# A group affair: understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali

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In the past years, Mali has experienced an unprecedented rise in terrorism. After twenty years of relative peace, the country was shaken to its core in 2012 when a Tuareg-led rebellion overthrew the government and the northern parts of the country quickly turned into a safe haven for terrorist groups including Al Qaeda and – in later years – the Islamic State. From 2012 to 2022, a country that was once considered a prime example of African democracy, has been faced with a rapidly downward cycle in terms of stability and security. In the past three years alone, the military staged two coups and Mali is now ruled by a military regime. Two major military and political interventions by the French, operations Serval and Barkhane, the multiple efforts of ECOWAS, and a large UN-mission to the country, MINUSMA, were not able to turn the tide.

In a country where it is already a challenge to draw clear lines between the multitude of terrorist, separatist, guerilla and auto-defense groups, it is even more difficult to understand how individuals become involved in terrorist groups. Seeking the answer to that question is the central aim of this study. Based on extensive research among policymakers, prison staff, the international community and those accused and/or sentenced for terrorism, this thesis conducts a multilevel analysis of the process of involvement in terrorism in Mali. The findings suggest that group-level factors including peer pressure, group think, societal tensions and fusion of values were best able to shed light on how individuals become involved with terrorist groups. Especially the relationship between citizens and the state turned out to be an important factor, with prisoners arguing they do not recognize the ruling elite, foreign actors or the borders of the country as they are drawn.

With the combination of access to and analysis of unique primary source material, this study offers a nuanced and empirically grounded contriution to the academic and societal debate on terrorism involvement in Mali – with wider implications for the West-African context. While taking into account the inherently subjective nature of narratives, this thesis provides us with a better understanding of why individuals become terrorists given the specific cultural, historical and geographical context within which they have shared their stories.

A GROUP AFFAIR UNDERSTANDING TERRORISM INVOLVEMENT IN MALI LIESBETH VAN DER HEIDE

# A Group Affair
# Understanding Involvement in Terrorism in Mali

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# Glossary

| Abbreviation | Explanation |
|---|---|
| AFISMA | African-Led International Support Mission to Mali |
| AIS | Armée islamique du salut [Islamic Army for the Salute] |
| AQIM | al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb |
| ASIFU | All Sources Information Fusion Unit |
| CAERT | Centre africain d'études et de recherche sur le terrorisme [African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism] |
| CMA | Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad [Coordination of Azawad Movements] |
| CMFPR | Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance [Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts] |
| CMFPR II | Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II [Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements II] |
| CPA | Coalition pour le peuple de l'Azawad [Coalition for the Azawad People] |
| CSO | Civil society organisation |
| CT | Counter-terrorism |
| DDR | Disarmament, Demobilisatoin and Reintegration |
| DNAPES | Direction National de l'Administration Pénitentiaire et de l'Education Surveillée [National Directorate of the Penitentiary Administration] |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| EU | European Union |
| FAMA | Forces armées maliennes [Malian armed forces] |
| FIS | Front islamique du salut [Islamic Salvation Front] |
| FPA | Front populaire de l'Azawad [Popular Front of Azawad] |
| GATIA | Groupe d'autodéfense des touareg Imghads et alliés [Imghad and Allied Touareg Self Defence Movement] |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| GIA | Groupe islamique armé [Armed Islamic Group] |
| GSIM | Group to Support Islam and Muslims |
| GSPC | Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat [Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat] |
| HCUA | Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad [Higher Council for the Unity of Azawad] |
| HRA | Human Rights Affairs |
| HUMINT | Human Intelligence |
| IBK | Ibrahim Boubacar Keita |
| ICCT | International Centre for Counter-Terrorism |
| ICPS | International Centre for Prison Studies |
| IDPs | Internally Displaced Persons |
| IS | Islamic State |
| ISGS | Islamic State in the Greater Sahara |
| ISIS | Islamic State in Iraq and Syria |
| ISWAP | Islamic State's West Africa Province |
| JCS | Justice and Corrections Sector |
| JMAC | Joint Mission Analysis Centre |
| KNAW | Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen [Royal |

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|---|---|
| | Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences] |
| MAA | Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad [Arab Movement of Azawad] |
| MCA | Maison centrale d'arrêt [Central Penitentiary] |
| MDP | Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie [Movement for the Defence of the Country] |
| MEI | Mouvement pour l'État islamique [Movement for the Islamic State] |
| MIA | Mouvement islamique armé [Armed Islamic Movement] |
| MINUSMA | Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali [United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali] |
| MLF | Macina Liberation Front |
| MNLA | Mouvement national de liberation de l'Azawad [National Movement for the Libération of Azawad] |
| MPSA | Mouvement Populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad [Popular Movement for the Salute of Azawad] |
| MUJAO | Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest [Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa] |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| SCT | *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* |
| SSR | Security Sector Reform |
| TCA | Thematic Content Analysis |
| TPV | *Terrorism and Political Violence* |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNDSS | UN Department of Safety and Security |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| UNICRI | United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute |
| UNOCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| UNODC | United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime |
| UNSC | United Nations Security Council |
| US | United States |
| VEOs | Violent Extremist Offenders |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 Terrorism in Mali

On Friday 20 November 2015, a group of armed men entered the Radisson Blu hotel in the Malian capital Bamako and took 170 hotel guests and personnel hostage.[1] A number of hotel guests were in Bamako to attend a conference on countering violent extremism. Other foreign guests included Air France and Turkish Airlines personnel, American embassy staff, and a number of Chinese businessmen. The militants belonged to the jihadist organisation al-Mourabitoun, a group that claimed to cooperate with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The attack left 21 people dead, including two of the attackers.[2] This attack marked the start of a period in which the country saw a rapidly deteriorating security situation. From 2015 to 2020, Mali faced the rise of terrorist groups in the country and escalating violence in the form of both interethnic attacks within communitires as well as terrorist attacks carried out against the United Nation's forces and the armed forces of Mali.

The situation culminated in a deadly attack March 2019, when over a 100 armed men raided the small town of Ogossagou in Mali's Mopti region, killing over 150 Fulanis and set their houses on fire.[3] In 2020, after weeks of civil protests against the government over insecurity and corruption, Mali's military staged a coup and arrested the president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IB), as well as the prime minister Boubou Cissé. While the international community insisted on the restoration of the IBK's elected government, many Malians have hailed its demise.[4] The political instability continued when in May 2021, another military coup took place that toppled Mali's president Bah Ndaw.[5]

The Sahel region has become a focal point for many insurgent and terrorist groups over the past decade[6] and West African states have been faced with a range of security issues including cross-border narco-trafficking, terrorist attacks, and the rise of radical Islamic networks in the region. For Mali, terrorism and insurgent groups are the country's number one security problem, as illustrated by the 2015 Radisson Blu attack as well as a proliferation of terrorist attacks in the central regions of Mopti and Ségou[7] and in the capital Bamako[8] in the six years since the Radisson Blu attack. Mali and its direct neighbors, Niger and Burkina Faso, have witnessed the rise of an intricate web of militant, separatist and Jihadi terrorist groups with blurry linkages but with the shared goal to setup a Caliphate in the wider Sahel region. While many militants share allegiance with multiple groups and groups are often split internally across ethnic lines, the two dominant actors are the so-called 'Islamic State in the

[1] Peter Walker and Charlie English, "Mali Attack: More than 20 Dead after Terrorist Raid on Bamako Hotel", the Guardian, 21 November 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/20/mali-attack-highlights-global-spread-extremist-violence.
[2] Walker and English.
[3] Liesbeth van der Heide. 'Dumping One Government Won't Fix Mali'. Foreign Policy. Accessed 1 August 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/20/dumping-one-government-wont-fix-mali-security-west-africa-sahel-ogossagou-fulani-dogon-tuareg-azawad-terrorism/.
[4] Kathryn Salam, "Can Mali Escape Its Past? Politics in the country have followed familiair cycles of violence and collapse.", Foreign Policy, 21 August 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/21/mali-coup-history-violence-collapse/.
[5] David Lewis, "Military detain Mali's president, prime minister and defence minister.", Reuters, 24 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/military-arrest-malis-president-prime-minister-defence-minister-sources-2021-05-24/.
[6] Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict", *Clingendael CRU Report* 11 (2015).
[7] Including an attack on a hotel in Sévaré and many deadly attacks between ethnic groups such as the attack on Ogossagou in 2019.
[8] Including an attack on nightclub 'La Terrasse' and the Radisson Blu attack in 2015 and a terrorist attack on wellness facility 'Le Campement' in 2019.

Greater Sahara' or ISGS, which is linked to the terrorist group 'Islamic State' and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), which is linked to the terrorist group Al Qaeda. These, and other terrorist groups, armed rebels, and criminal groups are connected by individuals and ethnic groups with rapidly switching allegiances and fluid coalitions between government and armed groups that do not always hold up in practice. In Mali, a patchwork of terrorist groups, including JNIM and ISGS as well as smaller groups co-exist alongside other armed groups such as criminal groups and defense militias. All these groups confront and fight each other but also cooperate and facilitate one another on different occasions.[9]

In a country where achieving clarity on the status of the number of terrorist groups, their members, and in what region these groups are active, it is all the more difficult to determine the motives and ambitions of armed groups and jihadist networks.[10] The ethnic fabric and the cultural history play a central role in the ties between groups[11] and individuals and only intricate knowledge of this history can shed light on these various groups and individuals.

Since Mali experienced a violent uprising in 2012, many individuals have been arrested and incarcerated on the basis of terrorist-related charges. In 2015 alone, approximately 500 individuals were arrested in connection with the conflict in the North. Of the overall prison population in Mali, nearly 70 percent is on remand – in pre-trial detention.[12] For many of these incarcerated individuals it is not clear if they are involved with terrorist groups and if so, why and how. Some authors on terrorism in Mali point to structural factors such as the general rise of Islamism on the African continent, the post-colonial struggles of Mali including it's relationship with France, and Tuareg nationalism.[13] Others argue that the main source of radicalisation lies on the group level – as a result of the tensions between different ethnic groups and communities.[14] On the individual level, it is argued that people become involved with terrorist groups in Mali as a result of a search for identity and social status,[15] or for economic reasons.[16] However, to date, no thorough, empirical study has been conducted to analyse and deconstruct involvement in terrorism in Mali to identify what factors play a role in involvement in terrorism.

## 1.2 Research topic and aims

How can we understand involvement in terrorism in Mali? That is the overarching question this thesis seeks to answer. The analysis focuses specficially on Mali as a case study and the situation described above forms the context against which this study took place. Although terrorism is a global challenge and is among the most complicated and demanding security challenges for the international community, some countries are much more affected by it than others. Over the past ten years, countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Somalia have consistently ranked in the top ten of countries where most terrorist attacks take

[9] Liesbeth van der Heide. 'Dumping One Government Won't Fix Mali'.
[10] Arthur Boutellis and Naureen C. Fink, "Waging Peace: UN Peace Operations Confronting Terrorism and Violent Extremism", 2016.
[11] Liesbeth van der Heide, "Dumping One Government Won't Fix Mali", *Foreign Policy*. 4 April 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/20/dumping-one-government-wont-fix-mali-security-west-africa-sahel-ogossagou-fulani-dogon-tuareg-azawad-terrorism/.
[12] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017", accessed 20 November 2018, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper.
[13] Hussein Solomon, 'Ansar Dine in Mali: Between Tuareg Nationalism and Islamism', in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Africa* (Springer, 2015), 67–84.
[14] Annette Lohmann, 'Who Owns the Sahara? Old Conflicts, New Menaces: Mali and the Central Sahara between the Tuareg, Al Qaida and Organized Crime', 2011.
[15] David Gutelius, 'War on Terror and Social Networks in Mali', *ISIM Review* 17 (2006): 2.
[16] Morten Bøås and Liv E. Torheim, "The international intervention in Mali:'Desert blues' or a new beginning?", *International journal* 68, nr. 3 (2013): 417–23.

place and where terrorism causes most fatalities.[17] When taking a regional approach, it is mainly Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East that are disproportionally affected by terrorism. Over the past years, the African continent – aside from the southern region – has experienced an exponential increase in terrorist activities.[18] The Africa Center for Strategic Studies published a study that showed that for example in Burkina Faso alone, terrorist attacks rose from 12 attacks in 2016 to 137 attacks in 2019.[19] Mali witnessed a total of 456 deaths due to terrorism in 2019, which makes that year, according to Human Rights Watch, "the deadliest year for Malian civilians since the beginning of the crisis in 2012". In the same year, the number of so-called internally displaced people (IDPs) in the country rose to almost 200,000 individuals.[20]

The increasingly escalating security situation in Mali can be seen not just in the rising number of terrorist and militant attacks, the situation is also deteriorating across the region and affecting countries including Niger, Mauritania, Guinea and Burkina Faso. For example, while terrorist incidents declined worldwide in 2017, African countries faced an expansion of terror groups in parts of the continent.[21] In East Africa, specifically in the Horn of Africa countries like Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, it is mainly the Somalia-based al-Shabab group that poses a threat to the region.[22] The Lake Chad region, including countries like Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria is dealing with a resurgence in attacks on civilian, government, and military targets by groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State's branch in West Africa, the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).[23] Finally, the US, in its annual Country Reports on Terrorism refers to the Sahel region, bordering the Sahara Desert and including Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, as "the new front in the war on terrorism"[24] as "in the Sahel, terrorist groups – including affiliates and adherents of al-Qa'ida and ISIS – have expanded their operations in central Mali and the Tri-Border Region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger."[25] Additionally, the report states that:

> AQIM and JNIM continued to conduct terrorist attacks, primarily targeting Malian and international military forces. The terrorist groups launched attacks against civilians, security forces, peacekeepers, and others they reportedly perceived as not adhering to their interpretation of Islam. Attacks by terrorist groups expanded beyond the traditional conflict zone in the north to Mali's center and south. Malian Security Forces continued to

[17] 'Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism' (Institute for Economics &Peace, November 2019), 8, http://visionofhumanity.org/reports.

[18] Ruchita Beri, "Rise of Terrorism in Africa", Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 13 April 2017, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/rise-of-terrorism-in-africa_rberi_130417.

[19] "The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 15 February 2019, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-complex-and-growing-threat-of-militant-islamist-groups-in-the-sahel/.

[20] 'Situation in Mali. Report of the Secretary-General.', United Nations Security Council, 30 December 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_983.pdf.

[21] Ibrahim Ahmed, "Report: African Countries Struggle to Contain Terror Groups", Voice of America, 2 October 2018., https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/report-african-countries-struggle-contain-terror-groups.

[22] Akinola Olojo, "Time to Consider Negotiating with Al-Shabaab in Somalia?", ISS Africa, 11 June 2019, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/time-to-consider-negotiating-with-al-shabaab-in-somalia.

[23] Jacob Zenn, 'Mindful of the Islamic State, Boko Haram Broadens Reach into Lake Chad Region', The Jamestown Foundation, 6 February 2015, https://jamestown.org/program/mindful-of-the-islamic-state-boko-haram-broadens-reach-into-lake-chad-region/.

24 International Crisis Group, 'Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?', Africa Report 92 (2005).https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/islamist-terrorism-sahel-fact-or-fiction

[25] 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2017', United States Department of State, n.d., https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2017/.

suffer the largest number of casualties resulting from terrorist attacks. An estimated 138 Malian soldiers were killed in numerous incidents.[26]

In line with that, in a review of terrorism in Africa covering 2010-2018, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies wrote that "Mali remains the focal point of militant violence, accounting for roughly 64 percent of the reported events in the Sahel in 2018."[27] The death toll in the country has risen steadily, with civilians caught in the crossfire. From 2015 to 2018, over a thousand people have died, hundreds have been injured, and thousands more have been displaced in the country, with the central Mopti region becoming the deadliest region, accounting for nearly half of the country's violent deaths.[28]

However, while the majority of terrorist attacks take place outside of countries in Europe and North America, the majority of research on terrorism focuses on terrorism in the northern half of the hemisphere.[29] The literature and research on terrorism in Africa, its forms and connections with other forms of crimes, is very limited and suffers from a Western bias, as illustrated by a former Officer in Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN and a renowned scholar in the field of terrorism studies Alex Schmid. The latter notes in his meta-review of terrorism studies, "we [the Editorial Board of one of the main terrorism journals] were confronted with an abundance of submissions regarding the conflict in Northern Ireland while there was an absolute shortage of good-quality submissions from Africa or on African groups."[30]

Additionally, the literature that is available focuses heavily on terrorist organisations and strategies rather than the individual perspectives of those charged with or sentenced for terrorism. [31] (Suspected) terrorist offenders' individual narratives of historical conflict and its aftermath rarely feature in work on political violence.[32] A such, the field of terrorism studies still lacks a solid foundation of primary data based on interviews and life histories of individuals engaged in terrorism.

Thus, the academic literature requires further expansion and empirical research in the field,[33] especially when it comes to paying attention to individual narratives of (those who are labeled as) terrorists in non-Western contexts. The present study seeks to increase our understanding of involvement in terrorism in Mali in the following ways: (1) it seeks to provide the current state of the art in the literature on involvement in terrorism (including both empirical and theoretical studies); (2) it aims to empirically assess involvement in terrorism in Mali through a comparative analysis of narrative interviews; and (3) it will assess

[26] 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2017'.
[27] Ibidem.
[28] Recently, several human rights organisations have documented dozens of episodes of tit-for-tat violence, largely perpetrated by *dozos* against Peul civilians, and to a lesser – but not negligible – extent, by jihadists who are mostly Peul against Bambara and Dogon villagers. See "Dans le centre du Mali, les population prises au piège du terrorisme et du contre-terrorisme", FIDH/AMDH, November 2018; "'We Used to Be Brothers': Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali", Human Rights Watch, December 2018; UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, "Situation of Human Rights in Mali: Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali", January 2019.
[29] Ruth Blakeley, 'Bringing the State Back into Terrorism Studies', *European Political Science* 6, no. 3 (2007): 228.
[30] Alex P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (Taylor & Francis, 2011), 467.
[31] Martha Crenshaw, 'The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century', *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000): 405–20.
[32] Thus engaging with the research subject on the human level, something that conflict-studies author Sara Roy labeled 'humanizing the other' Sara M. Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Pluto Press, 2007), viii.
[33] Richard Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', in *BISA Annual Conference*, 2009, 18.

to what extent the academic theories of involvement in terrorism relate to the case study Mali. In doing so, this study seeks to find out to what exten the current academic knowledge on involvement in terrorism based is applicable to non-Western settings, and for what reasons it might or might not be applicable.

### 1.3 Studying involvement in terrorism

After 9/11, literature in the field of (counter) terrorism has grown exponentially.[34] In the subfield of terrorism studies, a number of scholars have studied the process of becoming involved in terrorism whereas other scholars have mainly focused on the process of leaving terrorism behind. According to terrorism scholar Peter Neumann, the term radicalisation has become the most dominant concept for involvement in terrorism, or: "what goes on before the bomb goes off"[35]; in other words, the process that individuals go through preceding terrorist attacks. In the context of involvement in terrorism, radicalisation is usually referred to as the process of adopting certain – more extremist – beliefs and attitude changes.[36] It is described as a process of socio-psychological change, linked to the adoption of an "extremist belief system"[37] with the aim to bring about change.

In the quest to identify the reasons why individuals join, stay in, or leave terrorist groups, authors have identified factors on various levels. Explanations on the individual level often are of a psychological nature. Questions on this individual, micro level include why individuals radicalise, why they join terrorist groups, and why they continue to stay in a group or choose to leave terrorism behind. The main explanations of why and how individuals engage in terrorism are the relative deprivation theory[38] and exposure theory. McAdam et al. have emphasised the role played by the political system and the state propensity towards repression in explaining collective violence.[39] Their views have inspired a new branch of terrorism studies that has specifically zoomed in on "the processual and relational understanding of violence".[40] Several authors[41] have highlighted the importance of going beyond the individual focus to broaden the analysis to socio-political context and the

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[34] Andrew Silke, 'The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research', in *Research on Terrorism* (Routledge, 2004), 206–33; Magnus Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction* (Routledge, 2006).

[35] P. R. Neumann, J. Stoil, and D. Esfandiary, 'Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence', *London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 2008, 4.

[36] Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (3 May 2016): 381–404, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277.

[37] Elaine Pressman, 'Risk Assessment Decisions for Violent Political Extremism' (Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, October 2009), https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/2009-02-rdv/2009-02-rdv-eng.pdf.

[38] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Published for the Center of International Studies, Princeton University [by] Princeton University Press, 1970).

[39] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[40] Didier Bigo and Daniel Hermant, *La relation terroriste, analyse de la violence politique des organisations clandestines dans les démocraties occidentales* (Paris: Etudes Polémologiques/Documentation Francaise., 1988).

[41] Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs*, trans. David Macey (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005); cf Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh, 1 edition (United States: Harvard University Press, 2004); cf Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, illustrated, reprint, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (United States: Cambridge University Press, 2003); cf Laurent Bonelli, ed., 'De L'usage De La Violence En Politique', *L'Harmattan*, Le passage par la violence en politique, no. 81/82 (11 October 2011): 7–15.

biographical exposure to violence. Scholars agree that there is not one pattern or profile of terrorists and analyses of past perpetrators have revealed that they have been rather "unremarkable individuals, who have led unremarkable lives, have held unremarkable jobs."[42]

On the group or meso level, explanations are sought at the level of socio-psychological group processes, such as the ideological characteristics of groups,[43] or peer group pressure and social movements.[44] The third level of explanation of involvement in terrorism focuses at the macro or structural level and primarily attempts to find "correlations between certain historical, cultural, economic, and socio-political characteristics of the larger society and the occurrence of terrorism". [45] Factors that might play a role on this level include the effects of (neo-) colonialism, processes of democratisation, poverty, and widespread social inequality. Although there has never been found a direct causal connection between a weak socioeconomic position and involvement in terrorism,[46] there are some elements that may be conducive to terrorism, such as political frustration,[47] and particular socioeconomic, cultural, and historical conditions.[48] It is indeed fundamental to underline that every terrorist is moved by his/her own specific motivations, that could be intrinsic (the motivation comes from within, the person feels a calling), extrinsic (the motivation comes from outside/external factors), or a combination of the two.

This study incorporates all three levels of analysis. Substantial attention has already been devoted to explaining terrorism on the individual level. That is the result of the predominant view in the 1970s that it must be terrorists' abnormality that accounts for their involvement in terrorism, a view that has survived in some form or other since then. This includes the scholarly search for psycho-pathological factors in individuals engaging in violent extremism,[49] as well as the idea of the so-called "terrorist mindset."[50] Nonetheless, strong evidence has been presented that points to the need to look beyond mere psychopathological profiles for explaining involvement in terrorism.[51] This makes it all the more relevant to study the factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism beyond the micro level. The more interesting question thus becomes how the socio-political factors impact the individual level.

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[42] Mitchell D. Silber en Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalisation in the West: The homegrown threat* (Police Department New York, 2007), 2.

[43] Paul Wilkinson, 'Trends in International Terrorism and the American Response', *Terrorism and International Order* 107 (1986): 107.

[44] Tore Bjørgo, *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* (Springer, 2013).

[45] Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedazhur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (1 January 2004): 777–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768.

[46] J. Maleckova, 'Impoverished Terrorists: Stereotype or Reality?', in *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward*, ed. Tore Bjørgo and Norwegian Institute Of International Affairs (London: Routledge, 2005).

[47] Christiane Nischler and Roger Morefield, 'An Actor Oriented Empirical Model of the Roots of Terrorism', *Journal of Business and Behaviour Sciences* 24, no. 3 (1 October 2012): 53.

[48] Domenico Tosini, 'A Sociological Understanding of Suicide Attacks', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 4 (1 July 2009): 67–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409104969.

[49] Max Taylor, 'Is Terrorism a Group Phenomenon?', *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 15, no. 2 (March 2010): 121–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.09.001.
Lia Brynjar, Skjølberg Katja H-w, and Jan Erik Torp, *Why Terrorism Occurs - A Survey of Theories and Hypotheses on the Causes of Terrorism*, 2000.[50] Jerrold M. Post, *Current Understanding of Terrorist Motivation and Psychology Implications for a Differentiated Antiterrorist Policy* (Bristol: Taylor & Francis, 1990) cf; Jeff Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (February 2005): 3–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704272040.

[51]Andrew Silke, 'Holy Warriors: Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization', *European Journal of Criminology* 5, no. 1 (1 January 2008): 99–123, https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370807084226.

### 1.4 Shortcomings in current research on involvement in terrorism

Describing and explaining involvement in terrorism is not a new endeavour; however, despite the increase in literature, "most research work scores poorly in terms of validity and objectivity,"[52] mainly due to a lack of primary sources, and is therefore overreliant on secondary sources.[53] In a review of all research published between 1995 and 1999 in the two leading journals in the subfield of terrorism studies (*Terrorism and Political Violence* (TPV) and *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (SCT)), Silke concluded that over 80 percent of studies relied solely on data gathered from secondary sources.[54] In 2006, Lum et al. conducted a literature review and concluded that of the 6041 peer-reviewed articles on terrorism published between 1971 and 2003, a mere three percent were based on empirical data. The most recent review of the field, conducted by Schuurman[55] and covering 2007-2016, concluded that even though there is a positive methodological increase of using primary sources, the use of the literature review method as the only method of data collection is still dominant in the field, accounting for roughly 40 percent of all studies.

According to Borum,[56] a persistent characteristic of terrorism research is "the attempt (implicit or otherwise) to emphasize how terrorist behaviour is different or 'special'." As a result, a specific body of literature on terrorism has emerged with its own terminology. Alhough it has been argued that terrorism is unique because it is an anomaly statistically speaking as well as from a societal perspective;[57] at the same time terrorist behaviour is governed through the exact same dynamics that underpin all human behaviour.[58] The field of terrorism studies thus could benefit from broadening its scope to include lessons from criminology, sociology, and psychology. Nonetheless, while the existing body of literature in other disciplines can contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism, a gap that remains to be filled is the conceptualisation and understanding how the individual, ideological, group, and societal conditions that contribute to or hinder involvement process play a role vis-à-vis one another and how that differs across different geographical regions. Overall, we can conclude that despite the rise in interest in the process of becoming involved with terrorism, the field is still fragemented and "there is a great deal of potential for learning, development and refinement."[59]

### 1.5 Used definitions

The field of terrorism studies has long been plagued by conceptual ambiguities. Scholars have spent decades trying to formulate universally accepted definitions of core concepts such as terrorism, radicalisation, and violent extremism.[60] Despite these efforts, it is

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[52] Silke, 'The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research'.

[53] Andrew Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001): 1–14; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Bart Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, 'Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources', *ICCT Background Note*, 2013, 1–11.

[54] Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism'.

[55] Bart Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018, 1–16.

[56] Randy Borum, 'Psychology of Terrorism' (University of South Florida Tampa Department of Mental Health Law and Policy, 14 December 2007), http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA494527.

[57] Christopher Gelpi, and Nazli Avdan. "Democracies at risk? A forecasting analysis of regime type and the risk of terrorist attack." *Conflict management and peace science* 35.1 (2018): 18-42.

[58] Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, 'Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism', *USAID, February*, 2009.

[59] Sam Mullins, 'Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 3, no. 3 (2010): 162–93.

[60] See for example A. Schmid and A. Jongman, 'Political Terrorism. Oxford.', 1998.

often unclear whether authors have a shared conception of these terms. In this thesis, the focus lies on involvement in terrorism; therefore, the main concepts that warrant a clear definition are *involvement* and *terrorism*. Given that the concepts of terrorism and violent extremism are often used as if they were synonyms, violent extremism will also be defined. Finally, the concept of radicalisation will be discussed given its central place in the academic literature on involvement in terrorism and I will explain how it is perceived of in this thesis vis-à-vis involvement in terrorism.

### *1.5.1 Terrorism and violent extremism*

While a commonly-agreed upon definition of terrorism is lacking, both in the scientific body of literature as well as among policymakers and practitioners, "most definitions tend to coalesce around the idea that terrorism aims to instil fear and fear-driven responses".[61] According to Irish terrorism scholar Louise Richardson: "terrorists aim to provoke from their enemies a psychological and behavioural overreaction, because overreactions are often self-destructive and bear high financial and societal costs". These high costs can refer to things such as increased intergroup tensions, loss of privacy, and a climate of fear and uncertainty. Moreover, fear-driven responses to terrorism are often accompanied by indiscriminate aggression and violence, which can mobilise support for the terrorists' cause among the affected communities.[62]

In this dissertation, I adopt the academic definition of terrorism provided by Dutch and Swiss terrorism researchers Jongman and Schmid, who define terrorism as "an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent actions employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets."[63] This study takes as a baseline that terrorists differ from *regular* criminals in their willingness to communicate a message through their acts. They seek to reach a larger audience through their acts, based on their personal beliefs: they have an underlying (political) ideology. It is not just the material damage or the direct victims – but government, specific *target audiences* within society or society at large that they want to address. From this perspective, the terrorist act is a strategy, a means to attain a (political) goal – there has to be an underlying ideology, a conflicting concept of justice and injustice, at play.

Violent extremism as a term has been used as a synonym to political violence and terrorism. According to an Australian study into the nature and definition of violent extremism in academic literature the term is often employed without providing a definition as if it's meaning is self-evident. "Thus, no real distinction between violent extremism and terrorism has been fully developed, it remains an evolving concept."[64] Violent extremism may, in fact, be somewhat of a pleonasm as extremists are often by definition inclined to use violence. Schmid wrote an extensive paper on the use (and usefulness) of the terms radicalism and extremism in which he states: "While radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. (...) They are positively in favor of the use of force to obtain and maintain political power."[65] Taking that as baseline, Schmid goes

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[61] Pete Lentini, *On Terrorism and Its (Re) Sources: A Review Essay* (Sage Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2003); cf E. J. van der Heide, 'Individual Terrorism: Indicators of Lone Operators' (2011).
[62] Louise Richardson, 'The Roots of Terrorism: An Overview', in *The Roots of Terrorism* (Routledge, 2013), 13–26; see also Ethan Bueno De Mesquita, 'Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence', *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 145–76.
[63] Albert J. Jongman and Alex P. Schmid, *Political Terrorism* (Transaction Publishers, NJ, 1998): 28.
[64] Minerva Nasser-Eddine et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review' (Defence Science and Technology Organisation Edinburgh (Australia), 2011), 9.
[65] Alex P. Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review' (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, March 2013), 10,

on to conclude that we should distinguish radicalism from extremism where the former refers to more open-minded forms of advocating reform that might or might not lead to some forms of political violence, while the latter is a characterised by close-mindedness and violent tendencies that can lead to terrorism. As such, violent extremism can be viewed as a pre-portal to terrorism where violent extremist individuals and groups are close-minded and intolerant of other worldviews as well as positive towards the use of force to achieve their goals. This could lead to terrorism, but it will not necessarily result in engaging in terrorism. While the definition of terrorism provided in this thesis presumes actual engagement in action ("a method of repeated violent actions"), those individuals that become involved with terrorist groups do not necessarily always engage in violent acts themselves. A group can be labelled as terrorist because of its use of violence while not all its members or supporters actively participate in those violent acts. That is why, in this thesis, if the term terrorism is used, it is used interchangeably with violent extremism, as it encompasses both individuals and groups who are labelled as either terrorists and/or violent extremists because of their ideological commitment or group affiliation – not because of their individual actions.

### *1.5.2 Involvement in terrorism and radicalisation*

As noted earlier, the field of terrorism studies has become particularly wedded to the notion of radicalisation to explain involvement in or engagement with terrorism. Some definitions of radicalisation have a broad focus, e.g. social psychologists McCauley and Moskalenko define radicalisation as "the development of beliefs, feelings, and actions in support of any group or cause in a conflict."[66] Radicalisation is then viewed as a process whereby an individual moves towards justifying violence and – in some cases – finally personally engaging in the use of violence. Most definitions agree that radicalisation is a process, however there is less consensus as to where that process leads.

In some definitions, radicalisation is inherently tied to terrorism (as the use of violence for ideological purposes) in that it is viewed as a process leading to terrorism. For example in the definition of the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, radicalisation is defined as "socialization to extremism, which manifests itself in terrorism."[67] In a similar vein, the UK defines radicalisation as "the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism."[68] Even though radicalisation has become a household concept in government and policy circles post 9/11,[69] it is often used without acknowledging the controversies surrounding the term. A main first issue lies in the "(often implicit) notion that the adoption of radical views necessarily leads to involvement in radical behaviour and that desistance from terrorism similarly necessitates the abandonment of such views".[70] This idea is overly simplistic when

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https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf.

[66] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 4.

[67] Rogelio Alonso et al., 'Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism. A Concise Report Prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation', 2008, 7.

[68] 'CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism' (Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, July 2011), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97995/strategy-contest.pdf.

[69] Arun Kundnani, 'Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept', *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (2012): 6.

[70] See for example Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalisation in Europe: What we know and what we do not know", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, nr. 9 (2010): 798; Michael Genkin en Alexander Gutfraind, "How do terrorist cells self-assemble: Insights from an agent-based model of radicalisation", 2011, 2; Lorenzo Vidino en James Brandon, "Countering radicalisation in Europe", *ICSR, Kings College Policy Report. London: Kings College,* 2012, 9.

it comes to the complexities involved in those individuals who become radicalised, both in terms of what that means cognitively as well as how it might manifest itself in behavior. As a matter of fact, many people hold radical ideas but do not engage in any terrorist activities. In light of the (likely) millions of individuals that we might consider as having radical or even extremist views, "the percentage that goes on to become involved in terrorist activities is exceedingly small".[71] It can – in some cases – lead to engagement in terrorist activities but is not necessarily linked to the use of violence. Thus, radicalisation as a process in many cases does not lead to terrorism. Researchers have argued that engagement in terrorist activity can also precede radicalisation: individuals sometimes radicalise only after involvement in terrorism.[72]

Second, being radical necessarily relates to what is generally viewed as the norm or as moderate in a given society. According to historian Mark Sedgwick, definitions of radicalisation, by opposing the "radical" and "moderate," always implicate the issue of what is considered normal or moderate. What is considered moderate is dependent on the cultural context and thus, it is never "self-evident in a "with-us-or-a-against-us" sense".[73] Additionally, someone can be viewed as having radical opinions on any issue ranging from political standpoints (i.e. pro- or anti-immigration) to religious themes (i.e. pro-or anti-sharia law) or any other issue (i.e. most conspiracy theorists are considered radical). That means that by nature, what is viewed as radicalisation in one country might be considered normal in another country. Third and finally, the process of radicalising or becoming more extreme usually indicates a process where individuals become less open to other interpretations or opinions.[74] For these three reasons, in this thesis, radicalisation is defined as the process of becoming more distanced from the prevailing norms on a given subject towards adopting an exclusive worldview that is viewed as the one and only truth.

Overall, as terrorism scholars Braddock and Horgan assert, "radicalization remains a poorly defined, inconsistently used term that has been used to characterize everything from acquiring extreme beliefs to actual engagement in violent activity."[75] All in all, the above clarifies that there is a clear difference between having radical ideas and engaging in radical behaviour. Second, individuals who became involved with terrorist groups can be motivated by radical ideas but that is not a prerequisite; nor does involvement with terrorist groups necessarily translate to engagement in (violent) action. Finally, many indiviudals do not 'join' terrorist groups in the traditional sense of signing up for membership but rather, can become involved in different ways ranging from mere affiliation with a group for ideological reasons, facilitating group activities or acting in supportive capacities to engagement in (violent) action. And even the latter category can include individuals who do not do so by choice but rather because they (feel) forced to do so. For those reasons, in this thesis the term *involvement* is used to describe this broad range of options by which an individual becomes affiliated with a terrorist group – covering a range of activities from supporting the ideology and facilitating a group's day-to-day operations to participating in the preparation and execution of violent acts.

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[71] James Khalil, 'Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture between Attitudes and Behaviours at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 198–211.

[72] Randy Borum, "Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, nr. 4 (december 2011): 7, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1.

[73] Mark Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (14 September 2010): 482, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009.

[74]Sedgwick, 482.

[75] Braddock and Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism'.

## 1.6 The present study

This study aims to deconstruct the process of involvement in terrorism in Mali through empirically investigating this process on the individual, group, and structural level; analysing the findings to identify the factors that play a role in becoming involved in terrorism. The decision to focus on Mali as a case study has been motivated by various considerations. Aside from constraints in terms of resources like time and costs, a sound empirical study into involvement in terrorism and the factors that play a role in that process require an in-depth explorative research based on a qualitative approach: since involvement is influenced "not only by the dynamics of political contention but also [by] historical precedents and processes".[76] To facilitate this in-depth research, it was decided to narrow the scope of this project to one specific country.

The setting of Mali has been selected because access to primary sources was facilitated through the researcher's participation in a four-year long training program focused on countering and preventing violent extremism in the prison context in Mali, which facilitated access to individuals charged with terrorism, local, and national government actors and international institutions working in Mali. Second, as previously outlined, the Sahel-Maghreb region is of particular interest in this domain of research given its history and the current trends in terrorism. Third, among the Sahel-Maghreb countries, Mali has been experiencing a violent conflict between different terrorist groups and the national government, which has been extended to the international level with the deployment of French troops in the country and the establishment of the UN peace-keeping mission, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (*Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation du Mali*, MINUSMA) in 2013.[77]

Given the multilevel approach to explaining terrorism that is employed in this study, the overarching question of this thesis is: **how can we understand involvement in terrorism in Mali?** The overall question will be answered through three subsidiary research questions. The first part of the study will provide an overview of the state of the art on the empirical and theoretical findings regarding involvement in terrorism. In the second phase of the study, empirical data will be presented based on interviews with (suspected and/or sentenced) terrorists and interviews with national and international actors active in the field of counter-terrorism in Mali. Finally, in the third phase, the outcomes of the empirical study will be critically evaluated in light of the academic literature in order to assess and answer the overall question of how we can understand involvement in terrorism in Mali. The deconstructive element in the title of this thesis pertains to the focus on identifying various factors in involvement in terrorism and doing so from the multilevel perspective (the macro-, meso- and micro level) with the aim to find vulnerabilities on those levels, rather than zooming in on individual trajectories.

## 1.7 Research design

The current study uses a multilevel approach, which aims to combine micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (structural) levels of analysis, thus adopting the approach promoted by Della Porta in analysing terrorism through a combination of three

[76] Donatella Della Porta en Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Patterns of radicalisation in political activism: An introduction", *Social Science History* 36, nr. 3 (2012): 317.
[77] Elena Dal Santo and Elizabeth Johanna van der Heide, 'Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts: Connecting Geopolitics to Individual Pathways to Terrorism in Mali', *African Security* 11, no. 3 (2018): 274–91.

perspectives.[78] The individual (micro), organisational (meso), and structural (macro) levels will be taken into account to provide a more comprehensive explanation of involvement in terrorism in Mali. The micro level focuses on the narratives of the alleged terrorist offenders in prison and the factors that they describe as playing a role on the individual level. The meso level focuses on the organisational level, thus assessing the group level factors that explain involvement in terrorism. Finally, the macro level identifies factors on the geo-political, historical, and social contrasts level that have led individuals to becoming involved in terrorism.

### *1.7.1 Scientific relevance*

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the academic body of literature on terrorism in four ways. First, many scholars have concluded that the current terrorism literature suffers from a Western bias. In the words of Jackson: "There is a real need to expand the study of terrorism to both address the Western-centricity prevalent in terrorism research while at the same time including the voices and perspectives of those in the global South who have been the most frequent victims of both terrorism and counter-terrorism."[79] Thus, this study seeks to add to the current literature by analysing a non-Western sample, deepening our knowledge of and insight into involvement in terrorism that could generally add to our understanding of involvement in terrorism across other non-Western countries. A second gap that this thesis addresses is the lack of analysis of meso and macro level factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism.

A majority of studies, especially in the Western academic sphere, has a dominant focus on understanding terrorism taking the individual as the unit of analysis. As Ekaterina Stepanova notes in Schmid: "at least equal attention should be paid to the social group level at the national and inter- (trans)national / systemic level."[80] This study seeks to tackle this issue by taking a multilevel approach to terrorism, aiming to better understand the interplay between the micro, meso, and macro factors that play a role in individuals' involvement in and desistance from terrorism in Mali. Third, while several studies have been conducted detailing the overall situation in Mali vis-à-vis the different terrorist groups, an empirically sound analysis explaining involvement in and desistance from violent extremism and the role of prison in that process in the country is lacking. This study seeks to fill this knowledge gap. Fourth and finally, the unique access in this study to primary sources through conducting interviews with inmates incarcerated for terrorist-related offences as well as the professionals working with them or on countering terrorism in Mali will ensure a contribution to the empirically scarce basis of terrorism research in general.[81]

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[78] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 10–11.

[79] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 18; see also Matt McDonald, 'Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies', in *Critical Terrorism Studies* (Routledge, 2009), 123–37.

[80] Alex P. Schmid, 'The Literature on Terrorism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (Routledge, 2011), 469.

[81] John Horgan, 'Interviewing Terrorists: A Case for Primary Research', in *Terrorism Informatics*, ed. Hsinchun Chen et al., vol. 18, Integrated Series In Information Systems (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2008), 73–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-71613-8_4. ;Todd C. Helmus, 'Why and How Some People Become Terrorists', in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, ed. Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009).

### *1.7.2 Societal relevance*

The collapse of security in Mali, which used to be described as "the poster child for democracy",[82] begs solutions to the on-going security crisis that are based on an in-depth and contextualised understanding of how individuals became engaged with terrorism in the country. To inform both national policies aiming to demobilise, disarm, and reintegrate (DDR) former combatants, including terrorists, as well as international policy ranging from counterterrorism to stabilisation and peacekeeping operations, it is necessary to understand *the enemy*. Having knowledge of the factors that play a role in the process of involvement in terrorism is clearly critical in enabling us to understand how and why individuals come to change their behaviour. Developing a better knowledge base and increasing our insights in the individual processes and social circumstances in and through which involvement in terrorism takes place is an indispensable precursor for building practice models. In other words: practitioner paradigms need to be embedded in a sound understanding of the process of involvement. At the same time, many studies have shown that there is a tendency in terrorism studies to perceive of terrorist offenders as mainly religiously motivated individuals,[83] despite the evidence that underlines the importance of other factors on the social and individual level that might play a role in their radicalisation process. This study seeks to develop a more nuanced understanding of the individual and the context within which involvement in terrorism takes place in Mali, thereby also addressing factors such as perceived injustice and altruism that drives some of these individuals.

## 1.8 Methods

The analysis of involvement in terrorism is addressed using a twofold methodological approach. First, an in-depth analysis of the available literature was conducted to provide a solid framework of theoretical elements and empirical findings that can explain involvement in terrorism on a macro, meso, and micro level. This part includes an extensive review of the literature from a range of disciplines that are relevant to this research, primarily findings from terrorism studies, criminology, sociology, and psychology – as these disciplines have all contributed to theories of involvement in terrorism. Second, through fieldwork in Mali, a total of 105 respondents were interviewed to gather their perspectives on involvement in terrorism in Mali. This includes narrative interviews with Malian inmates that have been incarcerated in Bamako's central prison based on terrorist charges. Between December 2016 and June 2018, a total of 36 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 30 inmates charged with and/or sentenced for terrorism-related offenses in Mali.

Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted with prison staff, local and national government actors, and international actors that are active in the field of countering violent extremism in Mali. In total, 75 professionals were interviewed through focus group and individual interviews, including organisations dealing with terrorist offenders in Mali, such as the National Directorate of the Penitentiary Administration (*Direction National de l'Administration Pénitentiaire et de l'Education Surveillée*, DNAPES), the prison director of Bamako Central Prison, a number of prison staff, a psychiatrist working in the prison setting, several MINUSMA agencies, including the Justice and Corrections sector, the Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC), the Human Rights section, and the UN Department of Safety and

[82] Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, 'The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29 March 2019, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1592356.

