in July 2020, people organised themselves to negotiate with 'jihadist' leaders in the Soum province of the Sahel region of Burkina Faso.

In Mali, in the Mopti region, representatives of legitimate local powers in several communities in the Koro and Bandiagara circles, notably in Dioungani, Diankabou, Madou and Sangha, as well as the general population negotiate directly with the local overlords, namely the violent extremist groups. In line with this strategy, in July 2020, some communities in these two circles entered into community peace and reconciliation agreements with fighters from the JNIM-affiliated Macina katiba, which itself has pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda. These agreements notably focus on the regulation of relations between jihadists on the one hand and self-defence groups and traditional Dozo hunters mobilised to protect their communities on the other. During the first quarter of 2021,

in the Niono Circle (Ségou region), talks with the attackers were initiated by representatives of the High Islamic Council (HCI) from Bamako and the village communities in the area in order to find a solution to the siege suffered by the village of Farabougou, encircled by jihadist fighters from the Kourmari area since October 2020. In reaching these agreements, the local actors emphasised the historical ties between the communities. Furthermore, in the Mopti region, in the context of the conflict between Fulani and Dogon, which also involved extremist groups, local agreements have also been signed to ease tensions. In some communities in central Mali, violent extremist groups have concluded peace agreements that have ended the violence between the two communities. The groups have laid down a number of conditions to allow people to carry out farming, logging and livestock rearing activities.

In Burkina Faso, while the authorities had previously taken an extremely firm stance, refusing to consider any kind of dialogue, they now seem to be changing their position, as the Prime Minister stated in his general policy speech. Many communities, particularly in the Djibo region, do not hesitate to negotiate with armed groups, including jihadists. 'In communities where agreements are signed, there is a relative lull in the conflicts', reported a native of the Burkinabe Sahel based in Ouagadougou. In addition to these formal local agreements, communities are increasingly entering into unwritten arrangements with violent extremist groups to ensure their survival. In several locations in Mali and Burkina Faso, arrangements ranging from a ban on weapons, the introduction of family laws and Sharia-based taxes, to a ban on all contact with the government and the military have been reached. Commissions have been set up to negotiate the lifting of the jihadist embargo and bare minimum agreements have been reached, with severe restrictions. In some cases, notably in the Youwarou circles in central Mali, violent extremist groups have ordered the population to break with the Malian defence forces and return to Sharia and jihad. In return, the population was granted access to food supplies and allowed to resume farming and fishing. In many other cases, violent extremist groups have simply managed to turn local populations against the armed forces by imposing embargoes and blocking movements to and from villages. In some cases, the formal or informal agreements reached by the local inhabitants have reduced violence. In addition to negotiations to secure the release of hostages or to protect humanitarian access, dialogue with the groups has essentially consisted of 'bottom-up' exchanges. This approach has made it possible, on the one hand, to circumvent the principle of non-negotiation with this category of actors; and, on the other hand, to find a modus vivendi in the areas where the groups are active. In Mali, a great many of these bottom-up dialogues, with immediate operational aims, have led to localised results in terms of pragmatic peace, such as lifting embargoes on certain communities, securing humanitarian access, defusing conflicts linked to local resources management, and even concluding localised micro-cease-fires. However, although mediation actions are beneficial, the results obtained do not lead to lasting peace. In some cases, the 'achievements' revolve around the causes of the conflicts, the recommendations and the regulatory role of the government. However, the euphoria of the government and the NGOs involved in mediation is rarely echoed on the ground, where violence continues to escalate. The various agreements adopted by communities at local level, such as the ones reached in Koro and Farabougou, Mali, respectively in 2017 and 2020, highlight a lack of vision or strategic depth in the search

for solutions to conflicts. Firstly, these agreements raise the issue of the capacity of the signatories, i. e. the village chiefs, to influence the peace process on the ground. Secondly, while some extremist groups have signed, the process does not include the militias. In the national capitals, some believe that dialogue is a form of capitulation that would threaten some of their freedoms, such as the freedoms of worship and expression. This underlines the divide between a segment of the population that is less directly affected by the consequences of insecurity, and another segment that has apparently grown weary of living with insecurity on a daily basis. Communities are not alone in engaging with the 'jihadists' to ensure their survival. Humanitarian actors also negotiate for humanitarian access. The violence that has spread throughout the region means that the governments fail to control a significant portion of their national territories, which is under the partial or permanent domination of armed non-State actors. Although they often have divergent approaches to humanitarian access, these actors are mostly open to it and, in areas beyond state control, they remain the counterparts in dialogue with humanitarians in negotiating access.

