A group affair: understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali

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Chapter 8 – Conclusion and discussion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis set out with the question: **how can we understand involvement in terrorism in Mali?** How do factors on the micro, meso, and macro level play a role in the individual process of involvement with terrorist groups? In the previous chapters I presented the empirical data gathered in Mali based on the interviews with the 30 (suspected and) incarcerated terrorists in Bamako and additional data gathered through interviews and focus groups with 75 both Malian and international professionals working in the field of terrorism in Mali. The analysis focuses on deconstructing involvement in terrorism through identifying the factors that play a role in that process. In chapter six, seven domains were identified that inform involvement in terrorism, that include state-citizen relationships, survival, foreign influence, societal tensions, economic opportunities, ideology, and lack of information.

In this chapter, I will answer the main research question based on both the perspectives of those viewed as terrorists on how and why they engaged with terrorism as well as the perspectives of those that work on preventing or countering terrorism in the country. I conclude that involvement in terrorism in Mali can be best understood as a group affair, as meso-level factors are best able to aid our understanding of this process. Of all elements considered in the literature, the factors that prove most valuable in understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali are state-citizen relationships, societal tensions, ideology and foreign influence. Second, I assess how my empirical findings relate to the academic literature presented in chapter two on how individuals become involved in terrorism. Specifically, I will examine to what extent the micro, meso, and macro level explanations of involvement in terrorism apply to this Malian case study.

8.2 Involvement in terrorism in Mali as a group affair

The answer to the research question is based on three distinct sources: (1) insights from the academic literature; (2) those who were or who are accused of being involved with terrorism; and (3) professionals that work in the field of counter-terrorism in Mali. Three things became clear from the interviews with both (suspected) terrorists as well as professionals working in counter-terrorism in Mali. First, that while involvement in terrorism is an individual pathway that is influenced by all three levels: by the individual context, group dynamics, and structural factors; group-or meso level explanations for involvement in terrorism are most important in the analysis of the empirical findings. Second, that these pathways are never linear processes following a number of pre-identifiable steps, but that these are rather dynamic processes including lapses and re-lapses, pauses, triggers, and environmental influences that altogether can push an individual towards engaging in terrorism. Third, that individual explanations or descriptions of this process are by definition intersubjective and depend on both the perception of those involved as well as those who interpret that perception. With that in mind, the empirical findings presented below – structured along the lines of common factors on the micro, meso and macro level – inform the process of involvement in terrorism in Mali.

As noted in the overview of the academic literature in chapter two, the majority of the studies in the field of terrorism are based on or have been written in a different part of the world: outside of Africa and mainly in Europe and the United States. That is why in this paragraph, the empirical findings in this study are assessed in light of the existing theories to determine to what extent the existing body of academic literature is relevant for, or applicable to, the phenomenon involvement in terrorism in Mali.

8.2.1. On the micro level

The themes that are considered micro level factors that influence involvement in terrorism in Mali are aspects of the domains survival, state-citizen relationships, and ideology. Survival was defined as *a strategy to prevent immediate or long-term harm to a person's physical, familial or material sphere*. When taking a closer look at the narratives of those detainees that listed survival as a reason to engage with terrorism, two types of survival were distinguished. Either it meant collaborating with or facilitating terrorist groups because of the threat of physical harm (including being killed) when refusing to cooperate. This category was labelled 'immediate survival', characterized by forced cooperation with terrorist groups. Or it meant engaging with terrorist groups as an outcome of a rational consideration that doing so provided a means to ensure income or other economic means. This was then labelled a long-term survival strategy, which was considered to be of a more (though not entirely) voluntary nature. Especially immediate survival is a factor that clearly plays a role on the micro or the personal level. It is arguably the most direct (forced) push factor that leads individuals to become involved with terrorist groups. Long-term survival strategies, however, can also be viewed as a meso level factor, when it was considered to be a strategy for survival not just for the individual per se but for the family or the community as well.

This study did not find evidence for theories that view(ed) involvement in terrorism as a result of psychopathological differences (deviant character traits, psychological trauma), nor do the findings support overall explanations of involvement in terrorism from a psycho-sociological perspective (a higher prevalence of aggressive, action-oriented or excitement-seeking individuals). This is likely due to limitations of the data used, as the data do not include psychological or psychiatric assessments of those respondents who were (accused of or sentenced for being) involved in terrorism. It is also unlikely that those respondents themselves would explain their own process of becoming involved with terrorism as the outcome of aggressive or excitement-seeking character traits, as this would undermine their (more rational) explanations. Nonetheless, the professional respondents also did not mention psychopathological or psycho-sociological explanations in their responses, including prison staff who are closely monitoring the inmates' behaviour on a daily basis and know their background fairly well. This does not necessarily mean we can rule out these explanations altogether, but it does imply that these theories do not help us better understand involvement in terrorism in Mali.

Still, to a certain extent Post's finding that attraction to the path of terrorism is higher for those who feel marginalised and/or isolated,[586] is supported by the findings. The inmate respondents did indeed refer to feeling neglected by the Malian government and/or other ethnic groups. Nonetheless, another statement by Post (asserting that these individuals are often 'inadequate individuals from troubled family backgrounds'[587]) is not reflected in the findings when it comes to the demographic profile of the inmate respondents.

Another factor that played a role on the individual, micro level was identity (situated in the larger domain of state-citizen relationships). This included inmate respondents who discussed how they did not 'feel' Malian or did not have a Malian identity. Some of them connected this identity issue to feelings of resentment towards *others* who play a role in what their identity should or should not be ('I live in a country that others call Mali'). However, while these feelings of resentment were apparent in the interviews, there was no mention of

[586] Post, *Current Understanding of Terrorist Motivation and Psychology Implications for a Differentiated Antiterrorist Policy*, 25.
[587] Post, Jerrold M. (1984). Notes on a psychodynamic theory of terrorist behavior, Terrorism, 7:2, 241- 256, https://doi: 10.1080/10576108408435577, p. 241.

dehumanization of the enemy or essentialist thinking – for example through the use of derogatory terms for the perceived enemy or even through labelling the roles respondents fulfilled as 'revolutionary' or 'mujahid'.

A third domain that helps our understanding of involvement in terrorism in Mali is ideology, a domain that I also situate at the micro level. I defined ideology as '*all aspects related to a specific set of ideas or a specific worldview*' and clustered two themes under the domain: religion and Azawad. For about a third of the inmate respondents, their motivation to engage with terrorist groups was clearly an ideological or religious one. For example, Boubacar, who was motivated by watching videos of abuse against fellow Muslims, or Kheirou, who viewed the use of violence as a logical outcome of his religious beliefs. The same applies to motivations related to (striving for autonomy for) Azawad, which for some respondents was a clear individual motivator. Usman, who was a member of CMA, said he joined this group because he believed in CMA's goals, and he fought for independence for the North.