[83] Liam Stephens and Stijn Sieckelinck, 'Radicalization and Religion', in *Religion and European Society* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2019), 159–70, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119162766.ch10.

Security (UNDSS), the mission's All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), and a number of embassies. The empirical data was analysed using an inductive approach: the raw data was classified according to a framework of coding key themes. The methodological approach is presented in more detail in Chapter three.

### 1.9 Outline

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter two presents an overview of research on involvement in terrorism, both from an empirical as well as a theoretical perspective. It underlines the need for both an empirical and multilevel analysis approach to study involvement and desistance from terrorism in Mali. Chapter three provides the methodological framework. Chapter four provides the necessary Malian context, starting with a historical and geographical overview and providing a timeline of terrorism-related events in Mali to familiarise readers with the context.

The empirical analysis is presented in chapters five through seven. Chapter five presents an overview of the respondents that were interviewed in prison, providing a summary of their demographic characteristics and group affiliations. Chapter six presents an analysis of the factors that played a role in their process of becoming involved in terrorism, based on the narrative interviews with these 30 suspected terrorists. Chapter seven presents the empirical data from the 75 interviews with professionals that play a role in the Malian context, with a focus on what they view as factors that play a role in (becoming involved in) terrorism in Mali. Chapter eight provides an in-depth analysis of the empirical data, including a comparison between the empirical findings from both the inmate and the professional perspective with the micro or individual level of analysis, the meso or group level of analysis, and the macro or structural factors that played a role in the process of involvement in terrorism in Mali. Chapter eight also provides a conclusion and discusses the main findings, evaluates the academic and policy implications, and provides some suggestions for future research.

# Chapter 2 – Research on involvement in terrorism

## 2.1 Introduction

Terrorist attacks generally lead to the question: 'Why?' Why did this happen? Why did this person kill so many people? The answer to the question of why individuals become involved in terrorism can be summarized as being the outcome of "a complex process in which multiple factors play a role".[84] That is why this research adopts a multilevel analytical framework to understand how people become involved in terrorism. In this framework, theoretical explanations from diverse fields, including criminology, (social) psychology, and sociology will be discussed, structured along the lines of a micro, meso, and macro level of analysis to explaining involvement in terrorism. This approach is endorsed by the academic body of literature.[85] According to psychiatrist and terrorism researcher Jessica Stern: "[humans] catch the fire of terrorism in myriad ways – some environmental, some individual (or more likely, in most cases, a mix of the two)."[86]

Aside from the academic value of taking an interdisciplinary approach to the topic of involvement in terrorism; this approach also does justice to the linkages that are often observed in reality between terrorism and other forms of crime such as all narco-, arms and human trafficking, money laundering, and immigration violations.[87] The regional linkages in Mali and the Sahel between organised crime and terrorism[88] represent an example of Shelley's theory of the "unholy trinity" between terrorism, organised crime, and corruption.[89] According to Shelley, newer transnational criminal groups share common interests with terrorist groups and profit from state economic development and poor governance, "porous borders and dysfunctional state institutions."[90] In line with the observed overlap in organized criminal and terrorist interests, this thesis starts from the assumption that factors that play a role in individual involvement with terrorist groups might have been just as much influenced by this larger criminal context rather than being the mere result of considerations related specifically to terrorism as ideologically-driven violence.

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[84] Tore Bjørgo, *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward* (Routledge, 2004); John Horgan, 'Understanding Terrorist Motivation: A Socio-Psychological Perspective', in *Mapping Terrorism Research* (Routledge, 2006), 120–40; Max Taylor and John Horgan, 'A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585–601.

[85] Martha Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism", *Political psychology* 21, nr. 2 (1986): 380; Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalisation in Europe: What we know and what we do not know", 810; Horgan, "Understanding terrorist motivation: A socio-psychological perspective", 13–14; Rex A. Hudson, "The sociology and psychology of terrorism: Who becomes a terrorist and why?" (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WASHINGTON DC FEDERAL RESEARCH DIV, 1999), 15, 23; Clark McCauley en Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalisation: Pathways toward terrorism", *Terrorism and political violence* 20, nr. 3 (2008): 429; Jeffrey Ian Ross, "A model of the psychological causes of oppositional political terrorism", *Peace and Conflict* 2, nr. 2 (1996): 129; Gregory D. Miller, "Rationality, decision-making and the levels of analysis problem in terrorism studies", in *ISA's 50th Annual Convention' Exploring the past, anticipating the future', New York*, 2009, 3–4; Tinka Veldhuis en Jørgen Staun, *Islamist radicalisation: A root cause model* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael The Hague, 2009), 22; Joshua Sinai, "New trends in terrorism studies: strengths and weaknesses", in *Mapping terrorism research* (Routledge, 2006), 46–47.

[86] Jessica Stern, 'Response to Marc Sageman's "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research"', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014): 607.

[87] Vincenzo Ruggiero, 'Hybrids: On the Crime–Terror Nexus', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 2017, 6.

[88] Erik Alda and Joseph Sala, 'Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3, no. 1 (2014).

[89] Louise Shelley, 'The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism', *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2004): 101–11.

[90] Shelley, 104–5.

A persistent characteristic of terrorism research is the attempt (implicit or otherwise) to emphasise how violent extremist behaviour is different or *special*.[91] As a result, a specific body of literature on terrorism has emerged with its own terminology. Though it has been argued that terrorism is special because it is an anomaly statistically speaking as well as from a societal perspective,[92] terrorist behaviour is governed by the many socio-psychological dynamics that underpin all human behaviour.[93] However, terrorism studies have often failed to incorporate useful insights from other disciplines, as many terrorism scholars have attempted to "construct terrorism as a separate and unique category of political violence, which required its own specialized approaches and dedicated scholars."[94] Additionally, even though numerous studies in academic disciplines ranging from (social) psychology to criminology and sociology have focused on the same themes, "exceptionalism regarding terrorism oftentimes see researchers "reinventing the wheel" in terms of explanatory frameworks for political violence".[95]

Parallels can be drawn between the profiles of criminals and violent extremist offenders on the grounds that they are usually rationally acting, lower-middle class males.[96] From the emergence of identity gangs in prison to the role of prison as a cathartic event, this literature is underutilised in the case of violent extremism and radicalisation research due in large part to the exceptionalisation of terrorist offending.[97] That is why in this thesis terrorism is viewed as a subset of the larger phenomenon of political violence – which is in itself a subset of criminal behaviour. This research seeks to draw on the well-established and empirically grounded literature that informs our view of crime – generally understood – in an effort to analyse involvement in terrorism.

## 2.2 Taking a multilevel approach

The current body of academic literature provides a starting point in understanding involvement in terrorism. Nonetheless, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to primary-source based studies that detail the role of factors on the individual, the group or the structural level that either contribute to or provide barriers to becoming involved in terrorism.[98] As Doosje et al. conclude in a study of micro, meso, and macro level factors in the process of radicalisation: it is impossible to understand this process "without taking into account the group-level psychological processes in terms of belonging, social influence and polarization".[99] In the field of criminology, many attempts have been made to develop theoretical models of criminal behaviour, taking into account individual, biological, and

[91] Randy Borum, 'Counterterrorism Training Post-9/11', *The Changing Face of Terrorism*, 2004, 62–73.
[92] Scott Atran, 'Genesis of Suicide Terrorism', *Science (New York, N.Y.)* 299, no. 5612 (7 March 2003): 1534–39, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1078854.
[93] Denoeux and Carter, 'Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism', 1.
[94] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 9.
[95] Sara Zeiger and Anne Aly, 'Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice' (Perth: Hedayah and Curtin University, 2015), 3.
[96] Jacob Aasland Ravndal and Tore Bjørgo, 'Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 5–22.
[97] Mareile Kaufmann, *Ethnic Profiling and Counter-Terrorism: Examples of European Practice and Possible Repercussions*, vol. 46 (LIT Verlag Münster, 2010).
[98] Ednan Aslan and Margaret Rausch, *Religious Education: Between Radicalism and Tolerance* (Springer, 2018).
[99] Bertjan Doosje et al., 'Terrorism, Radicalization and de-Radicalization', *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11 (October 2016): 82, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.06.008.

psychological factors as well as social, situational, and cultural factors that seem to play a role in offending behaviour.[100]

Within terrorism studies the debate on how and why individuals engage in terrorism has centred around the term radicalisation. However, there is neither a common definition nor a shared understanding of what radicalisation is and how the process of radicalisation unfolds. Some scholars, such as criminologist Gary Lafree,[101] have long advocated that the body of academic literature in the field of criminology should be used to analyse the similarities and differences between common violence and political violence including terrorism. In his opinion, what these two have in common as that forms of violence are used to achieve a specific goal.[102] Others, both in the psychological and the criminological field, have put forward that conventional crime is characterised by factors and mechanisms that also underpin terrorism,[103] including factors such as value, loss, shame, frustration, and repressed anger, alongside the pursuit of respect (either individually or as a group).[104] As such, important insights from (socio-) psychological and criminological analysis may also help establish taxonomy of factors playing a role in involvement in terrorism.

### 2.3 Explaining involvement in terrorism

Given that terrorism studies, as a subfield of security studies, is a relatively young field, it has a strong multidisciplinary character. Studies in the field adopt disciplinary perspectives ranging from history, political science, and international relations to criminology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.[105] Despite Schmid's assertion that this has nonetheless resulted in a "fairly solid body of consolidated knowledge",[106] a number of terrorism scholars including Crenshaw and Reich have complained that there is still a tendency to explain complex behaviour in mono-causal terms.[107] Adopting a multilevel framework of analysis to analyse involvement makes sense because first, the academic literature supports understanding involvement in terrorism as the outcome of a multifaceted trajectory that is impacted by many different elements. Second, these elements can be found at different levels of analysis. Third and finally, involvement in terrorism is best understood as a dynamic process, meaning that the importance of the elements that play a role change

[100] Kevin M. Beaver, 'Genetics and Crime', in *The Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment* (American Cancer Society, 2015), 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118519639.wbecpx073.
[101] Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan, 'How Does Studying Terrorism Compare to Studying Crime?', in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Deflem Mathieu, vol. 5, Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 53–74, https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136(2004)0000005006.
[102] Vincenzo Ruggiero, 'Organised Behaviour and Organised Identity', *Beijing Law Review* 01, no. 01 (2010): 6, https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2010.11003.
[103] Gary LaFree and James Hendrickson, 'Build a Criminal Justice Policy for Terrorism', *Criminology & Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (2007): 781–90.
[104] Arie W Kruglanski and Edward Orehek, *The Role of the Quest for Personal Significance in Motivating Terrorism* (na, 2011).
[105] B. W. Schuurman, 'Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist: A Multilevel Analysis of Involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005', Doctoral Thesis, 26 January 2017, https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/45328.; Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism," 458; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "The Role of History and Continuity in Terrorism Research," in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp (New York / Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 51-75.
[106] Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism," 470.
[107] Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Political Terrorism," in *Political Psychology*, ed. Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), 381.Walter Reich, "Understanding Terrorist Behaviour: The Limits and Opportunities of Psychological Inquiry," in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990; reprint, 1998), 261-71.

over time.[108] Or, in the words of terrorism researcher Schuurman: "(…) although a particular factor may convincingly explain why someone became involved in a terrorist group in the first place, it may be irrelevant to understanding how or why that person came to commit an actual act of violence."[109]

## 2.4 Micro level explanations

The micro level of analysis draws mainly upon psychological explanations for why individuals become involved in terrorism.[110] Borum and Victoroff each conducted literature reviews to structure the explanations for individuals' engagement with terrorism.[111]Within terrorism studies, two main strands of literature can be distinguished that seek explanations for involvement in terrorism. The first of these deals with theories focused on involvement that centre on the individual profiles of terrorist with the idea that these are somehow distinct in terms of psychology or emotional mindset, and explain involvement in terrorism as a result of psychopathological characteristics or as a consequence of psycho-sociological processes.[112] The second views involvement in terrorism as the result of specific cognitive processes where someone's worldview or ideology is a determining factor in the likelihood that an inidivual engages with terrorism.

### *2.4.1 Psychopathological theories*

Underlying the psychopathological tradition that developed over the 1970s and 1980s was the assumption "that non-violent behaviour is the accepted norm, and that those engaged in terrorist activities therefore necessarily must be abnormal".[113] The psychopathological tradition thus ignores the social context of the individual in the search for deviant character traits. Within this tradition, some authors focused on understanding involvement in terrorism as the consequence of psychopathology or the outcome of psychological trauma sustained in early or late childhood.[114] In the 1990s, Jerrold Post coined the term "terrorist psycho-logic" – referring to his research proposition that "[t]errorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces, and that their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit."[115]

While psychopathology as an overall explanation for terrorism has become less prevalent, some studies do report on specific psychopathological traits in terrorist offender populations.[116] For example, Kleinmann researched home-grown Sunni militants in the US and concluded that the prevalence of mental health diagnoses is higher among terrorists.[117] In another study focused on suicide terrorism, Lankford partially confirmed this by concluding

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[108] Bjørgo, "Conclusions," 260; Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; repr., 2006), 9-10; Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 7-10.

[109] Schuurman, 'Becoming a European Homegrown Jihadist', 36.

[110] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Hudson, 'The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?'; Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*; Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist'.

[111] Ibid.; "Radicalization into Violent Extremism Ii: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37-62; Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist," 3-42.

[112] Charles W. Kegley, *International Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls* (St. Martin's Press New York, 1990).

[113] Schmid and Jongman, 'Political Terrorism. Oxford.'

[114] Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist'; cf Crenshaw, 'The Psychology of Political Terrorism'.

[115] Post, *Current Understanding of Terrorist Motivation and Psychology Implications for a Differentiated Antiterrorist Policy*, 25.

[116] Liem, M., van Buuren, J., de Roy van Zuijdewijn, J., Schönberger, H., & Bakker, E. (2018). European lone actor terrorists versus "common" homicide offenders: An empirical analysis. *Homicide studies*, *22*(1), 45-69.

[117] Kleinmann, "Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States," 287-88.

that a substantial number of individuals in his research population was diagnosed with mental health issues such as "depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health problems."[118] In the Netherlands, Weenink analyzed police files of terrorist offenders and concluded that just under fifty percent of his sample of Dutch jihadists displayed what he labeled "problematic behaviour" and that six percent had diagnosed mental health problems.[119] And an extensive life-course analysis of 250 West German, 227 left-wing and 23 right-wing terrorists, conducted by a consortium of researchers found that especially the two psychological mechanisms of externalisation and splitting were predominant in the population.[120]

However, the psychopathological perspective has received much criticism for "depoliticizing terrorism" and for its lack of an empirical basis. Convincing evidence for a distinctly different psychological profile of terrorists has not been found.[121] To the contrary, the most common indicator of individual terrorists appears to be how normal they are.[122] As a result, scholars advocated for a more contextually rich view on terrorism through recognising the influence of the environment upon individuals.[123] Terrorism scholar Wilkinson, for example, argues that we should pay much more attention to the social environment within which terrorists adopt and form their narratives or ideologies to understand involvement in terrorism. According to him, the most promising avenue for explaining terrorism involvement can be found in the analysis of the political motives they have and placing these in their "unique political, historical, and cultural context, and the ideology and aims of the groups involved".[124] Crenshaw, reasoning along the same lines, remarks that "terrorism is not the direct result of social conditions but of individual perceptions of those conditions."[125]

### *2.4.2 Cognitive theories*

Within the cognitive tradition, Victoroff has focused on two concepts, namey cognitive style and cognitive capacity. Cognitive style refers to someone's mindset or how individuals make decisions and the biases involved in that process. [126] Cognitive capacity how able individuals are to apply their cognitive capabilities to their lives – for example how they store information, how well they can concentrate, to what extent they can understand and adhere to norms and regulations, to come to logical conclusions based on rational reasoning, and whether they can make accurate risk analyses.[127] More recently, the concept of *radicalisation* has been put front and center in individual-level explanations in the field of

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[118] Adam Lankford, "Précis of the Myth of Martyrdom: What Really Drives Suicide Bombers, Rampage Shooters, and Other Self-Destructive Killers," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* 37, no. 4 (2014): 354-55.
[119] Anton W. Weenink, "Behavioural Problems and Disorders among Radicals in Police Files," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 24-27.
[120] L Bollinger, 'Die Entwicklung Zu Terroristischem Handeln Als Psychosozialer Prozess: Begegnungen Mit Beteiligten [The Development of Terrorist Actions as a Psychosocial Process: Encounters with Participants]', in *Analysen Zum Terrorismus [Analysis of Terrorism]*, ed. H. Jager, G. Schmidtchen, and L. Sullwold, Lebenslauf-Analysen 2 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981).
[121] Victoroff, 'The Mind of the Terrorist', 31–32.
[122] David Weatherston and Jonathan Moran, 'Terrorism and Mental Illness: Is There a Relationship?', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 47, no. 6 (2003): 698–713.
[123] Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann. (2017). *Fear thy neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist attacks in the West*. Ledizioni; see also Bibi van Ginkel and Eva Entenmann, eds. *The foreign fighters phenomenon in the European Union: profiles, threats & policies*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016.
[124] Wilkinson, 'Trends in International Terrorism and the American Response'.
[125] Martha Crenshaw, 'Questions to Be Answered, Research to Be Done, Knowledge to Be Applied.', in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1990), 250.
[126] Martha Crenshaw, 'Questions to Be Answered', 250.
[127] Victoroff, "The Mind of the Terrorist," 26.

terrorism studies.[128] Generally speaking, this term is used to denote a process within which someone adopts ideological (political or religious views) that become increasingly extreme.[129] Within the cognitive tradition, radicalisation is viewed as a process of change on the mental level that entails the internalisation of (more) radical or even extreme beliefs.[130] Buijs and Demant and Slootman and Tillie, for example, see radicalisation first and foremost as a process that involves the "de-legitimization" of the conventional order in society an politics, leading individuals to harbour a strong wish to change this and – ultimately to change that might necessarily involve the use of violence.[131] To clarify the distinction between individuals that do or do not go on to use violence, Horgan differentiates between "violent radicalization" on the one hand and "radicalization" on the other, defining the latter as the "social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology."[132]

In the cognitive tradition, several models have been developed to evaluate the level of radicalisation by assessing to what extent an individual adheres to a violent extremist narrative or is influenced by the beliefs of their social network. Kruglanski and colleagues, for example, see radicalisation as "a movement in the direction of *supporting* or *enacting* radical behaviour."[133] An example of such a model is the *Quest for Significance*, developed by Kruglanski et al. that explains involvement in terrorism as primarly a way to maintain or gain a sense of significance in the face of unfavourable or even harmful conditions. Examples of these conditions are discrimination, humiliation, or relative deprivation.[134] In this model, an individual may be radicalised because of strong *needs* to feel accepted and to matter in the eyes of others. Other individuals may be radicalised primarily because of the *narrative* to which they are exposed. Yet other individuals may be radicalised through the social influence of their radical friends and relatives, that is, by the social *network* to which they belong.

Partially in line with Kruglanski's quest for significance, Taylor introduced the concept of "fanaticism" to explain individual involvement in terrorism. According to him, beliefs or worldviews can have an influence on behaviour as they generally provide guidance or a set of rules to live by that provide a person with a link between their direct behaviour and some (ideological) distant outcome such as salvation or redemption.[135] Fanaticism, according to Taylor, refers to behaviour that demonstrates "excessive enthusiasm" for specific ideological beliefs.[136] While he asserts that for most individuals, ideological beliefs are only one among many other influences in their live, to the fanatic, "the influence of ideology is

[128] Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: The Journey of a Concept," *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (2012): 7; Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 480.
[129] Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation'.
[130] Randy Borum, "Understanding the Terrorist Mindset," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 72, no. 7 (2003): 7-10; Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, "Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the Challenge of Extremist and Radicalized Prisoners," (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), 2.
[131] Slootman and Tillie, "Processen Van Radicalisering," 24; Buijs and Demant, "Extremisme En Radicalisering," 173; Froukje Demant et al., "Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation," in *IMES Reports Series* (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2008), 12-13.
[132] Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, 152.
[133] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism," *Advances in Political Psychology* 35, no. Supplement S1 (2014): 70.
[134] Arie W. Kruglanski et al., 'Terrorism--a (Self) Love Story: Redirecting the Significance Quest Can End Violence', *The American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (October 2013): 559–75, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032615.
[135]Kruglanski et al., 112–13, 269. ; Maxwell Taylor, *The Fanatics: A Behavioural Approach to Political Violence* (London: Brassey's, 1991).
[136] Taylor, *The Fanatics: A Behavioural Approach to Political Violence*, 14.

such that it excludes or attenuates other social, political or personal forces that might be expected to control and influence behaviour."[137]

Theories from disciplines including criminology,[138] sociology,[139] and psychology[140] tend to view terrorists as coming from a background characterised by hardship. What that means exactly is explained in various ways by authors but they generally agree that the individual is faced with a form of (perceived) humiliation. Humiliation can stem from a range of personal circumstances, such as personal failure,[141] the loss of a loved one,[142] or feeling stigmatized within the social community.[143] From the cognitive perspective, the exact event or condition matters less, it is the psychological effect these experiences or condition have that provide what Wiktorowicz has described as a "cognitive opening." He explains that cognitive openings, or "trigger events" are generally induced on by a feeling of (personal) crisis, whether it be of personal, social, political or economic nature. This perceived crisis can lead to a person questioning the beliefs they previously held.[144] This, in turn, can set in motion a process of adopting more and more radial and/or extremist beliefs and potentially even participating in political violence.[145] An important disclaimer here is that the perceived crisis that produces a cognitive opening does not need to be based on a personal experience of humiliation. It can also be brought on by empathising with the suffering of others or group humiliation.[146]

Another cognitive concept that is often used in the context of radicalisation and terrorism is the concept of "dehumanization." According to Bandura, beliefs or an ideology can free its adherents to act violently against ones enemies "without the burden of guilt typically attached to perpetration of violence".[147] Tactics like dehumanisation (displaying the (perceived) enemy as less than or even non-human) can provide a very effective way of doing this,[148] while at the same time indoctrinating and stimulating an individual into a simplistic, black and white type of thought-process that is very appealing to those who strive for

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[137] Taylor, *The Fanatics*, 33.
[138] Robert Agnew, 'A General Strain Theory of Terrorism', *Theoretical Criminology* 14, no. 2 (1 May 2010): 131–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480609350163.
[139]Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*.
[140] McCauley and Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism'.; see also John Horgan, 'From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94.
[141] Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, 'Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization', *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (2017): 815–31, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12376.
[142] Anne Speckhard, *Talking to Terrorists: Understanding the Psycho-Social Motivations of Militant Jihadi Terrorists, Mass Hostage Takers, Suicide Bombers and Martyrs to Combat Terrorism in Prison and Community Rehabilitation* (McLean, VA: Advances press, 2012).
[143]Ami Pedazhur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Polity Press, 2005).
[144] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam," in *The Roots of Islamic Radicalism* (Yale University, United States 2004), 1, 7-8.
[145] Gaetano Joe Ilardi, "Interviews with Canadian Radicals," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 726-27; Porter and Kebbell, "Radicalization in Australia: Examining Australia's Convicted Terrorists," 227; Wiktorowicz, "Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam," 1.
[146] Andrew Silke, *Terrorism: All That Matters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 66-67; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 72-75; "The Next Generation of Terror," 40-41.
[147]A. Bandura, 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.
[148] Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood, and Michael E Fromson, 'Disinhibition of Aggression through Diffusion of Responsibility and Dehumanization of Victims', *Journal of Research in Personality* 9, no. 4 (1 December 1975): 253–69, https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(75)90001-X.

significance.[149] As such, dehumanisation is generally not viewed as an overall explanation for involvement in terrorism, but rather, as one step that can shed light on why individuals engage in violence or view their own beliefs is the one truth.

Psychologists McCauley and Moskalenko argue that dehumanisation is an outcome of "essentialist thinking" that can become dominant in groups of people who are at odds with others. A prominent sign of this mindset is the tendency to over-generalize conclusions. An example is viewing the behavior of one individual as representative for the "evil nature" of an entire group or culture. Another sign is the idea that one's group is somehow under attack and runs the risk of being contaminated by other individuals. And finally, a sign is the tendency to refer to others using derogatory terminology that characterizes them as either stupid or evil. In some cases this can take the form of dehumanization, for instance by calling enemies "sheep" or "pigs."[150] This often also includes placing one's own identity on the opposite side of that spectre, referring to oneself or group members as heroes, soldiers or revolutionaries.[151]

Overall, within the literature on micro level explanations for engagement with terrorism, there is a split both within the psychopathological and the cognitive perspective between authors who focus on individual mindsets, perceptions or thoughts directly related to behaviour and those that do not. Take, for example, one of the most cited definitions of radicalisation by McCauley and Moskalenko, who define it as "increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict."[152] Or the definition by Dalgaard-Nielsen, who views "violent radicalization" as a "process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts."[153] These behaviour-oriented definitions and theories include for example studies conducted by Dawson on religious movements and by King and Taylor on home-grown jihadism.[154] And as Schmid concluded in his study on radicalisation, many government agencies also adopt behaviour-oriented definitions of radicalisation to explain the developments that lead up to engagement with terrorism.[155]

Where most academics that include a link to behaviour in their definitions do not necessarily believe that ideas alone provide sufficient explanations for someone's involvement in terrorism,[156] the link to violent behaviour is hard to overlook. As Schuurman notes, "the very term 'radicalization' implies that radical (or as is more often the case 'extremist') ideas are key to understanding terrorism."[157] However, the vast majority of people who radicalise or adopt radical beliefs never act on them.[158] And the reverse is true as

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[149]Jeff Victoroff, Janice R. Adelman, and Miriam Matthews, 'Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora', *Political Psychology* 33, no. 6 (2012): 791–809.
[150] McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 161-67.
[151] Bandura, "Mechanisms," 170; Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Political Terrorism," 398; Loza, "The Psychology of Extremism and Terrorism," 149; Della Porta, *Social Movements*, 174-76.
[152] McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization," 416.
[153] Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe," 798.
[154] Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements," 4; King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists," 603.
[155] See Danish, Dutch and Swedish government definitions in: Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation," 12.
[156] Borum, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 45-47; Arie Kruglanski, "Inside the Terrorist Mind: The Relevance of Ideology," *Estudios de Psicología: Studies in Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006): 274-75; Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization," 76-78.
[157] Schuurman, Understanding Home Grown Jihadism, p. 159.
[158] Borum, "Rethinking Radicalization," 1-2; "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I," 8; James Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous: How to Place the Key Disjuncture between Attitudes and Behaviours at the Heart of Our Research into Political Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 198-211; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 219-21; Max Taylor, "Conflict Resolution and Counter Radicalization: Where Do We Go from Here?," in *DIIS Religion and Violence* (Copenhagen: Danish Institution for International Studies, 2012), 1.

well; research has demonstrated many terrorists are not or not first and foremost motivated by radical beliefs.[159] To the contrary, there is an empirical lack of evidence to support the idea that radical ideologies lead to violent behaviour.[160] Additionally, what is viewed as "radical" or "extreme" is always relative to the prevailing norms in a society and as such, radicalisation as a concept is inherently fraught by its contextual and intersubjective nature.[161]

## 2.5 Meso level explanations

On the group level, sociological theories offer various explanations for why individuals become involved with politically violent groups. The point of departure for meso level explanations is that individual grievances alone cannot explain (participation in) extreme violence. According to 'pure sociologist'[162] Black researchers should focus on identifying the sociological ties and relations between the terrorists, their grievances, and their adversaries – or the "social geometry" of the actors.[163] The outcome of that process can lead to the identification and prioritization of a variety of factors across theories of involvement in terrorism, as well as differences in the language used to describe involvement in terrorism. Meso level approaches to explaining terrorism have gained ground over the past decade[164] with many authors arguing the individual level received too much attention at the expense of group level explanations.[165] In essence, as Nesser argues, terrorism is a group phenomenon.[166] An analysis of meso level factors explaining or aiming to better understand involvement in terrorism found a wide variety of potential explanations.

A number of explanations focus on how terrorist organisations are established; how and why do individuals engage with terrorist and/or (violent) extremist groups? Some studies point to the relevance of pre-existing social connections.[167] The meso level includes explanations that concentrate on the concepts of social distance and social control, as well as social psychological concepts such as collective humiliation, peer pressure, and in-group/outgroup thinking.

### *2.5.1 Social distance theories*

Senechal de la Roche, a sociologist, argues that environments chararacterized by high levels of what she calls "social distance"[168] or "social polarization" are most vulnerable to the occurrence of terrorism. This distance refers to the polarization between "perpetrators and victims including a high degree of cultural and relational distance, inequality, and functional

[159] Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," 98-99; Maxwell Taylor and Ethel Quayle, *Terrorist Lives* (London: Brassey's, 1994), 37-38.
[160] King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists," 615-16; Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I," 15.
[161] Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," 876-77.
[162] Pure sociology is a paradigm developed by Donald Black, building on earlier work by Emile Durkheim, that conceptualises human behavior in terms of social life rather than driven by individual considerations.
[163] Donald Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control', in *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 9–18.
[164] Martha Crenshaw, 'The Logic of Terrorism', *Terrorism in Perspective* 24 (2007): 24–33.
[165] Scott Matthew Kleinmann, "Radicalisation of homegrown Sunni militants in the United States: Comparing converts and non-converts", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, nr. 4 (2012): 288; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 22.
[166] Nesser, "Toward an Increasingly Heterogeneous Threat," 440, 50; Ramón Spaaij, "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," ibid.33, no. 9 (2010): 859.
[167] Donatella Della Porta, 'Recruitment Processes in Clandestine Political Organisations: Italian Left Wing Terrorism', *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 309–10.
[168] Social distance refers to difference between social locations, involving categories such as wealth, authority, integration, culture, intimacy, organisation, activities, etc.

independence".[169] In line with this, sociologist Black discusses the concept of social distance, and specifically notes that "terrorism has an "inter-collective" direction: terrorists strike against civilians associated with another collectivity, be it another ethno-religious group or foreign nationals". Additionally, he asserts that terrorism is generally directed towards the upper echelons of power with attacks aimed at targets that (symbolically) represent the local or national government, foreign regimes, or other groups that are perceived of as elites: as superior in terms of their economic, social or political standing. Terrorism is then essentially "the weapon of the weak" or an attempt at "social control from below."[170] Black argues that, "terrorism in its purest form arises inter-collectively and upwardly across long distances in multidimensional social space."[171] This means that the larger the social distance between victims and perpetrators, the more likely it is that terrorism will occur in it's most destructive form.

### *2.5.2 Social psychological group theories*

Humiliation has already been mentioned as a factor that can play a role on the individual level, however this can also take place at the group or collective level. Group humiliation can, for example, be experienced due to the actions of a repressive government, or opprsive elite,[172] disenfranchisement or discrimination[173] of one's ethnic, social or religious group, or through occupation of a territory by a foreign actor.[174] However, humiliation alone does not account for involvement in terrorism, whether it be on the individual or the group level. Group processes play a role in further facilitating becoming involved, either by fortifying beliefs or by providing opportunities for (violent) action. For instance, Sageman concluded in a study of the radicalisation of Islamic extremists in the diaspora that "without network connections there would be a lot of angry young Muslims, but no real terrorists" as they would not know where or whom to turn to remedy their situations.[175] Likewise, a study conducted by Jasko et al. concluded that a close relationship with another individual who is radical or extreme increases the likelihood that someone will become involved with violence driven by ideology.[176] In line with this finding, Kleinmann studied Sunni terrorist networks and found that over the ones who were responsible for conduct domestic violent terrorist attacks in the United States were radicalised largely as part of their social network.[177] What it is exactly on the group level that contributes to involvement in terrorism is explained in three different ways. First of all, some authors stress the importance of collective identity, where being part of a group of others with radical or extremist ideas generally creates binds or "fuses" people's individual identity with that of the

[169] Roberta Senechal de la Roche, 'Collective Violence as Social Control', in *Sociological Forum*, vol. 11 (Springer, 1996), 97–128.
[170] Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control', 18.
[171] Black, 'Terrorism as Social Control'.
[172] 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.
[173] Victoroff, Adelman, and Matthews, 'Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora'.
[174]Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House, 2005).
[175] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*.

[176] Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, 'Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism'.
[177]Kleinmann, 'Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts'.

group.[178] This process can have a more volitional as well as a more forced nature. For instance, Della Porta underlined the importance of peer pressure as in her research an unconscious desire for approval of friends or allies who were previously members of illegal organisations impacted the involvement of new group members.[179]

In the context of terrorism, this collective identity can even progress to the point where one is willing to sacrifice themselves and die for one's "brothers in arms."[180] A second reason is that like-minded individuals function as a confirmation of an ideology – they validate the beliefs of the individual.[181] This is what Jervis labeled "group think."[182] Third, the presence of allies increases an individual's willingness to deviate against normative pressures.[183]

As such, engagement in terrorism can provide individuals with group-level benefits that coalesce around the concept of a collective identity providing members with emotional fulfillment (for perceived humiliation), cognitive benefits (confirming one's own beliefs or strengthening an ideology), and social value (the potential to acquire status, an increased sense of self-esteem and the need to belong).[184] These factors do not only play a role in physical groups but can also take place through virtual connections, either through social media or on the Internet.[185]

### 2.6 Macro level explanations

In the academic literature, the macro level of analysis is generally viewed to be mainly useful in long-term forecasting of terrorism patterns. This level of analysis, also known as the systematic or structural level, relates to "specific characteristics of the social, cultural, economic, and (geo)political *environment* that can enable, motivate, or trigger the use of terrorism".[186] A clear causal connection has never been established between factors on this level (i.e. poverty, illiteracy, or climate change[187]) and terrorism, even though these factors are often labeled "root causes" of terrorism.[188] As such, while structural conditions can provide fertile ground for involvement in terrorism, they cannot be viewed as causally related to – or sufficient explanatory factors for – involvement in terrorism.

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[178] William B. Swann et al., 'Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behaviour', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (May 2009): 995–1011, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668.

[179]Della Porta, 'Recruitment Processes in Clandestine Political Organisations: Italian Left Wing Terrorism'.

[180] Scott Atran, Hammad Sheikh, and Angel Gomez, 'Devoted Actors Sacrifice for Close Comrades and Sacred Cause', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111, no. 50 (16 December 2014): 17702–3, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1420474111.

[181]Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Penguin Group, 1966).

[182] Irving Lester Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

[183] Solomon E. Asch, 'Opinions and Social Pressure', in *Readings About The Social Animal*, ed. Joshua Aronson and Elliot Aronson (Worth, 2011), 17–26.

[184] Dina Al Raffie, 'Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora', *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (December 2013): 67–68, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.4.4.; Clark R. McCauley and Mary E. Segal, 'Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups.', 1987, 336.

[185] Thomas Olesen and Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'Islamism as Social Movement', *Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR), Ed.(Aarhus: Aarhus University, Denmark, 2009)*, 2009, 19.

[186] Brynjar, H-w, and Torp, *Why Terrorism Occurs - A Survey of Theories and Hypotheses on the Causes of Terrorism*; Ross, 'A Model of the Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism'.; Lia and Skjølberg, "Causes of Terrorism," 40.

[187] James J.F. Forest, "Exploring Root Causes of Terrorism: An Introduction," in *The Making of a Terrorist, Volume Iii: Root Causes*, ed. James J.F. Forest (Westport / London: Praeger Security International, 2005), 1-2.

[188] John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (London / New York: Routledge, 2014), 85-86.

Factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism on this level can mainly be found in the historical, cultural, economic, political and social context of a society. Examples are extensive poverty, significant patterns of social inequality, widespread conflict, war and local, national or regional instability, and political repression.[189] Overall, explanations on the macro level fall into two categories: proximate and distal causes – or, as terrorism researcher Martha Crenshaw labelled them in her analysis of the causes of terrorism: preconditions and precipitants.[190]

### *2.6.1 Preconditions*

Crenshaw describes preconditions as circumstances that provide opportunities as well as potential motivations to become involved with terrorism or terrorist groups.[191] Government repression, for example, or access to weapons, can both provide powerful incentives or opportunities for potential terrorists. Preconditions, however, are *necessary* but not *sufficient* to lead to terrorism. The capability to conduct a terrorist attack does not in and of itself lead to an attack, unless the person with access to weapons also happens to have a strong motivation to act. Factors that play a role in why individuals become involved in terrorism on the macro level can also pertain to specific events in people's lives where they become entangled in larger developments in their environment. Examples are rebellions or revolutions against the government, having to deal with the consequences of natural disasters that can leave a region in turmoil, or living in an area where terrorist groups have taken control – for example as was the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s or more recently, the so-called Islamic State that has been controlling large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq. Such events can enmesh individuals in a day-to-day environment characterised by (sometimes extreme) violence, and they can form decisive turning points in people's lives that can steer them towards involvement in political violence and terrorism.

In a larger sense, this is what authors often refer to as the correlation between failed states and terrorism.[192] From this perspective, failed states are seen as places where terrorist groups can setup safe havens from which they can recruit new members, inspire others and create links with other terrorist groups across borers. However, Coggins, in a wide-ranging study into the correlation between failed or weak states on the one hand and terrorism on the other, provided some nuance in this debate when she wrote that "Much of the relationship between state failure and terrorism can plausibly be explained by "terrorism as war fighting."[193] Instead, she finds that there are relationships between specific types of state failure, including human insecurity, state incapacity, and political collapse and the presence of terrorism.[194] This finding is confirmed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which conducted an extensive study into processes of engagement and involvement with terrorist groups across six African countries (not including Mali). Of all the factors they identified as push factors in the process of involvement, limited confidence in government, corrupt government, a perception of neglect and political marginalisation, and a lack of service provision by government featured as significant factors related to state failure.[195]

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[189] Edward Newman, 'Exploring the "Root Causes" of Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 749–72.
[190] Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 379–99.
[191] Crenshaw, 381.
[192]Joseph K. Young and Michael G. Findley, 'Promise and Pitfalls of Terrorism Research', *International Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (2011): 411–31.
[193] Bridget L. Coggins, 'Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999–2008)', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 19 March 2014, 456, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713515403.
[194] Coggins, 458.
[195]'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment' (UNDP, 2017), 6.

Another precondition that features frequently in the academic literature is the assumption that poverty is a cause of terrorism.[196] For example, Bakker's analysis of the background of homegrown jihadists across Europe concluded that his sample could be characterized as generally coming from a low socioeconomic background.[197] Additionally, Fair and Shepherd looked into support for terrorism through surveying opinion polls and concluded those who were relatively poor had a higher chance of supporting terrorism.[198] This is again confirmed by the UNDP study, which concluded that "The grievances associated with growing up in contexts where multidimensional poverty is high and far deeper than national averages, with the lived reality of unemployment and underemployment, render 'economic factors' a major source of frustration identified by those who joined violent extremist groups."[199] At the same time, other authors concluded that an increase in personal capital can be linked to a decrease in support for political violence,[200] or that there is no significant causal relation between low levels of economic development and terrorism.[201]

In a similar vein, the research on lack of education and terrorism also shows a mixed picture. Where some studies confirm the notion that it is often individuals who have experienced a lack of education who are attracted to or recruited by terrorism groups;[202] other studies reach more nuanced or even opposite conclusions.[203] Terrorism researcher Stern, for example, concluded that many religious schools in Pakistan (where students are purposely educated to steer them towards roles as foot soldiers or elite operatives in terrorist or armed extremist organisations) are funded by wealthy capitalists. In this context, the UNDP research specifically mentioned a religious illiteracy or misinterpretation of religion as a factor conducive to involvement with terrorism.[204] All in all, as Krueger and Malečková note, this suggests that "the international community should not limit itself to increasing years of schooling but should consider the content of education."[205] Given the fact that these findings are at odds, the main conclusion is that poverty and lack or quality of education in an of themselves do not provide a clear motivation for involvement in terrorism.

A government that is unable or unwilling to prevent terrorism is, according to Crenshaw, a specific precondition as well as one of the most significant causes of

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[196] See the examples in: James A. Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159-60.
[197] Edwin Bakker, "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists in Europe (2001-2009)," in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge*, ed. Rik Coolsaet (Farnham / Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 140.
[198] C. Christine Fair and Bryan Shepherd, "Who Supports Terrorism? Evidence from Fourteen Muslim Countries," ibid.29, no. 1 (2006): 52, 71.
[199] 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 5.
[200] Robert MacCulloch, "The Impact of Income on the Taste for Revolt," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2004): 843; Ayla Schbley, "Torn between God, Family, and Money: The Changing Profile of Lebanon's Religious Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 23, no. 3 (2000): 182.
[201] Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty," 170-71.
[202] Ana Bela Santos Bravo and Carlos Manuel Mendes Dias, "An Empirical Analysis of Terrorism: Deprivation, Islamism and Geopolitical Factors," *Defence and Peace Economics* 17, no. 4 (2006): 337; Jerrold M. Post, "The Socio-Cultural Underpinnings of Terrorist Psychology: When Hatred Is Bred in the Bone," in *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward*, ed. Tore Bjørgo (London / New York: Routledge, 2005), 64; Karin Von Hippel, "The Roots of Terrorism: Probing the Myths," *The Political Quarterly* 73, no. Supplement 1 (2002): 28-30.
[203] Krueger and Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism," 125-26,31-32, 35; Bakker, "Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists," 140; Berrebi, "Evidence About the Link between Education," 17; Pape, *Dying to Win*, 214; Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 74-77; Abdelaziz Testas, "Determinants of Terrorism in the Muslim World: An Empirical Cross-Sectional Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 262-63.
[204] 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 7.
[205] Alan B Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, 'Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?', Working Paper (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2002), 33, https://doi.org/10.3386/w9074.

terrorism.[206] This is not related to state failure in the broad sense but rather to the absence of adequate prevention by law enforcement agencies such as police and intelligence services – to prevent terrorism. Crenshaw explains that this can be due to inefficiency or leniency – dependent on the context. According to her, "for many governments, the cost of disallowing terrorism is too high."[207] Landes[208] and Sandler et al.[209] apply an economic model of criminal behaviour to transnational terrorism. Specifically, they zoom in on a cost-benefit analysis of involvement in crime where an increase in factors such as penalties and law enforcement influences the decision or incentive to become involved with terrorist activities. In the end, they conclude that there is no direct causal relation as in the end, participation in terrorist acts is more contingent on the perception that the terrorist act will bring about the desired political change.

### *2.6.3 Precipitants*

Whereas preconditions, or contextual factors alone might provide a fertile ground for involvement with terrorism, they do not necessarily lead to involvement with terrorism unless individuals have a specific *motive* to engage or join. These turning points are what Crenshaw describes as precipitants. Precipitants are trigger events that often function as a final push for an individual to act; or in Crenshaw's words: "specific events that immediately precede the occurrence of terrorism."[210] Examples are the sudden loss of loved ones, a comment made by a politician that is perceived as a direct attack on one's group, or a military strike.

Nonetheless, the factors discussed above that can structure an individual's environment and heavily influence their lives, are in and of themselves not necessary conditions for becoming involved in terrorism. Following Crenshaw, these conditions are often labelled as *necessary* but not *sufficient* causes for an individual pathway into terrorism; they can provide the motivation to act and maybe even the means to do so but that still does not necessarily lead to engagement in terrorism.[211] As Fishbein and Ajzen argue in their theory of *Reasoned Action*,[212] a motivation to act leads to the intention to act *if* an individual has a positive attitude toward it and when social approval is anticipated, and when the individual believes they have the capability to act. Thus, we need to distinguish between engagement (with a cause, a group or an ideology) and intent (the willingness to use violence or commit extremist offenses).