IV. THE ISSUE OF A NEGOTIATED PEACE: TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK?

As explained above, given the inadequacies of the military responses to the crisis so far, the people are taking a growing interest in dialogue as a response to insecurity. This interest is not only due to the steady deterioration of the security situation. It is also a consequence of the increasingly endogenous nature of the threat. The fighters belonging to violent groups, who used to come from neighbouring countries such as Algeria and more recently Mauritania, are now mostly members of the local population. This trend brings grist to the mill of proponents of dialogue, be it in Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger. In Mali and Burkina Faso, there are already local processes underway at the community level. However, a thought process is ongoing, focusing on legitimate questions about the contents of the dialogue, the key participants who should take part in it, as well as the purpose of the dialogue.

4.1 What should be Discussed and with Whom?

The upsurge in violence in the Sahel and particularly in the Liptako-Gourma region is a threat, but it is also a source of opportunities, including the opportunity for political dialogue with the communities, including those who have taken up arms. By involving them in the necessary debate on governance models, states can transform a conflict dynamic into a vector for systemic change, address the structural challenges they face, coordinate their policies towards cross-border and nomadic commu-

nities, create a rapprochement between the centre and the periphery and, more fundamentally, renegotiate the social covenant/contract that serves as the foundation for peace and national cohesion.

The option of dialogue entails agreeing to speak with armed groups described as terrorists in order to increase the chances of reducing the violence and frustrations that are generated from day to day. With this end in mind, three factors should be taken into account in conducting a dialogue process. The first revolves around the question of the objectives assigned to the option. According to Ibrahim Sangho, a traditional communicator in Mali, *'…whatever the nature of an armed conflict, it has always been met with a favourable response under the palaver tree, hence the need for dialogue in a traditional society such as ours'.* At this level, the starting point should be to ask a certain number of questions about the security context, namely: Who should be included in the dialogue? What should the dialogue be about? How should it be organised? Why should dialogue be undertaken? And what are its limitations? Secondly, there is the question of the implementation of key local dynamics through traditional and customary conflict resolution mechanisms. Finally, that of communities' grievances and frustrations with regards to justice, basic social services, protection, unemployment and employment.

The success or failure of this approach should not be assessed exclusively in terms of the signing of an agreement, but also in terms of its capacity to demobilise some of the combatants who have joined these groups for insurrectional reasons. According to a civil society stakeholder we met in Mali, *'negotiation is a good idea that came out of the inclusive national dialogue of December 2019, because today's terrorists*

have a national countenance. We need to talk to them so they can see reason. However, there are caveats; for example in Farabougou, Niono Circle, the communities negotiated at the expense of the state, and a month later, the same terrorists came back in force and occupied the land again. You have to know who to negotiate with, and whether they are the real players or people who want to join them. A combatant is not just someone who has a weapon. They could also be a potential combatant, and perhaps even an ex-combatant. Also, we should not dismiss women, thinking that they are only victims; they can be actors and influencers. How many women are fighting because they have been told about the injustices their grandparents suffered through stories or poems? They can also prevent their husbands from going into battle by threatening to divorce them. These are powers that women have that should not be overlooked. A woman is a potential negotiator or someone to be negotiated with.'