These empirical findings thus support micro-level theories related to the cognitive perspective, especially when it comes to the role of ideology. Kruglanski's *Quest for Significance*[588], viewing individuals who engage in terrorism as primarily driven by a search for meaning, value and control in life, mirrors the finding that a number of respondents explicitly viewed their engagement with terrorism as a calling, and as a logical outcome of their religious or ideological beliefs.

As discussed in detail in the chapter two, micro level theories of why individuals become involved in terrorism explain that process as a result of personal factors. This can refer to either psychopathological characteristics, psycho-sociological processes or cognitive processes. [589] When comparing these approaches to the three micro level factors presented in the empirical findings (survival, identity and ideology), it becomes clear that the empirical findings challenge both the psychopathological and the psycho-sociological view on why individuals engage with terrorism. None of the respondents talked about childhood trauma or were showing a higher prevalence of specific character traits, combining personal feelings of inadequacy with a reliance on externalization and splitting. As such, these explanations for involvement in terrorism do not seem applicable to these empirical findings. Nonetheless, this could be the result of the fact that the interview time per individuals was too limited to get into an extensive or in-depth discussion of these aspects.

Overall, the empirical findings clearly underline the value of cognitive explanations for engagement in terrorism, while they challenge theories that point to psychopathological or psycho-sociological explanations. At the same time, most inmate respondents were never assessed psychologically or psychiatrically. Nor did this study include a psychological assessment of the inmate respondents. However, the 75 Malian and international professionals, in line with the inmate respondents, did not report any factors related to these theories either. All in all, while the data is insufficient to carefully test these aspects it is worthwhile noting that none of the inmate nor the professional respondents refered to psychopathological factors or theories related to involvement in terrorism in Mali.

8.2.2. On the meso level

[588] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization".
[589] Kegley, *International Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls*.

The themes that can be viewed as meso level factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism in Mali are themes in the larger domain of state-citizenship relations (lack of political responsibilities, lack of institutional capabilities and identity), aspects of the theme long-term survival strategies, all themes in the domain of societal tensions (North vs South conflict, no sense of community and ethnic tensions in society), all themes in the domain economic opportunities (economic benefits provided by terrorist groups and economic challenges), all themes in the domain ideology (religion, Azawad) and the domain lack of information.

The point of departure for meso level explanations in the academic literature is that individual issues alone cannot explain (participation in) extreme violence. In the words of 'pure' sociologist Black, a sociological understanding of why people become violent "… ignores the contents of the human mind, such as thought and feelings, and is entirely free of psychology."[590] Instead, the explanation should be found in "the sociological interrelationships between terrorists, their grievances, and their enemies – or the "social geometry" of the actors". The meso level includes explanations for involvement in terrorism that concentrate on the concepts of social distance and social control, as well as socio-psychological concepts such as peer pressure, group humiliation, collective identity, fusion of values and in-group/outgroup thinking.

As explained in chapter four, in Mali, the role of tribes, clans, and familial relationships forms the traditional backbone underpinning how society is organised. It determines everything from who serves in what position in government to the way justice is organised locally, where you can and cannot sell your products, and what terrorist groups you become a member of. Malian society is organised into tribes called *kabilas,* which can be recognized by their surname (i.e. Diallo, Boubacar, Coulibaly) and that are further split into specific clans and families. The importance of the group; of these relationships and connections, cannot be overestimated. The empirical data suggest that most respondents strongly identify with their kabila or ethnic group; the findings underline the complex nature of identity, citizenship, and the state in a country like Mali and how the domains identified become part of a group narrative that influences involvement in terrorism. As such, involvement in terrorism in Mali is not just the outcome of meso-level factors but very much a group affair: the meso-level factors become meaningful through group relations and a shared perception of events and the larger environment in which involvement takes place.

The importance of these pre-existing social ties or social networks and the related notions of 'fusion' of individual with collective identities, seeking approval or peer pressure within groups, are clearly supported by both the inmate as well as the professional respondents. Given the already closely-knit fabric of Mali's societal structure into kabilas and tribes determined by ethnicity and history, pre-existing social ties, especially of familial and ethnic nature, clearly facilitate or drive involvement in terrorism in the country. This collective identity aspect also resonates with Kruglanski's *Quest for Significance*,[591] specifically the network element of that theory, where members of a group increasingly share values and adhere to a common narrative. Related theories on group humiliation as a factor driving involvement in terrorism[592] are also validated by the empirical findings. Especially group humiliation experienced as disenfranchisement or discrimination of one's ethnic or

[590] Donald Black, 'The Geometry of Terrorism', *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 1 (1 March 2004): 14–15, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2004.00201.x. p. 14.
[591] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization".
[592] David Webber and Arie W Kruglanski, 'The Social Psychological Makings of a Terrorist', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Aggression and violence, 19 (1 February 2018): 131–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.03.024.

religious group as well as through occupation of one's homeland by a foreign entity are elements that are supported by this research.

Regarding the role of ideology on the meso level, many terrorist groups in Mali define themselves in ideological or religious terms, invoking separatist notions and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam in their narratives, regardless of what other factors drive their conduct.[593] In some academic literature, extremist interpretations of religion are assumed to be a key factor in how individuals become involved with terrorist (jihadist) groups.[594] It is not difficult to find examples of unrest and radical religious thinking in the Malian region. A significant number of Pakistani Islamic preachers in Mali and Niger were found to be bringing radical views to their congregants.[595] However, in most narratives analysed in this study, involvement was not the direct consequence of extremist religious interpretation or the result of religious indoctrination. Rather, the religious dimension seems to play a role either in individuals who had little religious education, or in providing an answer to perceived grievances.

Some inmate participants framed their participation in terrorist groups in ideological terms also clearly as a group affair: as a struggle of their ethnic group against the South of Mali or the government. This was, however, based on secular, irredentist notions rather than for religious reasons. MNLA is a secular terrorist organisation, however, in the aftermath of the 2012 rebellion, the lead of that rebellion was taken over by Islamist groups such as MUJWA and Ansar Dine. These latter terrorist groups are more interested in enforcing Sharia law in Azawad rather than Tuareg independence as such. All in all, the notion of Azawad is historically not related to religion. Given that many terrorist groups that are active in Mali emphasize their ideological (often religious) agendas, this supports the finding that the decision to become involved with terrorist groups is motivated by many diverse needs and priorities, religion or ideology often providing a cohesive narrative to bind these issues together, rather than functioning as an independent motivator.

Thus, the empirical findings do back up ideologically oriented theories for explaining involvement in terrorism, as the ideological notion of Azawad played a role on the meso level through providing a clear objective to restore the autonomy and standing of the independent North. This ideological element played a role on the group-level in bringing like-minded individuals together and (further) fusing their beliefs through mutual processes of reinforcement.