Macro level factors that can push individuals towards involvement in terrorism are dynamic and can be understood through relative deprivation theory, which holds that individuals and groups perceive of certain grievances vis-à-vis other individuals or groups.[213] For example, the Troubles in Northern Ireland were influenced from the start by what was perceived by the Catholics as an underrepresentation of their group politically and a backward socioeconomic position compared to their Protestant neighbours.[214]

The failed state – terrorism paradigm as a precondition is closely related to political grievances as a macro level precipitant influencing individual perceptions of a government's

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[206] Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 382.
[207] Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism'.
[208] William M. Landes, 'An Economic Study of U. S. Aircraft Hijacking, 1961-1976', *The Journal of Law & Economics* 21, no. 1 (1978): 1–31.
[209]Todd Sandler, John T. Tschirhart, and Jon Cauley, 'A Theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism', *The American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (1983): 36–54, https://doi.org/10.2307/1956010.
[210] Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 381.
[211] Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', 381.
[212] Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Predicting and Changing Behaviour: The Reasoned Action Approach* (Psychology Press, 2011).
[213] Mario Coccia, 'A Theory of General Causes of Terrorism', *Archives of Psychology* 2, no. 4 (2018).
[214] Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (Routledge, 2014).

exclusionary, illigitemate or unjust policies and thus, a strong motivator for their involvement in terrorism.[215] From this perspective, terrorism is an instrument to address these grievances and (potentially) gain political influence through violence. For example, the UNDP *Journey to Extremism in Africa* states that "A striking 71 percent pointed to 'government action', including 'killing of a family member or friend' or 'arrest of a family member or friend', as the incident that prompted them to join."[216]

Finally, Crenshaw notes that the excessive use of force by governments can provide a powerful precipitant to join extremist groups. Weinberg, for example, has argued that repressive policies have an exarbacating effect on the likelihood that a group will be mobilised into using violence but also underling a government's vulnerability to being overthrown, should these policies fail.[217] Repressive policies, including the use of force, have the add-on effect of pushing moderate majorities towards the extreme sides of the political debate – and potentially into the arms of terrorist groups.[218] One study even concluded that state repression is a necessary cause for both the creation and the growth of terrorism.[219]

### 2.7 Combined models

Many authors throughout history have acknowledged the correlation between human frustration on the one hand and the outbreak of political violence on the other. In his classic theory of revolution, Aristotle examined constitutions to understand the implications of revolutions and the factors that enable revolutions. Political philosopher De Tocqueville further discussed the role of revolutionary mechanisms in his influential study of the French Revolution where he – in line with Aristotle – speaks of the revolution as "a product of general causes that local causes pushed beyond all bounds."[220] These theories connect the personal mobilisation of feelings of resentment, anger, and aggression to specific individual circumstances on the social, economic or political level.[221] The link between frustration and aggressive behaviour, established by psychiatrist Freud among others, was further described in the book *Frustration and Aggression* by Dollard et al.[222] In 1964, Galtung[223] argued that a situation in which individuals find themselves socio-politically disadvantaged vis-à-vis others, something he labelled as "a state of disequilibrium", is more likely to provoke aggressive behaviour, which may include violence.

However, Davies nuanced that proposition by stating that these perceptions of a state of disequilibrium should be linked to people's expectations.[224] In his opinion, the likelihood of the occurrence of violent conflict is highest when individuals expect more than they

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[215] Gary LaFree and Gary Ackerman, "The Empirical Study of Terrorism: Social and Legal Research," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 5 (2009): 360-62; Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," 383-84; Ehud Sprinzak, "The Process of Delegitimation: Towards a Linkage Theory of Political Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 1 (1991): 50-68.

[216] 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', 5.

[217] Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Arie Perliger, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups* (Routledge, 2008).

[218] Dipak K. Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life Cycle of Birth, Growth, Transformation, and Demise* (Routledge, 2008).

[219] Rhonda L. Callaway and Julie Harrelson-Stephens, 'Toward a Theory of Terrorism: Human Security as a Determinant of Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 773–96.

[220] De Toqueville, as quoted in Alan Kahan, 'Tocqueville's Two Revolutions', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1985, 585–96.

[221] Hakan Wiberg, 'Konfliktteori Och Fredsforskning [Theory of Conflict and Peace Research]', *Stockholm: Esselte Studium*, 1990.

[222] John Dollard et al., 'Frustration and Aggression.', 1939.

[223] Johan Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Aggression', *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 2 (1964): 95–119.

[224] James C. Davies, 'Toward a Theory of Revolution', *American Sociological Review*, 1962, 69.

receive – especially when their circumstances, economically or politically speaking, have first improved but are then followed by a period of deterioration. His famous *Davies J-Curve* schematically portrays this process where he describes the tension following from unmet expectations and the resulting experience of deprivation as the main permissive circumstance for collective violence. His main thesis centers on the so-called "DFA-linkage": deprivation leads to frustration, which in turn produces aggression or even violent conflict against the perceived oppressor. This perceived deprivation can be absolute but is often relative in the sense that it is the outcome of a growing disparity between one's expectations and the exten to which those expectations are met.

Finally, a useful model to conceptualise the role that different factors play in processes of engagement and disengagement are what Norwegian terrorism scholar Bjørgo and American terrorism scholar Tore Bjørgo labelled "push and pull factors."[225] Push factors are negative forces and circumstances that make the present social affiliations unattractive and unpleasant, for example perceived discrimination or a lack of a sense of purpose. Conversely, pull factors offer attractive and rewarding alternatives into terrorism or towards a life out of terrorism, for example the feeling that joining a terrorist group will lead to a feeling of brotherhood. Barriers are factors that may block a process of such change, e.g. negative sanctions or removing opportunities. Factors on all three levels of analysis, the macro, meso, and micro level can either be push or pull factors. When both push and pull factors are strong and barriers are weak, a change into or out of terrorism or terrorist groups is likely to happen, according to Bjørgo.

## 2.8 Shortcomings in current research

### *2.8.1 Lack of fieldwork and primary sources*

The field of terrorism studies has suffered for a long time from a lack of theorisation, but that has changed after 9/11, with a noted rise in theories of terrorism, as "a reflection of the dramatic rise of terrorism itself."[226] Most appraisals of the field of terrorism studies– or the state of terrorism research (for those who dispute that such a field exists)[227] – generally voice the same criticisms; the main one being the observed lack of primary research and the recycling of secondary data.[228] A review of the post-2000 literature by Nasser-Eddine et al. lists a number of deficiencies in the academic literature on disengagement and countering violent extremism including a lack of primary sources, limited methodologies, and a non-critical approach to existing research. They also note a lack of more experienced terrorism researchers and an abundance of terrorism researchers many of whom have not undertaken any fieldwork, let alone having met with extremists.[229] Silke evaluated in 2001 that of

[225] Tore Bjørgo, 'Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right', in *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, ed. Tore Bjørgo and John G. Horgan, 2008, 30–48, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203884751-11.

[226] Roberta Senechal dela Roche, 'Toward a Scientific Theory of Terrorism', *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 1 (1 March 2004): 3, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2004.00199.x.

[227] Among those who study terrorism, there is an ongoing debate as to whether we can speak of a clearly delineated field of 'terrorism studies' (hence the quotation marks). While some authors argue that creating a separate field of terrorism studies would necessarily impede on the multidisciplinary perspective, others explicitly place themselves in the field of terrorism studies.

[228] John Horgan, '„Understanding Terrorism: Old Assumptions, New Assertions, and Challenges for Research"', *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism, Amsterdam: IOS Press/NATO Public Diplomacy Division*, 2006, 2–3; Avishag Gordon, 'Terrorism as an Academic Subject after 9/11: Searching the Internet Reveals a S Tockholm Syndrome Trend', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 1 (2005): 46–50; Ranstorp, *Mapping Terrorism Research*.

[229] Nasser-Eddine et al., 'Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review'.

contemporary terrorism research, only nine percent is based on interviews with terrorists (either former or current ones).[230] Lum, Kennedy, and Sherley surveyed 14,006 articles on terrorism in 2006, and concluded that of the peer-reviewed articles, 96 percent of the studies could be characterised as "think pieces" and only three percent was based on empirical research.[231] Schmid, in his 2006 handbook on terrorism summarising the state of the field, notes that despite the increase in the number of publications after 9/11, "new empirical research did not increase proportionally with the production of new publications."[232] A study by Schuurman and Eijkman dating back to 2014 indicates that not much has changed for the better, as they conclude "Instead of referring to primary sources of data, such as interviews with (former) terrorists, transcripts of their interrogations or intercepted communications, most publications on terrorism speak amongst themselves."[233] Nonetheless, in a more recent overview, Schuurman noted a positive change as in his review 53.8 percent of the authors used some kind of primary sources. He writes:

> the lack of research based on primary sources, one of the most enduring and detrimental problems to face the field, finally appears to be abating. Of course, this does not mean that all associated issues are similarly being resolved; the empirical verification of explanations for involvement in terrorism, for instance, still seems a long way off.

According to Dawson, aside from a lack of primary resources – especially direct interviews with those labelled as terrorists – the field suffers from ""deep suspicions about what terrorists say, casting doubt on the evidentiary value of such data".[234] He explains that essentially this suspicion is rooted in the hermeneutical question of what one really can know of someone else's motivations and the corresponding question of how much value we should attribute to terrorists' own accounts of involvement. This echoes Horgan, cautioning that we must always keep in mind when researching terrorist narratives that any account will always be both incomplete and biased, and those accounts will often be characterized by justification in hind-sight or what he calls a "post-hoc invention" inspired by ideology.[235] As such, terrorists' narratives can be authentic expressions of their underlying motivations, however issues related to accurate memory as well as deliberately shifting facts will enivatably accomponay any retrospective narrative of past conduct.

### *2.8.2 Western bias and labelling*

Most of the academic literature on terrorism is very heavily influenced by Western accounts of radicalisation.[236] Terrorism as a phenomenon has been labelled a 'weapon of the

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[230] Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', 14.
[231] Cynthia Lum, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alison Sherley, 'Are Counter-Terrorism Strategies Effective? The Results of the Campbell Systematic Review on Counter-Terrorism Evaluation Research', *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 2, no. 4 (2006): 492.
[232] Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 460.
[233] Schuurman and Eijkman, 'Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources'.
[234] Lorne L. Dawson, 'Taking Terrorist Accounts of Their Motivations Seriously: An Exploration of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 5 (2019): 74, https://doi.org/10.2307/26798579..
[235] John G. Horgan and John Horgan, *The Psychology of Terrorism* (Routledge, 2004), 91.
[236] Edna OF Reid, 'Evolution of a Body of Knowledge: An Analysis of Terrorism Research', *Information Processing & Management* 33, no. 1 (1997): 91–106; cf Sidney Tarrow, 'Foreword', in *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, by Donatella Della Porta (Cambridge University Press, 2006), vii; cf Silke, 'The Road Less Travelled: Recent Trends in Terrorism Research', 207–10; Louise Richardson and Leonard Weinberg, 'Conflict Theory and the Trajectory of Terrorist Campaigns in Western Europe', in *Research on Terrorism* (Routledge, 2004), 158–80.

weak'[237] against states that have a monopoloy on the use of force. This perspective is wedded to an inherently Western view of states in the Westphalian sense, where states are defined by sovereignty, fixed territory, mutual recognition and control (often through a monopoly on the use of force).[238] This raises the question to what extent our knowledge of involvement in and desistance from terrorism is applicable to non-Western countries. As Chomsky notes,[239] the question is not just what defines "terrorism" but rather, who gets to call who a "terrorist"?[240] Or, in the words of sociologist Oliverio:

> … The analysis of terror, terrorists, and terrorism has been predominantly provided by a tiny fraction of the world's population residing primarily in privileged estranged, spaces. It is time to reopen and re-examine these issues and present alternative questions and responses from the rest of humankind, people who suffer daily from violence and terrorism.[241]

This thesis seeks to do just that by focusing on those labelled as terrorists and living in a daily reality that is far removed from the "privileged, estranged, spaces" Oliverio refers to. Another issue in terrorism research is that where academics oftentimes lack access to primary sources, government officials who do have that access are often faced with the politics inherent in labelling individuals as terrorists.

There is an inherent tension in the use terrorism and terrorist as a label for individuals and groups. Despite the lack of a commonly agreed upon definition of terrorism both in the academic as well as in in the international community, some elements of what constitutes terrorism can be found both in legal definitions as well as academic definitions. These include the threat or the use of force and the aim to advance a political, religious, or ideological cause.[242] However, when the label is applied to individuals by states, it is often applied based on the affiliation with terrorist groups. This means that those labelled as such might not all have been actively involved in the actual (threat of the) use of force or have ideological motives. As a result, many individuals labelled as terrorists from a legal or criminal justice perspective cannot be labelled as such from an academic perspective. As terrorism is by definition a label applied to one's enemies,[243] those labelled as terrorists often include individuals who – without government pressure – would have never turned violent on their own initiative.[244] It also means the label is applied to individuals ranging from very ideologically motivated to those motivated by opportunistic reasons and ranging from mentally stable people to individuals suffering from mental illnesses. Finally, it includes both individuals who have used gruesome violence, including murder, as well as individuals who have committed relatively light offenses such as re-tweeting propaganda, or transferring small sums of money. As Kruglanski notes in his research:

> the individual that is labelled as a radical or a terrorist is hardly likely to share that perception – they are unlikely to view their ideas, beliefs, or actions as either

[237] Martha Crenshaw, M. (2007). The logic of terrorism. *Terrorism in perspective*, *24*, 24-33.
[238] Steven Krasner, (2001). Rethinking the sovereign state model. *Review of International Studies*, *27* (5), 17.
[239] Noam Chomsky, 'International Terrorism: Image and Reality', *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 27/28 (1987): 172.
[240] Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice* (Leiden University Press, 2015), 87.
[241] Annamarie Oliverio, *The State of Terror* (SUNY Press, 1998), 146.
[242] James C. Simeon, 'The Evolving Common Law Jurisprudence Combatting the Threat of Terrorism in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada', *Laws* 8, no. 1 (2019): 5.
[243] Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders, 'Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah,'Terrorism'and the Politics of Perception', *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 173–97.
[244] Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 19.

> irrational or extreme. “Killing members of an out-group may seem justifiable to the radicalized person in light of her or his cause's subjective importance, but it may hardly seem so to members of the victimized group.[245]

This necessitates a critical perspective into who exactly has been labelled as such, by whom, and for what reasons.

### *2.8.3 Lack of attention for individual experiences*

Terrorist offenders’ individual experiences of historical conflict and its aftermath rarely feature in work on political violence.[246] The terrorism studies literature is generally more concerned with organisation and strategy than lived experience.[247] As Crenshaw notes in her research agenda for the field of terrorism: “It is not enough simply to propose hypotheses. The study of terrorism still lacks the foundation of extensive primary data based on interviews and life histories of individuals engaged in terrorism.”[248] While valuable, these studies overlook important emotional and experiential factors that inform processes of sense making on the individual level.

To analyse that process based on primary resources therefore logically necessitates direct contact with individuals who have had this experience. Partially, this is due to the inherent difficulties in doing empirical research in the field of terrorism including for example gaining access to (former) terrorists.[249] First of all, the number of terrorists (or radicalised individuals willing to use violence) is very small, and therefore hard to find, let alone interview. Second, access to terrorists is often restricted by governments, who tend to either lock terrorists away in inaccessible maximum security prisons – or, if they are incarcerated in regular prisons or even out on the streets, governments are often wary of allowing researchers access to terrorists for fear of reputational damage or terrorists seeking an audience.

While that is not in any way impossible;[250] it is not just a matter of identifying and gaining access to individuals who (might) have been involved in illegal and sometimes violent acts, it also requires time and investment in building trust.[251] Government agencies are often reluctant to provide researchers with access to terrorist offenders due to security considerations[252] and even when access is guaranteed, not all terrorists are willing to cooperate with external researchers. Doing fieldwork in non-Western contexts raises some extra barriers while at the same time reducing others. Access is in some cases more easily gained in non-Western contexts, because for example the sheer number of terrorist offenders is much higher or because security regulations are less stringent. The willingness to talk to outsiders is often also greater in countries where the main issue for terrorist offenders in prison is a combination of lack of judicial progress, congestion, and boredom. At the same

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[245]Arie W. Kruglanski et al., ‘The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism’, *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (n.d.): 69–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163.
[246] Thus engaging with the research subject on the human level, something that conflict-studies author Sara Roy labeled ‘humanizing the other’ Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, viii.
[247] Crenshaw, ‘The Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century’.
[248]Crenshaw, 410.
[249] John Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research," in *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements and Failures*, ed. Andrew Silke (London / New York: Frank Cass, 2004), 30; Silke, "The Devil You Know," 2.
[250] Horgan, "Interviewing the Terrorists," 195-211.
[251] Alessandro Orsini, "A Day among the Diehard Terrorists: The Psychological Costs of Doing Ethnographic Research," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 4 (2013): 337-51; Harmonie Toros, "Terrorists, Scholars and Ordinary People: Confronting Terrorism Studies with Field Experiences," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2008): 279-80, 86-90.
[252] Marc Sageman, ‘Low Return on Investment’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (1 September 2014): 616, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895655.

time, the potential dangers can be very high, again because of less stringent security procedures.[253] Finally, cultural barriers including but not limited to language barriers and misunderstanding can provide further challenges to gathering primary source material from individual terrorists.

Those researchers who did publish empirical studies focusing on radicalisation or disengagement from terrorism have mainly used direct, often semi-structured, interviews as a method.[254] The semi-structured nature of the interviews generally ensures a structured approach to the interviews, allowing the researcher to identify common themes, while at the same time allowing for flexibility within each interview. The number of studies in the field that have an empirical basis have generally taken a qualitative research approach, an approach that is deemed suitable for studying terrorism and will therefore also be adopted in this study. As Neumann and Kleinmann note: "Indeed, for 'micro phenomena' such as terrorism and radicalisation, the use of qualitative methodologies—such as detailed case studies and narratives—may, in many cases, be more appropriate and produce more valid results than the construction of large—and largely meaningless—datasets."[255]

In terrorism research, the narrative approach is not dominant. A number of studies using the narrative approach have been conducted, including De Bruijn's edited volume on Sub-Saharan biographies of radicalisation,[256] Della Porta's study of social movement activists, and Argomaniz and Lynch' study on victim narratives.[257] Nonetheless, this is still a minority approach in the field and when the narrative approach is adopted is does not always rely on primary sources.[258] The narrative approach is more often used in criminological research focused on other offender groups.[259] Within terrorism research, the call for the use of narrative methods has also increased in the past years.[260] The field of terrorism still tends to neglect this wider social, political, and cultural context and the effect this has on the individual and their desistance process. In 2017, Pemberton and Aarten made the cases for increasing narrative-oriented research when analysing political violence in general, and terrorism specifically, arguing that "the construction of a coherent life story is one of the most important elements of an individual's personality development from adolescence

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[253] Dolnik, "Conducting Field Research," 4; Horgan, "The Case for Firsthand Research," 48-50; Frederick Schulze, "Breaking the Cycle: Empirical Research and Postgraduate Studies on Terrorism," ibid., 181-82.

[254] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (2013): 16.

[255] Peter Neumann en Scott Kleinmann, "How Rigorous Is Radicalisation Research?", *Democracy and Security* 9, nr. 4 (2013): 378.

[256] Mirjam De Bruijn, *Biographies De La Radicalisation: Des Messages Cachés Du Changement Social* (Langaa Publishers, 2018).

[257] Donatella Della Porta, 'Life Histories in the Analysis of Social Movement Activists', *Studying Collective Action*, 1992, 168–93; David Canter, Sudhanshu Sarangi, and Donna Youngs, 'Terrorists' Personal Constructs and Their Roles: A Comparison of the Three I Slamic Terrorists', *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2014): 160–78; Javier Argomaniz and Orla Lynch, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: The Complexity of Terrorism—Victims, Perpetrators and Radicalization', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 7 (3 July 2018): 491–506, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1311101.

[258] For example Melissa Deary's book based on the autobiographical accounts of radicalized actors: Melissa Dearey, *Radicalisation: The life writings of political prisoners* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2009).

[259] In narrative criminology Shadd Maruna, *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, vol. 6 (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2001). is generally perceived as a foundational work; see also Hubert JM Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio, 'Self, Identity, and Globalization in Times of Uncertainty: A Dialogical Analysis.', *Review of General Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2007): 31.

[260] Daan Weggemans, Edwin Bakker, and Peter Grol, 'Who Are They and Why Do They Go? The Radicalisation and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014): 100–110; Orla Lynch, 'British Muslim Youth: Radicalisation, Terrorism and the Construction of the "Other"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 2 (2013): 241–61; Peter Clough et al., *Researching Life Stories: Method, Theory and Analyses in a Biographical Age* (Routledge, 2004).

onward."[261] According to the authors, the relevance for terrorism research lies in how individuals construct their own narratives around conceptions of victimisation and identity. They argue that these life stories are often not necessarily true in the sense that they provide a literal account of historical facts, but they provide a framework within which the individual frames his or her identity and that provides meaning.

As concluded in the theoretical framework, most theories of involvement in terrorism provide an explanation on just one level – the individual, group, or structural level. In line with Pemberton and Aarten, the value of the narrative approach to study involvement in terrorism is that it does not confine itself to one of those levels but instead, it focuses on how an individual explains his own process of involvement taking into account the role of his social, cultural, and political context as well as any macro level, structural factors that might have played a role. As such, it allows for an individual explanation of how factors on all three levels play a role in the meaning-making process and the construction of one's identity around those factors. In doing so, the narrative approach also allows the research to go beyond the question of asking what factors play a role in involvement in terrorism and instead, asking the question of why some factors become important to individuals to the extent that they become a push or a pull factor towards involvement in terrorism. This is in line with the conclusion regarding the body of literature on involvement in terrorism that individual explanations of involvement are by definition subjective and depend on the perceptions of those involved.

## 2.9 Conclusion

Overall, what most theories aiming to explain involvement in terrorism have in common is that they provide an explanation on only one level – whether it be the micro, meso, or macro level, which constitutes an oversimplification of a very complex process. As a result, most of the criticisms touch on this point, criticising micro level explanations for not taking into account the role of the wider social and political context, and blaming the meso and macro level for overemphasising the role of structural, environmental factors, and playing down individual agency. The main conclusion of this theoretical review is thus threefold: (1) involvement in terrorism, from a Western perspective, is an individual trajectory that is influenced by context, group dynamics, and structural factors; (2) this trajectory is never a linear process following a number of pre-identifiable steps but rather a dynamic process including many bends in the road, lapses and re-lapses, pauses, triggers, and environmental influences that altogether can push an individual towards engaging in terrorism; and (3) that individual explanations or descriptions of this process are by definition subjective and depend on the perceptions of those involved.

The combination of a lack of primary sources and non-Western research samples in this field, as well as an often-uncritical approach to researching those labelled as terrorists, necessitate a qualitative research approach that allows for an in-depth inquiry into those labelled as terrorists, based on primary data in a non-Western context. This study aims to increase our understanding of how involvement is affected by structural, group, and individual factors in Mali. The next chapter will elaborate the methodological approach taken in this thesis and chapter four will place this research in its specific context by providing a description of the history, geography, political, and security situation in Mali. The second part of this study, chapters five to seven, present the empirical data that was gathered through narrative interviews on the factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism in the Malian context.

[261] Antony Pemberton and Pauline GM Aarten, 'Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 7 (2018): 541–56.

# Chapter 3 – Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework and the methodological approach used in this study. This study contributes to the field through the analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 suspected violent extremist offenders imprisoned in Mali, as well as with 76 professionals (both Malian and international) who work in Mali on terrorism. It seeks to 'deconstruct' the process of involvement using a narrative approach to empricial data through which the elements of involvement are analysed on the micro, meso and macro level. The exploratory nature of this research will be discussed, with a specific focus on the use of narrative interviews as a method to aid our understanding of the factors at play in involvement in terrorism. An overview of the methods will be provided, detailing the case selection, the research sample and the representativeness of the sample. The interview procedures (including the setting, the role of the researcher and practicalities such as recording and taking notes) will be discussed including potential biases resulting from the chosen methodology. Finally, given the vulnerable position of the subjects and the sensitivity of the data that can potentially be gathered from a prison population, the ethics paragraph addresses the legal, regulatory, and ethical aspects of this study.

## 3.2 The present research

To increase our understanding of terrorism involvement in a Malian context, the current study explores the narrative accounts of a number of individuals charged as violent extremist offenders who (are suspected of having participated) in jihadist/terrorist organisations in Mali between 2011 and 2018 as well as the perspectives of professionals who work in Mali on terrorism. In this section, the exploratory nature of this research will be discussed, with a specific focus on the use of narrative interviews as a method to aid our understanding of the factors at play in involvement in terrorism. This research will use narrative interviews to identify how individuals labelled as violent extremist offenders (VEOs) in the Malian prison context construct and evaluate their personal experiences before and during imprisonment through narratives. For the interviews with professionals, both focus group and semi-structured individual interviews were used.

As the title suggests, this thesis aims to deconstruct the process involvement in terrorism in Mali. The process of deconstructing refers to the discovery of the context and the identification of the constitutive elements or factors that play a role in involvement in terrorism; literally exploring a research topic or problem.[262] The exploratory approach ensures that "[researchers] are concerned with generating information about unknown aspects of a phenomenon."[263] In this study, interview data forms the foundation that grounds the analysis. This method implies engaging with individuals who have been labelled as terrorists by their national authorities. As critical terrorism studies scholar Jackson notes, "acts of 'terrorism' and even the existence of 'terrorist' groups are typically only one small part of a broader set of contentious political struggles and conflicts."[264] As a result, the researcher must work within the established legal framework within which the individual has been charged with or sentenced for terrorism, while at the same time being extremely careful and

[262] Silke, 'The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism', 1.
[263] Teddlie, C. and Tashakkori, A. (2009) *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research.* Los Angeles, London: SAGE.
[264] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 14.

awareness of the inherently political nature of such a label.[265] An exploratory research approach thus offers a logical starting point for conducting this study in line with these considerations.

### 3.3 Taking a narrative approach

Researchers from various disciplines in the social sciences have long advocated for the importance of the study of narratives.[266] In the 1980s, narrative theory took a turn beyond the field of literary studies and linguistics as Theodore Sarbin published the first psychological perspective on narratives titled *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct.* Presented as a counterargument to the – in his view – dominant "mechanical" approach in psychology, he insisted that "In giving accounts of ourselves or of others, we are guided by narrative plots. Whether for formal biographies or autobiographies, for psychotherapy, for self-disclosure, or for entertainment, we do much more than catalogue a series of events. Rather, we render the events into a story."[267] Narrative theory holds that we live in a storied world and our lives are lived through the continuous creation and exchange of stories.[268]

In 2006, Dan McAdams published a book titled *The Redemptive Self* in which he took the debate a step further by arguing not just for the importance of narratives or stories in life, but stating that narratives actually "(…) guide behaviour in every moment, and frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future."[269] Based on his findings, he and his research team developed the research method of "life-story interviews." Life stories are individual narratives through which a person makes sense of his or her life. A typical life-story interview takes about 1.5 to 2 hours, and will have a person describe his or her life as if they were outlining chapters, starting with their earliest childhood memories and ending in the here and now.[270] In a life-story interview, the interviewee usually underlines the importance of a number of crucial events and describes those in a very detailed way (the big move to the unknown city, complete with tales of the moving team, and the car trouble along the way). The life-story interview can also include a number of high and low points, as well as turning points in the individuals' life.

Criminologists Cid and Martí, in their research with prisoners, expanded on the role of life stories and turning points in the life of individual offenders.[271] Following Sampson and Laub, and Maruna, they used the narrative approach and thematic content analysis to identify how interviewees evaluated their lives and constructed their narratives. While this thesis does not make use of life story interviews, it does adopt the narrative approach: the interviews conducted provide insight in the involvement of the individuals up until the point of the interview –they do not hold predictive power for future involvement or desistance.

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[265] Jackson, R. (2007). The core commitments of critical terrorism studies. *European political science*, *6*(3), 244-251.

[266] D. Jean Clandinin and Vera Caine, 'Narrative Inquiry', in *Reviewing Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences* (Routledge, 2013), 178–91.

[267] Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (Praeger, 1986), 23.

[268] Freeman Mark, 'Rewriting the Self: History', *Memory, Narrative*, 1993; see also R. Ruard Ganzevoort, 'Investigating Life-Stories: Personal Narratives in Pastoral Psychology', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 21, no. 4 (1993): 277–87.

[269] Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live by-Revised and Expanded Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[270] Robert Atkinson, 'The Life Story Interview as a Bridge in Narrative Inquiry', *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, 2007, 224–45.

[271] José Cid and Joel Martí, 'Turning Points and Returning Points: Understanding the Role of Family Ties in the Process of Desistance', *European Journal of Criminology* 9, no. 6 (2012): 603–20.

While Pemberton and Aarten's call[272] to use narrative approaches when studying terrorism seems to overlook some of the existing narrative research within terrorism studies, it is nevertheless a welcome sentiment. When it comes to narrative research on terrorism, the majority of studies have focused on the content of terrorist (auto)biographies or self-narratives. This includes for example political scientist Altier et al. who identified and coded the occurrence of biographic incidents and episodes.[273] Other researchers have examined autobiographical texts from an ideological perspective, i.e. to reveal what they reveal about how terrorists think ideologically. Examples include research by Ramsay and Marsden who used a narrative approach to analyse two jihadist speeches by the prominent ideologues Adam Gadahn and Anwar al-Awlaki[274] and a study of ideolgoical attractions of terrorism by Cottee and Hayward.[275] Colvin and Pisiou applied a specific strand of narrative research, neutralization theory, to German right wing convicts' self-narratives.[276] Sandberg used narrative criminology to study Norwegian terrorist Breivik's personal manifesto.[277] Hearty analysed competing narratives of "Violent Dissident Irish Republican" activities.[278] And Braddock and Horgan adopted a narrative approach to explore the potential of counternarratives to affect change in beliefs and attitudes and reduce support for terrorism.[279] Most of these studies have moved beyond studying propaganda or terrorist biographies and specifically look at the importance of the narrative aspect – through the analysis of written (books, biographies) as well as oral (interviews) text to understand individuals' personal experiences of engaging in terrorism.

However, adopting a narrative approach in research warrants a further exploration of what a narrative is exactly, why the concept of a narrative is important and what impact it can have. And, as Graef, da Silva and Lemay-Hebert argue in their introduction to a special issue on using narrative approaches in terrorism studies, while using a narrative approach has become more popular in the field, many terrorism researchers do not necessarily critically evaluate the methodological implications of that approach.[280] Partially, this is a result of the different disciplinary lenses adopted in terrorism studies while the concept of narrative originates in the field of literary studies.[281]

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[272] Pemberton and Aarten, 'Narrative in the Study of Victimological Processes in Terrorism and Political Violence: An Initial Exploration', 12.

[273] Altier, Mary Beth, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood. "In their own words? Methodological considerations in the analysis of terrorist autobiographies." *Journal of strategic security* 5, no. 4 (2012): 85-98.

[274] Gilbert Ramsay and Sarah Victoria Marsden, 'Radical Distinctions: A Comparative Study of Two Jihadist Speeches', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 3 (2013): 392–409.

[275] Cottee, Simon, and Keith Hayward. "Terrorist (e) motives: The existential attractions of terrorism." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 12 (2011): 963-986, p. 946.

[276] Sarah Colvin and Daniela Pisoiu, 'When Being Bad Is Good? Bringing Neutralization Theory to Subcultural Narratives of Right-Wing Violence', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018, 1–16.

[277] Sveinung Sandberg, 'Are Self-Narratives Strategic or Determined, Unified or Fragmented? Reading Breivik's Manifesto in Light of Narrative Criminology', *Acta Sociologica* 56, no. 1 (2013): 69–83.

[278] Kevin Hearty, 'From "Former Comrades" to "near Enemy": The Narrative Template of "Armed Struggle" and Conflicting Discourses on Violent Dissident Irish Republican Activity (VDR)', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2016): 269–91.

[279] Braddock and Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism'.

[280] Josefin Graef, Raquel da Silva, and Nicolas Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), 1.

[281] Simon Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts', *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 11, no. 3 (2019): 233.

### 3.4 Defining narratives

Despite the increased attention that has been paid to narrative approaches, the concept of *a narrative* remains elusive and there is no single, commonly agreed on definition of the concept. When narrative is used, it is frequently conceptualised as a synonym for ideology, belief or worldview. A narrative, however, is not necessarily one of these things. In this thesis, McAdams' definition of life stories is used to define narratives as "psychological constructions, co-authored by the person himself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning."[282] As such, these narratives are based on biographical facts but they do not mirror them as the individual selectively attributes meaning to those facts. This "meaning-making capability" (talking about growth, interpreting events in one's life and what they mean to an individual) is a capability that develops across adolescence, according to McLean and Pratt.[283]

Despite the lack of a commonly accepted definition of narrative, there is more agreement as to what are some of the characteristics or central features of narrative. First of all, many narrative researchers distinguish between "stories" on the one hand, as "merely a recounted sequence of events", and "narratives" as "accounts of events that require some level of organisation, plotting and interpretation on behalf of the narrator."[284] This dichotomy between story and narrative also unveils an underlying assumption, namely that narratives are based on events that have taken place in some objective reality that can be known through an individual's subjective interpretation of those events. In other words, to talk about a narrative implies that an event, however abstract, must have taken place.

In terms of what narrative *does*, it is essentially an instrument that enables an individual to organise, plot and interpret these events or incidents and place them in a specific order of time. In that sense, a narrative goes beyond mere description, it also provides a specific point of view, one that aims to justify or explains what, how and why events have happened.[285] That is where a narrative also functions as a vessel for meaning-making; meaning is attributed to specific events through presenting a narrative.[286] This requires a level of symbolic work on behalf of the author or presenter of the narrative in detailing an event or order of events as they took place.[287]

In a recent study on the narrative approach in terrorism studies, Copeland writes that different disciplinary understandings of narrative – specifically within narrative criminology – provide a good starting point for scholars of terrorism to aspire to.[288] He specifically references how criminologists Presser and Sandberg have conceptualised narratives in their handbook on narrative criminology.[289] Their starting point is the assumption that "human lives exist somewhere, independent of narrative description"[290] and that narratives provide a subjective interpretation of these lives or the events in them as they happened and the context

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[282] Dan P. McAdams, 'The Psychology of Life Stories.', *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100.
[283] Kate C. McLean and Michael W. Pratt, 'Life's Little (and Big) Lessons: Identity Statuses and Meaning-Making in the Turning Point Narratives of Emerging Adults.', *Developmental Psychology* 42, no. 4 (2006): 714.
[284] Chatman, S. (1975). Towards a theory of narrative. *New literary history*, *6*(2), 295-318, p. 295.
[285] Squire, C., Andrews, M., Davis, M., Esin, C., Harrison, B., Hyden, L. C., & Hyden, M. (2014). *What is narrative research?*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Polletta, F. (2009). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
[286] Polletta, F., Chen, P. C. B., Gardner, B. G., & Motes, A. (2011). The sociology of storytelling. *Annual review of sociology*, *37*, 109-130.
[287] Chatman, S. (1975). Towards a theory of narrative. *New literary history*, *6*(2), 295-318, p. 296.
[288] Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts'.
[289] Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime*, vol. 17 (NYU Press, 2015).
[290] Presser, Lois. "Collecting and analyzing the stories of offenders." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 21, no. 4 (2010): 431-446, p. 434.

they occurred within. All in all, narrative then serves partially as a record of – partially as an interpretation of experience. That also brings with it the issue of veracity or as Hopkins puts it: "the perennial question of truthfulness and authenticity in memoir-writing has coloured the social scientific reception for this type of source material."[291]

Presser emphasises the constitutive aspect of narratives arguing that rather than being just post hoc justifications – they shape experience. Because as humans we live in a storied world – subjective interpretation of that world is really the only means available to us to know that reality. This perspective also mitigates the wish or belief that a personal narrative will "always be the same in each retelling despite the dynamic nature of human life."[292] To the contrary, given the ever-changing nature of experiences, the narratives of how we understand these experiences must logically change with it. In line with this, Presser and Sandberg emphasise the idea that "stories *do something* – that is they are always told for different purposes or audiences – and this inevitably influences how they are narrated."[293]

Narratives are on the one hand culturally intelligible, as they tend to reflect the norms and values within a particular society or culture. At the same time, they differentiate individuals from one another through the "drawing self" – whereby one person might attribute negative events externally (it is always someone else's fault) while others might be more internally –focused in their attribution ('I made the wrong decision'). Interviews with human subjects in research are thus in essence an encounter with "the drawing self" – where the individual constructs a narrative and attributes meaning and causal linkages to the actors and events in the narrative. At the same time, "narrative scholars caution that people do not have a single identity, or even a single identity in a particular context".[294] As a result, the stories through which they construct their identities have an evolutionary nature and are not singularly but rather, jointly constructed. This thesis adopts that approach in emphasising the emergent and intersubjective quality through narrative.[295] Essentially, as Copeland writes:

> Through narrative we are able to bring our own meanings to the public domain, further renegotiating and reconstituting them. Storytelling, then, is meaning-making; in other words, individuals do not merely express meaning through stories but rather fundamentally create meaning in the process of constituting their experiences in narrative form.[296]

In an attempt to further the methodological rigor of the use of narratives in terrorism research, narrative researchers Graef and his colleagues propose a basic framework of three modes of narrative: as a lens, as data, and as a tool.[297] Specifically, they call upon researchers to clarify their conceptualisation of narratives as either "a *lens* to view the social world; as *data* that provide insights into that world; and as a *tool* for analyzing this data in a

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[291] Hopkins, Stephen. *The politics of memoir and the Northern Ireland conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.
[292] Polletta, Francesca. *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 3.
[293] Presser, Lois, and Sveinung Sandberg, eds. *Narrative criminology: Understanding stories of crime*. Vol. 17. NYU Press, 2015, p.3.
[294] Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz, *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Routledge, 2012); Anna De Fina, 'Group Identity, Narrative and Self-Representations', *Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics* 23 (2006): 351.
[295] Jacomijne Prins et al., 'Telling the Collective Story? Moroccan-Dutch Young Adults' Negotiation of a Collective Identity through Storytelling', *Qualitative Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2013): 81–99.
[296] Copeland, 'Telling Stories of Terrorism: A Framework for Applying Narrative Approaches to the Study of Militant's Self-Accounts', 238.
[297] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*, 2.

systematic and coherent manner."[298] Applying the methodological framework proposed by Graef et al., this thesis uses the concept of narrative as both a *lens* and as *data*. A lens in the sense that narratives are viewed as the way within which we all live our lives, in storied realities where individuals organise and synthesise, make sense and attribute meaning to events in time and space. This is how they "come to know, understand and make sense of the world"[299] around them, and draw their social identities. This is an approach also taken by linguist Mieke Bal who asserts that "narrative approach as textual analysis looks at conditions of process of reception- of producing meaning and meaning is a cultural phenomenon, partaking of cultural processes. It is the condition of possibility of these processes that constitute the interest of narrative analysis".[300]

Following political scientist Wibben: "to think of experience as narrative captures the interpretative aspect inherent in any recollection of experience".[301] And "If experience can only be grasped through retrospective construction through narratives, these narratives warrant close attention."[302] I use narrative data not in the sense that through studying this narrative data I aim to discover some narrative structure or a universal plot (looking for specific story elements). Doing this is what is known as the field of narratology, a field with a long history dating back to Aristotle who proposed that the defining feature of a narrative is a good plot. This tradition is evident, for example, in linguist Jonathan Culler's work, who writes that "good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end".[303] Instead, I use data in the sense that I have collected narrative data based on oral records as the basis for my empirical investigation, in line with Polkinghorne, who states the aim of a narrative approach is "to make explicit the operations that produce (a) particular kind of meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence".[304]

That means that interpreting that meaning form a text, makes the researcher a co-constructor of meaning as narrative always goes beyond what can be captured in analysis. As Gadamer writes, the question when analyzing narratives is always: "what happens beyond our willing and doing?"[305] Bal writes that interpreting narratives "although not absolutely free and arbitrary since it does, or should, interact with a text, is in practice unlimited and free".[306] That freedom of interpretation characterizes the deconstructive element in analyzing narratives as it challenges the organization of knowledge in purely binary oppositions, privileging one term over another – i.e. rational vs irrational, object vs subject, nature vs culture. When it comes to narrative as data, Bal argues that the analyst or researcher tries to uncover not *the* structure but *a* structure of the narrative "on the basis of selected events combined with other data".[307] In this study for example, the narratives of the inmate respondents are combined with the outcomes of the professional interview. In that process

[298] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*.
[299] Margaret R. Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, 1994, 606.
[300] Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto, Buffalo* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 9.
[301] Annick TR Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Routledge, 2010), 44.
[302] Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*.
[303] Culler Jonathan, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85; cf Jonathan Culler, 'Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative', *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* 169 (1981): 169–87.
[304] Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Suny Press, 1988), 6.
[305] Gadamer, as quoted in David E. Linge, 'Editor's Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics', *Philosophical Hermeneutics, Translated by DE Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976)*, 1976, x.
[306] Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Toronto, Buffalo*, x.
[307] Bal, 193.

"the choice of a particular combination is always intuitive" because it is impossible "to investigate everything and to make it explicit". In this study, I interpret the narratives of the prison interviews as data with the use of Thematic Content Analysis, which will be further explained in paragraph 3.8.

All in all, a narrative analysis does not provide truth or decide on quality or value of the narrative but instead, it provides insights into how certain mechanisms are used to encourage one or another meaning – meanings are the "result of the interpretation by the reader, an interpretation influenced both by the initial encounter with the text and by the manipulation of the story".[308]

## 3.5 Methods

### *3.5.1 Mali as a case study*

The Malian context is unique for various reasons. First, as previously outlined, the Sahel-Maghreb region is of particular interest in terrorism research given its history, the geo-political situation, and its exposure to terrorist groups and narco-trafficking. Second, among the Sahel-Maghreb countries, Mali has been experiencing a violent conflict between various terrorist groups and the national government, which has been extended to the international level with the deployment of French troops in the country and the establishment of the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA. Third, literature and research on terrorism, its forms and connections with other crimes, is very limited and suffers from a Western bias,[309] requiring further research with a focus on local input. This study seeks to fill these gaps. Access to primary sources was facilitated through the researcher's participation in a training project in Mali, including access to individuals charged with terrorism, local and national government actors, and international institutions working in Mali. Together with a researcher from the United Nations Interregional Crime Research Institute (UNICRI), the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), represented by the researcher, was requested to conduct these interviews by DNAPES, part of the Malian Ministry of Justice. The request from the Malian government was to provide them with a description of this prison population including their demographic profiles and an analysis of their involvement in terrorism. As such, the research focus of the project (with a timeline starting in September 2016 to August 2020)[310] overlaps with the overall research question of this thesis.

### *3.5.2 Participant recruitment*

Given that the focus of the research is involvement in terrorism, for the interviews with (suspected) terrorists it was a requirement that participants were linked to terrorism offences. As Jerrold Post, Ehud Sprinzak and Laurita Denny note in their prison-based research into motivations of terrorists: "The best way to find out the interest of terrorists [in using weapons of mass destruction] was to ask them, and this we did, with the fascinating results reported below."[311] Participants were recruited from Mali's central prison in its capital Bamako: the Central Penitentiary (*Maison Central d'Arret*, MCA), based on their label as a (suspected) VEO, a label assigned to them by the Malian authorities. This study relied on a

[308] Bal, 193.
[309] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 18; see also McDonald, 'Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies'.
[310] See ICCT's website for more information on ICCT and UNICRI's activities in Mali and the associated reports: www.icct.nl.
[311] Post, J., Sprinzak, E., & Denny, L. (2003). The terrorists in their own words: Interviews with 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists∗∗ This research was conducted with the support of the Smith Richardson Foundation. *Terrorism and political Violence*, *15*(1), 172.

combination of opportunity sampling and snowball sampling. The prison authorities were asked to select participants who were former members of groups with extreme political or religious ideologies (opportunity sapmling). At the same time, it became clear throughout the interviews that this was done in consultation with the prisoners themselves (snowball sampling).