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that this approach should be implemented alongside other actions, including a military response. In other words, dialogue should be seen not as the only solution or as a panacea, but rather as part of a toolbox that includes both preventive and reactive actions in the areas of governance, security and development. Finally, dialogue should be seen as an opportunity for broader consultations with local communities on governance reform in the region, especially in the border areas. In all cases, dialogue should be understood in its holistic dimension. Confining it to one level of the conflict scale reinforces imbalances, creates new opportunities for violence and radicalisation, and limits its impact on the potential for building genuine peace. Opening up the possibility of dialogue with armed protagonists, including with the so-called terror-

ist movements, in response to calls from many community and religious leaders, is becoming a viable avenue to explore.

The military approach has shown certain limitations, as it blocks the endogenous mechanisms for ending violence. Instead, a dialogue-based approach entails putting local stakeholders, particularly social regulators, back at the heart of conflict resolution. The latter could play a decisive role in driving discussions on the use of violence and how to end it. They could also act as intermediaries in the implementation of resolutions. Moreover, broadening the scope of the dialogue to include different levels makes it possible to build bridges between conflict levels, to understand the expectations of the people, to move away from the state-centred approach and to draw inspiration from the lower levels of the conflict. Dialogue should be understood as a continuous mode of action in the process. Differences in interpretation cannot be resolved as long as political dialogue is suspended or considered obsolete.

Finally, it is important to consider that engagement in such groups is not always the result of a religious indoctrination process. In 2016, the Institute for Security Studies interviewed dozens of former members of Malian jihadist groups to understand their motivations for 'signing up'. The study found 15 broad categories of reasons, including: personal, economic, political, religious, familial, educational, social welfare, ethical, influence-based, as well as undisclosed motivations. The idea that young people join armed groups because they adhere to radical religious ideologies is therefore a misconception that could lead to inappropriate responses.

4.2 The challenges of establishing dialogue

a. Regional framework
There is no single, shared position across the region. Although all G-5 Sahel countries face insecurity, each has its own particular trajectory and history, including with regard to the presence and activities of violent extremist groups. Mauritania, for instance, recorded the first attack on its territory in April 2005, costing the lives of 15 of its soldiers. Between 2005 and 2011, the country experienced a series of attacks attributed to or claimed by AQIM, some of which made a lasting impression, such as the one that took the lives of four French tourists on 24 December 2007. Mauritania was the first country to pay a heavy price, after Algeria, where some of AQIM's leaders originated. Other countries, such as Mali, served as a refuge for certain individuals or splinter groups with close ties to AQIM networks throughout most of the first decade of the 21st century. However, it was following France's Operation Serval and the emergence of a form of guerrilla warfare that attacks by these groups began on Malian soil and gradually spread to Niger and Burkina Faso. According to a Burkinabe researcher interviewed during the study, *'Mali wants dialogue, but the regional and international context of the security situation must be taken into account. The international forces that are here and provide their support have their say and should be taken into account, because they have troops engaged in the region who are dying in the fight against terrorism. The security issue is also linked to development problems, but also to long-standing conflicts between farmers and herders, hence the need to address the issue of pastoralism. So, for the moment, the states should be discussing the means of action through dialogue.'* (Interview conducted in Ouagadougou, 4 August 2021).

The interest in dialogue as a potential response to insecurity is not only due to the continuing deterioration of the security situation. It is also a consequence of the increasingly endogenous nature of the threat. Thus, the aim is not to open talks with foreigners, but rather to interact with fellow citizens who take radical stances. It also seems that this view is shared by some of Mali's partners, although few of them raise the issue openly in public. Following in the footsteps of Smaïl Chergui, the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, in an interview with the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* in December 2019, that dialogue was possible with some jihadist groups in the Sahel, but not with the most 'radical' ones such as the Islamic State. At regional level, it is important to observe developments in the dynamics around the existing agreements in order to assess their medium-term impact on alliances and relations between armed groups and communities, and on the stability of the region in general.

b. The endogenisation of the threat and the segmentation of extremist groups

As the main protagonists in insecurity and perpetrators of attacks, extremist groups have turned violence into a strategy and are undermining the credibility of the government in the eyes of the communities by imposing themselves as actors in local governance. In rural areas, they offer security and mediate long-standing disputes to gain community support. Economic and social fragility provide ideal conditions for the establishment of such groups, which instrumentalise conflicts between communities, while posing as guarantors of social order. In these areas, insecurity is on the rise, against a backdrop of the endogenisation of the 'jihad', as groups recruit members, and even leaders, from within local communities.