The meso level of analysis of the findings focused on whether participants viewed engaging in terrorism as a form of social control through collective violence. Both groups of respondents viewed (their) involvement in terrorism as a logical outcome of grievances against the Malian state, specifically the lack of political responsibilities and institutional capabilities that – in their opinion – characterised the Malian government. The domain 'state-citizen relationships', within which these themes are situated, was the most often mentioned domain that informs involvement in terrorism according to both the inmate as well as the professional respondents.

[593] Théroux-Bénoni et al., 'Mali's Young "Jihadists" Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?'
[594] Bart Schuurman, Edwin Bakker, and Quirine Eijkman, 'Structural Influences on Involvement in European Homegrown Jihadism: A Case Study', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 108, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1158165.
[595] Princeton N. Lyman, 'The War on Terrorism in Africa', in *Africa in World Politics*, ed. John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothchild (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 5.

These findings are very much in line with both Black's perception of terrorism as a form of social control[596] and De La Roche's notion of terrorism as an organised form of collective violence by non-state actors to address grievances against the Malian state.[597] These grievances include themes such as a perceived lack of political responsibilities and institutional capabilities on account of the government, ethnic tensions in society, and a conflict between the Northern and the Southern part of the country. For many respondents, the feeling that the state neglected them, favouring specific ethnic groups and generally favouring the South over the North of the country, was put forth as a reason to engage with terrorist groups as a form of collective, violent protest. It is likely that these theories are so prominently visible in the empirical findings as a result of two factors: the geopolitical history and the socio-cultural environment. The colonial background of Mali clearly has led to a border that many ethnic groups, who predate the drawing of those borders, simply do not recognize – and as a result they are in an ambivalent state where on the one hand do not feel they have a Malian identity, while on the other hand they resent the Malian government for not being included in the political process and for not taking up state tasks such as providing security or justice. Additionally, the colonial background has fostered resentment against the former colonizer, France; and given France's active political and military interventions in the country, this has also led to an impetus in involvement in terrorist groups. Second, as stressed before, the Malian socio-cultural environment can be characterized as collective, rather than individual, meaning that group grievances such as those mentioned here as the outcome of the geopolitical history quickly become motivators for individuals to join terrorist groups in response to those group-level grievances.

Finally, the concept of in-group/outgroup thinking, as proposed by Jervis,[598] was clearly visible in the findings. Especially the themes lack of community, ethnic tensions and identity, where the (suspected) terrorist as well as the Malian and international professional respondents underlined that individuals in Mali very clearly situate themselves within specific ethnic groups and tribes and define their identity in line with these groups vis-à-vis *the other* (which could be either other ethnic groups, the government or foreigners).

8.2.3 On the macro level

One domain can be clearly characterised as offering a macro level explanation for involvement in terrorism in Mali: the domain of foreign influence (including the themes direct influence of neighbouring countries, influence of international actors, and foreign jihadist influence). Additionally, some aspects of the domain economic opportunities were identified as macro level aspects. And finally, the theme of identity, especially in light of state-citizenship relations, has a macro level aspect to it that will be further discussed below. The Malian and international professional respondents also clearly indicated the presence of international actors and economic opportunities offered by terrorist groups as factors that can aid our understanding of why individuals become involved with terrorism in Mali.

Macro level theories in the academic literature, focusing on the systemic or structural level of explanation, relate to "specific characteristics of the social, cultural, economic, and (geo)political *environment* that can enable, motivate or trigger the use of

[596] Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control'.
[597] Roberta Senechal de la Roche, 'Collective Violence as Social Control'.
[598] Irving Lester Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

terrorism".[599] Examples of such characteristics include (relative) deprivation caused by economic hardship and/or poverty and social disparaties within society, lack of political opportunity or freedom, patterns of conflict and war or regional insecurity. As such, the macro level centers on the situational factors that lead to the formation of terrorist groups. When looking specifically at Crenshaw's preconditions,[600] the Malian case study finds evidence for the government's lack of will or sheer inability to prevent terrorism (as some participants noted they believed that the government seemed to work with terrorist groups or at least tolerates their presence). When turning to direct events that drive individuals to become involved in terrorism (precipitants), the factors of lack of opportunity for political participation and elite dissatisfaction were coherent with the empirical findings.

In the debate on drivers of violent extremism, the correlation between poverty or unemployment and violence, especially the perceived connection between "jobless youths" and violent extremism, has become a dominant narrative.[601] In the case of Mali, the lack of economic opportunities or poverty did not rank high in the responses of the participants. In total, 17 out of 30 inmate respondents identified a lack of economic opportunities in their answer to the question of how they became involved with terrorist groups. These participants mentioned either that the absence of long-term job opportunities (often blamed on the government), or salaries offered by terrorist groups were a reason to engage. In none of the cases, this related to not having a job at the time of becoming involved; to the contrary, all participants that became involved for economic reasons were employed at the time of recruitment. An explanation for this finding could be twofold.

On the one hand, terrorist groups in Mali are clearly able to support a large workforce – as evidenced by the variety of positions the inmate respondents held in their respective terrorist groups, ranging from fighters to mechanics and translators. The consequence of this might be that it does not require an economic sacrifice for individuals to join these groups; to the contrary, they can either sustain or improve their economic conditions. That means that becoming involved with these groups does not feel as a choice or process where economic considerations play a large role. Second, emphasizing the role of economic motivations could undermine the ideological narrative that some individuals might want to emphasize. As such, this could also be the outcome of response that are consciously or unconsciously white-washed to exclude non-ideological factors or factors that might be perceived as more self-centred rather than focused on the common good. At the same time, a number of interviewees mentioned that while not for them personally, for others who joined terrorist groups unemployment was in many cases a factor of significance. Overall, even though this finding does support the perspective that poverty can be a driver for engagement in terrorism, it is not able to provide an answer to why so many others – in the same circumstances – do not engage in terrorism.

Foreign influence featured prominently in the responses of both inmate and professional interviewees as a factor that can lead to involvement in terrorism. Events in the geopolitical sphere, such as the fall of the Gadhafi regime in Libya and the international interventions of MINUSMA and the French counter-terrorism operations Serval and Barkhane, were cited as

[599] Hanne Brynjar and Torp, *Why Terrorism Occurs - A Survey of Theories and Hypotheses on the Causes of Terrorism.*
[600] Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99.
[601] United Nations. (2015). Security Council, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2250 (2015), Urges Member States to Increase Representation of Youth in Decision-Making at All Levels. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm

reasons for engaging in terrorism. Also, the spill-over effects of neighbouring countries, for example the ethnic and clan-ties to family members in the Sahelian region (mainly in Algeria but also in Libya, Mauretania, and Niger) and the resulting trade networks of these connections, were named as reasons for foreign influence in the country, leading individuals to become involved in terrorism activities such as narcotrafficking and illicit trading in the region to support or facilitate terrorist groups.