As criminologist Carol Matfin notes, "Snowball sampling would offer the best opportunity to access those within a specific group. With snowball sampling, it is crucial to get the initial approach right and the prison grapevine should never be underestimated."[312] Participants were not required to have participated in acts of violence or illegality themselves. In their work on prison-based research, Copes et al. emphasise the importance of ensuring there is no pressure from correctional staff to participate in the interviews, as involuntary participation affects the validity and reliability of the data negatively. This goes hand-in-hand with the perception that participation might lead to obtaining certain benefits. The participants were informed of the research project beforehand by MCA's social worker, who provided a short summary of the research and emphasised the voluntary nature of participation. The prisoners were then asked who was willing to participate in the research.

The interviewees were selected based on their status as violent extremist offenders and the fact that they were all detained at MCA. Even though this specific prison population is thus not representative of the total universe of cases (of violent extremist offenders (VEOs)), research among inmates – especially this sub-population of offenders – provides a primary source of basic criminological data. Given that in Mali, all VEOs are detained in either Bamako or Koulikouro prison, the sample is representative for the population of incarcerated Malian VEOs. This resulted in a total of 30 individuals, who were 18 years or older at the time of interview, spoke French, and consented to participate.

For the interviews with professionals, participants were selected based on their work in the field of terrorism (or counterterrorism) and they were recruited using the snowball method. Individual respondents would refer us to other respondents they thought would be relevant to the research project or we would reach out to individuals that we believed could be relevant to the research. In total, 75 individuals were interviewed between September 2016 and November 2018. This group includes the 56 professionals that were interviewed in focus group interviews during two workshop sessions on violent extremism in the Malian context, and 19 semi-structured interviews with foreign individuals who work in Mali in the field of counterterrorism. The 56 professionals that were recruited through the project that was implemented by ICCT and UNICRI include prison staff; religious leaders; policymakers; and representatives from MINUSMA followed training sessions on terrorism and radicalisation in Malian prisons. The Malian group includes 23 Malian religious leaders; five representatives from MINUSMA's Justice and Corrections Sector (JCS); 15 Malian prison staff; two policymakers from the Ministries of Justice; five policymakers of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; one Judge and one General Prosecutor; three staff from DNAPES.

The group of respondents that was interviewed individually was recruited based on their work on terrorism in Mali – they were contacted directly through snowball sampling and asked for an interview on the topic. The group includes 19 respondents of which six individuals who work for MINUSMA (one from SSR sector); two from JMAC; one from ASIFU; one from UNDSS; and one from the Human Rights Affairs (HRA) section. One individual is a senior adviser within the EU Delegation to Mali, one respondent worked as a researcher at the University of Bamako and one respondent was a former US intelligence officer. Another five respondents represent four embassies (Canadian, US, Dutch, French).

[312] Matfin, Carol. 'Doing research in a prison setting.' In *Doing criminological research.* Edited by Pamela Davies, and Peter Francis, (2018) SAGE Publications Limited, 226.

And finally, I interviewed five individuals from a range of nongovernmental and civil society organisations (NGOs and CSOs), including International Alert, SNV, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Think Peace Mali, and Mercy Corps. The respondents in the international group thus represent the main foreign actors in the country as well as a number of NGOs/CSOs that work in the field of terrorism in Mali. Although the interviews with professionals do not cover the entire country and Bamako is overrepresented in the sample, this did not have a major impact on researching involvement in terrorism in Mali because the respondents all focus in their daily work on dealing with terrorism in the country – either in prison or in designing and implementing counter-terrorism (CT)-related policies. As such, they all have knowledge of and/or experience with the various terrorist groups in the country. Table 3.1 provides an overview of all research participants.

*Table 3.1 – Overview of research participants*

| Participants | Sub-category | Number of respondents |
|---|---|---|
| **Inmates suspected and/or sentenced for terrorism-related offenses** | | 30 |
| **Malian respondents** | *Prison staff* | 15 |
| | *Religious leaders* | 23 |
| | *MINUSMA* | 5 |
| | *Ministry of Justice* | 2 |
| | *Ministry of Religious Affairs* | 5 |
| | *Judge* | 1 |
| | *Prosecutor* | 1 |
| | *DNAPES* | 3 |
| | *Researcher* | 1 |
| | **Subtotal** | **56** |
| **International respondents** | *MINUSMA* | 6 |
| | *EU Delegation to Mali* | 1 |
| | *Embassies* | 5 |
| | *University of Bamako* | 1 |
| | *Former US Intelligence Officer* | 1 |
| | *NGOs/CSOs* | 5 |
| | **Subtotal** | **19** |
| | **TOTAL** | **105** |

### *3.5.3 Research sample*

Given the main research question's focus on how we can understand involvement in terrorism in Mali, the unit of analysis is the individual. While the theoretical framework includes explanations on the macro, meso, and micro level, this framework is applied to the individual experiences of involvement in terrorism in Mali. The participants in this research consist of both men charged with and/or sentenced for terrorism-related crimes (including violent and non-violent offences), incarcerated in a high-security prison, as well as individuals who work with or on the topic of terrorism in Mali. Between December 2016 and December 2018, a total number of 36 qualitative interviews with 30 VEOs were conducted in

MCA, where a total of over 200 individuals are detained based on terrorism-related charges.[313] Currently, Mali's prison authority, DNAPES, detains all arrested VEOs[314] in two prisons: MCA in Bamako or Koulikouro prison (in the greater capital region). An additional 75 interviews were conducted in focus group and individual interviews with Malian and international professionals. An overview of the research sample including information on the demographic profile of the inmates is provided in chapter five.

### 3.6 Semi-structured interviews

The empirical data collected for this research was gathered through conducting narrative interviews with inmates and with professionals. The inmate interviews were conducted in prison in Mali with inmates who were labelled as terrorist offenders (or *malfacteurs* in French) by the Malian government. The research includes interviews with 30 individuals, who are imprisoned in the MCA in Mali's capital Bamako. Together with UNICRI, ICCT was requested to conduct these interviews by DNAPES, part of the Malian Ministry of Justice. Thus, access to MCA and permission to conduct the interviews was guaranteed through the Minister of Justice and the Prison's Director. In total, 36 semi-structured narrative interviews with 30 (suspected) terrorists and 75 semi-structured interviews (of which 56 in focus groups and 19 individual interviews) with professionals were conducted, meaning that the interview setup was used as a general guide throughout the interviews, while at the same time creating space for the interviewees to share their own story. A semi-structured approach allows for a certain degree of flexibility when navigating through the various sensitive issues that can play a role in interviews in the prison setting or on sensitive issues like terrorism, such as biases and trust issues.[315] The interview guide presented in Annex A provides the topics that were generally covered during the interview with the suspected inmates and Annex B provides the interview outline that was used for the individual and focus group interviews with professionals.[316]

For the inmate interviews, this general structure provided the flexibility to focus on the understanding of the social reality of the interviewee by allowing the inmate room to expand on specific topics or not address specific questions.[317] For the professional interviews, the focus group interviews were guided by questions related to perceptions of terrorism and causes of radicalization in the country. For the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists, the number of interviews was determined based on saturation in the inductive coding process. Many qualitative researchers use what is referred to as 'theoretical saturation'.[318] The concept of theoretical saturation, as defined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. as 'the moment at which no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can

[313] Mali has adopted a Counter-Terrorism Law on 23 July 2008 (Law No. 08-025) that incorporates the offences required in the international instruments against terrorism, such as offences related to civil aviation, vessels and fixed-platforms, dangerous materials, diplomatic agents, hostage-taking, financing of terrorism and nuclear terrorism.

[314] All offenders who have been arrested based on violent extremism or terrorism-related charges are detained as a group in two prisons: Maison Central d'Arret in Bamako or Koulikouro prison. The charges can vary from being a member of a terrorist group to facilitating terrorism.

[315] Donald J. Newman, 'Research Interviewing in Prison', *J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci.* 49 (1958): 127; see also Schuurman and Eijkman, 'Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources'.

[316] Jerry Wellington and Marcin Szczerbinski, *Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (A&C Black, 2007), 83–84.

[317] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford university press, 2016), 468–69.

[318] Byrne, M. 2001. Evaluating the findings of qualitative research. AORN Journal 73: 703–6; see also Fossey, E., C. Harvey, F. McDermott, and L. Davidson. 2002. Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry 36:717–32; Guest, G., A. Bunce, and L. Johnson. 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. Field Methods 18:59–82.

develop properties of the category'.[319] However, their definition applies to grounded theory research and not to exploratory research. Thus, in this thesis, I focused not on theoretical saturation but on data saturation, defined by Guest et al, as "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook".[320] More specifically, in this study, I adopted methodologist Given's definition, who defined data saturation as "the point at which additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes";[321] in line with the approach of thematic content analysis. In practice, this means that when coding interview data, I applied thematic content analysis to identify nodes, themes and domains and the point where no new themes were identified despite additional data was the point of data saturation.

While the notion of saturation has become the norm in determining sample sizes for qualitative research,[322] they do not provide much information about the actual number of interviews needed. To address that issue, Morgan and colleagues statistically examined saturation based on raw data and concluded the majority of data was produced in the first five to six interviews.[323] In the four sample categories in their study, the first ten interviews led to the identification of roughly eighty to ninety percent of themes while the next ten interviews in the sample led to very few additional themes. Other authors discussing sample sizes confirmed these findings.[324] Nonetheless, when it comes to cross-cultural research, a study by Hagaman and Wutich found that generally, a higher number of interviews is required to reach saturation.[325] They concluded that to identify common themes, fewer than 16 interviews were enough, but to identify domains or meta-themes that cut across all data categories, a minimum of 20–40 interviews were necessary. In the end, building on a review article by Guest et al,[326] I determined the overall number of interviews based on whether new themes and domains were still emerging in the coding process – which led to a total of 36 individual interviews with 30 inmates. For the interviews with professionals, the number of interviews was determined based on the access to these interviews through the project that was implemented.

### *3.6.1 Interview settings*

For the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists, the primary research team (including myself) consisted of two (one Italian and one Dutch) females aged 29 and 30 at the start of the research in 2016. The implications of this are discussed in the next paragraphs. Throughout the research project, two other researchers assisted in conducting interviews based on their language skills (one Arab-speaking colleague) and based on gender (one participant was only comfortable talking to a male researcher). The interviews took place in the prison environment – in an office where no prison staff was present. The two researchers

[319] Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 1967. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine, p. 61.
[320] Guest, G., A. Bunce, and L. Johnson. 2006. How many interviews?, p. 65.
[321] Lisa M. Given, *100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2015), 135.
[322] Guest et al, p.5
[323] Morgan, M., B. Fischoff, A. Bostrom, and C. Atman. 2002. Risk Communication: A Mental Models Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[324] Francis, J. J., M. Johnston, C. Robertson, L. Glidewell, V. Entwistle, M. P. Eccles, and J. M. Grimshaw. 2010. What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. Psychology and Health 25:1229–45.
[325] Hagaman, A., and A. Wutich. 2017. How many interviews are enough to identify metathemes in multi-sited and cross-cultural research? Another perspective on Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) landmark study. Field Methods 29:23–41.
[326] Guest, G., Namey, E., & McKenna, K. (2017). How many focus groups are enough? Building an evidence base for nonprobability sample sizes. *Field methods*, *29*(1), see specifically the table on p. 8 for a summary of their findings.

were seated next to each other, facing the participant who was seated in a similar chair, not wearing handcuffs or being otherwise restrained. The office was adjacent to the office of the head of security, and the door between the offices was closed or nearly closed during the interviews to create an atmosphere of privacy, and due to the overall level of noise in the prison the interview could not be overheard. Due to security restrictions, the researchers were not allowed to record the interviews. Both researchers made written notes throughout the interview of everything that was said throughout the interview. These notes were then compared and transcribed right after the interviews. The average interview took 45-90 minutes. At the start of the interview, the research team and the research project were introduced by explaining the purpose of the research (gaining insight in involvement in terrorism in Mali), the background of the researchers, and interviewees were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and their participation.

All interviewees provided oral informed consent to participate prior to the interview on the basis that the outcomes would be anonymised. This is in line with similar studies done with inmates in a prison setting – for example as terrorism researcher Ann Speckard writes: "For these reasons [potential harm coming from participating in the interview for the subject], to keep everyone involved in less danger, I have made it my practice to do interviews as anonymously as possible. I never record the real names or addresses or any identifying information about those I interview so that their words cannot be linked back to them."[327] As a courtesy, the researchers offered tea and dates to the prison participants during the interview – the tea was provided by the prison authorities.

The interviews with professionals took place in many different settings, dependent on the preference of the professionals. In many cases, the interviews took place in the work environment, i.e. at a military camp, MINUSMA Headquarters, at embassies, at Ministries or at the offices of NGOs/CSOs. In some cases, the interviews were conducted in a social setting, for example in a restaurant or café, or at home. All interviews with professionals took place in Mali and in line with the prison interviews. The focus group interviews took place during training workshops in small group settings either in or outside the training venues (in hotels in Bamako). The interviews were conducted by the same research team (ICCT and UNICRI) with the majority of the professional interviews conducted by the same team mentioned above but some interviews were conducted one-on-one or with other colleagues from ICCT or UNICRI. All individual interviews were conducted with only one interviewee present whereas the focus group interviews, on average, had five to eight participants per group. For the focus group interviews, the research team always consisted of a minimum of two researchers to allow for coordinated moderation and note taking of the discussions. Where the focus group interviews were part of training workshops and took two to two and a half hours, the individual interviews varied from at minimum half an hour to two hours. Dependent on the interviewee, a short introduction was given (some of the interviewees were already aware of the topic and project we were conducting) and the interview then proceeded with a set of semi-structured questions.

### *3.6.2 Role of the researcher*

The next two paragraphs reflect on the role of the researcher in the prison environment and the potential cultural bias, given the sensitivity of interviewing individuals in that environment, even more so when it comes to offenders labelled as terrorists in a non-Western, male prison setting. Researcher role construction in the prison environment begins at the very first moment a researcher sets foot in a prison. As argued by Schlosser: "Accompanied by a figure of authority, a researcher's presence is that of an outsider with

[327] Speckhard, A. (2009). Research challenges involved in field research and interviews regarding the militant jihad, extremism, and suicide terrorism. *Democracy and Security*, *5*(3), 200.

power. As a new and unfamiliar face on prison grounds, it is inevitable that the inmates were aware of such a presence'.[328] Therefore, before starting the research, the prison authorities were asked for specific cultural guidelines in conducting the interviews. We also asked the social worker of the prison to introduce the research project to the inmates in their cell before asking who would voluntarily participate. In the introduction of the interviews, extra care was taken to explain to the participants that the researchers have or had no affiliation with any state or local prison or ministry.

For staff and inmates alike, the role of the researcher is that of the observer and the listener. Following Alison Liebling, who wrote extensively on doing qualitative research in prison settings:[329]

> On reflection, our research enterprise was launched with all the rigor and discipline of the 'social scientific' methodology we had at our disposal: careful observation and reporting, painstakingly prepared questionnaires, patiently gather information, hours spent 'hanging out' between formally arranged interviews. Once launched, it was our judgment, intuition and creative instinct, our various abilities to connect with others and our (ethnographically inclined) 'selves', which steered us through the exercise.[330]

Similarly, in our research we often had to improvise, or judge situations in terms of rapport between the research team and the prison staff or the inmate, and creatively find ways to build a relationship to provide an open atmosphere for the interviews. Being in the field and regularly visiting the prison over a three year time period was crucial. Finding the right balance between keeping a professional distance both from the prison staff and the prisoners and investing in trust-based relationships with them proved essential. In the Malian context that translated into clearly presenting ourselves as researchers from a university as well as being transparent about both the nature of the interviews (instigated by the Malian government). At the same time, it also meant we had to explain ourselves repeatedly and patiently, time and again to the same inmates when we came back for a total of six follow up interviews, to the prison director, again at the end of any conversation, and to any new guard that was hired in between. During the prison interviews, the final question of an interviewee often was: who did you say you were exactly? Other commonly asked questions by the interviewees to the interviewers throughout the interviews related to who we were, our background (where we lived and how old we were), why we were interested in Mali and in them, and what we would do with the interview data.

Cultural and religious sensitivities were especially relevant in this research given that the participants generally maintained a strong commitment to their cultural traditions and beliefs. Cultural courtesy was displayed during the interviews, such as refraining from any form of physical contact if the inmate indicated a preference not to shake hands, and being mindful of daily routines such as prayer and meal times when scheduling interviews. During all interviews the researchers made sure to dress appropriately (modest dress), be polite and friendly, and take social cues from the participants (e.g. in case they were tired or preferred not to answer a question). As a result, while some interviews were more formal in tone, while others were more relaxed, generally speaking the interviews were conducted in a similar fashion.

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[328] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 8 (2008): 1512. See also Marco Marzano, 'Informed Consent, Deception, and Research Freedom in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 3 (2007): 417–36.

[329] Alison Liebling, 'Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?', *Theoretical Criminology* 3, no. 2 (1999): 147–73; see also Alison Liebling, *Suicides in Prison* (Routledge, 2002); Alison Liebling, *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

[330] Liebling, 'Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?', 159.

In the professional interviews, some similar as well as different dynamics played a role compared to the prison interviews. Just as with the prison interviews, the topic of the interviews (security and terrorism) were overall sensitive topics, especially for participants working for Malian government institutions – as they generally would be inclined to defend government policies or be less open about challenges and dilemmas in formal settings with a larger audience. However, because the interviews were conducted over a time period of four years (2016 to 2020), a trust relationship had developed between the research team and the majority of the interviewees, significantly contributing to a more informal setting and to openness and honesty in the professional interviews with Malian stakeholders. The international respondents were generally more open and explicit in their analysis and assessment of the security and terrorism situation in Mali.

The biggest difference to the prison interviews was that the power relationship was much more equal and the objective of the interviews was much easier to explain. Partially this was a consequence of the existing trust relationship mentioned in the paragraph above, meaning that for the majority of the professional participants, they were already familiair with the research team and the work ICCT and UNICRI were implementing in Mali. Overall, the professional respondents were eager to provide their opinions and needed little to know extra input in the interviews to share their perspectives.

Another similarity to the prison interviews was the fact that the professional respondents were predominantly male (with 6 out of 75 respondents or 8% being female). All female respondents worked for embassies, MINUSMA or NGO/CSOs and none of the Malian respondents were female. This reflects the work field of security and terrorism where the majority of professionals – especially practitioncers - are male; even more so in non-Western contexts. In the interviews with Malian respondents, we noticed that this dynamic led – in some cases – to a setting in which the respondents were taking an approach to the interview that can be best described as ‘teacher-like’. This meant that they would talk in terms of ‘let me explain how it works’ or ‘in Mali, we do things such and so’. However, this dit not provide an obstacle to the research process as it did not hinder us in gathering information that was usfeful for the analysis.

### *3.6.3 Biases*

A majority of prison studies highlight the researchers’ outsider status.[331] Researchers hold fundamentally different perspectives on the prison environment and prison staff often question whether outsiders without relevant practitioner experience can truly understand the daily realities of prison life.[332] The outsider perspective of the research team was amplified by the fact that we were young, female, Western researchers interviewing male, non-Western individuals. Odendahl and Shaw noted that gender is an issue in many interview situations, and that female interviewers generally appear more aware of both the positive and negative

[331] Richard S. Jones, ‘Uncovering the Hidden Social World: Insider Research in Prison’, *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 11, no. 2 (1 May 1995): 106–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/104398629501100203; Heith Copes, Andy Hochstetler, and Anastasia Brown, ‘Inmates’ Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews’, *Field Methods* 25, no. 2 (1 May 2013): 182–96, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X12465798; Deborah H. Drake and Joel Harvey, ‘Performing the Role of Ethnographer: Processing and Managing the Emotional Dimensions of Prison Research’, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 17, no. 5 (3 September 2014): 489–501, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.769702.

[332] Liebling, ‘Doing Research in Prison: Breaking the Silence?’

influences their gender might have on the interview process.[333] Some respondents commented on the fact that we were young Western women either by asking us family-related questions such as whether we were already married and had children, or asking questions related to age and what country we came from.

One participant clearly felt uncomfortable talking to us, as demonstrated through his general avoidance to look at us and the answers he provided (either very short or evasive). However, it was not entirely clear whether this was caused by gender, age, or other factors. When we later came back with a male colleague he did not say much more in that additional interview. We did not encounter any openly sexist attitudes during the research. As noted, gender can be both a barrier and an advantage when it comes to interviewing people. Schwedler concluded on Western female researchers doing field work in non-Western contexts: "Female researchers do face many challenges, but most have less to do with gender than with examining sensitive political issues in highly repressive environments."[334] She points out that, contrary to expectations, visiting female researchers are often able to gain access to male officials and other prominent individuals more easily compared to male researchers; even in traditional patriarchal societies like the Middle East. In terrorism literature, there is also a prominence of Western female researchers doing fieldwork and interviewing terrorists. Especially noteworthy in his regard are Jessica Stern, who interviewed male terrorists in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Jordan,[335] and Ann Speckard, who did extensive fieldwork in Palestine, Chechnya, and among immigrant communities in Europe.[336] In line with this, our experience in Mali was overwhelmingly positive in terms of the willingness of inmate respondents to talk to us and their general openess during the interviews.

Nonetheless, incarcerated individuals, given the stigma that comes with being an inmate, could potentially hide or conceal particular sides of themselves out of fear of moral judgment from others.[337] As such, when trying to understand the specific context within which they live and perceive of themselves, we need to "listen to their words, and try to reconstruct their meaning in our minds, but we can never be sure about the accuracy of these transformations."[338] Within the prison environment, researcher are by definition outsiders and are perceived as such by inmates. However, as Schlosser describes, "they are also part of the identity definition and construction process when they elicit, interpret, and analyse the inmates' narratives by helping to construct both the story and the translated reality"[339]. The process of "reciprocal exposure" or "the researcher's will to be questioned by the potential

[333] Teresa Odendahl and Aileen M. Shaw, 'Interviewing Elites', in *Handbook of Interview Research*, by Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States of America: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2001), 311, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588.n19.
[334] Jillian Schwedler, 'The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 03 (July 2006): 425–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909650606077X.
[335] Jessica Stern, 'Terror in the Name of God' (Ecco New York, 2003); cf Jessica Stern, 'Pakistan's Jihad Culture', *Foreign Aff.* 79 (2000): 115.
[336] Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, 'The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 429–92; cf Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, 'Talking to Terrorists', *Journal of Psychohistory* 33, no. 2 (2005): 125.
[337] Harold Garfinkel, 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies', *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 5 (1 March 1956): 420–24, https://doi.org/10.1086/221800; Erving Goffman, 'Stigma Englewood Cliffs', *NJ: Spectrum*, 1963 as quoted in; Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, 'Conceptualizing Stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 363–85.
[338] Gudmundsdottir, 1996, p. 303-304.
[339] Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates', p. 1519.

respondents"[340] was also utilised as a way to establish rapport with the inmates. During the interviews, the researchers mitigated this factor to the extent possible through asking open questions, not indicating any surprise or moral judgment in response to some of the stories that were shared, and remaining calm, polite, and friendly throughout the interviews.

The interviews were not audiotaped, as the prison authorities did not allow this. Every interview was conducted by two researchers, both taking notes on paper from the interview and transcribing the interviews in the next couple of hours into a Word document. The participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any question, pause, or cease the interview at any time. The length of the interviews was restricted by the availability of the participants, and ranged from a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes.

Interviewing inmates warrants a specific and cautious approach as the interviews took place in a restricted setting, focusing on vulnerable subjects. Taking into consideration that inmates are often stigmatised,[341] the researchers avoided questions that would have led inmates to feeling (further) stigmatised, [342] including for example explicit questions enquiring after *why* the inmate committed certain crimes. The researchers took the responsibility to design the interview in such a way that participants felt comfortable, were able to understand the questions, and that protected the interviewees' interests in the sense that they did not feel they were incriminating themselves. Throughout the research project, the researchers treated the participants with respect and patience to avoid or mitigate any reluctance to participate and to allow the research to remain truthful and honest.

At the start of the interview, it was of vital importance to establish trust between the interviewers and interviewee, in order to gather valid and reliable data from the interview.[343] Identifying or building that trust relationship was not easy as it was not something that could easily be measured. Generally, a trust relationship could only be identified through two things: willingness to talk and a sense of openness that we perceived from the inmate. Overall, contrary to our expectations, with the majority of the prison interviews we felt a trust relationship was quite quickly established.

This could be a consequence of a number of factors, including that the inmates were generally happy to be outside of their prison cells for the duration of the interview, grateful for the tea and dates provided, the fact that we were women (in an all male environment), foreign (which often seemed to spark their curiosity) and the fact that we did not press them on issues they clearly did not want to discuss. This will be elaborated upon below. However, we were not always able to develop a trust relationship (as one inmate hardly provided any answers) or only to a limited extent (two other inmates were quite succinct and evasive in their answers).

At the start of the project the researchers imagined that inmates might be concerned about the legal consequences of sharing information; or they might feel the tendency to provide socially desirable answers in order to gain favour with criminal justice officials.[344] However, interestingly, almost all prison participants did not seem at all concerned about

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[340] Marta Bolognani, 'Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological Issues in Researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10, no. 4 (1 October 2007): 279–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701546570.

[341] Schnittker, Jason, and Andrea John. "Enduring stigma: the long-term effects of incarceration on health." *Journal of health and social behaviour* 48.2 (2007): 115-130; see also Pettit, Becky, and Christopher Lyons. "Status and the stigma of incarceration: The labor market effects of incarceration by race, class, and criminal involvement." *Barriers to reentry* (2007): 203-226.

[342] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* (14) 8, December 2008, pp. 1500-1525.

[343] Copes e.a. (2012) Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews, *Field Methods,* 25(2), p. 183

[344] Ibid.

legal consequences or sharing information about themselves, even when it concerned their involvement in activities that were illegal and for which they had not been sentenced yet. To the contrary, overall the participants were very open and willing to share their personal stories, including potentially incriminating details, with the researchers.

The researchers concluded that three factors contributed to the willingness and openness of the participants. First, all prison cells (on average containing 40 to 70 inmates) in the prison within which the research was conducted, are headed by a so-called *Chef du Chambre* – or cell leader. The prison authorities had already informed the researchers of this fact and also pointed out that the researchers would only be able to conduct interviews with the authorisation of the cell leader. In practice, the first participant that was interviewed was the right-hand man of the cell leader and according to the prison staff; he was sent by the cell leader to find out who the researchers were and what the research was about. The second interview was conducted with the cell leader himself, who apparently had given his permission to the inmates in his cell to participate in the research, as no issues were encountered in finding participants after that interview.

A second, more mundane factor was the fact that a number of participants specifically mentioned that participating in the interview provided them with a welcome break from their otherwise boring daily routine, and a break from an overpopulated prison cell. Third and finally, it became clear from the interviews that the participants did not have faith in the legal process, and as a result, they did not feel it mattered whether they would or would not share their stories. This is in line with earlier research by Copes and colleagues, who concluded that inmates who participated in interviews stated to have benefitted from their participation, for instance because the interview offered break in their daily routine as well as a chance to talk to strangers.[345]

Aside from potential stigmatisation and willingness to participate, another concern at the outset of the research project was the chance that inmates would not be honest or provide socially desirable answers. Even more so in the context of the research sample as the majority of inmates was still on remand, awaiting trial, and therefore might not be willing to share information with the researchers.[346] However, as described above, almost all participants were very willing to share their stories, including potentially incriminating facts about themselves, and therefore the researchers concluded the social desirability bias could largely be discarded. Honesty and truth, however, were more difficult concepts to assess. It is important to note here that we did not conduct interviews expecting *the truth* from participants.

This research is grounded in the narrative approach where the stories that are shared are based on biographical facts but were not viewed as *reality* but rather as psychological constructions where participants build their own narratives based on a combination of facts and meaning making. As such, the greatest benefit of interviews with (former) extremists lies in their ability to provide glimpses into the world around them and their own role in it and the meaning they attribute to their participation in a terrorist group. In other words, the main value of the interview data gathered in this research project lies more in what it says about the interviewees, rather than in the factual accuracy of the stories they provide.[347] Nonetheless, the researchers cross-checked factual information provided in the interviews (such as age, ethnicity, charge) with the prison registry and – where possible – checked inmates' stories with open source data (for example the presence of certain violent extremist groups in specific regions where inmates claimed they had been involved with a group, or names of group leaders that were mentioned in interviews) and found no inconsistencies.

[345] Copes, Hochstetler, and Brown, 'Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews', 185.
[346] Ibid, p. 188-189
[347] Horgan, "Interviewing the terrorists," 201.

### *3.6.4 Interview structure*

*3.6.4.1 Inmate interviews*

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured outline (see Annex A**)**. The interviews were conducted using a three-pronged approach: an introductory part, a part on the current situation of the participant, and a part on involvement in violent extremism that clustered questions around the three main analytical perspectives used in this study. In the introductory part, the researchers introduced themselves, and explained the purpose of the research is the interview structure. The researchers explained to inmates that they were not affiliated with any state authorities, Malian or otherwise; nor with the correctional/justice system.[348] They introduced themselves as part of an international research group focused on studying individual inmates' experiences in post-conflict countries. Furthermore, to allow the interviewees to provide oral informed consent to participate in the interview, the researchers explained that participation was voluntary and that the confidentiality of the data would be respected.[349] Next, we explained what participation would entail and how the data would be used.[350] Then, we explicitly asked inmates whether they consented to participate in the research project, which all participants did.

During the development of the interview design, certain concerns with interviewing inmates were taken into consideration. As Schlosser[351] argued, the researcher has the responsibility to make sure participants feel comfortable to talk, and understand the questions. Therefore, as a second part of the interview after establishing informed consent, the interview focused on asking non-threatening questions regarding the present situation of the interviewee. This included questions such as: how are you doing today? What have you had for breakfast? What does your daily routine look like? In this first part of the interview, we aimed to make the interviewee feel comfortable and at ease with us.

In the third phase, the interview addressed the narrative of the interviewee, with a specific focus on their narrative prior to being detained. This part went hand-in-hand with gathering essential demographic information from the participant, including name, age and gender, ethnic group, accusation, and sentence. Questions were deliberately phrased broadly; could they explain in their own words what their life looked like before prison? How did they end up here? What group do they associate with and how did they become involved in that specific group? This setup was used because, as Horgan cautions,[352] people are liable to have learned reasons for their involvement during their time in radical or extremist groups that may have little bearing on their actual motives. A standardised list of support questions was constructed but the participants were encouraged to tell their story freely. Thus, asking *how* rather than *why* they became involved with terrorist groups is likely to produce a more revealing and truthful account.[353]

In most cases there was no need to ask additional questions because the participants were articulate and fulsome in sharing their stories. In a few cases, participants were less

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[348] Jennifer A. Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 8 (2008): 1512.
[349] Ritchie e.a. (2014) *Qualitative Research Practice.* Los Angeles, London: SAGE, p. 87-88.
[350] Seidman (2013) *Interviewing as Qualitateive Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education & The Social Sciences.* New York: Teachers College Press, p. 64.
[351] Schlosser, 'Issues in Interviewing Inmates: Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research', 1506.
[352] Horgan, "From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalisation into terrorism".
[353] Horgan, 86–87.

articulate or refrained from providing expansive answers. Support questions were drawn from themes in the theoretical chapter, such as the various elements of becoming involved in extremist groups or desisting from extremist environments, including topics such as group dynamics, ideology, and relationships. Using this interview structure, having the exact same structure across all interviews but with room for individual expansion on specific themes, ensured that all participants were exposed to the full range of identical questions, but were able self-select what was relevant to their individual stories. As a result, the answers to this question could provide clues on all levels of the research design: some participants mainly talked about personal (micro level) factors that played a role in their involvement with terrorist groups whereas others mainly attributed their involvement to geopolitical (macro level) factors. This was the most essential part of the interview, as it touched upon the central question of what factors play or might have played a role in– and thus might help us better understand – their involvement in terrorism. This phase also focused on life after prison, asking the inmate what he would like to do upon release. Most, if not all, respondents will eventually be released according to the prison authorities and during our time in the country eight inmates were released.

*3.6.4.2 Interviews with professionals*

The interviews with professionals provide an understanding of how professionals view involvement in terrorism within the larger Malian context. It allows for a comparison with the perspectives of the inmates and with the literature and as such, adds value to the data gathered in prison and through the literature review. The interview data was used to further nuance and add to the data used to describe the Malian context in chapter four and to provide additional perspectives to the overall research question. Similar to the inmate interviews, the interviews with professionals were also conducted using a semi-structured outline (see Annex B). The outline focused on three overall themes: the situation in Mali generally, terrorism in Mali specifically and finally, reasons for individuals to become involved with terrorist groups. Starting with asking participants what their general assessment was of the situation in Mali provided us with a sense of context to how the individual viewed Mali (both historically, politically as well as in terms of security) and how they themselves related to Mali when it comes to their position and experience.

Thus, the focus group interviews focused more directly on the issue of terrorism in Mali and causes for terrorism or factors that influence involvement in terrorism in the country. Informed consent forms were provided to the focus group participants in printed form, explained plenary and signed by all participants. All interviewees were given the choice to make their contribution anonymous to prevent them from being more cautious in their responses. This provided them with the reassurance to talk freely, without implications for their careers. The interviewees were given a codename in order to maintain anonymity and categorised based on their affiliation. See Annex C for the (anonymised) list of respondents.

In line with the inmate interviews, in most cases there was no need to ask many probing or additional questions as most respondents were very articulate and provided lengthy answers to the main questions. In the focus group interviews with groups of three to eight participants, usually one to three individuals would take the lead in giving answers, but we specifically called upon participants that took a more passive role to provide their answers as well. The risk that individual perceptions of focus group participants would not be included was mitigated through giving the respondents questionnaires asking about the factors that influence involvement in terrorism ahead of the discussion. Regarding the individual interviews, the research team noted that where the Malian participants and international participants working for NGOs/CSOs and embassies were generally very open

and clear, some respondents working for MINUSMA were generally more political in providing answers.

One of the MINUSMA respondents for example, noted that he had to be given formal permission to participate in the interview and when this finally came through, he jokingly said that he had received a list of topics he was not allowed to discuss with us. In another interview with an international respondent working at MINUSMA, the interviewers noted that to some questions, the individual found it very difficult to provide an answer (i.e. to the question to what extent do MINUSMA and the French counter-terrorism force Barkhane cooperate?) – and when the researchers summarised an answer he would say: that is correct but those are not my exact words. As such, the researchers took note of a political bias in some of the respondents' answers but overall; this was only the case in a handful of interviews. As a matter of fact, some international MINUSMA respondents were very explicit in criticising their own organisation or providing a political assessment of the UN's work in Mali.

## 3.7 Ethical aspects of the research

According to social psychologist Craig Haney: "the effects of incarceration are far-reaching: extended lengths of time spent within prison and the repeated expression of those effects will likely lead to major changes in the way the inmate views himself and his surroundings".[354] Thus, prison presents a difficult and sensitive context to do research of any kind because it deals with vulnerable human subjects. Overcoming assumptions in prison research such as "they will never talk to you", or "they are all liars",[355] proved to be an even greater issue when interviewing terrorist prisoners. Similar to sex offenders, the public discourse generally leans towards viewing these offenders as "evil and sub-human."[356] Nonetheless, this was not so much our experience in Mali, where most professional respondents working directly with these offenders were generally sympathetic to their background, motivations and situation. Given the sensitivity surrounding prison research generally, and specifically related to interviewing terrorists in prison, this paragraph details the steps taken to address any ethical considerations throughout the research.

### *3.7.1 Data collection*

The data used for this research consists of both existing data (such as public aggregate data, government documents and academic sources); as well as empirical data gathered through narrative interviews with inmates and contextual interviews with professionals. The main ethical issues concern the inmate interviews, as that data relates to human subjects in a vulnerable environment. Throughout this study, the research team complied with ICCT's regulations for research ethics including procedures for data collection, protection, retention and destruction.

Existing publicly available aggregate data, such as country reports or specific assessment of the economic or demographic situation of a country are well-documented by agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UNDP, UNICRI, the World Bank, and reports from organisations such as the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS).[357] Other existing data that were

[354] Craig Haney, 'The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment', *Prisoners Once Removed: The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities* 33 (2003): 66.
[355] James B Waldram, 'Challenges of Prison Ethnography', *Anthropology News* 50, no. 1 (January 2009): 4–5, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.05014.x.
[356] Waldram.
[357] See the International Centre for Prison Studies, http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/mali.

used in this research consist of government data, such as policy plans and documents related to the management and rehabilitation of violent extremist offenders in prison.

As is always the case with research involving human subjects, it was important that the risks for the participants were minimised. The main ethical concerns dealt with questions of anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, data protection, and data sharing, as well as any concerns for impacts on mental health and wellbeing when inmates were asked to discuss their (potentially violent) past. The adopted approach is based on widely used interview tactics in prisons as well as research strategies to interview terrorists or terrorist suspects.[358] The use of interviews regarding terrorism and with (suspected) terrorists posed several privacy and security-related concerns. I followed the guidelines for the use of personal data set out by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science (*Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, KNAW).[359] Safety and security precautions were also taken for the research team – considering interviews would take place one on one with charged and/or convicted offenders in a prison setting where 100% security could not be guaranteed. This translated into participating in a three-day Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) that focused on working in medium to high-risk environments and mitigating risks. Additionally, a series of conversations discussing the ethical and security considerations took place with ICCT's and UNICRI's research team and management, as well as with MINUSMA's Safety and Seucrity Department. Finally, prior to every field trip, a security analysis report was drafted and discussed in an individual meeting with ICCT's Director.

In order to address the central research question, it was necessary to collect some sensitive and personal data. The most important measure taken to ensure the privacy and safety of the individuals discussed in this thesis is to have rendered individuals anonymous and non-identifiable. In accordance with recommendations by other academics who have conducted prison interviews with terrorism,[360] no respondent is referred to by name. In the data collection phase, interviewees were identified using a numerical identification system – the file linking these ID's to the interviewees were kept separately from the interview transcripts. Names were withheld from the analysis and were replaced by pseudonyms. Due to the possibility that a participant's identity may be deduced if significant information regarding criminal charges, associations, geographical locations, or actions were disclosed, all work stemming from this research limited personal information to a very generic nature. All information that can lead to identification of individuals was removed in the transcription process. At no point was the data gathered in the project downloaded or saved to an internal or external unprotected hard drive; it was initially stored on an encrypted flash drive, and later on a university encrypted server where only the principal researchers had access to the data with a password. All researchers gathering or accessing information as part of the project signed non-disclosure agreements.

Furthermore, to ensure adherence to ethical standards, the sensitivity of the prison context was taken into consideration and approval to participate in interviews was acquired from the participants. This was done through establishing oral informed consent at the start of the inmate interviews.[361] This is in line with for example the recommendation of terrorism

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[358] Horgan (2011) Interviewing the terrorists: reflections on fieldwork and implications for psychological research, *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*; Cf. Copes e.a. (2012) Inmates' Perceptions of the Benefits and Harm of Prison Interviews, *Field Methods*, 25(2); Schlosser (2008) Issues in Interviewing Inmates. Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(8).

[359] Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Gedragscode Voor Gebruik Van Persoonsgegevens in Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2003).

[360] Speckhard, A. (2009). Research challenges involved in field research and interviews regarding the militant jihad, extremism, and suicide terrorism. *Democracy and Security, 5*(3), 202.

[361] Schlosser (2008) Issues in Interviewing Inmates. Navigating the Methodological Landmines of Prison Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14(8), p. 1512.

researcher Adam Dolnik, who writes that "in conflict settings, the concept of each interviewee signing a consent form or any other document is completely ludicrous, as it will not only ruin the researcher's credibility due to fears of espionage; being asked to sign documents will automatically trigger fear of manipulation of the signature for fake confessions by government forces."[362] The interviewees were also provided with the opportunity to contact the researchers afterwards in case they had further questions.

## 3.8 Analysing data

This research aims to explain and understand the phenomenon of involvement in terrorism in Mali *from the inside* and is therefore focused on perception. The data of the narrative interviews were analysed following an inductive approach, or more specifically a constructivist approach – starting from the assumptions that "(1) multiple realities exist, (b) data reflect researchers' and research participants' mutual constructions, and (c) the researcher enters, however incompletely, the participant's world and is affected by it."[363]

This approach was deemed most appropriate for this research as the research question focuses on understanding involvement in terrorism based on inductively coding qualitative interview data based on participants' perspectives on their involvement in terrorism. Terrorism researcher Kate Barrelle, for example, has used the same (inductive coding) approach in her research based on interviews with terrorist offenders.[364] Professor of language and culture Klaus Krippendorff summarises content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use".[365] One should note that inference is the key notion that drives content analysis. As White and Marsh explain: "The researcher uses analytical constructs, or rules of inference, to move from the text to the answers to the research questions."[366] In plainer terms, content analysis is a research approach that looks at the presence of concepts in texts, and subsequently analyses the presence, meaning and relationships of those concepts to make inferences about the message of the text and author. Content analysis approaches a text by breaking it into manageable categories. It does so by labeling, or coding, words phrases, sentences or themes. These categories are designed based on the research question, available theory and a hypothesis. By organising the extraction of concepts from text according to consistent coding, content analysis encourages reliability and uniformity in concept extraction. The following paragraph will elaborate on how the content analysis was conducted.

### *3.8.1 Thematic content analysis*

Using semi-structured narrative interviews as a source, the data from the inmate interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis (TCA). Using professor of psychology Smith's concept of thematic content analysis as a method that "… involves coding or scoring verbal material for content or style for the purpose of making inferences

[362] Adam Dolnik, (2011). Conducting field research on terrorism: A brief primer. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *5*(2), 9.
[363] Kathy Charmaz and Liska Belgrave, 'Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis', *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft* 2 (2012): 324.
[364] Barrelle, Kate. 'Pro-integration: disengagement from and life after extremism.' *Behavioural sciences of terrorism and political aggression*, (2015) *7*(2), 129-142.
[365] Krippendorff 2004)
[366] White and Marsh (2006)

about, or assessing, the characteristics or experiences of persons, social groups, or historical periods."[367]

At the heart of content analysis as a research methodology is the acknowledgment of the importance of language in human cognition.[368] The analysis of text or narratives builds on the assumption that the researcher can understand other people's cognitive schemas.[369] The interpretation is aimed at looking at beings: uncovering an essence that manifests itself in the phenomena and is therefore aimed at the phenomenon as it hides behind its appearance. The research is thus not focused on quantification, but on the exploration of the structure of the phenomenon. Additionally, TCA assumes that groups of words reveal underlying themes.[370] The *thematic* part of content analysis refers to the importance of identifying relatively comprehensive units of analysis within the analysis of story like material such as themes.[371] The purpose of TCA is to arrive at an interpretation and identify patterns across an entire dataset.

This study adopted a two-phased approach. In the first phase, a thematic content analysis of the inmate interviews was conducted through reading through the interview notes and *coding* the emerging themes for the entire dataset. This involved an initial coding process selecting comments that relate to the main research question of how we can understand involvement in terrorism in Mali, and putting them into containers that are called *nodes* in the software program used. These nodes are assigned a label selected by the research to reflect the statement, for example if a participant talked about how the financial benefits provided by a terrorist group, that specific statement would be selected as a node and labelled as *financial benefits* and another node would be assigned to the statement labelled with the specific terrorist group the participant was talking about. This phase is characterised as an inductive phase, allowing the data to speak for itself rather than approaching the data from a theoretical perspective.