Under these conditions, where communities are extremely fragile and there is no institutional justice, particularly in central Mali, there seems to be a need for government actors to work through local elected representatives to gain 'transformative' access at local level. Accessing local communities through decentralised government would be more than 'inappropriate'. Prefects and other representatives of local government administrations are not only daily targets due to the high level of endogenisation of the 'jihad'; they are also players whose presence is barely more than 'symbolic'. Thus, this does not seem to be an effective approach. It would be much more beneficial to rely instead on 'local elected officials'. They are also channels of community persuasion for jihadists. The central government should make more use of such channels.

From 1990 to the present day, several extremist groups have established themselves and operated in the Sahel. First, there was Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which arose in 2007 from the ashes of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Algerian terrorist movement that claimed to apply an uncompromising form of radical Islam. This group operates in the north of Niger. Then came the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), led by a certain Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, a Mauritanian national also known as Abu-Qumqum, who escaped from prison in 2006 and for whom an international arrest warrant was issued on 28 December 2011 by the Mauritanian authorities. The 'movement' seems to have been created during the Libyan conflict and in the wake of the return of thousands of pro-Gaddafi Sahelian militiamen fleeing Tripoli with a substantial supply of weapons. In 2013, the group merged with 'Those Who Sign in Blood' to form Al Mourabitoun. Finally, there came Ansar Dine, founded in 2012 in northern

Mali by Iyad Ag Ghali. This group, which has ties with AQIM, advocates the creation of an Islamic State in the north of the country and may be behind attacks in Niger such as the one in Tazalit on 6 October 2016. AQIM has some outgrowths in the region including the Tareq Ibn Zeyad katiba, led by Abu Zeid, which was based in Timbuktu during the occupation in 2012. The Ansar Dine katiba of Macina, led by Hamadoun Kouffa, who was also one of the planners of the offensive on Konna that precipitated the Franco-African intervention in January 2013. The group operates in central Mali (Ségou, Mopti). Hamadoun Kouffa was known throughout the Niger River Delta for his virulent preaching. He reappeared in January 2015. The attacks on Nampala, in the Ségou region (12 soldiers killed in January), Tenenkou (three soldiers killed in January 2015), Dioura (where the town hall was burnt down), Diafarabé (where an official from the Water and Forestry Department was murdered, and the national flag was set on fire in April) are attributed to his followers. He has links with Iyad Ag Ghaly and is said to be planning to set up a caliphate in central Mali. There is also the 'Khalid bun walid' or 'Ansar Dine du Sud' katibat, led in southern Mali by Emir Souleymane Keïta, who set up a training camp in Samanco, a suburb of Bamako. He was arrested in Sokolo, in the Centre, in late March 2016. In 2017, most of these groups came together to form Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin, the 'Group to Support Islam and Muslims', (JNIM or GSIM). It was born from the merger of Ansar Dine, AQIM, the Macina katiba and Al-Mourabitoun, and led by Iyad Ag Ghaly. In March, the group claimed responsibility for an attack that killed 11 Malian soldiers in Boulikessi, a Malian town on the border with Burkina Faso. On the Lake Chad Basin front, Boko Haram, which emerged in Nigeria in 2002, is considered the deadliest terrorist group in West Africa and collaborates

with other local groups in Niger. It operates mainly in the Lake Chad region. The very meaning of the name of Boko Haram sums up its primary motivations. 'Boko' means 'book' in Nigerian English and 'haram' means 'forbidden' in Arabic. By extension, 'Boko Haram' means, for this movement: 'Western school is banned'. Boko Haram was not the first Islamic protest movement in Nigeria. It has come in the wake of others, which appeared in the 1970s, such as the Maitatsine movement created under the aegis of Muhammad Marwa. The latter was killed in a confrontation with the army in 1980. His group was disbanded, but its members, who were scattered across the country, gradually regrouped.