The role of international actors, especially France and MINUSMA, also played a clear role in the involvement of the respondents. In some cases, the arrival of international actors provided a turning point for individuals (for example the arrival of France's counter-terrorism military operations Serval and Barkhane in someone's home region) and in other cases it was viewed more as an event in the background (the role that MINUSMA played). Sixteen respondents listing the role of international actors as having an influence on involvement with terrorism in Mali, with seven respondents arguing that international actors have something to benefit from in the Malian conflict, either money, trade, or territory. France was especially perceived as playing a very negative role in Mali with 12 inmate respondents labelling the French as either terrorists or as part of the problem in Mali. France is viewed by many participants as playing a neo-colonial role in the country, lacking understanding of the cultural context, and supporting specific terrorist groups. Overall, the role of MINUSMA as perceived by both inmate and professional respondents can be characterised as a passive bystander. Where most inmates blamed the government, the French, or other ethnic groups for the problems in the country, MINUSMA is viewed as incompetent and ignorant at best, complicit at worst.

As such, the role of geopolitical events such as the Tuareg Rebellion of 2012, the fall of Gadhafi's regime in 2014 and the international interventions in Mali in the shape of MINUSMA and France's counterterrorism military operations (Serval and Barkhane) played a role in individual's decisions to become involved in terrorism according to both professional as well as prison participants. Some respondents characterised the role of international actors (especially France) as neo-colonial and imperialist, and both the roles played by MINUSMA and the counter-terrorism operations Serval and Barkhane provided significant motivations for some of the participants to engage in terrorist groups. Relating these findings to the academic literature again underlines the value of Crenshaw's precipitants[602] – as events or turning points that precede and can trigger terrorism.

Participants viewed foreign jihadist influence as a factor leading them to become involved with terrorist groups, as a result of direct influence of jihadist groups that were formed by foreigners (i.e. Algerians and Mauritanians in AQIM or the role of returning ISIS-fighters in some of the groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS). A number of (suspected) terrorists as well as some of the professional respondents underlined the influence of hard-line jihadist ideology spread through Mali with the help of foreign actors such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, fostering incolcement in terrorism for example one of the participants who studied in a madrassa funded by Qatari money.

Finally, the role of identity vis-à-vis the state has clear macro level characteristics in terms of what statehood and citizenship entail in the Malian context. When discussing identity in the context of the country, inmate participants indicated they did not necessarily feel *Malian* but rather they associated themselves with their respective ethnic groups. Additionally, many respondents do not view the Malian state – or the government of Mali as the actor responsible for governing the country – as either a legitimate concept or a legitimate actor. Both the territory of the Malian state and the role of the Malian government were

[602] Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99.

contested by the respondents. As such, the very foundation of the concept of statehood as a territorially bound institute with a monopoly on the use of force is at odds with the reality on the ground in Mali as observed in this study.

Relating the macro level domains and themes found in the empirical evidence to the academic literature shows that the notion that involvement in terrorism is the outcome of the perception of deprivation vis-à-vis others, often caused by profound social inequality in terms of economic wealth is clearly applicable to the Malian case study. Both the inmate as well as the professional respondents all pointed towards macro-level factors that played a role in involvement in terrorism in Mali, whether it be the domain of foreign influence or aspects of the domains state-citizenship relations and societal tensions.

All in all, without taking away from the complexity of the process of involvement in terrorism, this study shows involvement in terrorism in Mali can mainly be understood as a group affair; as meso-level factors offer most understanding in to this process. Of all factors considered in the literature, and the factors identified in the analysis of the empirical findings, the factors that prove most valuable in understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali are state-citizen relationships, societal tensions, ideology (on the meso-level) and foreign influence (on the macro-level). The results also show that identity as a factor, which in this study was viewed as an element within the larger meso domain of state-citizen relationships, is in fact a factor that plays a role on all three levels. Given the importance of group-ties in Mali, the lines between individual and group identity are blurred; and this study demonstrates that – at the macro level – identity is also tied to the concepts of citizenship, statehood and legitimate government. This is not to say that the other factors identified in this study are not important. Factors such as survival, ideology and economic opportunities, also play a role in the process of becoming involved in terrorism, but to a much lesser extent compared to the factors discussed above.

When assessing these findings in light of the academic literature, I conclude that involvement in terrorism in Mali can be best understood as a "form of social control from below, aiming to defend (sacred) traditions"[603] and re-establish a (lost) power balance, facilitated by social networks and collective identity. The findings demonstrate that involvement in terrorism clearly provides individuals in Mali with benefits including a strong collective identity that fosters feelings of collective humiliation and/or emotional fulfilment in addressing that humiliation, confirms individual's beliefs and/or strengthens group ideology. Additionally, involvement in terrorism can provide social value in the sense that it offers individuals the possibility of acquiring status and increased self-esteem and finally, fulfils a need to belong to a group. The importance of the group, the family, the village, the clan and one's ethnic group in Mali's cultural context cannot be overstated.

8.3 Discussion

In light of the above, I will focus here on what the implications are of the findings for the different levels of analysis. Specifically, while meso-level theories provide most insight into involvement in terrorism in Mali, I will discuss how the process of involvement takes place within the macro-level context where concepts such as relative deprivation, push-and

[603] Scott Atran (2007). Sacred values, terrorism and the limits of rational choice. *In the same light as slavery: Building a global antiterrorist consensus.*

pull factors, the centre-periphery divide and Crenshaw's preconditions and precipitants.[604] Next, I will discuss what this implies for the usefulness of the multi-level framework and understanding how individuals attribute meaning to events unfolding in their lives.

8.3.1. The macro-level context

While it is likely that meso-level explanations are generally more aligned with the collectivist culture of Mali and are thus best able to shed light on involvement in terrorism; it is worth noting that the lines between the different levels are blurry. Especially when it comes to the delineation between micro-and meso level factors on the one hand and macro- and meso-level explanations on the other hand. Perceived relative deprivation (a macro level theory)[605] for example, is very closely linked to the meso level explanation of terrorism as a form of social control through collective violence. The main difference seems to be that the macro level concept of relative deprivation can be perceived as a driver for involvement in terrorism (perceived deprivation), whereas the meso level concept of social control through collective violence can be perceived as – in line with Gurr's theory on revolution – the outcome of that driver[606] (the response to that perceived deprivation).

Overall, the findings of this study do not only shed light on what levels of analyses (and what specific theories on those levels of analyses) are best able to increase our understanding of why individuals become involved with terrorism in the Malian context – they also provide us with an understanding of how these different levels relate to one another, in a way that seems very relevant to experiences of involvement in terrorism in the broader Sahelian context of Mali's neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger with similar circumstances. While meso-level explanations for involvement in terrorism are most dominant in this study, they are placed within a wider geopolitical (macro-level) context that can provide further understanding as to why the factors identified in this study might be push or pull factors for involvement in terrorism in one country or region, while they might not be in other countries or region.