After developing a list of nodes, the next step included reviewing the nodes and grouping them together under similar themes. This is a more focused coding phase using the most frequent and/or significant initial codes to sort, synthesise, and conceptualise the dataset.[372] Nvivo, a specialized content analysis software program,[373] was used to assist in the ordering of nodes into larger themes and domains. For example, when prison respondents talked about engaging with terrorist groups because these groups threatened to kill them or their family if they did not cooperate, this was coded as *protection* or *protection of family members*. Going from codes to themes included for example grouping both nodes under the theme *immediate survival*. For example, when respondents talked about the absence of state

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[367] Charles P. Smith et al., *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[368] Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Mit Press, 2012); Ruth Wodak and Paul Chilton, *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory, Methodology and Interdisciplinarity* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2005).

[369] Robert Gephart, 'Hazardous Measures: An Interpretive Textual Analysis of Quantitative Sensemaking during Crises', *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 18, no. S1 (1 November 1997): 583–622, https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1379(199711)18:1+<583::AID-JOB908>3.0.CO;2-T; Eric Woodrum, '"Mainstreaming" Content Analysis in Social Science: Methodological Advantages, Obstacles, and Solutions', *Social Science Research* 13, no. 1 (1 March 1984): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1016/0049-089X(84)90001-2.

[370] Yan Zhang and Barbara M. Wildemuth, 'Qualitative Analysis of Content', *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* 308 (2009): 319; Robert Philip Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (Sage, 1990).

[371] Ole R. Holsti, 'Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities', *Reading. MA: Addison-Wesley (Content Analysis)*, 1969.

[372] Charmaz and Belgrave, 'Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis', 356.

[373] NVivo is a software package to aid qualitative data analysis designed by QSR that "helps capture, manage, explore and understand data" (2013). Its full title is NUD.IST Vivo.

services such as water or education, this was grouped under the theme *lack of services*. The third and final step in the coding process entailed converging the themes into larger domains that characterise common factors that played a role in the involvement with terrorist groups. In total, these seven domains that were identified through the coding process are *state-citizen relationships, survival, foreign influence, societal tensions, economic opportunities, ideology,* and *lack of information*. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the domains with their corresponding themes.

Throughout the analysis, some themes were re-defined and re-labelled to more accurately represent the answers of the participants. In the case of all reasons for involvement that were related to the Malian government, I first labelled the domain as *Bad governance*. However, I struggled with where to include the theme of *identity* as I felt it would fit both in the domain of *ideology* as well as feeling it had something to do with citizenship and government. In the end, after re-reading the quotes and codes I assigned, I decided that most statements related to whether the respondents felt like they were Malian citizens and if that was not the case it often directly related to the role of the Malian government. As such I decided to group the theme identity under the domain *Bad governance* and in turn I decided to re-label the domain as *State-citizenship relationships* to better reflect the three constituent themes. Additionally, I provided a definition for every theme and domain to clarify how I perceive of the domains and themes.

*Table 3.2 – Content Anaysis Results: Domains and themes*

| **Involvement with terrorist groups** | **Domains** | **Themes** |
|---|---|---|
| | State-citizenship relationships | Institutional capabilities |
| | | Political responsibilities |
| | | Identity |
| | Survival | Immediate survival |
| | | Long-term survival strategies |
| | Foreign influence | Direct influence neighbouring countries |
| | | International actors |
| | | Foreign jihadist influence |
| | Societal tensions | North vs South |
| | | Lack of community |
| | | Lack of mutual understanding |
| | | Ethnic tensions |
| | Economic opportunities | Economic benefits |
| | | Economic challenges |
| | Ideology | Religion / Azawad |
| | Lack of information | Lack of education / information |

Assessing the coded data together with the short summaries of the nodes, notes were made of possible relationships between themes based on the interpretation of the interview data. For example, when considering inmate participant statements relating to involvement in terrorism, relevant parts from all interviews were coded as *reasons to join jihadist group* and a short summary was written to describe that specific node. The theme of lack of *basic services* (which was related to some participants' motivation to collaborate with terrorist groups) was identified from this node and thus initial themes were formulated that in the end led to a larger domain labelled as *bad governance*. Finally, Smith recommends using extracts from at least three participants for every theme as well as a measure of prevalence of themes, or extracts from half the sample for every domain.[374] On average, between two and four

[374] Jonathan A. Smith, 'Evaluating the Contribution of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis', *Health Psychology Review* 5, no. 1 (2011): 17.

extracts are provided for each of the sixteen themes in the results section in chapter 6, thus well satisfying Smith's criteria.

Building on the theoretical framework, the final step in the analysis was to move from the inductive approach to reflecting on the findings in light of the academic literature. In this phase, the themes were analysed to determine on what level of analysis they were situated – i.e. on the micro (personal), the meso (group), the macro (structural) level, or whether they were better viewed as a combination of levels. This was done to assess what levels were most prominent in the respondents' narratives of their involvement and to reflect on the academic body of literature explaining involvement in terrorism. Thus, the second phase ended with a (theory-driven) deductive analysis of the themes along the lines of the multi-level theoretical explanations for involvement in terrorism as laid out in chapter two.

The interview data (written notes of all interviews) that resulted from the interviews with the 75 professionals were used to contextualise the results from the interviews with the (suspected) terrorists. The data was analysed to identify the main themes that participants agreed played a role in conflict and terrorism in Mali. This was done similarly to the use of TCA for the inmate interviews with the difference that the interview data was not coded and no software was used to aid the analysis. This was a consequence of the fact that part of the professional data was gathered as part of the project that ICCT and UNICRI were implementing (i.e. the focus group interviews with prison staff) and was originally not intended to be used for this thesis. As such, the professional interviews did not take place in the same structured manner, following the exact same interview guideline, nor did I transcribe all interview data to the same level of detail as the inmate interviews. That is why instead, for the professional interviews, four overall themes were inductively identified through an analysis of the notes of the interviews. These themes were: (1) the general (security) situation in Mali that reflected on the current state of affairs in the country; (2) the role of international actors in Mali (main actors and type of plus rationale for involvement in the country); (3) the terrorism situation in Mali; and (4) factors that drive indiviudals to engage with terrorist groups or become involved with terrorism. Next, their perspectives were compared and contrasted both with the inmates' perspectives as well as with the academic literature.

## 3.9 Dilemmas and considerations

### 3.9.1 Considerations related to the narrative approach

When using narrative interviews to gather knowledge you always deal with layered realities. In other words: the reality presented by the respondent reflects the perspective, experiences and values of the person presenting the information. While the reality is shaped and presented as a narrative by that individual, it is interpreted in turn by the specific disciplinary lenses of those who research it, whether from a sociological, criminological, psychological, or political science point of view. As such, the empirical data or knowledge gathered through interviews in essence creates a joint vision of the reality of – in this case – involvement in terrorism as the phenomenon that is studied. Ultimately, it is up to reader to in turn recognise this layered reality and its diversity, and to interpret the knowledge presented to improve our understanding. As Taylor and Horgan[375] put it:

[375] M. Taylor and J. Horgan, "A Conceptual Framework for Addressing Psychological Process in the Development of the Terrorist," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 4 (2006): 585–601

> an under-explored alternative to an account in terms of individual qualities is to see involvement in terrorism, at least in psychological terms, as a process rather than a state; this implies a focus not on the individual and their presumed psychological or moral qualities, but on process variables such as the changing context that the individual operates in, and also the relationships between events and the individual as they affect behaviour

In prison, there is the added layer of the prison life or prison reality. This prison reality involves the impact of the prison environment on the self, any changes this has brought about and the process of meaning-making of all of this. This involves what Sykes has labelled the 'pains of imprisonment'- or the prison experience as a form of psychological survival.[376] Examples include the potential abusive dimension of power and authority structures in the prison environment – as researched by Zimbardo and Milgram through socio-psychological experiments.[377] Another (related) example of the prison reality includes what Toch (studying prison from an environmental psychological perspective) labeled the 'transactional element of prison'; how the prison environment is perceived and how individuals negotiate with that environment.[378]

All these elements impact this research, and do not solely pertain to the inmate interviews. There is always a transactional element in conducting interviews in the sense that it raises questions such as: why do the respondents participate in this research project, what is in it for them – or: what are the consequences if they choose not to participate? Here, for the inmate participants factors such as curiosity, spending some time outside of a congested prison cell, power structures in the prison cell (orders from a cell leader or fellow inmates) and psychological survival (what is the consequence for me if I refuse to cooperate with prison staff) are likely to play a role. Refusing to participate in the research might not even be a realistic option for (some of the) participants. For the professional respondents, some factors are similar (for example curiosity or power stuctures within an organization) while other factors could also play a role (i.e. wanting to share one's perspective, strengthening professional relationships).

Especially the nature of the prison environment of those who are labeled as terrorists is important. It is likely that this environment increases the effect of group pressure (given ideological and group linkages) and reinforces the existing power structures both within the cell as well as vis-à-vis larger prison environment (in terms of how the 'terrorists' are viewed by the other inmates). Additionaly, the high-risk nature of this offender population, which requires more from prison staff to manage security, makes prison staff partially dependent on the cooperation of these inmates.

Then, there is the limitation of the influence that the researcher has on the narrative that is being shared. This automatically poses the question, in the words of criminologists Liem and Maruna, "just whose story is this"?[379] To what extent does the researcher, in this study the primary audience for the respondents, influence the story of the interviewee? When doing

[376] Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
[377] Stanley Milgram, 'Group Pressure and Action against a Person.', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 69, no. 2 (1964): 137; Philip G. Zimbardo et al., *Stanford Prison Experiment* (Zimbardo, Incorporated, 1971).
[378] Hans Toch, *Living in Prison: The Ecology of Survival.* (Free Press, 1977).
[379] Shadd Maruna and Marieke Liem (2020). Where Is This Story Going? A Critical Analysis of the Emerging Field of Narrative Criminology. *Annual Review of Criminology*, *4*.

fieldwork, from a narrative perspective it is assumed that the participants that were interviewed answered and behaved and responded in a unique way that is different from when anyone else would or might have interviewed them. Partially this is the result of the character of the interivews as a research project and as such, a novel or an a-typical experience for both the inmates and the professionals. Partially, it is the outcome of the constitutive character of these narratives that is shaped by both the researcher(s) and the participants. Additionally, the specific questions, the order and the formulation of those questions by any researcher introduce bias into an interview, particularly when questions or answers are sensitive and personal.

Finally, a consideration of this research is that using content analysis as a method creates its own obstacles in terms of reliability. It is limited by its reliance on the available records of source materials. In this case, because the interviews were not audio-recorded, the reader has to rely on the notes and interpretation of the researcher. In that way, while certain objects of study can rely on a rich source of registered data for researchers to analyze (think for example of data such as records of parliamentary debates, speeches by politicians, ideologies of dictators), other phenomena – including narratives of involvement in terrorism may be less well documented. Additionally, maybe even more so with regard to participants reflecting on their own experiences of involvement in terrorism, respondents may be inclined to only reveal specific elements of their personal lives and can provide a selection of information rather than the entire story; this is likely to be even more the case when interviewing inmates that have not been sentenced yet.

This part (the group element in the prison context) also undoubtedly has a large impact on the individual narratives, given that the ideological part of terrorism already involves a larger group narrative. And specific narratives of involvement are likely to be influenced by fellow group members both during membership of a terrorist group outside of prison as well as by fellow inmates during time spent in prison. This intra-group influence can take the form of coordination (sticking to the message, communicating similar attitudes on specific terrorist groups or regarding the treatment by external actors such as Barkhane, the Malian police, or prison staff). But it can also take on a more subtle role where it may lead to individual inmates amplifying or sprucing up their narratives to gain or improve status, to satisfy a need to belong i.e. by claiming to be part of similar networks or groups or by adhering to same beliefs; or to resistance, by disagreeing with another inmate's narrative or a group narrative.

Nonetheless, in my opinion the value of the narrative approach to involvement in terrorism is that it advances beyond the oft-discussed notion of a 'terrorist personality' and instead, zooms in on the constructed realities of alleged terrorist offenders and professionals working in the field of terrorism. Given that this thesis follows the notion that we live in a storied world, the qualitiative analysis of these narratives holds great value – especially for topics that do not lend themselves for easy access for researchers such as involvement in terrorism. It allows us to deconstruct those narrative constructions and categorize and analyse its constitutive elements. Specifically, I found that narrative interviews with indiviudals who are or who were formerly involved with terrorist groups provide useful avenues to analyse the attitudes, intentions and behaviour of these indiviudals as well as how these relate to the meso-level processes and dynamics of the groups to which they belong(ed). Gaining access to and conducting interviews with (suspected) terrorists is a costly and time-intensive endeavor, often posing an insurmountable challenge to researchers aiming to obtain sample sizes that are sufficiently large to conduct relevant and significant quantitative analysis. In light of this, despite implications for representative samples and thus – the potential to

generalize the findings, individual interviews can aid in providing us with a deeper understanding of involvement in terrorism.

As long as researchers are aware of the biases associated with this type of research and the implications are clearly accounted for, I would agree with with Altier and Horgan,[380] who argue that

> terrorist autobiographies and statements, we argue, consistent with Cordes, reflect the best, and often only, insider perspective on terrorist life and thinking. They provide insights into the ways in which current and former terrorists perceive themselves, what they believe they are doing (or did in the past), and what they think their actions will (or did) accomplish

Despite the many obstacles involved, I experienced that interviews allowed me to built and maintain a certain level of rapport with the respondents and ask focused questions centered on specific events or decisions in their lives. By letting (suspected) terrorists 'speak for themselves', the narrative starting point improves the chance that the information gathered provides sound and important desciriptions of the experiences, perspectives and points of view of those who became involved in terrorism. It also increases the potential for a reliable reflection of the interviewees' perceptions of their own mindsets and process of meaning-making at that particular point in time.

### 3.9.2 Considerations related to the methodology

The chosen methodology also comes with clear limitations. One is the representativeness of interviews. Because the inmate interviews were limited to 30 individuals (out of a population of over 200), the author essentially utilised *opportunity sampling*, 'interviewing only those who happened to be accessible and who were willing to talk'.[381] This means that it is difficult to assess how representative the analysis of this data is for the group (of suspected and/or sentenced terrorists) at large. An additional dilemma in the use of interviews for research purposes is the issue of reliability. As argued above, the influence of the prison context and the *on remand* nature of the majority of the inmate respondents cannot be overestimated. Thus, even though interviews can provide us with a unique understanding of the object of study; the problems addressed above emphasize the need for a perspective towards the data and the related outcomes of this study. In the conclusion further attention will be paid to these limitations.

For content analysis, reliability and validity can also be limited due to choices I made in the process of defining, conceptualizing and operationalizing the research questions and terms, and in measuring and analysing key variabes. In this research, this was mitigated through discussions ahead of the analysis phase on the overall approach to coding data to increase the chance that an individual coder will code the same data in the same way at other moments as well as the likelihood that another individual would code the data in the same way.

One of the main limitiations in adopting a narrative approach is that when interviewing people, there is a high likelihood of individuals portraying their lives and actions in the most favourable light possible. Especialy terrorists might have strong

[380] Altier, M. B., Horgan, J., & Thoroughgood, C. (2012). In their own words? Methodological considerations in the analysis of terrorist autobiographies. *Journal of strategic security*, *5*(4), p. 90.
[381] Silke, "The Devil You Know," 8.

motivations to hide important details of their background or to deliberately use a narrative for political purposes. In what is often referred to as 'hindsight bias',[382] there is thus a risk that the participants, including the professionals, sensationalize events; and rationalize their actions and their own choices.

Nonetheless, in that light it is striking how many personal experiences and biographical facts the participants were willing to share. Other concerns related to the vulnerable environment and newness of the type of interview are likely to have played a role in the responses of the inmates. These issues are an inherent part of research using primary sources through interviews and these aspects were taken ito account both in the data-gathering process as well as throughout the analytical phase. Even though the research interest is in the phenomenon of involvement in terrorism, it was not always easy for participants to speak openly about their experiences with or within terrorist groups without first having shared their broader background with us, which often felt like setting the stage for understanding the critical importance how and why they did in the end become involved with specific groups. In fact, participants often made a point of emphasising the importance of explaining their background and specific experiences prior to their involvement with terrorist groups as contextual backdrop to their engagement stories.

All in all, this research demonstrates the uniqueness of the individual process of becoming involved in terrorism; because (1) the individuals that did become involved with terrorism and terrorist groups are unique personalities; (2) the circumstances within which they became involved vary per individual; and (3) their personal interpretation of these circumstances and their own role in that larger environment provides us with their personal narratives of their own process of involvement. At the same time, this research also points towards the striking similarities in involvement within the research sample (as well as the overlap and agreement in the understanding of this process by both the inmate as well as the professional interviewees). While the acknowledgement of the unique character of involvement is nothing new, the more interesting question lies in how – despite this nuance – we can analyse and identify the commonalities in this process and what the implications are of these commonalities for our understanding of involvement in terrorism and our policies to address terrorism.

This research has traced involvement as a set of pathways that are ultimately defined by an individual process of meaning-making – where terrorist groups respond to both very practical needs (for security, income and basic services) as well as to more transcendental needs (for revenge, brotherhood, inclusion and a sense of significance, whether it be through religion, definance or autonomy). The narrative approach to involvement helps us to value the complexities of this process, as well as common themes that emerge when different narratives are compared contrasted. Last but not least, given that as researchers, most of our findings are communicated in narrative form – the products of our analysis – need to be interpreted and accepted by the reader just as much as the stories we study.[383] Luckily, stories have always been more gripping than abstract scientific models.

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[382] Bonnie Cordes, "When Terrorists Do the Talking: Reflections on Terrorist Literature," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): 150–171.

[383] Graef, da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, *Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change*, 1.

# Chapter 4 – The Malian context[384]

## 4.1 Introduction

This study empirically investigates involvement in terrorism in Mali and specifically, the role of social, psychological, cultural, and economic factors that play a role in becoming involved in terrorism in the country. The choice to study Mali is based on three reasons. First, as explained in the introduction, Mali has been experiencing a violent conflict since 2012 between different terrorist groups and the national government, which has been extended to the international level with the deployment of French troops in the country and the establishment of the UN peace-keeping mission MINUSMA, thus providing the study with a context where the international influence and impact can also be taken into consideration.[385] Second, literature and research on terrorism in the country, its forms and connections with other crimes, is very limited and suffers from a Western bias, as demonstrated in chapters one and two. Thus, the literature requires further expansion and empirical research in the field,[386] especially in non-Western contexts. Third, access to primary sources was facilitated through the researcher's participation in a training project in Mali, including access to individuals charged with terrorism-related crimes, local and national government actors, and international institutions working in Mali.

This chapter will describe the context within which the research took place, providing an introduction into Mali as a country and the complex conflict it is experiencing involving non-state actors including terrorist groups, organised crime networks, and external actors mandated to stabilise the country. Based on a literature review, the objective of this chapter is to provide a background to the empirical research through describing the Malian context, including its history and geopolitical situation, and identifying and analysing the elements that play a role in the on-going Malian conflict. The first part of this chapter will provide a brief overview of Mali as a country, its geography, economy, ethnic make-up, and political situation. The second part will put the current conflict in its historical perspective, tracing the evolution of the situation in Mali from the outbreak of the 2012 rebellion to the present. This background will serve as the basis for the second part of the chapter, in which the country context will be analysed from a broader historical and geopolitical perspective. The macro and meso level factors that play a role in the current conflict form the backdrop against which individual involvement occurs and will further contextualise the empirical research in this thesis. Whereas this chapter is based on both academic literature as well as information from media sources and reports by international organisations like the UN or the International Crisis Group, in chapter seven, additional contextual information on the country is provided based on interviews with professionals. However, that data functions as a background to their personal understanding of the situation in Mali and engagement in terrorism whereas this chapter provides the background within which the empirical research can be better understood.

[384] Parts of this chapter have been published in 2018, see Elena Dal Santo and Liesbeth van der Heide. 'Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts: Connecting Geopolitics to Individual Pathways to Terrorism in Mali'. *African Security* 11, no. 3 (2018): 274–91.

[385] Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 'Operation "Serval": A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (19 September 2015): 801–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494.

[386] Jackson, 'Critical Terrorism Studies: An Explanation, a Defence and a Way Forward', 18.

### 4.2 Country context

Mali is a large country in West Africa that borders on seven other countries: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger, Senegal and Mauretania. It has a population of nearly 18.4 million.[387] It is the seventh-larges country on the African continent and is located in the north-western Sahel region that stretches from the Atlantic coast in the East to Sudan in the West. In the North, Mali's northern regions extend partially into the Saharan deserts and the country is characterized by a semi-arid climate. The southern regions account for most of the economic activity and food production as the lands in the southern region are much more fertile. The economy is mainly driven by pastoralists and agriculture and cotton and gold making up about 80 percent of exports. High annual fiscal fluctuation and the dependency on few export goods leave Mali dependent on foreign aid.[388] Sixty percent[389] of the population lives in the countryside and they rely mainly on the informal economy as farmers and fishermen.[390] According to an overview of country's economic indicators, Mali's economic situation can be described as follows:

> Prior to several political crises (starting in 2012) and resulting instability, Mali had been on track to reducing poverty, with gross domestic product (GDP) growth during 2007-2010 averaging at 4.9 percent per year. As a consequence of a political crisis in 2012, however, Mali experienced zero economic growth and an increase of only 1.7 percent in 2013. From 2014-2018 GDP growth has increased 5 to 6 percent amid higher rainfall and better harvests.[391]

Today, despite the temporary economic stability, Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 182nd on the 2019 Human Development Index[392], with approximately 36 percent of the population living below the poverty line (2017 est.).[393]

Various ethnic communities inhabit Mali: the country comprises approximately 60 ethnic groups who speak at least 20 languages.[394] In a simplified description, the North is mainly populated by nomadic communities, including the Tuaregs and the Arabs, while the rest of the country is populated by Sub-Saharans. The majority of the latter are sedentary farmers (such as the Songhaïs) with the exception of the Peuls, who are nomadic pastoralists, and who are also known in other Sub-Saharan countries as the Fulbe or the Fulani.[395] As Gregory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme note in their research on the origins of Mali's

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[387] 'Africa: Mali — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency', CIA -World Factbook, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html.

[388] Francesca Bastagli and Camilla Toulmin, 'Mali: Economic Factors behind the Crisis' (European Parliament - Directorate General for External Policies, 2014); 'Export Dependence and Export Concentration' (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2010), https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Towards%20Human%20Resilience/Towards_SustainingMDGProgress_Chapter1.pdf.

[389] 'Mali Population (2019)', Worldometers, accessed 20 December 2019, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/mali-population/.

[390] 'Mali - Country Partnership Framework for the Period FY16-19', Country Partnership Framework (Washington DC: World Bank, 2015), http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/839461468198005347/Mali-Country-partnership-framework-for-the-period-FY16-19.

[391] 'Africa: Mali — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency'.

[392] '2019 Human Development Report' (UNDP), accessed 20 December 2019, https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2019/To_answer_global_protests_tackle_new_inequalities_2019_Human_Development_Report.html.

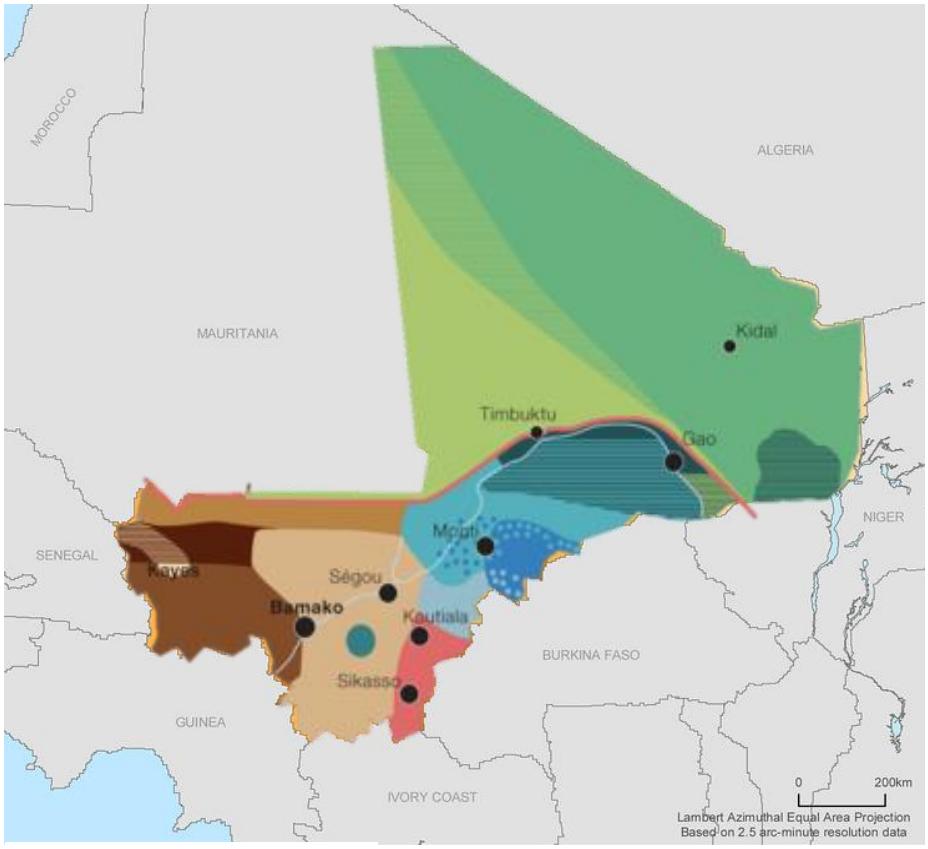
[393] 'Africa: Mali — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency'.

[394] 'An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel - Geography, Economics and Security' (Paris: OECD, 2014), 187, https://www.oecd.org/publications/an-atlas-of-the-sahara-sahel-9789264222359-en.htm.

[395] Kalilou Sidibé, 'Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms', *IDS Research Reports* 2012, no. 77 (2012): 1–103.

conflict, nomadic populations from the North are often associated with violence and insecurity because of their historical tradition to conduct raids against sedentary groups.[396] These ethnic groups do not share customs and traditions and present different socio-political, cultural, and security claims. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the predominant ethnic groups in Mali.

*Figure 4.1 – Distribution of ethnic groups across Mali*
*Source: Adapted from 'Atlas Jeune Afrique 2010', in Bossard, L., op. cit., OECD, Sahel and West Africa Club, 2015, 191, and SEDAC Maps*




| | Number | as % of total pop. |
|---|---|---|
| Bambara | 4 040 000 | 25 |
| Senoufo | 1 996 000 | 12 |
| Songhay | 1 591 000 | 10 |
| Fula | 1 475 000 | 9 |
| Malinké | 1 294 000 | 8 |
| Soninké | 1 252 000 | 8 |
| Dogon | 907 100 | 6 |
| Moor | 840 000 | 5 |
| Touareg | 813 000 | 5 |
| Bozo | 762 900 | 5 |
| Bomu | 248 000 | 2 |
| Khassonké | 222 000 | 1 |
| Toucouleur | 231 000 | 1 |

Historically, Mali was officially called the Sudanese Republic until it was renamed after it became independent from France in 1960. Modibo Keita became President in 1960 in a single-party socialist government, ousted by a military coup led by Moussa Traore in 1968. The military rule, which led to numerous border clashes between Mali and its neighbours, ended in 1991 when Traore was toppled in a military coup and replaced by a transitional committee. In 1992 Alpha Konare became the first democratically elected President in Mali's multi-party elections, bringing slight economic prosperity, but also increasing tribal tensions within Mali. In 2002 Amadou Toumani Toure was elected President amid allegations of fraud and won his second 5-year term election in 2007, a time in which Tuareg rebellion rose

[396] Chauzal and van Damme, 'The Roots of Mali's Conflict', 19.

temporarily.[397] A military coup in March 2012 overthrew President Toure, after Islamist militant groups executed 97 Malian soldiers after the battle for Aguelhok in late January 2012.[398] The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) returned power to an interim civilian administration under President Traore in April 2012. In 2013 Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) won the Presidential election.[399] The 2018 elections, held in July, led to a run-off vote between IBK, who garnered 41.4 percent of the vote, and his main rival Soumaila Cisse, who won 17.8 percent of the vote.[400] In April 2019, Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga and his entire staff resigned.[401] The resignation came ahead of a no-confidence vote over his administrations inability to quell the rise in attacks from "Islamist militants and clashes between ethnic communities."[402] Mali's history political instability continued when in 2020, after weeks of civil protests against the government over insecurity and corruption, the military staged a coup and arrested Mali's both president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, as well as the prime minister Boubou Cissé. And in May 2021, another military coup took place that toppled Mali's president Bah Ndaw.[403]

The Sahel region has become a focal point for many insurgent and terrorist groups over the past decade[404] and West African states have been faced with a range of security issues including cross-border narco-trafficking, terrorist attacks, and the rise of radical Islamic networks in the region. For Mali, terrorism and insurgent groups are the country's number one security problem, as illustrated by the 2015 Radisson Blu attack as well as a proliferation of terrorist attacks in the central regions of Mopti and Ségou[405] and in the capital Bamako[406] from 2016-2020.


*Figure 4.2 – Historical Tuareg Region, Economist, November 2012*
In 2012, the country experienced a Tuareg rebellion, an extremist takeover of the North, and a military coup. The context in the northern regions of Mali is marked by conflict, both along ethnic lines

news/world-africa-13881978.'
*Mali's Next Battle: Improving*

ncy'.
le 12 août 2018 : Des Maliens contre une
s://www.maliweb.net/politique/second-tour-
ns-contre-une-crise-postelectorale-

and His Entire Government Resign', CNN, 19 April 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/19/africa/mali-government-resigns-intl/index.html.

[402]Bokar Sangare, 'Mali's Prime Minister Resigns After Spike in Deadly Violence', *Bloomberg*, 19 April 2019, sec. Business, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-19/mali-s-prime-minister-resigns-as-country-sees-spike-in-violence.

[403] David Lewis, "Military detain Mali's president, prime minister and defence minister.", Reuters, 24 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/military-arrest-malis-president-prime-minister-defence-minister-sources-2021-05-24/.

[404] Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict", *Clingendael CRU Report* 11 (2015).

[405] Including an attack on a hotel in Sévaré and many deadly attacks between ethnic groups such as the attack on Ogossagou in 2019.

[406] Including an attack on nightclub 'La Terrasse' and the Radisson Blu attack in 2015 and a terrorist attack on '\[wellness fility 'Le Campement' in 2019.

as as well as against government forces, all leading to an increase in the militarisation of the existing frictions. According to a World Bank report on Mali:

> By mid-2012, Northern Mali was completely seized by the armed separatist and jihadist groups. The region soon fell to several extremist groups. A military force consisting of French and the Economic Community of West African States militaries assisted the Malian army in regaining control of much of the North and enabled a short-lived peace in 2013. A peace agreement brokered by Algeria was finally signed between the government, pro-government groups, and the rebel movements on 15 May and 20 June 2015.

The past and current situation in the country has persistent consequences on the regional, national, and international level. The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) alone more than doubled between January 2018, when there were 48,000, to 123,574 in January 2019. As of January 2019, 71,156 refugees returned to Mali and 135,147 Malian refugees and Asylum Seekers in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger.[407] Approximately 3.2 million people (18 percent of its population) are in dire need of humanitarian support.[408] About 5.1 million people (more than 27 percent of the population) live in areas affected by the crisis, with one in five people suffering from food insecurity. The number of children suffering from severe malnourishment has increased more than 10 percent between 2017 and 2018 from 142,000 to 165,000[409], and has increased even more to 170,000 in 2019.[410]

The enduring turmoil in Mali's northern region, coupled with a downturn in the economic situation over the past years has led – among other things – to a decrease in foreign investments in the country by 64 percent. As mentioned earlier, most of the economic activity takes place in the southern parts of Mali – partially due to the serious dislocation of individuals in groups in the North. This, in turn, has led to an increase in illegal activities that further undermine the country's security, including drug and human trafficking and piracy.

From a Western perspective, Mali was long hailed as the African success story – as one of the few countries that posed the democratic example for Africa.[411] After the military coup in 2012, it became clear that the civilian government enjoyed very little popular support throughout Malian society[412] and that the foundations of democracy in Mali were weak at best.[413] As this chapter shows, the takeover by Jihadi rebels in the North, which is viewed as an existential threat by the Malian – as well as many neighbouring West African governments – demonstrates Mali's security dilemma. The fluid and shifting boundaries between terrorist and separatist groups, and the mutual perceptions of the other party

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[407] 'Mali Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 - Mali', ReliefWeb, accessed 1 August 2019, https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-1-fiscal-year-fy-2019.

[408] 'Internally Displaced Population Falls in Mali', International Organization for Migration, 2 February 2016, https://www.iom.int/news/internally-displaced-population-falls-mali.

[409] 'Mali: $263 Million Sought to Assist Most Vulnerable with Humanitarian Support, Says UN Relief Official', UN News, 15 February 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002861.

[410] 'Mali', UNICEF - Humanitarian Action for Children, 8 January 2019, https://www.unicef.org/appeals/mali.html.

[411] Kalifa Keita, 'Conflict and conflict resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg insurgency in Mali', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 9, no. 3 (1998): 102-128; Robert Pringle, 'Mali's Unlikely Democracy', *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)* 30, no. 2 (2006): 31–39.

[412] R. James Bingen, David Robinson, and John M. Staatz, *Democracy and Development in Mali* (Michigan State University Press, 2000).

[413] James Traub, 'Two Cheers for Malian Democracy', *Foreign Policy* 13, no. 04 (2012); see also Morton Halperin, Joe Siegle, and Michael Weinstein, *The Democracy Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace* (Routledge, 2009), 149.

(whether it be government or rival groups) as the culprit, reinforce the factors that are believed to induce and further stimulate the conflict in the country.

## 4.3 Mali's conflict in historical perspective

Since its independence from France in 1960, Mali has experienced four Tuareg rebellions in its postcolonial history. The most recent Tuareg rebellion of 2012 resulted in an extremist takeover of the North by the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* MNLA). From 2012 to 2019, a number of separatist, terrorist, jihadist, and rebel groups engaged in a struggle for power in the northern and central regions of Mali. The ensuing conflict situation is characterised by shifting alliances and a proliferation of organised crime in the Malian border regions. The next paragraphs provide a chronological overview of the conflict from 2012 to 2019, as well as an overview of the main groups involved.

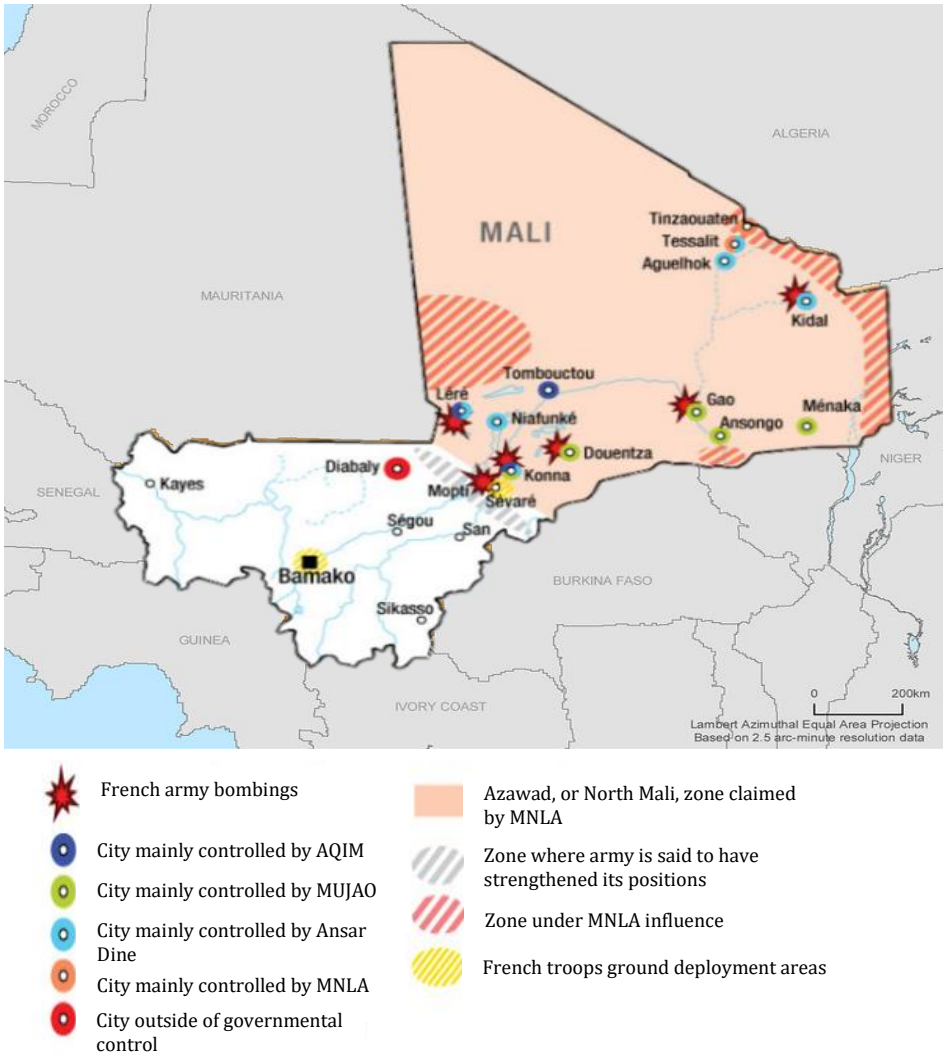
### *4.3.1 2012 – the Tuareg rebellion*

In January 2012, a Tuareg rebellion began in Northern Mali, mainly led by a secessionist movement formed in 2011.[414] A few months after the rebellion, a coup d'état was launched by the Mali's armed forces in the capital, Bamako, to overcome the president's failure to suppress the MNLA-led uprising. Contrary to the army's expectations, the situation deteriorated quickly and as a result, MNLA took control of Northern Mali in alliance with a second violent extremist group: Ansar Dine.

Iyad Ag Ghali, a former leader of the MNLA, founded Ansar Dine in 2012. The MNLA broke publicly with Ag Ghali, branding him a "criminal whose efforts to establish a theocratic regime were anathema to the foundations of our culture and civilization."[415] After having been rejected by both the Ifoghas and the Tuaregs in his attempt to gain power, and once the North was under its control, Ansar Dine overthrew MNLA, with the support of two other violent extremist groups, AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, MUJAO), Ansar Dine and its affiliates Katiba Ansar Dine Macina and Ansar Dine du Sud,[416] MLF, AQIM, MUJAO, and al-Mourabitoun, led by the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, thus became the main terrorist groups in the country.[417] Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the situation in North Mali right after the Tuareg rebellion, including the four main terrorist groups and the areas under their control.

[414] Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013* (Routledge, 2016), 175.
[415] Julius Cavendish, 'The Fearsome Tuareg Uprising in Mali: Less Monolithic than Meets the Eye', *TIME Magazine* 30 (2012).
[416] Ibrahim Maïga, 'Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the Labels', 2016, 7–8.
[417] Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead', *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 5 (2014): 33.