Throughout the region, various armed 'jihadist' groups take advantage of gaps in state governance and divisions within and between communities to recruit fighters and establish themselves in certain areas of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These armed groups also use a narrative based on the idea of social justice for the most marginalised Fulani communities, positioning themselves as relays/substitutes for a corrupt and biased regime. However, after gaining the support of certain villages thanks to their more citizen-friendly approach, the behaviour of armed jihadist groups changed. They started to demand that those who wished to join their groups be financially self-sufficient and have a motorbike and financial resources in order to be accepted.

According to informants interviewed in Burkina Faso and Mali, this change was due to a drop in income among the armed groups, so these demands were linked to a need for funding to continue the armed struggle. This situation has apparently contributed to the growing confusion between 'jihadist' groups (and self-defence militias) and groups of criminals who

take advantage of the chaos generated by the conflict for personal gain. 'This is particularly true in the areas where the absence of an alternative and of an educational infrastructure mean that Qur'anic education is the only available cultural and moral framework. The central Sahel is experiencing a rapid withdrawal of formal education due to badly paid and poorly trained teachers, infrastructure that is poorly adapted to meet the needs of transhumant communities, and educational programmes based on the colonial model which are therefore not well suited to the local contexts' (International Alert, 2018, If Victims Become Perpetrators, p. 38.). The deterioration of the school system in the countries of the Sahel is thus weakening the resilience of young people to religious radicalism and violent extremism. In the areas they control, the jihadists are clearly well aware of this. They close so-called 'French' state schools and harass the teachers, who are accused of disseminating a neo-colonial ideology under the guise of secularism. According to the 25 September 2018 Report of the Secretary-General of the Security Council on the situation in Mali (S/2018/866), at the end of the school year, 464 schools remained closed in the Mopti region owing to insecurity, including threats and attacks from violent extremist groups. At the same time, they set up Koranic schools to impart their radical ideology, responding to the huge demand for education coming from the communities. In fact, in the villages of the Mopti region that are under the influence of violent extremists, women without access to education in the past have said they appreciated the access to religious education offered by the jihadists and expressed the desire to marry 'a marabout or a Qur'anic master so he'll teach [them] religion' (remarks recorded during an interview with a community actor in central Mali).

The Liptako-Gourma border areas are a crossroads for a range of trafficking activities, particularly drug trafficking (cannabis, cocaine and Tramadol) from the Gao and Timbuktu regions, in which MUJWA and members of GATIA are allegedly involved (Carayol R. (2016), *'Carte : au centre du Mali, une constellation de groupes armés', Jeune Afrique,* 17/06/2016) along with other armed groups. In the Gao region of Mali, trafficking resources are more widely reinvested in the local economy. With the activities of violent extremist groups and the counter-terrorism efforts undertaken by the country and its partners, communities' fears of being caught in the middle generate a constant feeling of insecurity, which takes many forms. The cooperative links, alliances and dynamics that are gradually being forged and strengthened between the various violent extremist groups and certain actors involved in local conflicts bear the seeds of a threat that it is particularly difficult for the Burkinabe government to combat. Through their *modus operandi*, violent extremist groups playing on situational psychology, notably the existence of old and new antagonisms, have been able to forge links with parties in conflict in order to maintain and consolidate their presence. The rhetoric of 'terrorism' galvanises forms of violence that are often neither ideological nor communal. In some cases, the fight against terrorism, as observed in the northern parts of Burkina Faso, contributes to new opportunities for revenge and the settling of scores in certain local conflicts. In this context, the paradigm of the fight against terrorism increasingly compels the population and the parties to the conflict to either rally behind the national armed forces or to form *ad hoc* coalitions with violent extremist groups. This situation has led to local opportunism and seen the emergence of new power relations that generate violence, coupled with settling of scores against the backdrop of age-old ri-

valries (over access to pastoral or agricultural resources, for instance) under the guise of combating terrorism. Ultimately, the government's ability to manage local conflicts in this context has been further undermined by the fact that accusations that certain community groups are complicit with or linked to terrorism have led to exactions and abuses by state armed forces, without proof or investigation.