To further illustrate this point: Mali is faced with specific persistent vulnerabilities to terrorism, which are is shaped by a combination of continued hardship in terms of livelihood in the northern regions and a failed social contract between the state and its citizens. The challenges faced by the government are vast: from ensuring security and stability as a prerequisite for delivering services including education, electricity and water, to building political legitimacy[607] through ensuring inclusion of the North in the political decision-making process, and addressing the grievances of the northern populations. This is all the more difficult as the findings show that at its core, the Westphalian concept of the state as a territorial entity with a monopoly on the use of force,[608] does not match the reality on the ground in Mali, where the majority of the incarcerated terrorists come from pastoralist nomadic communities that have done without the state for centuries.

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[604] Martha Crenshaw, M. (2007). The logic of terrorism. *Terrorism in perspective*, *24*, 24-33.
[605] James C. Davies. 'Toward a Theory of Revolution'; Clare Richardson, 'Relative Deprivation Theory in Terrorism'; for a study on relative deprivation in the African (Nigerian) context, see Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, (2013). Living in fear: religious identity, relative deprivation and the Boko Haram terrorism. *African security*, *6*(2), 153-170.
[606] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Published for the Center of International Studies, Princeton University [by] Princeton University Press, 1970).
[607] Kaufmann, Daniel and Kraay, Aart andMastruzzi, Massimo, The Worldwide Governance Indicators.
[608] Theodore J. Lowi and Edward J. Harpham, 'Political Theory and Public Policy: Marx, Weber, and a Republican Theory of the State'.

Additionally, the *centre-periphery*[609] divide is very tangible in Mali and has, if anything, been aggravated in the eyes of both groups of respondents by the interests and presence of foreign actors, including France and MINUSMA. As this analysis shows, the "accident of geography",[610] referring to the environment where the respondents in this study were born, dramatically impacts their life trajectories and opportunities. While poverty is present in Bamako as well, it is most absolute and most desperate in the Northern regions, close to the borders, according to both the inmate and professional participants in this study. This is where the incarcerated individuals, who feel they have no promising prospects in their lives after prison, become vulnerable to recruitment by or engagement with terrorist groups, whose narratives appeal to the locally felt frustration and anger, which is closely in line with Taylor's concept of *fanaticism* as "excessive enthusiasm for specific religious or political beliefs".[611] The professional interviews also underlined that where individuals view their lives as characterised by injustice and deprivation, terrorist ideologies present themselves, as the answer in the search for beliefs (in line with Kruglanski's Quest for Significance)[612] and (in line with Blumenthal's overview of reasons for justifying violence)[613] perceived benefits.

When the phenomenon of engagement with terrorist groups is analysed through an exclusively ideological prism, the findings showed a distinction can be drawn between (violent) extremist interpretations of religion and the more secular notion of an independent Azawad as motivators for engagement. Both notions were supported by a number of professional and inmate participants in this study with some inmates advocating for the implementation of Sharia law in the country and others claiming autonomy for Azawad. Overall, the combination of the absence of education and a dependence on religious – in some cases foreign-funded extremist – teachers enables ideologies and extremist narratives that are essentially brought into the country by foreigners to serve as a catalyst for local grievances.

This macro-level context provides the backdrop against which state neglect and grievances against foreign powers are especially noteworthy in the narratives of those respondents whose situation could already be described as vulnerable in terms of their economic conditions and perceived lack of opportunities. As such, this study also indicates that while meso-level factors hold most explanatory power when analysing involvement in terrorism in Mali, those factors are more likely to come to the fore in a macro-level context characterized by a clear centre-periphery divide, absent government or a government that is perceived as illegitimate, tensions between a geographically delineated state that harbours nomadic communities and the vacuum these conditions create that are easily exploited by extremist and terrorist groups.

Thus, this research suggests that macro, structural conditions in Mali and the wider Sahel (the fall of the Gadhafi regime, the presence of MINUSMA, state neglect) ripple through to the meso/group and the individual, micro level, shaping individual's vulnerabilities, life choices and ultimately, pathways to extremism. The narratives of the 30 (suspected) terrorists, illustrate both the urgency of the issue of engagement with terrorist groups as well as the increasing depth of Mali's vulnerability to this phenomenon. Going back to Crenshaw's distinction between preconditions and precipitants in the process of

[609] S. B. D. De Silva, (2012). *The political economy of underdevelopment*. Routledge.
[610] Richard C. Blum, *An Accident of Geography.*
[611] Taylor, *The Fanatics: A Behavioural Approach to Political Violence*, 14.
[612] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization".
[613] Monica D. Blumenthal et al., *More about Justifying Violence: Methodological Studies of Attitudes and Behavior*.

engaging with terrorist groups,[614] this study finds two clear preconditions: the perceived marginalization of Northern Mali and a perceived failed social contract between the state and its citizens. It also finds two precipitants: the perceived direct struggle for survival and the force of what Janis has labelled 'group think';[615] which brings with it the pressure of peer groups.[616] Individual involvement with terrorism can thus be characterised as a process that generally starts with moral outrage at political events or a political status quo, in response to which what Sageman called "loose, fluid amorphous political protest communities"[617] adopt a warlike narrative or ideology, which in the Malian context is either framed in religious terms as Islam being at war with the West, or in secular terms as the North/Azawad being at war with the South/the government.

8.3.2 The usefulness of the multi-level framework of analysis

This process of becoming involved with terrorist groups blurs the lines between the theoretical levels of analysis. Individual inmate participants frame their personal experiences in a way that resonates with that narrative through a process of identification and socialisation and finally, are mobilised through their social (often militant) networks. Given the extent to which individuals view their own identity as hardly distinguishable from their respective group identity – whether it be family, clan or tribe – the micro level explanations sit uneasy with Malian reality. On the other end of the spectre, the findings show that macro level factors (geopolitical events and structural conditions) only become relevant to the process of engagement with terrorist groups through their translation into militant narratives. Moreover, the identification of individuals with those (group-level) narratives, seems to muddy the waters between the macro and the meso levels. Finally, as noted earlier, the meso-level theories of social movement theory[618] and political violence as a struggle for social control[619] have some overlap with the macro level theory of relative deprivation.

Much of this confusion surrounding the differences between levels of analysis seems to be the result of a lack of clear categorisations of types of factors. Where some theories or concepts describe drivers of terrorism (grievances), others focus on the outcomes of those drivers (mobilisation). The question comes down to how the multilevel framework of analysis enables us to better understand how involvement in terrorism functions in the Malian context.