*Figure 4.3 – The situation in North Mali in 2012, adapted from © France24 and SEDAC maps (https://www.flickr.com/photos/54545503@N04/5457016047)*




### *4.3.2 2012-2015 – fragmentation of the conflict*

The unstable situation that unfolded represented the ideal breeding ground for several self-defence and/or pro-governmental armed groups to flourish.[418] Some locals joined *Platform*, a coalition of movements engaged in the peace process with the government. Among the main actors within Platform are Imghad and Allied Touareg Self Defence Movement (*Groupe d'autodéfense des touareg Imghads et alliés*, GATIA), Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR),[419] Arab Arab Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad*, MAA), Popular Movement for the Salute of Azawad (*Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad* MPSA), Popular Front of Azawad *(Front populaire de l'Azawad* FPA), and Movement for the Defence of the Country (*Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie* MDP). Maïga, a consultant in the Conflict Prevention and Risk Analysis division at the Institute for Security Studies, adds that the second main coordination effort in the country, aimed at

[418] Susanna D. Wing, 'Mali: Politics of a Crisis', *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 481.
[419] Including Ganda Koy, Ganda Izo and FLN-Forces de libération des régions Nord du Mali.

establishing a network among the so-called "rebels", is the Coordination of Azawad Movements (*Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad*, CMA), which consists of the MNLA, Higher Council for Azawad (*Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad*, HCUA), the Coalition for the Azawad People (*Coalition pour le peuple de l'Azawad*, CPA) and a section of the Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements II (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR II.)[420]

### *4.3.3 2015-2018 – the Peace Agreement*

The outcome of a long peace negotiation process, the Algiers Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, was signed respectively on 15 May by the government and Platform, and on 20 June 2015 by the members of CMA. Between the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015 and 2017, the country was held hostage by an increasingly volatile security situation in which many violent armed groups were established and disbanded and many individuals changed alliances in the process.[421] Security in the country further deteriorated and Mali has witnessed a continuous stream of violent and terrorist attacks, including the high profile terrorist attacks on the café La Terrasse and the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako in March and November 2015,[422] the attack on a military camp in Gao in January 2017,[423] the attack on Le Campement, a resort popular with expats for weekend outings near Bamako in July 2017,[424] and most recently 14 soldiers being killed in a suspected Islamist attack on an military base in Soumpy, and 26 civilians being killed when their vehicle hit a land mine.[425]

In March 2017, Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoune, Katiba Ansar Dine Macina, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb announced the establishment of a new alliance, under the guidance of Ag Ghali.[426] According to the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (CAERT), the union, as well as the choice of its leader, reflects al-Qaeda's strategic attempt to expand by empowering local actors,[427] creating social ties through marriages,[428] and protecting civilians from governmental injustices.[429] Besides this proliferation of terrorist and militia groups, Mali has also witnessed an increase in connections between violent extremist groups and organised crime in the Sahel region.[430] According to criminologist Erik Alda and researcher Joseph Sala, who wrote a joint article on

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[420] Maïga, 'Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the Labels', 2–6.
[421] Baz Lecocq, 'Northern Mali: A Long and Complicated Conflict', *ZiF-Mitteilungen* 3 (2013): 1–6.
[422] Mamadou Tapily Peter Walker and Matthew Weaver in London, 'Mali Hotel Hostage Situation over as UN Troops Report Seeing 27 Bodies', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2015, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/20/gunmen-take-hostages-radisson-hotel-mali-bamako.
[423] 'Dozens Killed In Suicide Attack Against MOC Military Camp In Gao', United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed 3 December 2018, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/dozens-killed-suicide-attack-against-moc-military-camp-gao.
[424] Joseph Netto CNN Farai Sevenzo and Darran Simon, 'Gunmen Attack Mali Luxury Resort, at Least 2 Dead', CNN, accessed 3 December 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/18/africa/urgent--gunfire-heard-at-mali-tourist-resort/index.html.
[425] 'Mali Profile'.
[426] Par Madjid Zerrouky, 'Les groupes djihadistes s'unissent au Sahel', *Le Monde*, 4 March 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2017/03/04/les-groupes-djihadistes-s-unissent-au-sahel_5089337_3210.html.
[427] Sahel-Sahara Region and Ansar Eddine, 'Preliminary Analysis: Merger of Terrorist Groups in Mali', *AFRICAN CENTRE FOR STUDY AND RESEARCH ON TERRORISM (ACSRT/CAERT)*, n.d., 2.
[428] Modibo Goita, *West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy* (Africa Center for Strategic Studies Washington, DC, 2011), 3.
[429] Alta Grobbelaar and Hussein Solomon, 'The Origins, Ideology and Development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', *Africa Review* 7, no. 2 (2015): 153.
[430] Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, 'State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali', *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 250.

the crime-terror nexus in the Sahel, in that region, wealth and power rely on transportation and commercialisation of goods rather than on the possession of land: movements of money and goods "shape the political economy of state unmaking and remaking."[431] Furthermore, although the region can be characterised as mainly consisting of unpopulated desert, "all human activity – legitimate and illicit – relies on these same routes."[432] In the last years, illegal trafficking of drugs and weapons and smuggling of migrants towards the Mediterranean has generated huge revenues for organised crime groups in Northern Mali.[433] In line with these dynamics, local and regional terrorist groups have embarked on various forms of trafficking, especially smuggling and drug trafficking.[434] Synergies between organised crime and terrorist groups in the region are promoted by an environment characterised by weak or even lack of governance,[435] and a homogeneous demographic group composed of what Alda and Sala labeled as "young and dissatisfied men."[436] The regional linkages between organised crime and terrorism represent an example of Shelley's concept of the "unholy trinity" between terrorism, organised crime and corruption.[437]

### *4.3.4 2019 – the current situation*

Since the beginning of the 2019, the country has continued to experience great levels of instability due to continued attacks from the Dogon and Fulani clash. The largest attacks occurred in March and June.[438] In March, around 134 individuals were killed in a massacre by the Dogon militia in Ogossagou, exacerbating the anti-Fulani motivated violence. The June attack was perpetrated by Fulani members against a Dogon village where gunmen set fire and fired shots throughout the village.[439] A total of 95 bodies have been counted so far. Amidst the ethnic clashes, the political instability in the country has continued. On 18 April, Soumeylou Boubeye Maiga resigned from office along with his entire cabinet.[440] In May, the new Prime Minister Boubou Cisse formed his new cabinet of 38 members.[441] Alongside him, a new Health Minister was appointed, who had previously been clouded by accusations of enabling a "culture of harassment" during his time as UNAIDs chief.[442]

In late April, a video message was released by the terrorist group Islamic State's leader Baghdadi that lasted 18 minutes, which according to local security staff indicated al-Zahrawi as the new emir for the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The overall

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[431] Alda and Sala, 'Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region', 1–2.
[432] Alda and Sala, 5.
[433] Bruce Whitehouse and Francesco Strazzari, *Introduction: Rethinking Challenges to State Sovereignty in Mali and Northwest Africa* (Taylor & Francis, 2015), 216.
[434] Jessica M. Huckabey, 'Al Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections', *Orbis* 57, no. 3 (2013): 470.
[435] Oumar Diarra, 'Insecurity and Instability in the Sahel Region: The Case of Mali', *Army War College*, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA561296.pdf, 2012.
[436] Erik Alda and Joseph Sala, 'Links Between Terrorism, Organized Crime and Crime: The Case of the Sahel Region', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 3, no. 1 (10 September 2014): 7, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.ea.
[437] Shelley, 'The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism'.
[438] Stephanie Busari and Sharif Paget, 'At Least 95 Killed in Attack on Mali Village', CNN, 10 June 2019, 95, https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/10/africa/mali-village-massacre-sobane-intl/index.html.
[439]Liesbeth van der Heide, 'Dumping One Government Won't Fix Mali', Foreign Policy, accessed 1 August 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/20/dumping-one-government-wont-fix-mali-security-west-africa-sahel-ogossagou-fulani-dogon-tuareg-azawad-terrorism/.
[440] Bokar Sangare, 'Mali's Prime Minister Resigns After Spike in Deadly Violence', *Bloomberg*, 19 April 2019, sec. Business, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-19/mali-s-prime-minister-resigns-as-country-sees-spike-in-violence.
[441] Michele Cattani, 'Mali Gets New Government after Protests', News24, 7 May 2019, https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/mali-gets-new-government-after-protests-20190506.
[442] Nellie Peyton, 'UNAIDS Chief Charged with Enabling "culture of Harassment" Joins Mali Government - Reuters', Reuters, 8 May 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-aid-harassment-mali/unaids-chief-charged-with-enabling-culture-of-harassment-joins-mali-government-idUSKCN1SE26L.

message from Baghdadi focused on three main elements: raising funds, recruitment, and lone wolf terrorism. In 2019, the most impacted area by attacks is the central Mopti region (see Figure 3.3), where about two thirds of the attacks take place. This region is most susceptible for a number of reasons: it is institutionally weakened, it has a dense population with a mix of various ethnic groups, it holds great wealth in the region, and thus it presents a major strategic interest. The overall resentment of the population towards authorities is also changing. Overall there is a lot of pressure from terrorism, resulting in many schools having to close.[443] However, with the help of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the local women, communities have put pressure on schools to reopen.[444] Eighty percent of the country's population consists of youths under the age of 20,[445] with a literacy rate of 50.13 percent among the population aged between 15 and 24 years.[446]

## 4.4 Historical and geopolitical perspectives on Mali's conflict

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the research by providing an overview of Mali as a country, its history, and the current conflict, which is "highly context-specific and embedded in longer-term political, social, and economic processes."[447] Given that the situation in Mali is complex and eludes simple explanations,[448] the institutional level, including the role of ethnic tensions, regional instability, the proliferation of terrorist groups, and impact of major counterterrorism operations will first be discussed to provide the context on the macro level. On the meso level, the role of socioeconomic deprivation that may lead to frustration and aggression will be analysed.

### *4.4.1 Ethnic tensions*

Many authors trace back the origins of the current conflict in Mali to the 2012 Tuareg rebellion.[449] However, as Andrew Alesbury, a researcher and author on Tuareg history notes, the 2012 revolt was simply the latest among various rebellions promoted by a number of Tuaregs clans against the government for the independence of the country.[450] Contrary to usual representations[451] of the conflict, rebellions have also resulted from what political scientists with a focus on West Africa and the Sahel Pezard and Shurkin call "competition among northern Malians to advance their individual and group interests."[452] The use of violence has become such common practice that it is often perceived by scholars as the only way to promote economic and socio-political changes: professor of African history Baz

[443] Nadia Adam, Ekaterina Golovko, and Boubacar Sangaré, 'Terrorism Puts Education on Hold in Mali', ISS Africa, 17 October 2017, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/terrorism-puts-education-on-hold-in-mali.
[444] 'Protracted Crisis in Central Mali Impacting All Aspects of Children's Lives', UNICEF, 26 April 2019, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/protracted-crisis-central-mali-impacting-all-aspects-childrens-lives.
[445] 'Mali Age Structure - Demographics', Indexmundi, accessed 21 November 2019, https://www.indexmundi.com/mali/age_structure.html.
[446] 'Mali', UNESCO, 27 November 2016, http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ml.
[447] Caitriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh, 'The Myth of Global Islamic Terrorism and Local Conflict in Mali and the Sahel', *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 507.
[448] Huckabey, 'Al Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections', 467.
[449] 'Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?', Africa (International Crisis Group, 6 July 2016), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making.
[450] Andrew Alesbury, 'A Society in Motion: The Tuareg from the Pre-Colonial Era to Today', *Nomadic Peoples* 17, no. 1 (2013): 106–25.
[451] That have a tendency to portray the 2012 revolt as mainly being a conflict of the North vs the South and the government, rather than a conflict resulting partially from internal tensions among Tuareg factions.
[452] Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement* (RAND Corporation, 2015), 21, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR892.

Lecocq and professor of Cultural Anthropology of Arica Georg Klute, coined the neologism "demokalashi", democracy and kalashnikov, to describe local politics.[453] The nomadic and tribal nature of Tuaregs manifests itself in a scattered use of force and a refusal of formal national boundaries; a nature that is in stark contrast to the notion of state as conceived in Weberian terms, as the "political organization which claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in a particular territory."[454] As a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Developent (OECD) on the geography, economy and security situation in the Sahel states: nomadism implies a "netlike concept of space": that refuses the concepts of land property and sovereignty.[455] In addition, Gregory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, who wrote extensively on the origins of Mali's conflict, note that resentment and frictions between nomadic and sedentary groups is not only linked to a different cultural conception of the notion of space and power, but can also be partially traced back to the establishment of the state after decolonisation, "which promoted aggressive unity and the constant marginalization, in economic and political terms, of the north."[456]

Ethnic frictions in the country are not related exclusively to the claims brought forward by Tuareg clans but also to other conflicting relationships and identity clashes between groups. The cultural and historical divisions between ethnic groups present a major obstacle to peace and are partially the result of the policies promoted since the colonial ruling system to govern the North.[457]

### *4.4.2 Regional instability*

According to Peter Cole, in his paper on stabilising Libya's periphery, another important factor that influences destabilisation in Mali is the country's surrounding environment. A major aspect of the instability of the region can be traced back to Libya, where, during Gaddafi's regime, thousands of Tuaregs from Mali entered the country because of drought periods,[458] and forms of political and economic discrimination in Mali.[459] Many of them were recruited as soldiers in the Islamic Legion, an Islamic pan-Arabist military forced created by Gadaffi to unify the Arabs in the northern parts of Africa.[460] As Harmon, a researcher with a focus on France colonialism in West Africa, writes: after Gaddafi's regime was overthrown in 2011, Tuareg soldiers ransacked weapons depots in Libya, taking vehicles and Russian guns[461] back into Mali.[462] As a result, the already severe proliferation of arms in the North increased substantially.[463] The abundance of weapons also impacted the

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[453] Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, 'Tuareg Separatism in Mali', *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (2013): 428.
[454] Theodore J. Lowi and Edward J. Harpham, 'Political Theory and Public Policy: Marx, Weber, and a Republican Theory of the State', in *Contemporary Empirical Political Theory*, ed. Kristen R. Monroe (Berkely: University of California Press, 1997), 260.
[455] 'An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel - Geography, Economics and Security', 148.
[456] Chauzal and van Damme, 'The Roots of Mali's Conflict'.
[457] Chauzal and van Damme, 30–42.
[458]Peter Cole, *Borderline Chaos?: Stabilizing Libya's Periphery* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 18.
[459]Thomas Krings, 'Marginalisation and Revolt among the Tuareg in Mali and Niger', *GeoJournal* 36, no. 1 (1995): 60.
[460] The Islamic Legion was created and sponsored by Gaddafi's as a pan-Arabist paramilitary force aimed at establishing the Great Islamic State of the Sahel
[461] Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013*, 175.
[462]Ricardo Larémont, 'After the Fall of Qaddafi: Political, Economic, and Security Consequences for Libya, Mali, Niger, and Algeria', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (2013): 1.
[463]Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman, eds., *Armed and Aimless. Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, Small Arms Survey (Small Arms Survey, 2005), http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/book-series/armed-and-aimless.html.

availability of weapons among terrorist groups: AQIM is believed to have taken possession of several "abandoned Libyan stocks, including surface-to-air missiles."[464] Although international relations scholars Strazzari and Tholens argue that the impact of the collapse of Gaddafi's regime has often been overestimated, providing a scapegoat to explain instability in the region, arms availability is a crucial aspect to understand tactics development and conflict dynamics in the region.[465]

Anouar Boukhars, a Carnegie scholar and consultant on Middle Eastern and African matters, writes about how Algeria represents a second exogenous factor that has a significant impact on Mali's situation.[466] Algeria suffered a decade of bloody violence in the 90s, when various armed groups were founded with slightly different objectives, ranging from opposing the government to implementing Sharia law. While initially the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) acted as the major representative of a social and political movement looking for an Islamist alternative, several other armed groups were established in the early 90s, such as the Armed Islamic Movement (*Mouvement Islamique Armée*, MIA), the Movement for the Islamic State (*Mouvement pour l'Etat Islamique*, MEI), the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA), known for its cruelty,[467] and the (*Armée Islamique du Salut*, AIS).[468] The predecessor of AQIM, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat*, GSPC), was also born during the conflict in Algeria and easily expanded its activities in neighbouring countries, especially Mali and Mauritania, at the beginning of the new millennium.[469] GSPC gradually transferred its operations into North Mali not only because of the counter-measures adopted by the Algerian security services but also with the purpose of gaining revenues from contraband and trafficking.[470] The result is the development of a "hybrid group" that, exploiting weak governance, is involved both in crime and Islamist insurgency.[471]

### *4.4.3 Proliferation of terrorist groups*

The Sahel region harbours various and diverse paramilitary groups and (violent) extremist organisations. Besides local insurgents fighting for territorial control (such as MNLA), regional Salafist organisations and more global jihadi-affiliated groups, such as Boko Haram or AQIM, are active in the region. These groups, according to Rem Korteweg, a researcher who wrote about terrorism in the Sahel, are seeking to implement their interpretation of Islam in the region, harm Western interests, and create a caliphate.[472] In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a growing fear, especially in the US, that terrorists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East were moving towards Africa and, in particular, to the Sahel region to connect with Islamists in the Maghreb.

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[464]Grobbelaar and Solomon, 'The Origins, Ideology and Development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', 154.

[465]Francesco Strazzari and Simone Tholens, '"Tesco for Terrorists" Reconsidered: Arms and Conflict Dynamics in Libya and in the Sahara-Sahel Region', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 20, no. 3 (2014): 358.

[466]Anouar Boukhars, *The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali*, vol. 22 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 93–94.

[467] Mohammed M. Hafez, 'Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria', *The Middle East Journal*, 2000, 584–85, 572–91.

[468] Guolo Renzo, 'Il Fondamentalismo Islamico', *Laterza, Roma-Bari*, 2002, 167–99.

[469]Bøås and Torheim, 'The International Intervention in Mali:"Desert Blues" or a New Beginning?', 419.

[470]Stephen Albert Harmon, 'From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region' (Association of Concerned Africa Scholars, 2010), 17.

[471] Harmon, 20.

[472]Rem Korteweg, 'Treacherous Sands: The EU and Terrorism in the Broader Sahel':, *European View*, 1 December 2014, 254, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-014-0327-1.

This theory, dubbed the "banana theory of terrorism" because of the shape of the route,[473] has received strong criticism because of the lack of empirical data and scientific analysis.[474] Despite lack of evidence concerning the terrorist route from East Asia to the Sahel, North Mali has long provided a safe haven[475] and fruitful territory for recruitment for various terrorist groups,[476] who according to Basar, took advantage of regional insecurity, local tensions, fragile governance, and fast population growth.[477]

According to Francis, a Professor in Peace Studies, terrorist groups have, on the one hand, exploited local grievances against the central government and its repressive measures and, on the other hand, organised or collaborated with criminal networks involved in drug, cigarettes and arms trafficking, migrants smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom.[478] Sidibe, a professor at the Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences at Bamako University, notes that young people have been recruited for terrorist groups both through brainwashing as well as through offers of money and benefits.[479] At the end of the 1990s, the GSPC ensured support of the population through providing a broad range of social services, from distributing money, to providing medical care, and selling SIM cards.[480]

Bøås and Torheim, two researchers from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs who have written extensively on conflict, terrorism, and ethnicity in Africa, describe how AQIM's strategy to infiltrate the northern region of Mali has evolved over the years from granting economic benefits, providing services, and getting married local people to promoting a new and more conservative interpretation of Islam with the support of local religious teachers, known as marabouts.[481] In addition, AQIM built its reputation by providing protection: in Timbuktu, for example, a toll-free emergency number was provided to the local population in case of attacks from bandits or MNLA.[482] As South African political scientists Grobbelaar and Solomon note in their article tracing the role of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, from a macro perspective, AQIM cannot be viewed as just an external force, but should be considered as an actor that over time has managed to integrate itself within local communities.[483]

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[473] Jeremy Keenan, 'The Banana Theory of Terrorism: Alternative Truths and the Collapse of the "Second" (Saharan) Front in the War on Terror', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, no. 1 (1 January 2007): 31–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/02589000601157055.

[474] Jeremy Keenan, 'Conspiracy Theories and "Terrorists": How the "War on Terror" Is Placing New Responsibilities on Anthropology', *Anthropology Today* 22, no. 6 (December 2006): 7, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2006.00470.x.

[475] Cristiana C. Brafman Kittner, 'The Role of Safe Havens in Islamist Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 3 (4 July 2007): 307–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550701246791.

[476] David J Francis, 'The Regional Impact of the Armed Conflict and French Intervention in Mali' (NOREF, April 2013), 4, http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7911~v~The_regional_impact_of_the_armed_conflict_and_French_intervention_in_Mali.pdf.

[477] Eray Basar, 'Unsecured Libyan Weapons: Regional Impact and Possible Threats' (Norfolk: NATO Civil-Military Fusion Centre, November 2012), 2, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20121031%20Libya%20Weapons%20Update_final.pdf.

[478] Francis, 'The Regional Impact of the Armed Conflict and French Intervention in Mali', 4–5.

[479] Sidibé, 'Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms', 77.

[480] Jean-Luc Marret, 'Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A "Glocal" Organization', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (13 June 2008): 541–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802111824.

[481] Bøås and Torheim, 'The International Intervention in Mali:"Desert Blues" or a New Beginning?', 419.

[482] Bøås and Torheim, 420.

[483] Bøås and Torheim, 420.

### *4.4.4 Challenges of counterterrorism operations*

The perturbing presence of Islamist insurgent groups eventually led to a French military intervention in 2013: Operation Serval.[484] The official objective of the intervention was to impede the advance of jihadi groups towards the South through the deployment of air forces as well as more than 2,000 infantry troops.[485] Meanwhile, ECOWAS also launched the African-Led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and deployed approximately 1,500 troops. A few months later, in April 2013, the UN Security Council established MINUSMA, mandated to support the "stabilization of key population centres and … the reestablishment of State authority throughout the country", enhance political dialogue, foster national and international justice, and protect civilians as well as UN personnel.[486] In 2014, the reorganisation of French military forces in the region led to a second French military intervention: Operation Barkhane, consisting of 3,000 specially trained counterterrorism troops, armed vehicles, aircrafts, helicopters, and intelligence assets deployed in the Sahel region in Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.[487]

In response to the spreading military conflicts and the increase in the number of attacks in both the northern and the central parts of Mali, an international counterterrorism force was established in 2014, the so-called G5 Sahel Joint Force. The G5 Sahel Force was supported by the African Union as well as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with its main financial resources provided by the European Union (EU), the US, and Saudi Arabia. Generally due to the colonial history, Mali remains a political priority for France.[488] France and the US together lead military efforts, while the EU leads training and security sector reform, and the UN leads rule of law and political stability efforts.[489] A resulting challenge is that an increasing number of peacekeepers have been targeted in north and central Mali. Amnesty International reported that in the first three quarters of 2017:

> MINUSMA recorded at least 155 attacks against peacekeeping forces, Malian security forces, and French Barkhane soldiers. Throughout the year more than 30 MINUSMA personnel were killed. In June, 5 people were killed and 10 wounded during an attack on a hotel in Bamako; in July armed men beat 10 women at a wedding; and in August, 12 women were flogged for not wearing a veil in Mopti.[490]

Additionally, during 2017 MINUSMA registered "252 cases of human rights violations by security forces and armed groups, including 21 cases of extrajudicial executions and deliberate and arbitrary killings; 12 cases of enforced disappearances; and 31 cases of torture and other ill treatments".[491]

Many of these incidents have occurred due to a lack of solidified intelligence, which, according to intelligence researchers Rietjens and De Ward, has led to the establishment of an All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU) within the UN mission in Mali. ASIFU's

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[484] Grobbelaar and Solomon, 'The Origins, Ideology and Development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', 155.
[485] Larémont, 'After the Fall of Qaddafi: Political, Economic, and Security Consequences for Libya, Mali, Niger, and Algeria', 4.
[486] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2100 (2013), S/RES/2100 (2013)
[487] Korteweg, 'Treacherous Sands', 256.
[488] Marina E. Henke, 'Why Did France Intervene in Mali in 2013? Examining the Role of Intervention Entrepreneurs', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 3 (2 September 2017): 307–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2017.1352004.
[489] 'Mali: Events of 2017', Human Rights Watch, 21 December 2017, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/mali.
[490] 'Mali 2017/2018', *Amnesty International*, 2018. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/mali.
[491] *Id.*

mission can be summarised as "significantly improving the timely processing and production of MINUSMA broad accessible and usable (fused) information and intelligence in order to support the decision making process on the operational and tactical level."[492] In broad terms, ASIFU is tasked to "contribute especially to traditional non-military intelligence analysis, such as illegal trafficking and narcotics-trade; ethnic dynamics and tribal tensions; corruption and bad governance with Mali and MINUSMA area of interest."[493]

A number of challenges have been identified in the counter-terrorism efforts promoted by the international community in Mali. First of all, the role played by President Compaoré (president of Burkina Faso from 1987 to 2014), ECOWAS' official mediator, has been contested by the Malian population: President Compaoré was accused of exploiting this function to strengthen his power in Burkina Faso and was considered unable to promote a democratic process.[494] The lead of negotiation process was subsequently attributed to Algeria. According to political scientist Bergamaschi, who investigates the sociology of development and foreign aid, specifically in the context of Mali, operation Serval, along with efforts of the international community to fight the advance of terrorist groups, has been perceived as a simplistic approach to a conflict that is complex, multi-dimensional, and not restricted to the North alone.[495] Initiatives promoted by various international actors within the security-sector-reform (SSR) generally aim to address the tensions between the North and the Central government, the intercommunal rivalries, and the conflict between international actors and terrorist groups.[496] In that context, the military operations can be viewed as one element of a broader strategy aimed at promoting peace in the region through dialogue and mediation.[497]

### *4.4.5 Socio-economic factors*

The Sahel is a porous space where diverse forms of insurgency, connect to local grievances, in the words of Bøås and Torheim: "loosely allied through a combination of ideological and pragmatic concerns."[498] Economy in the Sahara has always been based on the transport of goods[499] and the difference between trade and trafficking is exceptionally unclear and ambiguous.[500] Trafficking is particularly attractive in a region where industry-related activities do not exist,[501] where natural resources are limited, and the impact of climate change is severe.[502] While goods- trafficking in North Mali initially concerned subsidised goods from Algeria[503] (mainly food and fuel), this was slowly replaced by

[492] Sebastiaan Rietjens and Erik de Waard, 'UN Peacekeeping Intelligence: The ASIFU Experiment', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 30, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 535, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1297108.
[493]Rietjens and de Waard, 533.
[494] Isaline Bergamaschi, 'French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual yet Insufficient', *Stability : International Journal of Security and Development* 2 (1 June 2013): 5, https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.bb.
[495] Bergamaschi, 9–10.
[496]Marina Caparini, *DDR and SSR Challenges in Mali*, 2015, 25, https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4499.0164.
[497] Kalilou Sidibé, 'Criminal Networks and Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali', *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (2012): 86, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2012.00336.x.
[498] Bøås, M. and Torheim, L. E., 'The international intervention in Mali', p. 423
[499] Raineri, L. and Strazzari, F., 'State, Secession, and Jihad', p. 250
[500] Sidibé, K. 'Criminal Networks and Conflict-resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali', pp. 83-84
[501] Sidibé, K. 'Security Management in Northern Mali', p. 75
[502] Tor A. Benjaminsen, 'Does Supply-Induced Scarcity Drive Violent Conflicts in the African Sahel? The Case of the Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali', *Journal of Peace Research*, 45, 2008, pp. 819–836
[503] Sami Bensassi et al., 'Algeria-Mali Trade: the Normality of Informality', *Economic Research Forum Working Papers*, No. 960, 2015, [internet] available at: https://erf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/960.pdf [last accessed: 01 June 2017]

cigarettes, and later weapons and drugs.[504] The spread of newer and faster means of communication and transportation led to the replacement of traditional food, fuel, and arms traders by modern smugglers.[505]

Terrorist groups have been successful in addressing local practical concerns and proposing alternatives.[506] AQIM, in particular, has taken advantage of financial vulnerabilities to establish itself as a credible actor and a point of reference for several local communities: as Carnegie Fellow and professor of international relations Boukhars describes, historically, GSPC used to provide remuneration to local tribe leaders "in exchange for safe passage or sanctuary",[507] while involvement in AQIM-connected smuggling networks has ensured revenues for local populations. AQIM acts as "an attractive employer for impoverished desert youth", as Grobbelaar and Solomon explain, where AQIM takes advantage of the regional instability for its operations.[508] Because of their knowledge of the terrain, local young people are often exploited both by terrorists and by criminal groups who recruit them as informants, drivers, or couriers. Although initially youth involvement was mainly restricted to drug trafficking, more recently concerns have been expressed regarding increasing drug abuse among youths.[509] Furthermore, as Malian professor Sidibé explains, while AQIM's recruitment strategy mainly revolves around offering money, other groups rely on brainwashing youngsters as a recruitment tactic.[510] These macro and meso dynamics, besides increasing active participation in terrorist and criminal groups, have affected what Boukhars describes as "the traditional socio-political patterns and the balance of power between and among communities":[511] the combination of poverty, unemployment and trafficking creates a vast "potential for instability" in the Sahara-Sahel region.[512]

### 4.5 Relevant research on terrorism for the Sahelian context

The macro and meso perspectives provide an initial framework to further identify push and pull factors that play a role at the individual level, leading people to join terrorist or paramilitary groups in a continuous cycle of violence. Although the micro level of analysis has usually been attributed to psychological research, it is now generally accepted that the study of terrorism should take into consideration both "psychological predispositions … and the external environment"[513] because terrorism is "*always* determined by a combination of innate factors, biological factors, early developmental factors, cognitive factors, temperament, environmental influences, and group dynamics",[514] as Victoroff, a professor in terrorism studies, states.

Terrorism scholar Horgan, in his research on radicalisation, for instance, focuses on the features of an environment conducive to involvement in terrorist activities and identifies some "predisposing risk factors": emotional vulnerability; dissatisfaction with current

[504] OECD, 'An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security', p. 235
[505] Strazzari, F. and Tholens, S., '"Tesco for Terrorists" Reconsidered', p. 354
[506] François Heisbourg, 'A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali', *Survival* 55, no. 2 (2013): 8–9.
[507] Boukhars, A., 'The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali', p. 94
[508] Grobbelaar, A. and Solomon, H., 'The origins, ideology and development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', p. 152.
[509] http://www.osiwa.org/wai_drugs/drug-use-effects-youths-west-africa/
[510] Sidibé, K., 'Security Management in Northern Mali', p. 77
[511] Boukhars, A., The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali', p. 94
[512] Harmon, S. A. *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, p. 133
[513] Martha Crenshaw, 'The psychology of political terrorism', in John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius, *Political psychology: Key readings*, eds., 2004, New York: Psychology Press, p. 414
[514] Jeff Victoroff, 'The mind of the terrorist: A review and critique of psychological approaches', *Journal of Conflict resolution* 49.1 (2005), p. 34

activity; identification with the victims; conceptualisation of violence as not immoral; sense of reward arising from the engagement; family/social ties to people sharing similar feelings and experiences.[515] Regarding the implications of the historical background described in this chapter for the individual level the academic literature points towards the lack of perspective and the (economic) opportunities presented by criminal and terrorist networks.

### *4.5.1 On the unemployment-terrorism relationship*

In North Africa, youth unemployment is expected to reach 29 percent by 2019, double the global average.[516] As a consequence, in the Malian and larger Sahelian context of unemployed youths, some youngsters turn to illegal activities to make a living. These activities range from drug and human trafficking to engagement with terrorist or other armed groups.[517] Especially since paid employment is generally not a common characteristic in Northern Mali, where most inhabitants are self-sustainable and create their own livelihoods through farming and trading.

Youths often form a majority demographic in African fragile states but at the same time, they "exist on the political and social fringe."[518] What motivates youths to join or become involved with violent groups according to the academic literature is not *just* lack of jobs and opportunities but rather the perceived injustices associated with it, often related to poor or corrupt governance. Past research on what drives participation in civil war showed that youths who do not feel they are represented in the political arena are two to three times more likely to turn to violence.[519] All in all, while the link between poverty and the lure of terrorism is often mentioned, the academic literature has challenged generalised assumptions about this relationship and agreed that poverty on itself does not provide a justification for why individuals engage with terrorism in general, or specifically in Africa.[520] Certain studies have emphasized how terrorists are not generally poor, drawing attention to other motivational factors such as the prospects of political gain or status.

### *4.5.2 On state citizen relationships*

The relationship between the state and terrorism is a topic that has been studied from the perspective of how the two relate to each other conceptually and historically;[521] what the state's monopoly of force or broader coercive capacities entails;[522] and how all of this relates to processes of democratisation.[523] More specifically, studies have zoomed in on the importance of both governmental as well as civil society institutions and how they relate to the effects of government and the potential for violence in societies.[524] Overall, the body of

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[515] John Horgan, "From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalisation into terrorism", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, nr. 1 (2008): 84–85.

[121] Middle East youth jobs crisis "lures recruits to extremism". *The National.* Retrieved from http://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/middle-east-youth-jobs-crisis-lures-recruits-to-extremism

[517] Morten Bøås (2015) Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery, African Security, 8:4, 299-319.

[518] Marc Sommers, *Fearing Africa's Young Men: The Case of Rwanda* (Citeseer, 2006).

[519] Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," American Journal of Political Science 52, no. 2 (April 2008).

[520] UNDP report journey to extremism

[521] Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[522] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War', *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.

[523] Jack A. Goldstone et al., 'A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability', *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (2010): 190–208.

[524] Anke Hoeffler, Syeda Shahbano Ijaz, and Sarah Von Billerbeck, *Post-Conflict Recovery and Peacebuilding* (World Bank, 2011).

research on states and violence asserts that "states with weak institutions run the greatest risk of the onset and recurrence of civil war, and of extreme levels of criminal violence".[525] However, the relationship between states and violence is more complex than that. First of all, there is no agreement on the definitions of states and governance. In the body of literature, indicators of governance outcomes such as democratic participation or representativeness of government, transparency and corruption) are often blurred with the effects or indicators of institutions and the level of institutionalization (such as the (democratic) rule of law, civil society, free press et cetera).

According to economist Kaufmann et al., many studies tend to analyse a mixture of the two actually measure both: the systematic underpinnings or institutionalization of governance in the form of legal frameworks, constitutions or more intangible factors such as culture and norms; coupled with measures of effects, such as levels of welfare, transparency and corruption, fair elections, levels of impunity and accountability. often imperfect, of whether these systems deliver good governance outcomes in practice.[526] So a state can have a well-established institutional system to *do* good governance while still failing to deliver good governance outcomes. As a result, the presence of good governance institutions does not equate good governance or a lack of violence. Nonetheless, research on state institutions has established a clear link between lower levels of institutionalisation and a higher likelihood of violence.[527] Taken together, even though the body of literature still lacks empirical scrutiny, it provides support for the importance of institutions as playing a critical role in avoiding violence. In line with this, numerous studies established a positive correlation between state instability – as is the case in Mali – and the frequency of terrorist attacks.[528]

### *4.5.3 On the impact of events in Libya*

The repercussions of the Libyan crisis are numerous in the Sahelian zone following the dispersion of weapons from Libya and the return of the mercenaries to their country of origin. The French National Assembly, in an information report on arms trafficking in the Sahel stated: "Pickups, heavy machine-guns and other weapons constitute dangerous luggage".[529] Other authors concluded that the weapon stockpiles left behind by Gadhafi's regime ranged from assault rifles, rockets and mines to shells, chemical weapons, and ground-to-air missiles.[530] The establishment of the armed group MNLA is generally viewed by experts as result from, among other factors, the return of these armed Tuareg of Libya.[531] Aside from the arms that flowed freely back into Mali and other neighbouring countries; under Gadhafi, Tripoli had also provided monetary assistance to a number of Sahelian countries. As a result, the end of the regime hampered the development of a number of

[525] Goldstone JA, Ulfelder J. How to Construct. Stable Democracies. The Washington Quarterly.2004;28(1):9-20. 19; see also Besley, Timothy and Persson, Torsten (2009) The origins of state capacity: property rights, taxation and politics. American economic review, 99 (4). pp. 1218-1244.
[526] Kaufmann, Daniel and Kraay, Aart andMastruzzi, Massimo, The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues (September 2010). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 5430.
[527] De Soysa, Indra. "Paradise is a bazaar? Greed, creed, and governance in civil war, 1989-99." *Journal of Peace Research*39.4 (2002): 395-416.
[528] Elbadawi, Ibrahim, and Nicholas Sambanis. 2002. How much war will we see? Explaining the prevalence of civil war. Journal of Conflict Resolution 46:307-34; cf Bhavnani, Ravi, and Dan Miodownik. 2009. "Ethnic Polarization, Ethnic Salience, and Civil War." JOURNAL OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION 53: 30-49.
[529] Rapport d'information de l'Assemblée nationale française n° 4431, La situation sécuritaire dans les pays de la zone sahélienne, 6 March 2012, p. 29.
[530] Laurence Aida Ammour, "Les enjeux de securite emergence au Maghreb et au sahel depuis le 'Printemps Arabe'", Annuaire de l'Institut Européen de la Méditerranée (IEMED), 2012, p. 3.
[531] Harvey J. Sindima, "Salafi-Wahhabi Islam in Africa", in: *Major Issues in Islam: The Challenges Within and Without*, Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2018, p. 123.

Sahelian countries dependent on the investment and financial flows of the Libyan companies.[532]

However, the intervention of the armed forces following the victory of the Islamists in the first election round eventually led to a serious legitimacy crisis. As a result, the security situation worsened rapidly as Algeria plunged into what has been labelled as the Dark Period. Even though from the end of the 1990s onwards Algeria has taken the stance that it has settled its issues with "Islamist" terrorism, many critics have noted that the state failed to eradicate militancy within its own territory.[533]

### *4.5.4 Opportunities presented by criminal and terrorist groups*

Lack of perspective for the Malian population, and the opportunities presented by criminal and terrorist groups, is something mentioned by several authors. For instance, Lacher, a senior associate at the German Institute for International and Security Studies in the Middle East and Africa division, has demonstrated that terrorist groups use various forms of trafficking to acquire weapons, vehicles, and other equipment.[534]

Malian researcher Sidibe has argued that "the transformation of Sahara into a cocaine highway from Latin America allows AQIM to levy tax on merchandise destined for Western Countries."[535] Political scientist Lounnas explains that AQIM finances its activities through two activities: abduction and release against ransom of Western hostages.[536] These different financing sources have also been highlighted by reports from the International Crisis Group and the French senate in its report "Mali : Comment gagner la paix?" ("Mali: how to win/obtain peace").[537] It has also been noted that none of these criminal trades would have been possible without the complicity of high-level state officials.[538]

In line with this argument, some scholars note that the implementation of terrorist groups in North Mali has been facilitated by their collusion with local populations. In an attempt to explain the acceptance of terrorist groups like AQIM by the Tuareg populations, the International Crisis Group in its report "Islamist terrorism in the Sahel: fact or fiction"[539] argues that the main explanation to the welcoming of AQIM by the Tuareg is of economic nature. Poverty in the region has pushed young Tuareg in the ranks of AQIM. American sociologist and political scientist Larémont follows the same logic: he argues that AQIM's implementation in the region can be understood in the context of the strategic methods of al-Qaeda (central) in Afghanistan and Pakistan where it was able to obtain shelter among the Pashtun tribes.[540] Because of the government's withdrawal in North Mali, AQIM and other terrorist groups have been given the opportunity to function as a government unto itself.[541]

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[532] Laurence Aida Ammour, "L'apres-Gaddafi au Sahara et au sahel", *Notres Internationales du CIDOB,* January 2012, p.1.
[533] Gray, David H., and Erik Stockham. "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The evolution from Algerian Islamism to transnational terror." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2.4 (2008): 091-097.
[534] Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,* vol. 1 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Washington DC, 2012).
[535] Sidibé, 'Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms', 77.
[536] Djallil Lounnas, 'The Regional Fallouts of the French Intervention in Mali', *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 2 (2013): 325–32.
[537] Jean-Pierre CHEVÈNEMENT and Gérard LARCHER, 'Mali : Comment Gagner La Paix ?', Pub. L. No. 513, § Sénat Français (2013), http://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-513/r12-513.html.
[538] Interview of an anonymous advisor to Amadou Toumani Touré, transcribed by Djallil Lounnas (2013).
[539] Group, 'Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?'
[540] Ricardo René Larémont, 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel', *African Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 242–68.
[541] Larémont, 247.

French government reports have noted that the money AQIM has gained from their different forms of trafficking has been invested in buying the goodwill of local populations (buying goods for twice the price, paying for weddings etc.).[542] A report by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on Mali also emphasized the existence of a link between youth unemployment and youth's involvement with violent extremist or armed jihadist groups.[543]

Within the context of fighting terrorism and arresting suspected terrorists, it is important to note that despite the financial incentives offered by terrorist groups, not all individuals who join terrorist groups in Mali fall into the category of what Orsini, the Director of the Observatory on International Security in Rome, calls "vocational terrorists."[544] The Malian case study supports the idea that a number of elements are conducive to terrorism, including political frustrations,[545] socioeconomic, cultural, and historical conditions.[546] The UN and the OSCE, in separate reports, identified a number of factors that may lead to terrorism in the Sahelian context, including "prolonged unresolved conflicts, dehumanization of victims of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, lack of rule of law, violations of human rights, ethnic, national and religious discrimination, political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization and lack of good governance".[547] This is in line with findings by anthropologist De Bruijn, who concludes that especially young people in Mali and Chad, do not feel protected by their governments and are increasingly questioning the legitimacy of their governments.[548]

### 4.6 Conclusion

As has become clear from the above, the Malian context is a complex one. The current conflict poses multidimensional challenges, ranging from terrorism to intra-state tensions, historical marginalization, discrimination of certain groups, and organised crime operations. Many factors are identified by researchers as conducive to Mali's conflict situation. On the meso level these range from ethnic tensions between groups and the proliferation of the terrorist groups. On the macro level, the spill over effect to and from other countries' conflicts as well as military operations to counter terrorist insurgencies have partially contributed to peace on the macro level, yet are also seen as a conflict-escalating factor on the individual/micro level. Finally, socioeconomic frustrations on the individual/micro level play out again on the group level where terrorist and non-state armed groups present themselves as alternatives to government rule.

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[542] CHEVÈNEMENT and LARCHER, Mali : comment gagner la paix ?

[543] Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni et al., 'Mali's Young "Jihadists" Fuelled by Faith or Circumstance?', 2016.

[544] Alessandro Orsini, 'Interview With a Terrorist by Vocation: A Day Among the Diehard Terrorists, Part II', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 672–84.

[545] Nischler and Morefield, 'An Actor Oriented Empirical Model of the Roots of Terrorism', 53.

[546] Domenico Tosini, 'Sociology of Terrorism and Counterterrorism: A Social Science Understanding of Terrorist Threat', *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (1 November 2007): 664–81, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00035.x.

[547] UN General Assembly, 'The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy', *Resolution* 60 (2006): 4; see also 'Ministerial Statement on Supporting the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy | OSCE', 1, accessed 20 November 2018, https://www.osce.org/mc/29544.

[548] Mirjam de Bruijn and Jonna Both (2017) 'Youth Between State and Rebel (Dis)Orders: Contesting Legitimacy from Below in Sub-Sahara Africa', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28:4-5, 779-798, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2017.1322329.

# Chapter 5 – (Suspected) terrorists in Mali: who are they?[549]

## 5.1 Introduction

Involvement in terrorism always has to be understood from the specific context of the individual. One of the main findings in the academic literature on terrorism literature has been that there is no specific demographic profile that sets terrorists (both those who radicalise as well as those who become involved for other reasons) apart from others.[550] The sample in this research is no different in its heterogeneity. This chapter presents the key characteristics of the 30 participants who were suspected and/or sentenced for terrorism in Mali, providing a summary of the background of the 30 participants including their legal status, type of involvement with terrorist groups, age, ethnicity, family background, and education/occupation (see Table 5.1). The second part provides an overview of variables related to their involvement in terrorism, including type of ideology, terrorist organisations they were involved in, and what type of position they held within those organisations. The chapter ends with a general introduction to the participants' perspectives on Mali, contextualising the findings that will be presented in chapter six.

*Table 5.1 – Overview research sample*

| **Participant overview** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Legal status** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| *Awaiting trial* | 28 | 97 |
| *Sentenced/appealing* | 2 | 7 |
| **Type of involvement** | | |
| *Voluntary* | 16 | 89 |
| *Forced* | 2 | 11 |
| *Unknown* | 12 | |
| **Demographic background** | | |
| *Age* | | |
| 16-25 yrs | 9 | 33 |
| 26-35 yrs | 12 | 45 |
| 36-45 yrs | 4 | 15 |
| 46 > yrs | 2 | 7 |
| Unknown | 3 | |
| *Ethnic group* | | |
| Tuareg/Tamasheq | 11 | 37 |
| Arab/Moor | 11 | 37 |
| Fulani/Peulh | 3 | 10 |
| Bambara | 2 | 7 |
| Songhai | 2 | 7 |
| Niger | 1 | 3 |
| *Geographic origin* | | |
| North Mali | 24 | 83 |
| South Mali | 3 | 11 |
| Central Mali | 1 | 3 |
| Niger | 1 | 3 |
| Unknown | 1 | |
| *Marital status* | | |
| Married | 20 | 67 |
| Single | 10 | 33 |

[549] Parts of this chapter have been published with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), see: Liesbeth van der Heide and Julie Coleman (May 2020), "The Last Frontier: Prisons and Violent Extremism in Mali", *ICCT Policy Brief,* https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/05/The-Last-Frontier-Prisons-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Mali.pdf.

[550] Horgan, 2008b; Silke, 1998

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Children* | | | |
| | 0 | 10 | 42 |
| | 1-2 | 5 | 21 |
| | 3-4 | 3 | 12 |
| | 4 > | 6 | 25 |
| | Unknown | 6 | |
| *Educational background* | | | |
| | No formal education | 11 | 48 |
| | 1-5 yrs | 3 | 13 |
| | 5 > yrs | 7 | 30 |
| | Madrassa/Arabic | 2 | 9 |
| | Unknown | 7 | |
| *Occupational background* | | | |
| | Shepherd/farmer | 12 | 46 |
| | Trader | 6 | 23 |
| | Other | 8 | 31 |
| | Unknown | 4 | |

## 5.2 Demographic background of the participants

An overview of the participants is provided in Table 5.1 including their age, ethnicity, geographic origin, marital status and number of children, education, and occupation. All these factors were self-reported in the interviews. While they were checked against the prison-registry, the researchers were informed that the prison registry is also largerly based on self-reported demographic data. Gender was not a relevant variable in this research as all participants were male, resulting from the fact that Bamako's central prison is an all-male facility. The overview of the demographic background serves as the background to the analysis in the following chapters.

### *5.2.1 Age*

Mali is characterised by a young age structure, with over 50 percent of its population being 15 years or younger and 80 percent under the age of 25.[551] One of the main cross-cultural findings in criminology is the so-called age-crime curve; showing that the age of crime perpetration peaks between 10 and 18 years old to decline thereafter.[552] Terrorism, as a specific form of criminal behaviour, mirrors this pattern. Even though no general profile of the terrorist offender has been found, the (Western) empirical literature finds that most participants are young males, ranging in age from 18 to 35 years.[553] The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 64 years old. Eighteen is also the age limit before which youngsters charged with criminal offenses (regardless of the nature of those charges) under Malian law would be incarcerated within a juvenile facility.[554] The majority (12 out of 30) of the participants were between 26 and 35 years old, while nine participants were 16 to 25 years old; which confirms the general conclusion in the academic literature that terrorism is "a young men's game."[555] Three participants did not know their own age or approximate year of birth, and their age was also not listed in the prison registry, these were labelled as 'unknown'. Table 5.1 provides the age distribution across the participants.