In some areas, the legitimacy of the various traditional authorities is challenged by elements from marginalised segments of the community. For example, rising insecurity has called into question the social contract in Fulani society, which recognised the supremacy of traditional chiefs in exchange for the protection they offered to the rest of the community. Subsequently, the armed struggle advocated by Malam Dicko provided an ideological basis for a primarily social revolt, challenging the social order. As a result, some traditional and religious leaders, fearing threats from violent extremist groups, no longer reside in their home communities. In addition, traditional leaders are less and less sought after due to the intensity of the violence and protests against them in some communities. Their actions were meaningful in smaller-scale conflicts, where violence rarely escalated beyond assault and battery. At the same time, violent extremist and community-based armed groups (Koglweogo and militias) have established themselves in many areas, where they have a significant impact on the lives of the people. They involve themselves in conflict management, among other aspects of daily life. In the areas where these armed groups have supplanted the government, they provide justice through arbitration and conciliation, relying on Islamic courts and law. The fact that they carry weapons is a deterrent for the various community actors and forces a rallying of traditional or religious leaders. It

should be noted, however, that while extremist groups are stakeholders in some conflicts, in other situations, their presence helps to freeze tensions between disputing parties for fear of reprisals if their decisions are not upheld. In the Oudalan region of Burkina Faso, the groups act as arbitrators between socio-professional groups in conflict, displacing the old traditional regulators. Thus, with or without the collaboration of traditional leaders, the positions of violent extremist groups in relation to local conflicts vary. Their attitudes seem to be influenced by a variety of parameters, including their capacities (strength and resources), their objectives (desire to establish themselves, to increase their recruitment base, etc.), their sociology (membership) and the sociology of the conflict area.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that tackling the security crisis in the Sahel will require not only short-term efforts, but also addressing the underlying structural factors. This can only be achieved by improving national governance and adopting a holistic vision of the way out of the crisis, which, although it may not be able to resolve the consequences of the problems, would certainly reduce their impact in the short term and lay the foundations for a sustainable resolution in the long term.

CONCLUSION

The fight against terrorism, as it is conducted, leaves little room for dialogue on peace. After all these years of military campaigns of various types in the region, new avenues need to be explored, including discussions with certain community actors who have political rather than ideological demands. Such dialogue needs to be conducted as close as possible to the communities concerned, in order to avoid instrumentalisation or partisan exploitation. As with any project, the process has its challenges and limitations; however, in any case, international actors should assist the Sahelian authorities on this issue by supporting them in various areas that could help to enhance the dialogue proposal. This applies as much to the issue of governance, particularly at local level, as to development in areas that have long been neglected.

Ultimately, it cannot be overlooked that the crisis, by causing the withdrawal of the government from vast rural areas in Mali, Burkina Faso and, to a lesser extent, Niger, has brought about new developments in local geopolitics. In the absence of the state, as traditional chieftaincies, community militias and 'jihadist' groups have been competing to fill the vacancy left behind or, in some cases, the historical vacuum, it has become more political, security-related and social. Communities, left to their own devices, have been struggling for survival on many fronts: economic, with the scarcity of natural resources aggravated by climate change; identity, as they are wooed by both governments and armed groups; and security, in view of the failings of the overwhelmed public defence and security forces.

In this environment, the pattern of alliances with one or another of the actors in a wider conflict has more or less completed the process of making communities a political issue and, therefore, a preferred target. More fundamentally, some communities have become aware of their marginalisation and are demanding their rightful place in the national political arena, as well as the dividends of development efforts from which they are largely excluded. It is therefore important to analyse the crisis in the broader context of the region's social dynamics and security issues. In this respect, attempts to reduce them exclusively to their socio-professional or even inter- or intra-community dimension, or to the exacerbation of armed violence linked to the presence and actions of 'jihadist' groups, do not contribute to a thorough understanding of this multi-dimensional conflict.

In the context of this study, and based on the lessons that emerge from our analysis, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. **Consider dialogue as a discussion process that includes all communities.** Dialogue should be a collective reflection on governance in the states of the region, while remaining attentive to local specificities and the negotiation of a new social contract. This negotiation should be based on a real dialogue with the communities, including the 'pariahs'.