First, based on the findings of this study, I argue that the multilevel framework is helpful to the extent that it enables researchers to analyse different factors that play a role by allowing for a categorization of these factors on the three levels. However, the risk involved is that in doing so, it will reduce a more complex and nuanced reality into a more abstract and simplistic model of that reality. As such, adopting a multilevel framework should be done with great caution and without translating the artificial levels back to the lived experience of those subjects under research.

The second potential use of the multilevel framework lies in translating research findings into policy recommendations, where the distinction between macro, meso and micro levels, albeit artificial, might provide guidance for interventions on those three levels as well. Especially when it comes to designing policies to counter or prevent violent extremism, it can facilitate a holistic approach – avoiding for example policies that are only focused on the

[614] Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', 381.
[615] Irving Lester Janis, *Victims of Groupthink.*
[616] Solomon E. Asch, 'Opinions and Social Pressure'.
[617] Marc Sageman, Misunderstanding Terrorism, p. 13.
[618] Della Porta, Donatella, and Mario Diani. *Social Movements: An Introduction*.
[619] Roberta Senechal de la Roche, 'Collective Violence as Social Control'.

individual or group level. Again, when doing this, it should always be done with a clear realisation that any policy measure or intervention implemented on one of the three levels will always have a larger impact beyond just that level.

Third and finally, based on this research I argue that to better understand involvement in terrorism, instead of thinking in terms of micro, meso and macro level factors that influence individual involvement, it is more useful to think in terms of internal and external attribution[620] on the level of the individual. The empirical findings of the prison interviews do demonstrate that those accused and/or sentenced for terrorism-related offences in Mali, when reflecting on their own involvement in terrorism, do attribute some elements of their involvement to their own decision-making process – known in psychology as internal attribution – whereas they place other aspects firmly in the 'world outside them' – known as external attribution.[621] This suggests that it might be more helpful, especially when it comes to policies focused on preventing violent extremism, to focus on this difference in attribution and try to address the level of agency individuals have and perceive of when confronted with terrorism.

This study shows that involvement in terrorism in Mali resides somewhere within the borders of developing personal maturity, (shifting) social relationships related to specific life circumstances, and the process of meaning-making: the distinct idiosyncratic life stories or narratives that delinquents construct around these life transitions. Involvement in terrorism can thus be best understood as a fusion of micro-, meso-, and macro dimensions that, dependent on the individual to whom it applies, form different connections in each case and are thus always more than simply a sum of these dimensions. It is, in the end, at the individual level where a person encounters challenges and opportunities at each of these levels which he or she *interprets*, and it is that interpretation that shapes the effects. Or, as the well-known Thomas theorem holds: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[622] Hence, none of the analytical levels of explanation can account for involvement on their own; instead, perspectives from different analytical layers and disciplines need to combine to aid our understanding of involvement in terrorism. It is not so much the life events and changes that matter but rather, how individuals perceive and interpret those events and how that interpretation in turn pushes or pulls[623] them towards or away from involvement in terrorism.

8.4 Limitations

The limitations related to this study are a result of the methodologies that were adopted in seeking to answer the main research question. Given the focus of the research question on factors that play a role in the process of involvement in terrorism, the related epistemological question becomes: how can we gather knowledge about this process? Any method used to gather and analyse data comes with its own limitations; the specific limitations of this research are a consequence of the participant selection, the interview process, the coding, and finally, limitations based on the methods of analysis.

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[620] Harold H. Kelley and John L. Michela. (1980). Attribution theory and research. *Annual review of psychology*, *31*(1), 457-501.
[621] Harold H. Kelley (1973). The processes of causal attribution. *American psychologist*, *28* (2), 107.
[622] As cited in Smith, R. S. "Giving credit where credit is due: Dorothy Swaine Thomas and the "Thomas theorem"." *The American Sociologist* 26.4 (1995): 9-28.
[623] Mary Beth Altier, Leonard Boyle, E., Shortland, N. D., & Horgan, J. G. (2017). Why they leave: An analysis of terrorist disengagement events from eighty-seven autobiographical accounts. *Security Studies*, *26* (2), 305-332.

First of all, with the selection of the 30 participants in such a specific environment (prison) – many, likely enriching, details about their lives and the lives of those around them who either did or did not become involved with terrorism, have been left out. Thus, there was no control group to research the question of how these individuals engaged with terrorism while others (in the same circumstances) did not. Additionally, there is a risk of selection bias, in the sense that participants with certain experiences, opinions or personalities may have been excluded from my sample. However, I had no reason to believe this was the case as I had a very diverse sample in terms of experiences and opinions. Such a concern would be especially relevant if the sample had to be representative of a population, for example, in a larger-scale quantitative study.

Second, given the fact that I had to resort to opportunity sampling to conduct this study, there is a clear limitation to the generalizability of findings. Especially for the 30 inmate interviews (the majority of whom were incarcerated on remand), there is a clear question of reliability. It is likely that a number of *unknowns*, vague answers and denials of involvement are a direct result of the fact that almost all participants in the sample are still waiting to appear in court. Additionally, alterior reasons are likely to have impacted the truthfulness of interviewees' accounts, for example seeking justifications for their own behavior. Nonetheless, as explained in the methodology, this research is grounded in the narrative approach where the stories that were shared were based on biographical facts but were not viewed as *reality.* Rather, taking into account critical perspective on narratives for example by Maruna and Liem,[624] they were viewed as psychological constructions where respondents built their own narratives based on a combination of facts and meaning making. These narratives are in turn co-created by the researcher through both the design of the interviews as well as through the interpretation of those narratives. In other words, the main value of the interview data gathered in this research project lies in what it tells us the process of involvement of the interviewees, rather than in the factual accuracy of the stories they provide.

Third, one of the realities of the academic research process that becomes almost buried when going from on-the-ground individual interviews in prison in Mali to the phase of coding behind a computer in the Netherlands, and the final phase of structuring and writing everything up at the end of the process, is the inherently developmental nature of this endeavour. At the start of the research phase, I coded the interviews in a software program looking for themes and domains. However, as I started categorising the data, it turned out to be rather complex to determine what was to be considered a theme or a domain, to what extent the characteristics of the participant mattered in weighing their answers, whether the relationship between specific codes and themes were relevant, and most importantly, to what extent this study provides us with a better understanding of involvement in terrorism (as a phenomenon) versus whether it mainly provides us with insight into involvement in terrorism in Mali (as a case study).

Finally, throughout the research and writing process, it became evident that the factors *as such* do not matter so much – but rather how they are interpreted by the participants and how the individuals I interviewed relate to these factors. The implication was that the research perspective moved from a focus on factors to a focus on perceptions. As such, this research essentially provides a narrative of how 30 Malian men, incarcerated for

[624] Maruna, Shadd and Marieke Liem (2020). Where Is This Story Going? A Critical Analysis of the Emerging Field of Narrative Criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, *4*.

terrorism, perceive of their own involvement as well as what the perspectives are of 75 professionals working in Mali in the field of counter-terrorism.