[551] https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/demographic_profile_rev_april_25.pdf, p. 17.
[552] Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Shulman, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2013; Sweeten, Piquero, & Steinberg, 2013
[553] Ehrlich & Liu, 2002, p.187; Sageman, 2004; Zedalis, 2004)
[554] See Unicef Child Protection – Mali, https://www.unicef.org/mali/3934_4090.html.
[555] Oots, Kent Layne. "Organizational perspectives on the formation and disintegration of terrorist groups." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 12.3 (1989): 139-152.

### *5.2.2 Ethnicity*

Regarding the ethnicity of the participants, it is interesting to note that while Mali's largest ethnic group is the Bambara (34 percent),[556] only two participants from Bambara ethnicity were among the participants. The majority of the participants were spread across two ethnic groups: the Tuareg and the Arabs/Moors. Eleven participants in total were from Tuareg (also known as Tamasheq) ethnicity, while the Tuareg only make up about one percent of Malian society.[557] Eleven participants shared the Arab or Moor ethnicity. The Moors are also known as Azawagh Arabs, named after the Azawagh region of the Sahara (covering parts of Niger, Mali, and Algeria).[558] The Arabs and Tuareg are often grouped together in analyses of Mali's ethnic conflict[559] as they both occupy the northern parts of Mali and fought side by side in a number of jihadist and separatist groups. The other ethnicities represented in this research are Songhai and Fulani (also known as Peulh). One participant was born in Niger. The range of ethnicities of participants is a result from the fact that Bamako's central prison mainly houses individuals labelled as terrorists who have been arrested in the North by French counterterrorism forces, and have been transported to the South and handed over to the Malian authorities.

### *5.2.3 Origin*

Africa is the world's fastest urbanising region.[560] Between 2006 and 2016, Mali's urbanisation rate went from 32.8 to 40.68 percent, showing an increase that is in line with the rest of Africa.[561] While in 2016, 40.68 percent of the total population of Mali was living in urban areas, most participants in the sample come from rural areas. Mali, together with neighbouring countries Mauritania and Niger, scores very low on population density. This is illustrative of the background of a number of participants, who can be categorised as nomadic peoples who travel across the Sahel region (mainly North Mali and the southern parts of Algeria and Libya), based on the weather and the needs of their livestock.[562] Of all participants, the majority (24) came from the north of Mali, mainly scattered around the northern cities of Tombouctou, Gao, and Kidal. This part of the country is often described as *la brousse* (or the bush).

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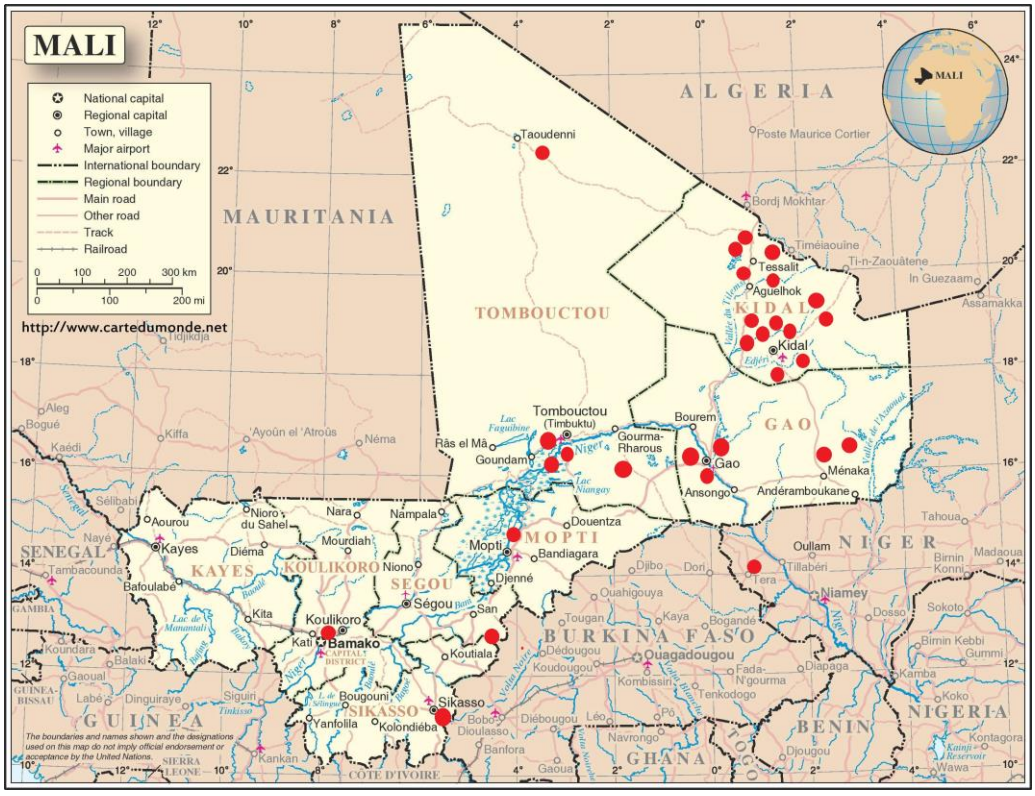
[556] CIA World Factbook 2018, Mali, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html.
[557] CIA World Factbook, idem.
[558] *Paris, François (1995). "L Bassin de I'Azawagh : peuplements et civilisations, du néolithique à l'arrivée de l'islam". Milieux, sociétés et archéologues (in French). Karthala. http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/pleins_textes_7/b_fdi_03_04/42071.pdf, Retrieved 4 January 2018.*
[559] Chauzal, Grégory, and Thibault Van Damme. *The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 crisis*. Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2015.
[560] United Nations, ed., *The Demographic Profile of African Countries* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Economic Commission for Africa, 2016), 1.
[561] 'Mali - Urbanization 2017 | Statistic', Statista, accessed 21 November 2018, https://www.statista.com/statistics/458529/urbanization-in-mali/.
[562] Andrew B. Smith, *African Herders: Emergence of Pastoral Traditions*, vol. 8 (Rowman Altamira, 2005).

*Picture 5.1 – 'La brousse' – Source: Clericus, http://www.panoramio.com/photo/45692181.*

One participant used to live in Mopti in Central Mali, three participants came from the south of Mali and one participant from the village of Tera in Niger – close to the border with Mali. For one participant it was unclear where he came from. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the specific areas and towns or villages. One participant was a foreigner, born and raised in Niger, but as a consequence of his occupation as a trader, he travelled alongside the Niger River on a monthly basis from Niger to Mauretania, crossing Mali. The overrepresentation of participants from Mali's north is due to the conflict and that region and the subsequent activities of the French counter-terrorism operation Barkhane in the Sahel region, including the northern parts of Mali.[563] Almost all participants were arrested by French forces and handed over to Malian authorities before being transported to the country's capital Bamako.

*Figure 5.2 – Geographic origin of participants*

[563] Chantal Lavallée and Jan Claudius Völkel, 'Military in Mali: The EU's Action against Instability in the Sahel Region', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 20, no. 2 (2015): 159–85.




### *5.2.4 Marital status, family situation and religious background*

Table 5.1 shows the marital status and the number of children at the time of joining the organisation of all participants. A large share of respondents was married at the time of arrest: 67 percent. On average, participants with children had 4 to 5 children. Regarding religious affiliation, there is a well-known saying in Mali that the country is "98% Muslim, 2% Christian and 100% animist", referring to the fact that where Islam is the dominant religion (98 percent of Malians are Muslim), it has absorbed traditional practices and has mixed with older, animist traditions.[564] All participants in the research grew up in a Muslim household and described themselves as Muslims.

### *5.2.5 Educational background and occupation*

In terms of educational background, participants usually answered in numbers of years they had attended school. One third of the participants did not have any formal education. One participant mentioned he learned Arabic at home and one other participant listed madrassa as his educational background. Of those who were educated, the number of years ranged from three to 12 years. Table 5.1 includes the distribution of participants across educational background. Compared to Mali's general population, the sample scores low on education. According to the World Bank, the gross enrolment rate in primary education in Mali had reached 82 percent in 2009, up from 60 percent in 2000.[565] At the same time, those statistics date back to before the Tuareg rebellion of 2012. After the rebellion and the military coup in the same year, hundreds of schools were and remain closed in the north and centre of Mali due to security concerns. A United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

[564] Celeste Hicks Bamako, 'Mali War Exposes Religious Fault Lines', *The Guardian*, 3 May 2013, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/03/mali-war-religious-faultlines.
[565] 'News & Broadcast - Mali: Second Education Sector Investment Program', accessed 21 November 2018, http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:22706245~menuPK:141310~pagePK:34370~piPK:34424~theSitePK:4607,00.html.

Affairs (UNOCHA), stated that 500 schools were closed at the end of 2016-17 as a result of the rampant insecurity caused by armed political and extremist groups.[566] Due to their hostility against what is perceived as "Western education", terrorist groups have carried out numerous attacks against schools in North and Central Mali.[567] All in all, the educational system has deteriorated dramatically after 2012, in light of which the educational background of the participants can be better understood.

The majority of the participants (12) described themselves as shepherds or farmers, three of which also mentioned they were traders on the side. Six participants were traders by occupation (excluding the two part-time traders). Other occupations included mechanic, electrician, plumber, truck driver, baker, and Koran scholar. One participant described himself as a hunter and traditional healer (marabout). Four participants did not provide their occupation, two of which because they were 18 and 19 years old and were helping out their families rather than having their own occupation.

The dataset consists of the coded data provided through interviews with thirty participants. All of them were incarcerated in Mali's capital Bamako, in the Central Penitentiary, for terrorism-related offenses. However, only two participants were sentenced, and both were appealing their sentence, whereas the majority had been charged with terrorism-related offenses but was still awaiting trial. Sixteen participants were individuals who used to be members of extremist organisations in Mali, which they had voluntarily joined, while two participants were forced to join. Eight participants denied involvement with terrorist organisations but did share their personal experiences, including reasons why they thought others joined extremist organisations in Mali. Four participants did not disclose the exact nature of their involvement with terrorist groups and it was difficult to determine whether they could be categorised as part of the voluntary or forced, hence they have been characterised under the label *vague*.

### 5.3 Involvement in terrorist groups

Of those participants who had joined extremist organisations, Table 5.2 provides a breakdown of those groups. Mali provides the backdrop for a plethora of terrorist, jihadist, and rebel groups and boundaries between these groups are blurry. In the past years, there has been a growing fragmentation of groups,[568] and as a result, a number of organisations participants were involved in, either merged with other groups or disappeared altogether.[569] In Table 5.2, an overview of all organisations participants claimed to have been members of, is provided. The participants who either denied involvement (three) with extremist groups or were unclear about their specific group involvement (four) have been listed as *unknown*. Four participants mentioned two groups when asked about their affiliation and in those cases we listed both groups. Two respondents described themselves as belonging to both MUJAO and another group (the Signed in Blood-Battalion and the AQIM being the other groups), one respondent affiliated himself with both AQIM and Plateforme, and one respondent said he was a member of both HCUA and CMA. In total, 11 groups were represented and these extremist groups provide a rather complete picture of all extremist groups that were active in Mali between 2013 and 2017.

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[566] 'Rapport Inter-Cluster Coordination Janvier - Juin 2017 | HumanitarianResponse', Rapport Inter-Cluster Coordination (UNOCHA, January 2017), https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/mali/document/rapport-inter-cluster-coordination-janvier-juin-2017.

[567] 'Students Flee Sharia in Northern Schools', IRIN, 22 June 2012, http://www.irinnews.org/report/95713/mali-students-flee-sharia-northern-schools.

[568] Dowd and Raleigh, 'The Myth of Global Islamic Terrorism and Local Conflict in Mali and the Sahel'.

[569] Dowd and Raleigh, 499.

*Table 5.2 Overview of participants' involvement in terrorist groups*

| | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| **Distribution across organisation** | | |
| *Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)* | 4 | 17 |
| *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)* | 4 | 17 |
| *al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)* | 3 | 13 |
| *al-Mourabitoun* | 2 | 8 |
| *Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)* | 2 | 8 |
| *Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA)* | 2 | 8 |
| *Platform of armed groups (Platform)* | 2 | 8 |
| *Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA)* | 2 | 8 |
| *Ansar Dine* | 1 | 4 |
| *Signed-in-Blood Batallion / Masked Brigade* | 1 | 4 |
| *Groupe d'autodéfense Touareg Imghad et alliés (GATIA)* | 1 | 4 |
| *Unknown* | 10 | |
| **Distribution across merged groups** | | |
| *Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM)* | 10 | 44 |
| *Platform (Platform, GATIA)* | 4 | 17 |
| *CMA (CMA, MAA, MNLA, HCUA)* | 9 | 39 |
| *Unknown* | 8 | |
| **Position in terrorist group** | | |
| *Recruiter* | 1 | 6 |
| *Sharia police* | 1 | 6 |
| *Other (support, collaboration)* | 2 | 11 |
| *Logistic services* | 5 | 28 |
| *Fighter* | 9 | 50 |
| *Unknown* | 12 | |

Table 5.2 also indicates which extremist groups merged in Mali in the past years. To illustrate the complexity of the situation: one participant described himself in the interview as a member of what he referred to as the *Mokhtar Belmokhtar Brigades*, named after its Algerian leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, also known as the One-Eyed, Marlboro Man or the Uncatchable.[570] Belmokhtar fought with the *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan in the 1990s, fighting against the pro-Soviet government. Upon his return to North Africa, he became a commander of the Mali-based AQIM. In December 2012, due to internal strife in AQIM, he announced his departure from AQIM and the founding of his own group, the *Mokhtar Belmokhtar Brigades*, more commonly known as the 'Masked Brigade' or the 'Signed-in-Blood-Brigade'. In August 2013, this group put out a statement announcing its merger with MUJAO into a new group called al-Mourabitoun,[571] the group responsible for the November 2051 attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital Bamako. Finally, in March 2017, the birth of yet another group was announced. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) was a merger of four al-Qaeda-linked organisations under one banner, including Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoun, and AQIM Sahara branch are all part of the new entity. One of the two other main groups is CMA, also represented as a separate group in the first figure, a merger of CMA with MAA, MNLA, and HCUA. The other one is Platform, a merger of Platform and GATIA.[572]

[570] Based in Mali, Belmokhtar also has a reputation as a smuggler, and had made millions smuggling diamonds, weapons, drugs and cigarettes, earning him the nickname "Mr. Marlboro." He has also been dubbed "The Uncatchable" by French officials.

[571] 'Sahara Militant Islamists "Merge"', 22 August 2013, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23796920.

[572] In reality, even the known groups and their mergers are more complex on the ground, as illustrated by one of the respondents in the research, who explained that he was a member of GATIA (which he described as a sub-

### 5.4 Position in terrorist group

Table 5.2 also provides a breakdown of participants according to what position they held within the groups they affiliated themselves with. The majority of participants (nine) classified their positions as fighters, with the others describing a variety of other positions ranging from practical support to administrative work. This is interesting to note as it raises the question what influence a certain position within a terrorist group might have on factors that play a role in becoming involved with a terrorist group in the first place. Logistical services within a group included providing mechanical or electric services, transporting arms and munitions, or doing administrative work. The category *other* includes those participants who described themselves as either supporters of – or collaborators with – the group without clearly indicating details of their specific role. The eight participants that denied involvement with any terrorist groups fall under the category *unknown*, as do four other participants who did not provide specific information about their own roles.

### 5.5 Participants' perspectives on terrorism in Mali

Before describing the factors that played a role in the involvement with terrorist groups in chapter six, this section will provide an overview of how the respondents reflected on Mali, ranging from general comments on the security situation, to insights on terrorism in the country, and personal experiences with violent groups. This section first clarifies how inmates accused of terrorism-related offences portrayed the phenomenon of terrorism in Mali to better contextualise the subsequent analysis of motivating factors.

When describing the current situation in the country, interviewees often started with describing a country torn by conflict due to the demands for independence in the North (Azawad) and a country that is heavily influenced by foreign actors. Within that context, they referred to the presence of terrorist and violent groups in the North of the country, where most respondents specifically mentioned MUJAO, Ansar Dine, AQIM, Platform, and CMA. According to the interviewees, terrorist groups in Mali were composed of both Malians as well as foreigners from neighbouring countries, were mainly present in cities and could be identified by their attitude, their gear, the weapons they carried, and specific signs such as flags or emblems.

The accused terrorists provided examples of life under the rule of these groups including the prohibition of smoking and drinking alcohol, placing strict rules on the movements of citizens, and enforcing sharia-based rules of conduct for women such as wearing the veil and not interacting with males that are not family members. Strict punishments were also implemented by terrorist groups; one of the participants was appointed as Head Commissioner of MUJAO's sharia police in Gao and he talked about how he oversaw punishments including the cutting off of limps and stoning to death. However, the new regime under the rule of terrorist groups also included improvements in the eyes of the participants, such as a greater sense of security, clearer rules and boundaries, and free provision of electricity and water. Some of the interviewees shared their direct experiences with terrorist and other violent groups in their functions of patrolling officers, soldiers, "public administrators", and technical experts. The rise of alternative actors (foreign powers, rebel groups) in the region pushed some to leave the terrorist groups to go back to their

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group within the group Plateforme). Then, he added that he was also a member of the group MAA, which according to him was being integrated into the larger GATIA/Plateforme combination. When asked for further clarification he explained that Plateforme was literally a platform of different groups including MAA, GATIA, and two paramilitary groups: Ganda Koy and Ganda Izo.

families and their previous occupations. This situation provides the context for the respondents in this research, who at some point either resorted to engaging with terrorist groups or have been accused of doing so. In the next chapter, the more direct situational characteristics that encouraged engagement of these individuals with terrorist groups, as well as precipitants – the specific events that preceded engagement with terrorist groups for the participants, will be further discussed.

### 5.6 Conclusion

As is evident from the description of the participants, the sample provides a large variety on most demographic dimensions. Nonetheless, a number of striking commonalities include geographic region of origin, with the majority coming from the northern region of Mali – and the fact that most participants were married and had children. Regarding ethnicity, Tuareg and Arabs are overrepresented in the sample but this is again in line with their northern background and the fact that all participants were arrested by the French counter-terrorism force Barkhane, which is only active in the northern regions of Mali and the broader Sahel. On most categories however, there is a large variety in the sample, both regarding demographic variables such as age and occupation, but notably also on the category of specific group involvement and role within terrorist groups.

In the next chapter (based on the thematic content analysis) the elements that played a role in the involvement of the participants will be presented. As much as possible, attention has been paid to highlighting differences between respondents and to steer cleer of generic conclusions. In chapter eight, the findings are compared and contrasted to the perspectives of Malian and international actors and with the existing literature.

# Chapter 6 – Results: suspected terrorists' perspectives[573]

## 6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding of how and why individuals become involved with terrorism in Mali. The research set out to analyse the individual narratives of Malian inmates who engaged with terrorism as well as the perspectives of those who work on the topic of terrorism in Mali, in order to provide more insight on what factors play a role in this process of engagement. The central research question in this thesis is: how can we understand involvement in terrorism in Mali? This chapter presents the first part of the empirical data gathered in Mali based on 30 interviews with (suspected) terrorists. Understanding why and how someone becomes involved in terrorism is a process that does not lend itself to a checklist. Individual factors (why) or specific steps (how) can be cited or ascribed, but they rarely capture the full explanation. Most (suspected) terrorists in this study did not provide a clear-cut response to the question of how or why they became involved with a violent extremist or terrorist group. They did not provide a list of reasons to explain their involvement with terrorism but rather, they chose to reflect on their own as well as others' experiences and gave lengthy descriptions of what was going on in their life at the time. Sociologist Lois Presser introduced the concept of "narrate identities" to describe the results from offender interviews: "…One does not have a story. Rather, one makes a story in a particular context. Story making is a dynamic and collaborative process, one that occurs during research encounters as during any other social encounter."[574] In line with that, the participants in this research essentially provided a narrative reflecting their own experience.

The interview structure for the interviews with prisoners consisted of three parts with the first phase focusing on building rapport with the prisoner, the second phase asking questions about their background, and finally, in the third phase asking how they became involved with terrorism. This third and most important question was introduced by asking the respondents how they ended up in prison. This question resulted in some cases directly into a story about how the respondent was arrested and the extent of his involvement with terrorism. In other cases, more questions were needed to more explicitly inquire after their involvement with terrorist groups. Three participants denied involvement with terrorist groups and said they did not know why there were in prison or why they were arrested. In those cases, the interview continued asking them why they thought *others* engaged with terrorist groups in Mali. With the other participants, some individuals gave lengthy descriptions of their recruitment by terrorist groups, their role and time in the group and their general experiences with terrorism. Others would provide a short answer to every specific question such as 'what was your role within the group?' or 'what was life like in your village under the occupation of this group?'. Another point worth mentioning is that while most interviews resulted in a personal account of the respondent, sometimes interviewees would answer a question speaking on behalf of a group, for example all those accused of terrorism, their ethnic group or all citizens living in the north of Mali. As a result, the themes and domains that were identified in the analysis of the interviews are a mixture of motivations that either directly or indirectly influenced the involvement in terrorist groups of the individuals that were

[573] Parts of this chapter have been published with the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), see: Liesbeth van der Heide and Julie Coleman (May 2020), "The Last Frontier: Prisons and Violent Extremism in Mali", *ICCT Policy Brief,* https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/05/The-Last-Frontier-Prisons-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Mali.pdf.

[574] Lois Presser, 'Violent Offenders, Moral Selves: Constructing Identities and Accounts in the Research Interview', *Social Problems* 51, no. 1 (2004): 82–101.

interviewed as well as motivations that played a role in the lives of others who became involved with terrorist groups.

This chapter reflects the findings from the 30 interviews that were conducted with individuals incarcerated for terrorism-related offences in Mali. These interviews, together with the interviews that are presented in chapter seven, comprise the core of the research. The narratives provide insights in the reasons and motivations of the participants to become involved with terrorist groups. When participants talked about how they became involved with terrorist groups, these motivations were coded as themes and these themes were in turn grouped under seven overarching domains that provide insight into involvement in terrorism in Mali. The themes and domains are mutually exclusive.

In line with this, the chapter is structured according to the main outcomes, first by domain, and second by a reflection on the various themes or motivations (individual, group, structural) within the domains. It then goes on to further deconstruct and investigate the themes and domains that jointly shed light on engagement in terrorism. These accounts are illustrative of terrorism involvement in Mali. In total, the seven domains that were identified are *state-citizen relations, survival, societal tensions, foreign influence, economic opportunities, ideology*, and *lack of information*. The prevalence per domain and theme is noted in Table 6.1 – in other words: how often was a specific theme mentioned across the thirty interviews?

*Table 6.1 – Overview of (relative) frequency per domain and theme*

| Domain + themes | | Frequency | Overall frequency | Relative frequency |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **State-citizen relations** | | | 41 | 13.7 |
| | *Lack of political responsibilities* | 17 | | |
| | *Lack of institutional capabilities* | 13 | | |
| | *Identity* | 11 | | |
| **Survival** | | | 27 | 13.5 |
| | *Immediate survival* | 14 | | |
| | *Long-term survival strategies* | 13 | | |
| **Foreign influence** | | | 33 | 11 |
| | *Direct influence neighbouring countries* | 9 | | |
| | *International actors* | 16 | | |
| | *Foreign jihadist influence* | 8 | | |
| **Societal tensions** | | | 29 | 9.7 |
| | *North vs. South conflict* | 10 | | |
| | *Lack of community in Mali* | 9 | | |
| | *Ethnic tensions in society* | 10 | | |
| **Economic opportunities** | | | 17 | 8.5 |
| | *Economic benefits* | 13 | | |
| | *Economic challenges* | 4 | | |
| **Ideology** | | | 11 | 5.5 |
| | *Religion/ Azawad* | 11 | | |
| **Lack of information** | | | 6 | 3 |
| | *Lack of education / information* | 6 | | |

Lack of government political responsibilities (labelled *lack of political responsibilities*) was the most commonly cited theme for becoming involved with terrorist groups. Closely related, but separately referenced was the lack of institutional capabilities of the government, labelled *lack of institutional capabilities* in Table 6.1. Lack of political responsibilities was followed closely by the influence of international actors and survival, the latter including both the themes of *immediate survival* and *long term survival strategies*. *Economic benefits* as a factor playing a role in involvement in terrorism was mentioned by 13 respondents. 11 respondents mentioned *religion or Azawad* as a theme that plays an important role in involvement with terrorist groups. *Identity* as a theme was also mentioned by 11 respondents referring to how the respondents perceived of themselves within Malian society and the larger Sahelian region. This was followed by the related theme of *ethnic tensions*, related to the larger domain of *societal tensions*. *Foreign jihadist influence* and were the next two themes mentioned by participants in terms of frequency. Aside from *ethnic tensions*, two other themes related to Malian society are grouped in the middle, including the *conflict between the North and the South of Mali* and *lack of community* in Mali. Finally, the list of frequencies is completed by the themes of the *direct influence of neighbouring countries, lack of education/information*, and *economic challenges*.

Overall, the domain of *state-citizenship relations* figured most prominently in the interviews –the themes *lack of political responsibilities* and *lack of institutional capabilities* both ranked high in the list of all themes (one and five, respectively). Nonetheless, since some domains include only one or two themes – *lack of information*, *ideology*, and *survival*) whereas others include as many as four themes (*societal tensions*), a weighted average was calculated across the domains by dividing the frequency per domain by the overall frequency, to provide an overview of the relative prominence per domain. The weighted frequencies per domain show that the two domains of state-citizenship relations and survival rank highest.

## 6.2 State-citizen relations

In this study, I defined the domain of state-citizen relations as *all aspects related to the perceived role of the Malian government vis-à-vis its citizens*, and the domain is further split into three themes: *identity, institutional capabilities*, and *political responsibilities* (see Table 6.2). The themes were inductively deduced from the coding process, where for example identity relates to how the respondents perceive of themselves within Malian society and to what extent they identify themselves as Malian citizens. *Institutional capabilities* relates to what the respondents perceive of as the government's main institutional or practical tasks (such as providing electricity, education, and justice) and how these are related to their involvement with terrorist groups. *Political responsibilities* as a theme refers to factors that the inmate respondents interpret as being related to the political tasks of the government, for example the perceived lack of willingness of the government to negotiate with terrorist groups or the perceived justice provided by terrorist groups vis-à-vis unjust policies of the government.

*Table 6.2 – State-citizen relations as a driver of involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Kabila<br>Malian citizenship<br>Cross-border community | Identity | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| No protection<br>Lack of basic services<br>No electricity or water<br>Government lack of education | Lack of institutional capabilities | State-citizen relations |
| Lack of governance<br>Not willing to negotiate with terrorist groups<br>Justice provided by terrorist groups | Lack of political responsibilities | |

### *6.2.1 Identity*

Throughout the interviews, the role of the Malian government and the identity of the respondents as Malian citizens emerged as a central theme in their pathways to involvement in terrorism. To the question 'How did you become involved with terrorist groups (or a specific group)?', 11 respondents provided an answer in which they linked their identification with terrorist groups to either their ethnic tribe, their identity as a Northerner – which they often viewed as at odds with the Malian government or state, – or their identity as part of groups that are not necessarily linked to Mali as a country but rather, have a regional or even transnational character. When discussing the background of the respondents (ranging from questions such as 'where are you from?' to 'are you Malian?', the concept of the *kabila* was often mentioned by respondents to describe their identity in the Malian context. Kabila (*qabila* in French) is the word used for the northern tribe-structure in the Sahel region, and refers to a group structure composed of the descendants of a common ancestor. For example, Vadim, a 23-year-old Bambara from Bamako, when asked what kabila he belonged to, proudly answered: "Malinke, which is one of many Bambara kabilas and it is the same kabila as the president" [Vadim]. Vadim is an exception as only two participants are Bambara by ethnicity. It is no coincidence that he referred to the president of Mali because the majority of government officials have Bambaran ethnicity, and they make up the majority of the Southern population of Mali. The kabila structure originates from within the Arab community, but the social organisation of other Malian communities is very similar, especially for the Tuareg and the Peulh (charcaterized by a strict hierarchy based on one's ethnic and social group, with authority originating from a system of Islamic chieftaincy).[575] Kabilas form the basis for the social structure of communities and range from very hierarchically organised groups (especially among the (Azawagh) Arabs) to less hierarchically organised ones. Often, those hierarchies involve specific the warriors, nobility, religious, and tributaries-kabilas.

The majority of the interviewees are part of ethnic groups that can be characterised as pastoralist nomadic communities, not bound to specific territories or country borders. This is in line with the most important geographical theatres of turmoil in both the North and central parts of Mali, which consist of mainly rural areas where pastoralists tend to their herds of cattle. These pastoralist communities are ethnically diverse, for example in the Timbuktu and Gao region they are made up generally by Tuareg, Bela ('black' Tuaregs), Arab, and Fulani while in the Kidal region they consist predominantly of Tuareg and Arab communities, and

[575] "Islamic chieftaincy titles are also awarded to faithful members of the community who had contributed to the development of the mosque or help in the propagation of Islam in general." Sulaiman, K. D. O. The Concept and the Challenges of Muslims Unity in Contemporary Nigeria from Islamic Perspectives, p. 162; cf Sidibé, 'Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms', 23.

most pastoralists in Mopti region are Peulh/Fulani. One of the Peulh respondents, Diriye from the Sikasso region explained that:

> I am part of the Peulh community and me and my family are herders. We move every year to find good lands for our cattle, but the Malian government tries to block our movement and they give weapons to local communities to try and stop us. The Malian government does not view the Peulh as part of the state but rather, we are a problem.

Many respondents shared stories that illustrated that to them, the northern areas of Mali together with the southern parts of Algeria and Libya constitute what they view as their homeland. As Xunus, an Arab from Gao, said when asked what Mali meant to him: "I feel very Malian, but I also feel like I belong to Algeria [Xunus]." He views both countries as his homeland. This was reflected both in specific answers to the questions about their involvement with specific terrorist groups or the cross-border drug trade but also more sporadically, when they talked about their background and their family members or their work as farmers, all of which were characterised by the lack of a sense of a territorially bound identity. Even more pointedly, Carim, a Tuareg from Taoudenni, answered the same question with: "I was born in a country that is called Mali by others." Carim said this after detailing his role in the terrorist group AQIM and in response to the question of what the group was fighting against. He talked about fighting for the North and for independence and when asked what Mali meant to him, this was his answer. With this he indicated that while others might label the territory where he was born and lived in as Mali but that he did not necessarily agree with that. At the same time, he also did not explicitly disagree with it. But the fact that this was his first response does indicate that he feels the labelling by others is not necessarily justified and that the existing labels that are used are – at the very least – contested.

### *6.2.2 Lack of institutional capabilities*

A lack of services (i.e. the lack of basic services such as providing electricity, infrastructure, and clean water, or lack of security provided by the state), something the respondents viewed as part of the government's core tasks, featured strongly in the interviews. Thirteen respondents commented on what they perceive of as the state's incompetence in conducting its core tasks or institutional responsibilities. The interviewees that mentioned the role of the government in their involvement with terrorist groups generally demonstrated a feeling of abandonment by the government in terms of security but also sheer governmental presence in the North. Geographic conditions make living in areas in the Northern territories extremely difficult, and there was a clear perception among interviewees that the perceived lack of service delivery is not merely a capacity issue but that the state is not willing to deliver those services. In turn, for many respondents this government neglect provided a push factor to join terrorist groups fighting against the government out of resentment or to join terrorist groups because they did provide those services. Rama, when asked why people become involved in terrorism answered: "Mali [the Malian government] ruined the north".

He added that in his opinion there can be no peace because the government itself provides reasons for individuals to engage in terrorism, including a lack of education, lack of civil rights, torture, and discrimination. Ali, commenting on the failure on part of the government to provide security in the North, said:

> Before the terrorists arrived, the state was functioning very well but when the rebels arrived, attacking the state, the Malian army and the government left, and the situation deteriorated. Before the departure of the state life was going well, we were working and had everything we needed. After the state left, doctors were arrested and banks

did not work anymore. Those who could not leave joined [terrorist groups], while many others escaped to Niger, Burkina Faso, Tunisia, Mauretania and other countries. [Ali].

Aside from not being able to provide security, a lack of the provision of basic services (such as access to justice, food, water and electricity, and security) was mentioned by six participants as playing a role in the decision of individuals to become involved with terrorist groups. In some cases, respondents indicated these tasks were taken up by terrorist groups after the retreat of the Malian army. And, according to four interviewees, they took up that role more successfully compared to the Malian government. To illustrate this, Moussa, a 43-year-old Tuareg from Kidal, reflected on his experiences with the terrorist group Ansar Dine in 2012. When asked whether the situation was better or worse under the occupation of Ansar Dine, he replied: "Yes it was better; before we had no electricity and water (or only irregularly) but that became freely available when Ansar Dine provided it" [Moussa]. Another respondent said: "In 2012, the entire North of the country was living under the Islamist government, there was security, no injustices, no taxes to be paid, free health care and electricity" [Yunus]. When asked how it was possible to have social services for free, without paying taxes, he answered: "I do not know but maybe through the kidnapping of foreigners. At that time, you could dispose your goods at the market and nobody would steal them, while nowadays robberies happen even in your own house" [Idem]. Both examples illustrate how terrorist groups are perceived as providing services that the government was not providing and / or that were appreciated by the respondents.

### *6.2.3 Lack of political responsibilities*

The highest-ranking theme that emerged from the interviews is the perceived lack of political responsibilities on behalf of the Malian government. In total, 17 respondents talked about what they perceived of as a lack of political representation, legitimacy, and accountability on part of the government. Regarding the political responsibilities of the state, the respondents mentioned three factors: a general lack of governance, the unwillingness to negotiate with terrorist groups, and justice provided by terrorist groups. The general lack of governance was explained in various ways. Three participants stated matter-of-factly that the state was absent in their region and had been for a long time. Others did not refer to the absence of the Malian government per se but rather, explained how alternative systems of governance function in the country. Sikou, a 34-year-old Arab from Gossi near Timbuktu, said that "the actions of the Malian government are viewed as torture and discrimination, and this leads to support for terrorist groups" [Sikou]. He explained how the tribal governance system works as an alternative to the Malian state:

> Without the state, we can live. Every tribe [or kabila as they are called locally] has its own tribal leader. If you mistreat the 'Chef du Kabila', it is considered an offense to the entire kabila. Within the kabila's there are a number of clans called ashira's. My ashira is spread across Mauritania, Niger and Algeria and members of my ashira visit me in prison. [Idem]

Sikou added that with new techniques, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, it is easy for individuals to inform and update everyone within their own kabila or ashira. "My kabila consists of about 10,000 people that I can mobilize without arms if I need them to advocate for something. We are not a family; we are a tribe. When you touch the feet, you touch the head" [Idem]. With this he explained that his tribe basically functions as a pseudo-state by representing the specific groups, taking care of each other, informing each other and if need be – mobilising each other.

Two respondents specifically mentioned the lack of willingness on part of the government to negotiate with terrorists. Vadim said: "The government could solve the problems with the jihadists by negotiating with them, without the involvement of MINUSMA" [Vadim]. Another point that was made by the participants was that some terrorist groups were not just better at providing basic services or security; they also did a better job at providing justice. Lamin, a Tuareg from Aguelhok, said that under the occupation of the terrorist group MNLA, life was easier. "The justice dispensed by MNLA was more effective than that of the government, as the locals knew who the thieves were" [Lamin]. By contrasting the justice ruled out by terrorist groups with an absent government that does not provide justice, they were explaining how other actors have picked up tasks that they view as governance tasks.

## 6.3 Survival

Aside from state-citizen relations, the principal driver for becoming involved with a terrorist group was *survival*. This referred in all cases to survival on the individual or group level. I defined survival as a theme in this study as *a strategy to prevent immediate or long-term harm to a person's physical, familial or material sphere*. The theme can be further divided into two categories: *immediate survival* and *long-term survival strategies* (see Table 6.3). The theme *long-term survival strategies* includes factors such as *money* and *salaries provided by terrorist groups*. These were clustered under the domain *survival* rather than the domain *economic opportunities* because the respondents did not choose to become involved with terrorist groups first and foremost for the economic benefits but rather because they saw no other opportunity to survive in the north and be able to feed their families.

*Table 6.3 – Survival as a driver for involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Survival<br>Protection<br>Protecting family members | Immediate survival | Survival |
| Salaries provided by terrorist groups<br>Lack of opportunities for young people<br>Money | Long term survival strategies | |

### *6.3.1 Immediate survival*

The first category, *immediate survival*, refers to participants who joined or worked with a terrorist group as a direct survival strategy, in the sense that they or their family members were being physically threatened in case of refusal to collaborate with terrorist groups. In 14 cases, participants indicated they literally felt they had no other option than to join or aid a terrorist group or be killed – or have their family members be killed. In the most straightforward example of this factor, Conate, a Bela Tuareg who lived in Kidal where the terrorist group Ansar Dine was present explained: "Many people join to save their life and protect their family" [Conate]. In his case, he said he had no option but to join the group to avoid them from killing him or his family. Eliya, a 33-year-old Ifoghas Tuareg, explained that he was arrested because he was carrying a weapon and to the French soldiers who arrested him, that was an indication of his involvement. He said: "In the North, there is no

security, everyone who owns property (a car, money etc.) has weapons to protect them. It is not safe in the North" [Eliya]. He said that he became involved with a terrorist group (he did not specify which group) because they provided weapons and, as a consequence, security.

Ali, a Songhai from Gao explained how two terrorist groups, MUJAO and MNLA, invaded the city of Gao in Northern Mali in 2012 when he lived there. When asked why he became involved with terrorist groups he answered: "I had no choice, I had to protect myself and my family" [Ali]. He said he quickly realized that MNLA was a much more violent group compared to MUJAO as they were "threatening, beating and killing people", so he chose to join MUJAO as they promised him protection against MNLA-members [Idem]. When participants mentioned survival as a factor explaining why they became involved with terrorist groups, they often tied it a lack of security provided by the government. Waydane, an Arab from the village of Tabankort (between Gao and Kidal) illustrated this situation. When the French (operation Serval) arrived in 2012 in his region, he said that the Arabs did not feel protected anymore from the Tuareg by the government. The Tuareg paid him a visit and threatened him, took his car, his motorbike and his livestock and beat him up. As a result, he fled and joined AQIM in a region about 200km from his home. Additionally, he said that "…Eventually another group, Platform, was established as a group of Arabs to establish protection against the Tuareg and they received government support. I knew I would be able to be protected by Platform, so I decided to leave [AQIM] and go back to my home village and join Platform instead. [Waydane]."

Kheirou, an Arab from the Menaka region who joined MAA, used to work in Libya as a soldier in Ghadafi's regime until the regime fell. When he returned to his family in Menaka in 2011 "MNLA, MUJAO and AQIM had established their authority in the North and the Malian army had already left the region" [Kheirou]. He explains that MNLA kept attacking the villages and as a result "we became tired". In response he says he gathered the young people from his village and urged them to secure the village against MNLA by joining MAA. When talking about his accusation later on in the interview he says he was accused of being a terrorist and adds: "but we were defending Mali" [Idem]. Thus, survival for these participants meant joining or cooperating with terrorist groups to defend themselves against other terrorist groups or prevent physical harm.

### *6.3.2 Long term survival strategies*

Aside from protecting themselves, family and/or community members as a motivation for engaging with terrorist groups, survival also pertained to issues such as protecting property or any income-generating activities. In this second category, long-term survival strategies refers to situations where participants viewed their involvement with terrorist organizations as a pragmatic choice fuelled by livelihood incentives. For example, if the presence of a terrorist group that provided security in a region was seen as a pre-condition to trade and to do business or if terrorist groups offered jobs and stability. As the Tuareg farmer from Kidal, Conate, said: "All those with property in Kidal, for example sheep or houses, could not leave it unattended so they just stayed and waited". This meant for example that some respondents joined a terrorist group because they were offered a salary – where the money itself was not so much the primary incentive but rather the role of money in providing a livelihood. The question then becomes to what extent this can be considered involvement in terrorism following Schmid's definition of terrorism as 'an anxiety-inspring method of repeated violent actions' for 'idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons'. However, as argued in the introduction, individuals who might themselves not participate in (the preparation of) violent acts, they can still be considered as involved with terrorism through their affiliation (and support of or collaboration with) terrorist groups.

Another example of this secondary type of survival motivations was when participants viewed engaging or collaborating with terrorist groups as a way out of a situation without any opportunities for personal development. For example, Usman, a 28-year Tuareg, talked about how he and many other young people have no options to build a life in Mali. He was the second eldest son of a cattle herder, and his older brother took over his father's cattle. As the second son, he had to look elsewhere for a job and income and because there was not much to do in the Kidal region, he joined the terrorist group because they provided him with something to do and an income. After prison, he wanted to leave the country and when asked whether the security situation in Mali would be worse if all young people leave the country he said: "Yes, young people could change the situation [positively] but they lack the financial resources to do so" [Usman]. Another participant, Rama, a 20-year-old Arab from Tagara, referring to the northern region, said: "People have nothing, the government is offering nothing for young people".

For a number of participants, survival meant engaging with terrorist groups to be granted an income (through payment of salaries or payment for services) or to be ensured of being allowed to carry out or continue their business. Hassan, a 22-year-old Ifoghas trader, talked about his trading activities in an area controlled by CMA. When asked when he first met CMA-members he explains he encountered them at a checkpoint on the road. "I was getting in touch with people I knew to trade, setting up a trading network. Business increased in the Kidal region during the war because there was a scarcity of food and fuel. In 2012, many people fled Kidal because of suffering. I did not flee because it is my region, my home; I did not have problems."

Waydane, who lived in the Gao region, said that CMA invaded his region in 2012 and pushed the Malian forces out of the region. "As soon as they [the Malian forces] left and the armed groups took over, we just had to work with them. Without their protection, anyone would come and steal our money or our cattle." This was especially the case for those respondents who were shepherds and cattle farmers in the region of Kidal and Gao and wanted to defend themselves against cattle theft.

### 6.4 Foreign influence

*Foreign influence* as a domain covers a number of themes and is defined in this study as *all aspects that relate to the influence of foreign actors*. Several participants talked about having travelled to other neighbouring countries during their youth, either to visit family or to work. An illustrative life-story is the story of Qalib, a 20-year-old Tuareg from the northern village Tessalit, bordering on Algeria, who comes from a nomadic pastoralist family. His father is a shepherd raising cattle including goats, sheep and camels. Qalib was also brought up as a shepherd and he said he liked his work. He did not receive any formal education, but he received Quran lessons at home and from a marabout[576]. When he turned 18, he went to Algeria for two years to "look for work and find money". However, despite many participants describing themselves as members of ethnic groups that are not necessarily bound to Mali (the Tuareg, Peulh, and Arabs), the domain of foreign influence relates to when individuals viewed the presence or actions of a foreign actor to become involved with terrorism.

The factors that were coded as falling within the larger domain of foreign influence in this research are those factors that are perceived by the respondents in this research as

[576] The term marabout indicates a broad range of Muslim religious experts or leader figures such as imams, teachers, scholars, preachers, Sufis and healers. Soares, B. (2017). Structural Adjustment Islam" and the Religious Economy in Neoliberal Mali. *Religion and the Morality of the Market, edited by Daromir Rudnyckyj and Filippo Osella*, 138-59, p. 141.

attempts to influence Mali as a country, either overt and with good intentions or covert and with bad intentions. Roughly speaking, foreign influence can be divided into three themes: (1) *direct influence of neighbouring countries*; (2) *international actors*; and (3) *foreign jihadist influence* (see Table 6.4).