2. **Multiplying the levels of dialogue.** Top-down political dialogue with certain violent extremist groups, if it is to take place at all, must be a local initiative, with genuine national leadership. At this level, it is rec-

ommended that substantive work be prioritised over rallying strategies and handouts that some view as 'peace dividends'. This requires a greater involvement of all parties in decision-making on the pacification of the region.

3. **Initiate a genuine paradigm shift in the fight against terrorism.** Changing the counter-terrorism paradigm in the Sahel will mean defining a new and more effective formula for action. Changes in the positions of violent extremist groups, from their territorial ambitions to a project to disseminate the threat throughout West Africa, point to a geographical expansion of the terrorist threat. The region's defence and security forces need to adapt to these developments.

4. **It is also recommended to engage in peace solutions in line with the historical context of the countries, including their governance models.** This will entail greater consideration of both the diversity and the unique features of each country. The international community must pay attention to these specificities and stop making aid conditional on the use of its own management models. Fully implementing this approach will mean restoring endogenous mechanisms to their full capacity and holistic dimension, especially with regard to regulating violence.

5. **Adapting military strategies to the realities on the ground.** The true challenge for an army is not to win tactical victories, but to successfully manage the strategic endgame. Clearly, the presence of the armed forces in various areas should not be merely symbolic but should reflect a genuine commitment to the protection of the citizens. Achieving

these objectives will necessarily involve ambitious structural reforms.

6. **Strengthen the armed forces' understanding of local dynamics.** Armies operating in the region need to better understand the environments in which they operate to ensure that they have a true historical and sociological grasp of local issues.

7. **Support states in security sector reform.** Security sector reform should be approached from a holistic perspective of rebuilding state governance. The aim is to establish an 'intelligible governance' of public affairs and institutions, based on the inclusion of the different ethnic groups and categories of local and national actors, to achieve social equilibrium and collective participation in the affairs of the nation, thereby mitigating conflicts and ensuring efficient implementation of reforms.

8. **Rebuilding states on new foundations.** With regard to the role of the state, the discourse on the 'return of the state', which is widespread, should focus more on considering the type of government that the people can accept (doubtless one with more respect for them). Ultimately, rather than questioning traditional political foundations, the violence in certain areas in the region is a call for greater government engagement with real local problems.

9. **Reforming regional peace and security policy.** The contradictions of counter-terrorism in the Sahel. This conflict is a perfect example of the inability of African countries, and more particularly Sahelian countries, to organise themselves and cooperate, as Mali has been unable to cope with this problem on its own and has been unable to count

on assistance from any source other than France (and the African Union, with very limited impact).

10. Finally, to support the efforts of governments in the region, international partners should begin by identifying existing local peace agreements, based on participatory dialogue with family and community representatives, religious and customary authorities, and local experts in conflict mediation. In so doing, it is important to avoid biased approaches, by basing engagement on a thorough and context-specific understanding of social and political practices and cultural and religious beliefs.

There is also a need to build trust and ensure broad participation by facilitating negotiations between community members, traditional, customary and religious actors and armed non-state actors, in order to remedy the current imbalance in natural resource management. It also means redefining the role of local institutions in the sustainable resolution of inter-community conflicts. Given the strong position of jihadist groups in conflict-affected areas, it is important to consider how to include them in local negotiations and peace agreements so as to avoid obstruction. This will entail linking peace-building efforts with support for dialogue and reconciliation.

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About this publication

This publication is the culmination of a study conducted on the basis of informal, semi-structured interviews with various informants in the region, including civil society representatives, journalists, diplomats, and international development cooperation officials in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The report is divided into five sections: I) An analytical overview of the security landscapes including the critical dynamics underlying the situations in the target countries; II) A presentation of existing security and other initiatives; III) An analysis of internal local and community dynamics; IV) An analysis of the question of negotiated stability as a means of managing the security crisis; and V) Options for a negotiated peace in the Sahel.

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