8.6 Implications and avenues for further research

In the previous paragraphs, the main findings were provided through discussing the specific themes and domains that provide us with most understanding of involvement in terrorism in Mali – thus answering the overall research question posed in this study. The next paragraphs, in turn, discuss the implications of this study, both for the academic field and for policymakers.

8.6.1 Implications for research

There are several areas where further research could build on this thesis. This research shows that for the Malian – and potentially similar African cases' – context, especially the distinction between the micro and the meso level of analysis is problematic given the importance of the group for individual identities. Where I conclude that involvement in terrorism in Mali is basically a group affair, the findings also seem to suggest that the mainly Western body of research on involvement in terrorism suffers from an *individualist bias*; in other words: is overly reliant on the assumption of the individual as an entity that is clearly distinct from social or group structures. As this research demonstrates, a first implication for research is that the focus should not just be on how individuals relate to their environment but also how the environment shapes individual's identities *differently* according to their specific cultural context. This again underlines the relevance of the concepts of fusion, group think and the impact of social networks on belief systems as they focus on how individuals' mind-sets are impacted upon by specific, localised narratives *through* group structures. We need to rethink the importance of the group level to understand involvement in terrorism.

Building on this argument, a second implication for the academic field relates to the utility of the concept of radicalisation. In chapter two, I explained the centrality of the concept of radicalisation in the Western academic literature and this concept can thus also be labeled as an individualist approach. Radicalisation is often tied to a perceived link between radical beliefs and radical behaviour. The findings of this study show that radical beliefs as a factor hardly accounts for involvement in terrorism. Among the inmate participants, only a small minority listed ideology as a factor that motivated their involvement in terrorism. The main reasons provided for involvement in terrorism both by inmate and professional respondents were related to state-citizenship relations, survival and economic opportunities rather than radical beliefs.

This is not to say that beliefs do not play a role in becoming involved in terrorism. But rather, this study shows that a set of beliefs or core values are often something that provides an answer to underlying grievances on the individual level – and that an ideology or a narrative is something that individuals coalesce around in (violent extremist) groups, rather than ideology being an initial driving force. In other words: to become involved with terrorism, one does not have to have an ideological or political agenda. For those individuals in this study that were not just involved with terrorist groups but also used violence, a sense of alienation and resentment provided fertile ground for the idea that violence – in their minds– was the only feasible means of expressing those feelings. Nonetheless, for the majority of those suspected of or sentenced for involvement in terrorism, a set of group values or a narrative played a role in justifying their involvement without necessarily leading to the use of violence.

A third outcome of this research is the implication for academic research on and perceptions of the traditional nation-state. In line with my argument about Western bias in the academic literature, our Western conceptualisation of state and statehood – and the related concepts of governance, social contract, rule of law and legitimacy – do not reflect the Malian (and likely, African) perceptions of these concepts. The conceptualisation of the state as an entity with the monopoly of force in a specific, delineated, territory,[625] is ill fated at best when applied to Mali or the larger Sahelian context. Thus, further research should take an even more critical approach to whom is applying labels such as 'terrorists', 'government' and 'legitimacy' in non-Western cases and what those labels denote in practice as well as how they are perceived by individuals and groups within a society.

The Western individualist bias described above means that a fourth avenue for further research should be the application of explanatory factors from the literature to the Malian case could be expanded to analyse to what extent similar factors play a role in involvement in terrorism in other parts of the Sahel, in other African countries, and internationally. The inmates incarcerated for terrorism-related offenses in this study were affiliated with a number of groups such as al-Qaeda, Ansar Dine and MUJAO. Further research should explore the explanations for involvement in terrorism against individuals affiliated with other terrorist or violent groups such as autodefense movements and militias. Additionally, further research is needed to see if the elements that can help us understand involvement in terrorism in Mali can also help us understand the process of involvement in terrorism in the wider Sahelian region and potentially other cases with similar circumstances.

As described earlier on in this chapter, it seems that while the group level provides most insight, the overall distinction between the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis is not particularly helpful in explaining why individuals become involved with terrorism in the Malian context. As the German sociologist Georg Simmel already noted in 1908: "macro-level processes are in fact nothing more than the sum of all the unique interactions between specific individuals at any one time."[626] Rather, following Emile Durkheim's thinking, macro level phenomena such as institutions, legal frameworks, political systems, and class provide a shared context within which individuals situate themselves and where the human process of meaning-making finds connection points to define itself.[627] As such, macro level conditions "can enable or constrain the daily interactions of the intimate circles in which we move, but they only become meaningful through localized perceptions".[628]

Following from the above, for the study of involvement in terrorism, a fifth implication is that academia should zoom in much more on the question of why specific individuals translate certain phenomena into extremist or even violent narratives while others – under similar circumstances – do not. In line with what other terrorism scholars like Schuurman[629] have argued, on the basis of the findings, the next step in researching involvement in terrorism in the Malian context should be to focus not so much on *why* these factors play a role but rather why, while so many individuals are impacted by these factors, do some engage with, collaborate with or join terrorist groups while others do not? Specifically, the question of why so many youths become involved in terrorism in Mali

[625] Edward Van Der Vliet, 'Polis. The Problem of Statehood', *Social Evolution & History* 4, no. 2 (2005): 120–50.
[626] Neil J. Smelser, *Problematics of Sociology: The Georg Simmel Lectures, 1995* (Univ of California Press, 1997).
[627] Emile Durkheim, *Émile Durkheim on Institutional Analysis* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[628] Ibidem.
[629] Bart Schuurman (2020). Non-Involvement in Terrorist Violence. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *14* (6), 14-26.

would be relevant, also in light of the academic literature on the higher risk of young men joining terrorist groups. Given the combination of Mali's demographic profile at the time of writing, with 80 percent of the Malian population aged 35 years or younger, with a lack of job opportunities, the exacerbating effects of climate change, and an absent government, it is essential to research this question.

Thus, from a methodological perspective, a sixth suggestion is that more research should be done to develop better theories of how individuals' pathways and histories can make them vulnerable and how, under specific conditions, they become violent. Especially the criminological literature has much to offer here as the universe of cases of individuals becomes much larger when looking at general vulnerability and/or violent tendencies. Empirical research in the field of criminology and sociology has already wielded a number of risk factors for becoming involved with violence including "school failure, violent or aggressive behaviour, impulsivity/hyperactivity, and externalizing problem behaviours during childhood".[630] In the end, involvement in terrorism remains a very rare phenomemom, in the West as much as in Africa, and the more we can learn from adjacent fields, the better.

8.6.2 Implications for policy

When grievances of local populations increase to the level where government, either through negotiations or concessions, cannot prevent the outbreak of revolution or civil war and is unable to militarily defeat the opposition, the stage is set for terrorist groups to take up a role in addressing grievances through violence.[631] In the previous chapters, I have shown how individuals become involved in terrorism in Mali and how different factors either provide motivations, triggers or a confirmation of their beliefs. Now I will discuss how this knowledge could help policymakers in three different ways: (1) in designing counter-terrorism policies in the Sahelian context; (2) in rethinking the role of the nation-state and governance in the Sahelian context; and (3) in addressing groups rather than individuals in collectivist cultural contexts.

At the time of writing, in light of the ongoing insecurity in Mali, stability and peace do not seem to be on the horizon. At the same time, much can be done to improve local, national and international policies and projects, whether they are implemented by Malian or foreign actors. Any effort should include a focus on "holding the Malian government in Bamako accountable for being (a better) steward of its northern populations, and making the Armed Malian Forces a net contributor to security rather than a contributor to insecurity".[632] First, when it comes to designing CT and CVE policies in the Sahel, policymakers, be it national or international, should not frame their efforts as a war against "evil."[633] This research shows that this brings a risk of applying the label of terrorism to individuals and/or groups that might not conform to those definitions either because they do not (threaten to) use violence

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[630] Tanner-Smith, et al., "Risk Factors and Crime," in Cullen and Wilcox, *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology Theory*, 108.

[631] Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzschke, 'Beyond Greed and Grievance: Policy Lessons from Studies in the Political Economy of Armed Conflict', *Security and Development: Investing in Peace and Prosperity*, 2013, 159.

[632] Bernardo Venture and Nana Toure, "The Great Illusion: Security Sector Reform in the Sahel", *The International Spectator* (55) No. 4, 9 November 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2020.1835326?casa_token=3b8-EWY7StcAAAAA%3AQxU1INmCkI1JRZ_8CwTtm0_xHNSOZhIZagBKNNaC6R8T0QNcWvAvHKcfhZ0MNj6zVr7mPxO2-Tpe1A.

[633] Guy Taylor, "Donald Trump's team puts 'radical Islam' front and center in terror fight," *Washington Times*, November 23, 2016, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/nov/23/donald-trumps-team-puts-radical-islam-front-and-ce/; "Full text: Donald Trump's speech on fighting terrorism," *Politico*, August 15, 2016, http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-terrorism-speech-227025.

for ideological reasons but instead, based on legitimate grievances, or because they become involved with terrorist groups involuntarily. Framing counter-terrorism efforts in black and white terminology – as *us vs. them* and *good vs. evil* – is not just unnece ssary, it has far-reaching consequences. It carries with it the connotation that terrorism and terrorists are beyond understanding and salvation and it can reinforce existing prejudice and stereotypes or foster tensions between different groups in society.

It is generally easier to receive political and financial resources to fight terrorism in comparison to find funding for preventative efforts - a subtlety that has the risk of influence the available resources – or lack thereof. In line with Horgan's statement: "if we are to break this vicious cycle effectively, we must be prepared to challenge traditional and essentially comfortable views that the security solution to terrorism is the most appropriate one. It is not, nor should it be."[634] Thus, a second implication of this research for policymakers is to be aware that the community (whether it be family or clans and tribal structures) plays a pivotal role in preventing individuals from engaging with terrorist groups, even more so in the Malian context as this research has shown. As I have found that involvement in terrorism in Mali is a group affair; as such, families and communities should be provided with the necessary support to mitigate factors that drive involvement in terrorism.

The findings emphasise the importance of tailoring approaches to the specific motivations that underlie involvement in terrorism. Where efforts focused on rehabilitation and reintegration often focus on ideological debates, as is the case in the Saudi Arabian Religious Subcommittee within their Counselling Program as well as in the case of the Yemeni Religious Dialogue Committee,[635] this is likely to only be appropriate for those individuals in this study who were motivated by religion or ideology or the quest for a 'significant life'. Similarly, interventions that aim to 'deradicalise' individuals are not likely to be helpful to those individuals who were mainly 'in it for the money'. And efforts perceived by individuals as top-down activities implemented by the Malian government, could be counterproductive for individuals whose reason for involvement in terrorism lies in their perception of the Malian government as the source of most problems.

8.7 Toward a label-sensitive study of involvement in terrorism

This thesis examined theoretically prescribed factors that are claimed to influence involvement in terrorism. Additionally, the analysis aimed to look beyond the theory by exploring what other factors play a role in the Malian context for individuals who engage with terrorist groups. The analysis of the findings demonstrates that involvement in terrorism in Mali can be best understood from a meso-level perspective where respondents identified factors related to the legitimacy and the (lack of) capability of the state, foreign influence and societal tensions and how that impacts their own identity as citizens in a "territory that others call Mali." These factors have all played out against the backdrop of an absentee government in the remotest areas of the country, a clear centre-periphery divide in terms of income and basic service provision, and geographically drawn borders that do not sit easy with existing nomadic populations.

[634] Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism,* 160.
[635] Horgan, J., & Braddock, K. (2010). Rehabilitating the terrorists?: Challenges in assessing the effectiveness of de-radicalization programmes. Terrorism and Political Violence, 22(2), 267–291. doi:10.1080/09546551003594748

Bearing in mind the complex geopolitical situation in Mali, the impact of terrorism is just one of many factors that plays a role in the daily lives of Malians. That impact, and especially how individuals perceive of and respond to it, is seldom taken into account when assessing tactical or strategic aspects of terrorist organisations and militias in and beyond the Sahel-region. The fluctuations of a conflict involving informal armed groups can be better understood by thinking about the incentives that drive the conflict. This is not necessarily a question of *follow the money* but rather; follow the attractions of engaging with terrorism more broadly. This study shows that involvement in terrorism is often simply better than the alternative. With a government that cannot be relied upon or that is not viewed as legitimate to begin with, brewing tensions between groups in society and group affiliations provide fertile ground for terrorist groups to exploit.

As such, the findings indicate that it is regularly profitable to engage with terrorism in Mali in terms of first and foremost, survival and protection, and second, in terms of employment, money, and other revenues. As terrorist groups exploit and foster existing grievances and provide individuals with both security and an income, the findings show that as a result, involvement in terrorism has become to a certain extent socially accepted where it is considered as a response to state neglect and lack of state capabilities. Some respondents mentioned that they did not just accept, but were even more satisfied with the basic services (electricity, water), or fundamental services such as provision of security and justice offered by terrorist groups.

At the same time, labelling specific groups or individuals as potentially 'at risk' for engagement in terrorism is both unnecessary and counterproductive. In agreement with Neumann, prevention programs at the community level "should be kept strictly separate from criminal justice, lest individuals or communities feel marginalised and be inadvertently pushed toward an extremist ideology".[636] Whether it is policymakers, politicians or academics, they all have a responsibility to tread very carefully to avoid burdening those who are generally vulnerable with the heavy label of potential terrorist.

[636] Neumann, *Radicalized*, 183.