*Table 6.4 – Foreign influence as a driver for involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Spill over effect Algeria<br>Libya weapons influx | Direct influence neighbouring countries | Foreign Influence |
| EU US will not accept Islamic government<br>MINUSMA<br>Serval/Barkhane | International actors | |
| Foreign Jihadist influence | Foreign Jihadist influence | |

### *6.4.1 Direct influence from neighbouring countries*

In terms of a country that was perceived by the participants as having a direct influence on their involvement with terrorist groups, Libya was the example most often mentioned by the respondents, by five respondents in total. The fall of the Gadhafi regime in 2011 led to a return of Tuareg fighters to the north of Mali and, with that, to an influx of weapons that the regime had stockpiled over the years. Two participants in this study served under Gadhafi in Libya and returned to Mali after the fall of his regime. One of the two, Bilal, a Malian Arab from the Menaka region, served in Libya as a member of Gadhafi's personal guard. After the fall of the regime, he went back to Mali and joined the Mokhtar Belmokhtar Brigades, a group that later merged with MUJAO.[577] Another story that is illustrative of Libya's influence on the Malian conflict is the story of Kheirou, another Arab from a small village near Menaka. According to him, he signed up to serve Gadhafi together with hundreds of fellow Arabs from Mali, either as soldiers or mercenaries. In Libya and under Gadhafi's reign, "We enjoyed a certain standard of living and social recognition" whereas upon their return to their home country, "we became refugees without resources in our own country" [Kheirou]. For him, that situation created a breeding ground for frustration and a sensitivity to calls for revolt and recruitment for Islamist groups. Hassan also underlined the Libyan connection to MNLA. "In the first phase of the conflict, MNLA consisted of Libyans but a number of them went back to Libya; now it is mainly Tuareg but still some Libyans as well".

Four interviewees mentioned Algeria as the second neighbouring country that has played a profound role in the Sahelian context. AQIM, generally viewed by the participants as the *most* Islamic and most extreme terrorist group, has its roots in Algeria, and most of its leadership is Algerian. Sikou, an interviewee from Gossi, traced the Algerian influence on

[577] MUJWA merged with the group led by former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Katibat al-Mulathimeen in 2013, creating a new group called al-Murabitun after the 11th-century Muslim empire that encompassed parts of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, and southern Spain.

Mali's situation back to the 1990s, when Algeria waged a hard-line military campaign against violent Islamist insurgents. In his words: "To understand the problem, it is important to understand the context. The origin of all the problems can be found in Algeria". He continued "The example of Egypt is similar to what happened in Algeria in the 80's when the modern Islamist party took power. Algeria was the theatre of a coup d'état and a revolution and as a result, jihadist movements left Algeria to install themselves in the African desert including in the North of Mali."

In total, nine respondents referred to these two countries (Algeria and Libya) specifically as having a direct impact on terrorism in Mali and in some cases, on their personal engagement with terrorist groups. Of these nine, all were either Tuareg (four) or Arab (five) from the northern regions of Mali and they had either received no formal education (six) or only one to two years of Islamic education at home (three). Additionally, the majority of these nine were cattle herders (five).

### *6.4.2 International actors*

A number of international actors featured prominently in the respondents' narratives. The theme of international actors is further divided into the role of the French CT-operations Barkhane and Serval, the role of MINUSMA, and the larger role of Western (European and American) actors in the country. Sixteen respondents listed 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, whether it is money, trade or territory. Kheirou said: "[…] there are many problems in the country because *tout le monde* (everybody) wants to benefit from the country by dividing the country into two parts". He specifically mentioned France, America, Germany, Morocco, and Algeria as countries that he believes have a stake in the Malian conflict. When asked to elaborate he said: "Everyone benefits from the chaos, everyone has his own project and own objective; our country is desolate" [Idem].

Especially the role of France in Mali is controversial in the eyes of the participants, not just because of its colonial history but also because of the CT-operations they run in the country. In total, 12 respondents labelled the French in general as either terrorists or as part of the problem in Mali. For example, Usman, when asked about the problems in Kidal said that "There is the conflict of CMA versus GATIA, and on top of that the French terrorists and the Malian army are killing people. They (the French terrorists and the Malian army) bring the kids of those who have been killed to prison."

Yusuf, a 34-year-old Arab from Timbuktu also blamed the French for a range of issues, ranging from corruption to collaborating with the Bambara:

> As soon as the French people arrived, injustice, corruption and crime began. On top of that, when the French arrived in the country, drought hit Mali and the harvest and the animals started to perish. […] They (the French) are only worried for their own safety and security and they shoot randomly. The people of Barkhane work for Bambaras, they come to the prison every three months to control the inmates they arrested.

And Zidi, a Peul from Djenne, says:

> The French are giving a big gift to Al Qaeda because everyone who wants to leave Al Qaeda is arrested by the French, so people do not leave the group or – when they do and they are arrested – they end up being very frustrated. Both the Malian government and the French are basically pushing people towards Al Qaeda.

Some respondents also suspect France of having its own interests in prolonging the conflict. Sikou refers to a specific moment where negotiations were underway, but then the French foreign minister visited Mali and stopped the dialogue with the terrorists. According to him:

> … the French are torturing the population – they take people, they kill the Tamashek and the Peul, they hurt the local population. The French are not open to dialogue. Talking would provide a solution. But maybe France has an interest in this war or in letting the war continue because it is a source of money because of the military expenses and arms sales.

In line with this, Ghaly says: "France created MNLA and works with them; […] France wants to separate the country into two in order to control the north because it is rich in resources such as uranium, oil and minerals".

Another respondent, Tenis, a 27-year-old male from the small village of Tabankort in the north of Mali, explained that in his view the conflict in Mali started with the arrival in 2012 of a number of terrorist groups in the northern regions. This is what he views as the first war. Then, he continues: "The French arrived in Mali without understanding the country or the context", something he defines as "*la deuxieme guerre"*. According to Sikou, Europe and the United States do not accept countries that are run by Islamist governments and as a consequence, "democratization is not a solution." He provides the example of Egypt where Mohamed Morsi was democratically elected and formed a government that was later removed because of Morsi's ties to an Islamic party.

Finally, the role of MINUSMA came up several times in the interviews. Most respondents did not mention MINUSMA when asked what actors played a role in Mali's conflict, or whom they think should play a role. However, when MINUSMA did come up the inmates generally viewed it negatively. Four respondents provided specific negative examples of their experiences with MINUSMA, while the majority of the interviewees just viewed it as a complicit actor, not necessarily causing problems but definitely not doing anything to solve problems either. In the words of Vadim: "Until MINUSMA leaves the country, Mali will not have peace." Overall, the role of MINUSMA as perceived by the respondents can be characterised as a passive bystander. Where most inmates blame 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.

### *6.4.3 Foreign jihadist influence*

The third factor playing a role when it comes to foreign actors, according to the respondents, is *foreign jihadist influence*. This refers to two things: the direct influence of jihadist groups that are mainly formed by foreigners (mainly from Algeria or Libya) and the more indirect influence of hard-line jihadist ideology spread through Mali with the help of foreign actors. Sikou, a member of MNLA, explains how foreign jihadists influence some specific terrorist groups in Mali: "… There is the problem of the foreigners who form the jihadi movements. They have established trust with the kabila of the Peul led by Konfla and with the Ifoghas led by Iyad Ag Ghali".

In his opinion, the actions of the Malian government are perceived by the Malian population as torture and discrimination, which led to further support for foreign terrorist groups. He also explains that Ag Ghali created a new movement early 2017 composed of AQIM, MUJAO, al-Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and MLF [Idem]. Two other participants mention the jihadist influence of Mali's neighbouring country Niger, because of the presence of Boko Haram in that country. And another participant notes that Somalia-based al-Shabaab is affiliated to al-Qaeda and thus, with AQIM, while both AQIM and Boko Haram have publicly sworn allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [Drouka]. All in all, it

is clear that international actors are viewed with great suspicion and are seen as primarily motivated by their own interests rather than an interest in Malian security.

## 6.5 Societal tensions

The domain of *societal tensions* includes factors that have to do with ethnic tensions and conflict between tribes and clans in Mali. It also includes factors that focus on what the interviewees view as underlying those tensions, for example a lack of mutual understanding and lack of community in society. And finally, partially aligned with the theme of ethnic tensions but at the same time viewed as a dominant issue in and of itself by the participants is the theme of the North vs South divide in the country. All in all, I defined societal tensions as a domain as *all endogenous factors in Mali as a country that are perceived as barriers to peaceful coexistence*. Table 6.5 provides an overview of the factors and themes that make up the larger domain.

*Table 6.5 – Societal tensions as a driver for involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Wanting autonomy in the North<br>Independence Azawad | North vs South conflict | Societal tensions |
| No sense of community<br>Not open to dialogue<br>Lack of mutual understanding | No sense of community | |
| Discrimination<br>Discrimination of Peul by Bambara<br>Ethnic conflict<br>Conflict between groups | Ethnic tensions | |

### *6.5.1 Ethnic tensions in society, north vs south conflict and lack of community*

Ten respondents out of 30 commented in the interviews on the ethnic tensions in the country. All 10 described clear fault lines within Malian society between specific groups (regardless of what group they were a member of). As Sikou noted:

> If you are Peul, Tuareg, or Arab, generally speaking you live in the North, and you are considered a terrorist because the Malian army consist of Bambara and they want to show their pride and assert their power. […] The Peul have been discriminated by the Bambaras and terrorist groups are offering a way to take revenge for the Peul. […] I understand why people turn to violence, because they want justice. The origin of the problem is racism. […] The Tamashek and Arabs get along well with one another, but the problem is the state. The state arrests innocents to flex their muscles. As such, the Bambara are like colonizers who do not understand the North. They know that Azawad is not for them.

This was confirmed by Usman, who said: “The Bambara – like the French – do not like the Tamashek and discriminate against them; and the prison staff mainly consists of Bambara so they view me as a terrorist”.

Many respondents confirmed the ethnic conflict between specific groups, especially the tensions between the Bambara on the one side and the Peul, Arabs, and Tuareg on the other side [Qalib]. In line with the issue of ethnic tensions lies the absence of a sense of community – denoting a lack of a shared identity. Because of the historical conflict between specific ethnic groups, there seems to be no such thing as a Malian identity, according to many of the respondents. One participant said: “There is no sense of community” [Boubacar]. According to Moussa: “Many differences between parties and armed groups and political groups who do not work together is often based on mutual misunderstanding”.

Regarding the perceived conflict between the North and the South of Mali, Lamin said: “In general, life in the North is difficult with water and other services in scarce supply. The locals think that the government in Bamako has forgotten about them”. Jaya, also discussing the North-South divide in the country viewed autonomy as the only solution to the conflict in Mali. Xunus, the Arab who was a member of Platform, explained that there is a big problem of antipathy and mistrust between the North and the government in the South. According to him: “They hate each other and the government has no interest in solving the issue”. On top of that, he added: “Platform was fighting for the government, and I was fighting for Platform – but now I am imprisoned by that same government.”

### 6.6 Economic opportunities

Another domain of personal experience informing individuals’ involvement with terrorism explored in this research is *economic opportunities*. This domain refers to the economic situation of the inmate participants at when they were recruited or become involved with terrorist groups and their perception of the relevance of these aspects to their becoming involved with terrorist groups. In this study, the larger domain of economic opportunities is defined as *aspects that relate to financial or economic gain*. The domain can be broken down into two themes (see Table 6.6): *economic benefits* and *economic challenges*. The latter refers to factors that were viewed by the participants as push factors, i.e. unemployment or lack of opportunities – where engagement with terrorist groups was viewed as a means to address these economic challenges. The former refers to pull factors provided by terrorist groups, i.e. the offer of salaries or other material rewards. If they framed their decision to engage with a terrorist group mainly as the necessary outcome of a strategy focused on survival – it was classified under that domain. If, however, they presented it as part of a more utilitarian consideration driven by economic gain as the main motivator, it was classified under economic opportunities.

*Table 6.6 – Economic opportunities as a driver for involvement in terrorism*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Salaries provided by terrorist groups<br>Money | Economic benefits | Economic opportunities |
| Lack of opportunities for young people<br>Unemployment | Economic challenges | |

### *6.6.1 Economic benefits*

As described in chapter five, almost half of the participants (12) described themselves as shepherds or farmers, three of which also mentioned they were traders on the side. In total, 17 respondents out of 30 identified economic opportunities in the answer to the question of how or why they became involved with terrorist groups. In none of the cases, this related to not having a job at the time of become involved; to the contrary, all participants that became involved for economic reasons were employed at the time of recruitment. At the same time, a number of interviewees mentioned that while not for them personally, for others who joined terrorist groups unemployment was often a factor. One interviewee, Diriye, a Peul from Sikasso, was arrested because he possessed material wealth (a television TV, a motorcycle, among other things) that according to the judge, could have only been accumulated as a result of payments by terrorist groups.

The types of employment of the participant can overall be categorized as unskilled or semi-skilled labour (see chapter five for an overview of respondents' occupations). Six participants were traders by occupation (excluding the two part-time traders). Other occupations included mechanic, electrician, plumber, truck driver, baker, and Koran scholar. One participant described himself as a hunter, traditional healer, and religious scholar (a so-called *marabout*). Four participants did not provide their occupation, two of them because they stated they were helping out their families rather than having a specific occupation.

Especially for the participants who identified themselves as traders, terrorist groups provided economic opportunities for them to expand their business, including the smuggling of weapons and drugs. One of the respondents, Jaya, a 27-year-old Arab a trader from Timbuktu, said that the region was already known for its smuggling routes and that for him, the trade increased when terrorist groups controlled his region. He explained that what he described as the *normal smuggling* he participated in was a very slow process with big trucks.

> There is a lot of smuggling in the northern region, specifically between Algeria and Mali. Petrol, gasoline, drugs, spaghetti and macaroni are traded from Algeria to Mali; cigarettes are traded to Burkina Faso; Animals from Mali to Algeria. The borders are not well guarded, I used to pay money to bandits and use animals to smuggle products to Nigeria; or three days to Algeria with camels.

Here, Jaya vividly demonstrated how he used to tie bags with products underneath the camels to get it across the border unnoticed. When asked about his support for an independent Azawad he says he does not necessarily support an independent country; he just wants to do his business. Another respondent explained how he – similarly to Jaya – engaged with terrorist groups as part of his daily work. He explained that with the arrival of terrorist groups in the North, a new system of checkpoints evolved. "For example, there were Malian government checkpoints, MNLA checkpoints and mafia checkpoints. To pass the

government checkpoints we had to pay between 20-25,000 CFA and at the MNLA checkpoint (later managed by GATIA) passage costs 15-20,000 CFA."

Also illustrative in this regard is the narrative of Hassan, a 21-year-old Tuareg from the Ifoghas clan, who described himself as a member of CMA. When asked how he became involved with CMA he explained he encountered CMA-members at a checkpoint near his village (200km north of Kidal). He was stopped and asked what his name was, where he came from and where he was going; and he answered he was going to *"la brousse."*[578] A while after his encounter with CMA, he was arrested northwest of Kidal, by the French soldiers from Barkhane. "They were on patrol, with approximately ten cars and five helicopters. I was alone on my motor with a lot of baggage on my way to 'la brousse'. When they [Barkhane] asked what I was transporting I answered: 'un sac des balles' (bullets), glasses, gloves, teacups and other stuff'."

Hassan also recalled his arrest by the Barkhane forces. He was asked whether he spoke French, what he was transporting, and whether he was armed or transporting arms. Next, they checked his motor and found the bullets at which point he was asked to step off the motor. The soldiers put his luggage on the ground and took pictures of it and a picture of him and they counted the bullets. When we ask him whether he was also transporting drugs he half-heartedly admits it. When asked about the drug and arms trade in the region, Hassan says the region is *the* route for drug trafficking. "It is very mixed. You cannot really draw a line between legal and illegal trade. There are people who earn 'proper money' – meaning white or legal money – and there are those who just want to earn money, regardless of whether it is black money/on the black market or the drug trade."

As such, cooperating, working with or simply accepting the rules and regulations applied by various terrorist groups that occupied the participants' regions, was something that was viewed by these participants as a necessary part of – quite literally – going about their daily business. Here, much more so then in the domain of economic opportunities (where participants deliberately choose to become involved with terrorist groups for economic reasons) it is a legitimate question to what extent this can really be considered involvement in terrorism. Especially as the idea of being affiliated with terrorist groups becomes even more fuzzy than it already is when it is applies to a daily environment dominated by terrorist groups.

### *6.6.2 Economic challenges*

Four participants commented on the issue of unemployment as a driving force behind involvement with terrorist groups. One respondent said: "A major factor that drives people to join Al Qaeda is unemployment. I was offered a job as a mechanic [by AQIM]. I was working with AQIM so that is why I was accused of collaborating with them but at least I was getting paid" [Waydane].

This was confirmed by Tenis, who said that "unemployment is the biggest problem in our community, there are very few jobs (...) this is the main motive for youth to join armed groups". And Vadim, when asked why others became involved with terrorism, said: "Because of bad governance. Good governance is the fight against poverty. If I were the president my first order of business would be to fight poverty". As such, the combination of a lack of employment or poverty altogether was mentioned as a factor driving involvement with terrorist groups in the region.

[578] 'La Brousse' in Mali is generally used to denote 'the bush', the arid and sparsely populated countryside of Northern Mali.

## 6.7 Ideology

Inmates' accounts also included *ideology* as a factor influencing their involvement in terrorism. Exploring more specifically how the ideological dimension has impacted the involvement in terrorism of the respondents in this study, I specifically inquired after the inmates' views on the role of ideology. I define ideology as a domain as *all aspects related to a specific set of ideas or a specific worldview*. The findings within the domain of ideology in this research can be broadly clustered under two themes and corresponding factors: *religion* and *Azawad*. Overall, 11 participants identified either one or both factors, indicating the significance of ideology as a factor informing involvement with terrorist groups.

*Table 6.7 – Ideology as a driver for involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|
| Religion<br>Azawad | | Ideology |

### *6.7.1 Religion*

Kheirou, who identified religion as a personal reason for him to engage with a terrorist group said: "There are two ways: you pray and work, or you pray and use violence." In his opinion, only a small minority opts for the latter. Another participant, Boubacar, said: "After watching videos of abuse of fellow Muslims, and the fight of other jihadists around the world, I found my path". Ali, the Sharia-police chief, identified religion as an important element for individuals to join terrorist groups. When asked about his daily routine as a member of MUJAO, Ali provided an illustration of life under the jihadist terrorist group

> We would patrol the streets in the city and monitor people. […] It was forbidden for women to go around without the veil, to listen to music and to drink alcohol. When patrolling it is for these elements that we were checking. For example, if a person was found with alcohol, he would be beaten up; if a woman was not wearing the veil, she was forced to wear it.

Two participants mentioned a rise in religious activism in the country, something that was seen as both a positive and a negative dynamic. According to Boubacar, the religious community is becoming more politically active and has formed associations as a way to influence the government. At the same time, he argued that, until now, Islamic groups felt abandoned and excluded from government. He explained that he was part of the Salafi movement in the North; a movement that he asserts has been growing over the past years. Poure, a 61-year-old Tuareg from Tessalit, also said that there is a general discrimination of Islam in the country; that all Muslims are treated the same way even though they are different.

Another interviewee, Carim, noted that for him, Muslim versus Muslim conflict over leadership issues and religious ideology was the main reason for him to join a specific terrorist group that he believed represented the legitimate interpretation of Islam. He explained how his local imam, who he described as an elder who functioned as a trusted advisor in his own community, urged him to join AQIM as the only true representative of Islam. Vadim, when asked about the difference between jihadist groups in the country he said that to him, they are all the same. In his opinion, a jihadist is

> He who fights on behalf of God with the purpose of implementing sharia law. Since the country is 95% Muslim why don't we implement the Quran if that is what the

> majority wants? Right now, in Mali there is a democracy but there is a big difference between sharia and democracy. We have had very many different laws in Mali and it has not always worked so why do we not try sharia law to see if it works better? […] The problem is that the Christian minority imposes its laws on the Muslim majority of the country.

However, for others, the role of religion vis-à-vis terrorism was less clear. Ghaly, when asked about terrorism in Mali, said:

> Jihadists are those who conduct war. I cannot say more because I have nothing to do with them. I do not know why they do what they do because I do not know what is in their heart. If others conduct war in the name of my God I do not know why, and I cannot judge them. We all have the same God. (…) Religion is for God, not for jihadists. Those who do not conduct war are not jihadists. Everybody follows his own set of beliefs.

All in all, only four participants named religion specifically as a factor that motivated them to engage with terrorist groups while the overwhelming majority did not. Of these four, two were Arabs (Boubacar and Kheirou) and two were Tuareg (Carim and Poure). Where Boubacar also tied conflict over religion to ethnic tensions – saying specific religious interpretations were also a way of defining one's group or tribe against the others – Kheirou tied the role of religion to international actors, specifically the influence of countries like Saudi Arabia who were actively spreading Wahhabism in the country. To Carim, identity was the other main factor that played a role in his involvement with terrorism, but he did not link that to religion as such. Other participants referred to religion as a factor more generally, i.e. as a potential cause for frustration when religious groups feel discriminated against by the government or by other groups in society, or as a factor that influences others who join terrorist groups.

### *6.7.2 Azawad*

The second ideological factor that came up several times in interviews is the notion of *Azawad.* Azawad refers to the name that most Tuareg rebels give to Northern Mali and MNLA, in 2012, declared the independence of Azawad.[579] In total, Azawad comprises roughly two thirds of the size of Mali and it consists of the territory stretching from the northern border of Mali to parts of the central Mopti region, including the cities of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. The Tuareg have rebelled over six times in Mali's history, among other things, for an independent Azawad. In the interviews, the majority of the inmates also did not mention Azawad in the context of religious motivations but rather as a separatist issue.

Kheirou, a member of MAA, told us that during his time as a member of MAA there were continuous clashes with MNLA. When asked what the clashes between MNLA and MAA were about, he said: "MNLA wants to split Mali up into two regions (north and south) and that MAA does not want that". Other participants also acknowledged this ideological dispute as a reason for involvement, although not necessarily stating it as their own reason for involvement with terrorist groups. As Moussa said when asked how he felt about the ideology of terrorist groups: "I am Malian, not Azawadian". Others, however, did support an independent Azawad. Usman, who was a member of CMA, said he joined because he believes in CMA's goals and he wants independence for the North. When asked whether he

[579] 'MNLA - Mouvement National de Libération de L'Azawad', DÉCLARATION D'INDÉPENDANCE DE L'AZAWAD, 6 April 2012, http://www.mnlamov.net/component/content/article/169-declaration-dindependance-de-lazawad.html.

did not see an alternative to solve his issues – for example politically – he said he opted to engage in physical battle because he was a more physical guy. According to him: "The only solution is the independence of Azawad as a state/nation for the Tamashek. Also, for the Arabs and the Peul and the Songhai. And you are also welcome to live there".

Some participants framed the fight for an independent Azawad mainly as a political fight between the Tuareg in the North and the Bambara in the South [Sikou]. Two respondents connected the notion of Azawad to religious motives as well. Illustrative in that regard is the story of Yusuf, who said:

> The North has tried to obtain freedom in a peaceful and legal manner, but these attempts have always failed as the government of Mali has always corrupted the leaders of these movements. This was the dynamic until the last terrorist attack of 2003. Laic (secular) movements are not reliable in their search for freedom because their people disappear and leave the fight after the first difficulty. In 2003, the liberation movements united in the mountains of Kidal and reached the conclusion that the only way to promote this fight is under the auspices of religion. The notion of Azawad is in line with this position. In 2012 the freedom movement, along with the Islamist movement, conquered the North in one week but after the victory the non-Islamist movement has gained the power and has initiated a fight against the Islamist movement. Azawad is now divided into two parts: one Islamic (in the desert) and one laic (in cities). Life under Islamist groups is wonderful, it's a life of dreams ("C'est la vie de reve")".

Another respondent, also describing the struggle for an independent Azawad, said:

> Since independence in 1960 Mali is one country, but more and more the northern populations are claiming their independence. If the Malian government would recognize the independence of Azawad (or even autonomous setting) France would not have had to intervene – because of the critical situation and the intervention, now the French have good reasons to stay here and profit from it [Diriye].

Overall, ideology, either motivated by religion (four) or separatism (seven), emerged as a reason for involvement with terrorist groups. At the same time, it is notable that 19 respondents out of the total of 30 respondents did not mention any ideological motivation to explain their involvement with terrorist groups.

### 6.8 Lack of information

The domain of *lack of information* is defined here as *all aspects related to a general lack of information and understanding*. In this study, the domain of lack of information refers to two factors: *the lack of education* and *lack of information* (see Table 6.8 below). The difference between lack of education in this domain and lack of education in the domain of State-citizenship relations is that here, when participants mentioned it, they referred not so much to the fact that the Malian government neglected to provide education, but rather that a lack of education led to a lack of information which made them vulnerable to recruitment and radicalisation. Six participants mentioned these factors as having an influence on involvement with terrorist groups.

*Table 6.8 – Lack of information as a driver for involvement with terrorist groups*

| Factors | Themes | Domain |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| No education<br>No exposure to information | | Lack of information |

When it comes to lack of education or information, none of the respondents mentioned either one of these factors as something that led to their personal involvement with terrorist groups. Instead, four participants discussed the general influence of the lack of information in Malian society vis-à-vis involvement with terrorist groups. These factors were usually viewed not so much as directly leading to involvement with terrorist groups but rather as factors that make individuals more vulnerable to the narratives of those groups. As Sikou explained in his answer to why individuals join terrorist groups: "Many of them join terrorist groups from the rural areas, where people have no TV, no exposure to international information, no education, no school, no nice women ('belles femmes') and, hence, they are very vulnerable to manipulation."

Two other respondents raised the need for education - specifically, informing citizens as to what the law and the constitution entail as well as the need for general civic education. One respondent, a 24-year-old Peul from Tessalit, said: "The violence of the terrorists is linked to bad education. If the child receives a good education, he will not do certain things" [Amin]. As such, to the participatns, education means something beyond the strictly academic context but rather, all modes of transmissions of values.

### 6.9 Reflection

The interviews reveal important insights into the various factors that influenced the personal pathways to involvement with terrorist groups of the inmate respondents. Most importantly, the individual narratives and the aggregate themes and domains that were informed by those narratives show that the macro, meso, and micro aspects of these pathways interact within the domains. It is important to address one crosscutting element that characterised most of the interviews, namely the feeling of injustice. Injustice was not classified as a specific code, theme, or domain in this research given its inherent integration into all themes and domains listed in chapter six – and its recurrence in interviews as a background element rather than an explicit factor. Rather than perceiving of injustice as a factor on its own, the respondents tend to connect the feeling of being a victim of unjust treatment to specific thematic factors. As such, the notion of injustice refers to several elements such as unfair treatment, underdevelopment of the region the participants live in, or the feeling of being neglected by the government for example through limited access to basic services, lack of safety and security, and lack of opportunities.

Regardless of the insights provided by the data, there are clear constraints to the use of interviews as a method, presenting a clear boundary for over-generalising the conclusions to the larger population that was not included in this study, whether it comes to suspected terrorists in Mali or the wider Sahel region. These limitations will be reflected upon in the conclusion and discussion in chapter eight. Nonetheless, the body of findings points to important conclusions. In the next chapter, the results of the interviews with professionals will be discussed. Discussion of the findings of this chapter in light of the academic literature and how these findings compare to the findings of the other research data will be presented in a comprehensive way in chapter eight.

# Chapter 7 – Results: professionals' perspectives

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical data from focus group interviews with 56 Malian participants (divided across ten groups) and 19 semi-structured individual interviews with international actors in Mali. Where the last chapter focused on the perspectives of (suspected) terrorists on their own and other individuals' involvement, this chapter looks at the perspectives of professionals who either work directly with those incarcerated for terrorism in the prison context, or who work on the topic of terrorism in Mali more generally. The individual interviews conducted with Malian and international respondents working on terrorism issues in the country focus on their understanding of what the current state of the conflict is in Mali (including structural background factors that can provide fertile ground for radicalisation and/or terrorist recruitment); what they perceive as the role of international actors is in that field and to what extent they provide barriers to or contribute to terrorism in the country; and finally what they views as specific causes for individual involvement in terrorism in the country. The focus group interviews with 56 Malian respondents with 6-8 participants per group focused specifically on this latter question: what factors contribute to involvement in terrorism. As such, the interviews with the 30 (suspected) terrorists are contextualised by comparing and contrasting them with the perspectives of these 75 Malian and international participants. I will compare the findings from these interviews with the findings from the inmate interviews and place both in the perspective of the academic literature on involvement in terrorism in chapter eight.

The interviews were conducted between September 2016 and November 2018 and include 56 Malian respondents who were interviewed in focus group interviews during two workshop sessions on violent extremism in the Malian context, and 19 semi-structured interviews with foreign respondents who work in Mali in the field of counter-terrorism. The focus group interviews were conducted over the course of two workshops organised by the ICCT– The Hague and UNICRI in Mali's capital Bamako. The workshops were part of a broader program implemented by ICCT and UNICRI focused on the rehabilitation of violent extremist offenders in the prison context in Mali. This program started in 2016 and included workshops with prison staff, policymakers, MINUSMA, and relevant experts in the field. These two specific workshops focused on the process of radicalisation and involvement in terrorism with plenary morning sessions where the participants were presented with the academic knowledge on radicalisation. The afternoon sessions consisted of focus group interviews to discuss radicalisation and involvement in terrorism in the Malian context. The first workshop was organised with 23 Malian religious leaders and five policymakers of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The second workshop was organised with 15 Malian prison staff, two policymakers from the Ministries of Justice, one Judge, one General Prosecutor, three staff from the Malian Prison Administration (DNAPES), and five staff from MINUSMA's Justice and Corrections Sector (JCS).

The group of international respondents includes 19 respondents of which six individuals who work for MINUSMA; one from the Security Sector Reform (SSR) sector; two from the Joint Misson Analysis Center (JMAC); one from the All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU); one from the Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS); and one from the Human Rights (HR) section. One individual is a senior adviser within the EU Delegation to Mali. One respondent was a former US Intelligence Officer. One respondent is a researcher at the University of Bamako. Another five respondents represent four embassies (Canadian, US, Dutch, French). And finally, I interviewed five individuals from a range of NGOs and CSOs, including International Alert, SNV, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, Think Peace Mali, and Mercy Corps. The respondents in the international group thus

represent the main foreign actors in the country as well as a number of NGOs/CSOs that work in the field of terrorism in Mali. Although Bamako is overrepresented in the sample, this did not have a major impact on researching involvement in terrorism in Mali because the respondents all focus in their daily work on dealing with terrorism in the country – either in prison or in designing and implementing CT-related policies. As such, they all have knowledge of and/or experience with the various terrorist groups in the country.

*Table 7.1 – Overview of professional participants*

| **Participants** | **Sub-category** | **Number of respondents** |
|---|---|---|
| Malian respondents | *Prison staff* | 15 |
| | *Religious leaders* | 23 |
| | *MINUSMA* | 5 |
| | *Ministry of Justice* | 2 |
| | *Ministry of Religious Affairs* | 5 |
| | *Judge* | 1 |
| | *Prosecutor* | 1 |
| | *DNAPES* | 3 |
| | *Researcher* | 1 |
| | **Subtotal** | **56** |
| International respondents | *MINUSMA* | 6 |
| | *EU Delegation to Mali* | 1 |
| | *Embassies* | 5 |
| | *University of Bamako* | 1 |
| | *Former US Intelligence Officer* | 1 |
| | *NGOs/CSOs* | 5 |
| | **Subtotal** | **19** |
| | **TOTAL** | **75** |

The focus group interviews (as well as a set of questionnaires) with the Malian respondents concentrated mainly on causes of radicalisation and reasons to join terrorist groups. Contrary to my expectations, the focus groups interviews added significantly to the dynamics and scope of responses. Because the respondents were very open to debate and eager to engage in small group discussions, the focus group interviews provided a structured context to further test and refine my observations from the one-on-one interviews through respondents' exchanges, where remarks were amplified, contested, and corrected. The focus group interviews were transcribed and analysed by comparing answers and identifying overarching themes. The individual interviews were structured along three main themes. First, respondents were asked to describe the current situation in Mali and the developments that had led to this situation. Second, they were asked what they viewed as the role of international actors in the country and to what extent international actors were fulfilling those roles. Finally, they were asked to reflect on why individuals join terrorist groups in Mali.

The findings are presented in line with the interview structure – the chapter starts with participants' general perspective on the situation in Mali. The chapter continues with a specific focus on the role of international actors in the country (where respondents reflect on their own as well as other actors' roles). Third, the chapter summarises the main findings related to how and why respondents thought individuals become involved with terrorist groups. The data from the focus group interviews is included in this third part, as the questions posed in the focus group interviews only focused on that third topic: specific reasons for joining or engaging with terrorist groups. Table 7.2 presents the overall themes that arose from within the three topics that were discussed in the semi-structured and focus group interviews.

*Table 7.2 – overview of themes professional interviews*

| Topics | Themes |
|---|---|
| **Current situation in Mali** | |
| | *Narco/drug trafficking* |
| | *North-South divide* |
| **International involvement** | |
| | *Role of France* |
| | *Role of US* |
| | *Role of MINUSMA* |
| | *Counter-terrorism operations* |
| | *Lack of interagency cooperation* |
| **Terrorism** | |
| | *Deterioration of security* |
| | *Fragmentation of terrorist groups* |
| | *Sophistication of modus operandi* |
| **Terrorist recruitment** | |
| | *Lack of state authority* |
| | *Economic/financial vulnerability* |
| | *Ideology* |
| **Causes for involvement with terrorism** | |
| | *Ethnic tensions* |
| | *Poor governance* |
| | *Poverty/lack of economic opportunities* |
| | *Lack of understanding of Islam* |
| | *Proximity to conflict* |
| | *Lack of education* |
| | *Prison environment* |

Within these three parts, the findings are presented based on the main themes that the professionals agreed on in their answers to those three questions. Thus, the chapter is structured on the current conflict in Mali, specifically narco-/drug trafficking, as well as the North-South divide including ethnic, tribal, and extremist tensions. Next, the chapter focuses on the role of international involvement, including counterterrorism measures in Mali, as well as the implications of these measures for individuals who join terrorist groups. Third and finally, the chapter focuses on why individuals join terrorist groups according to the respondents, according to both the focus group and the individual respondents.

## 7.2 Mali's current situation

The main issues Mali is currently facing are, according to the majority of the respondents that were interviewed individually, terrorism related. Respondents agreed that the road that led to radicalisation and violent extremism contains various factors, such as historic instability, general crime in the country and region, economic depression and income disparity, ethnic, religious and tribal tensions, as well as failed international involvement, and a further pressing North-South divide. One official from the French Embassy summarised this by saying "we have the same issues here in Mali as in many other West African

countries: socio-demographic changes, lack of a robust economy and the consequences of climate change." All these factors play into the current situation and describe the complexity of the issues leading to terrorism in Mali, according to the respondents.

### *7.2.1 Crime*

The respondents generally viewed the prevalence of terrorism in Mali, even outside of terrorism or extremism, as high. Because of its location, Mali represents a transitional route in terrestrial narco-trafficking, which four respondents have identified as an issue contributing to the terrorist situation in Mali [Senior official from US Embassy, Senior Political Advisor for Mercy Corps, Official from Canadian Embassy, UNDSS Official]. According to the respondents, crime and terrorism issues are all interlinked to one-another, as well as linked to the overall deterioration of stability in Mali. Be it the international interest of not wanting Mali to be the drug transit country for Europe, or narco-trafficking shifting to arms and human trafficking, in general, crime is on the mind of many interviewees, for several reasons.

One JMAC Operational Analyst said about those in power in the country "most people at the table have a background in armed violence and drug trafficking". According to him, the background in armed violence stems mainly from fighters returning from fighting for Ghaddafi in Libya. A UN Security Sector Reform Official described that the violence and terror are widespread, "there are tribal relations, jihadist groups… criminal networks, groups with economic motivations; I think 25% of European cocaine goes via Malian routes." An ASIFU Senior Official compared the narco/drug trafficking issues in Mali to those of Mauritania, where the rebels financed weapons through the drug trade. The issue with the narco-trafficking element is that, as the ASIFU Senior Official put it, "we know nothing except for anecdotal stories and evidence; we lack raw intelligence, but there is agreement it is taking place." One Official from the Canadian Embassy also noted:

> For the US, narco-trafficking is the biggest issue [in Mali], including the overlap with terrorism. The same cartels that are active in Mexico and Colombia are using the West African drug route to Europe. Also, the US cannot afford another safe-haven to develop in Africa, which would be the Bin Laden scenario. So they are now developing a new strategy for Mali and the wider Sahel region.

An Official from the NGO International Alert stated on the issue of general crime and narco-trafficking in Mali, that

> The space for civil society is diminishing as Malians are increasingly getting used to the environment characterized by violence rather than civil discourse. In Central Mali, especially in the region of Mopti, communities are killing each other on a daily basis over control of water and pasture. As a general rule, for many actors, conflict is far more financially rewarding than peace.

She continued detailing "Mali's drug, arms, and human trafficking routes are making some people incredibly rich and influential", feeding into high crime and terrorism rates, as well as funnelling into recruitment efforts. As most respondents have noted, the narco-trafficking issues in Mali form a gateway between general crime and terrorism, increased violence, and incentives for armed groups to recruit and live a profitable life outside the legal framework.

### *7.2.2 North-South Divide*

According to the respondents, the deserted North and the urban South are two different countries. Many participants conclude that this is the main reason for the tribal and ethnic tensions in the country, which, according to them, in turn provides fertile ground for armed groups and violent extremists to gain ground in Mali. Because of the vast geographical

difference between the more populated Centre/South and the rural North, most criminal issues occurred in the North, where the government does not have the same containment powers. Respondents noted that the conflict in the country shifted geographically from the Tuareg rebellion in 2012 with the aftermath from 2013-15 in the North but to an increasingly dire security situation in the Centre and South since 2016. As clarified by a UNDSS Senior Official, "There is no ability to address the various layers of the crisis…most layers are inter-linked and this resulted in the deterioration of the situation, the main example being the state authorities withdrawing from Kidal in May 2014, this made the situation even harder to grasp."

"Mali has lost control of the North, the Central region is under pressure, and that's a region that used to be fairly immune to what was going on," a US former Intelligence Officer summarised when explaining why the North-South divide is important in understanding the increase of criminal activity and deterioration of stability in Mali. Numerous respondents talked about how the criminality from the North has been increasingly moving southwards in recent years. "It took a while to acknowledge this, but there is serious deterioration," the UNDSS Senior Official explained, "in 2017 it became clear that the situation in the Center and South, the Macina area, was critical." An Official from the French Embassy adds that "The tension in Bamako is palpable. The central region is under pressure from the North, the rebels, separatist and terrorist groups are coming down to the Center. And those who flee the center are coming down to Bamako, but they have no family or jobs here." The current situation "is by far the most complex: historical problems, geography, ethnic issues, economics, income disparity, rich South versus the rest of the country," the UNDSS Senior Official continued, underlining the many related issues Mali is facing today.

A number of interviewees noted the importance of the 2018 presidential elections, and how that would determine a future outlook on the division and related inequalities. They hoped that the situation, at least concerning the economic and income disparities, as well as political representation and unity, would change for the better after the July 21 elections,[580] where a democratic process was expected to lead to a sense of unity in the country. The question here, which the US former Intelligence Officer pointed out, is "it has to be a fair, democratic process, but how do you do that in an area controlled by Jihadists?"

Whether, in light of the ethnic, tribal, and religious tensions, the North and South should separate is a question that has been posed over the past years, but never seriously considered in the political realm. A Mercy Corps Official said, referring to that issue:

> You already see a North-South divide in the sense that the government and the majority of the population are situated in the South, where most raw materials are, and which is the richest part. The North, especially towards the Sahel, is a big no-man's-land… no one lives [there], [there is] nothing to do, nothing to get.

Nonetheless, an ASIFU Senior Official stated that "the area is very dynamic and borders have little meaning, everyone is each other's brother, uncle, or nephew." This would make a separation difficult, even though "on the map you can see a difference between the green-black part and the Sahel – Tuareg/Peul part," the disconnect is so severe that "people in the South know nothing about what happens in the North." It is obvious here, that the interviewees have diverging opinions regarding the effectiveness of an official division of the country. A UNDSS Senior Official argued that the real issue is that "we have to make sure that this country exists otherwise than just on an ID card; people from the North shouldn't feel like being in a foreign country when they come to the South."

[580] [Postponed to 29.07.2018]

With this he implies that the disconnect is larger than *just* local tensions, but that it relates to an identity-related issue among citizens of Mali. He further explained that the more centralised a state is, the more unity there is. This does not necessarily mean there is cohesion, but according to him, that would at least lead to the feeling of a sole country. The issue here, as he says, is that in a country with seven or eight languages, bridging any kind of tensions is difficult, adding the disconnect of language barriers to the country's divide. A UN SSR Official noted the same issue saying that "[In] Mali the official language is French, but in many areas, French is barely spoken, especially outside the cities… nobody speaks the local languages but a few insufficient interpreters. This gives you a very limited picture of the local environment, of those cultural and social influences on the conflict."

He also notes that, as the majority of political, governmental, as well as humanitarian work is done using the French language, the majority of the population is excluded from that as they are not informed in their own language and thus, do not understand what is being done. A related problem is the lack of governmental representation outside the South and Central urban areas. "The biggest problem is that there is no such thing as one Mali, because it is so divided into areas and tribes," a Mercy Corps Official states. She also argues that

> The South and the Bambara [government] have for too long not worried about the North. In the North, all kinds of groups who have never had anything to do with the state, now do not have the need to do anything for it… [one of the huge issues is] the idea of the state, which is there for its citizens, is simply not there. If you do a mission in context, you'll see that Western ideas of stabilization and peacekeeping are all based on our views of a state, and that was not there, so that makes it difficult… it is very difficult to do state building if that state was not already there at all, and people are not used to the rule of law and what that should mean in practice.

She clarifies why, from her point of view, part of the population has no ties to the government, even beyond language barriers and tribal rivalry; Malians do not have the same Western vision of a state concept. "The mechanisms that have been developed over centuries of time are slowly but increasingly disintegrating, because of a state-model that does not fit with nomadic and traditional communities," one Political Officer from the Dutch Embassy added. She continued:

> The North suffers from many issues such as the issue of nomadic groups versus sedentary groups. The ethnic Peul are involved in territorial conflicts. The Tamashek were never part of the state to begin with. Let alone the pre-colonial empires that are still manifest in the border regions of Mali. The nation-state, as we know it, has a clearly delineated area defined by set borders. Nomadic populations, by definition, need more space and flexibility. Pastoralism does not adhere to artificially drawn borders. Whereas agricultural populations need a permanent piece of territory and as a result – also have a bigger need for a state structure.

As stated by an International Alert Official: *"The conflict in Mali is to a large extent a result of clashes over natural resources."* Central Mali is a fertile region where the coexistence of several ethnic groups often leads to conflict regarding socio-economical traditions. Climate change and intensive farming result in a land fragmentation at the origin of clashes over natural resources and land management. According to her, those conflicts mainly occur between farmers and pastoralists whose grazing areas are reducing.

A Political Officer from the Dutch Embassy points out here, how and why tribal conflict has evolved, and how this ties into the concept of statehood, identity, and belonging in Mali. Lastly, another consequence of the North-South divide that several respondents referred to, is the lack of hope or lack of trust in the future and security of a united country.

“There is a lack of hope,” a US former Intelligence Observer stated, “the government is trying, but if Northern Malians don’t consider themselves Malians, how can you say this state solution is going to bring you change, development and hope?” A Mercy Corps Official added that “Mali had been segregated along tribal lines anyway, and then you see how difficult it is to do fundamental state building; then you have MINUSMA with a task of peacekeeping while there was no peace when we got here.”

A JMAC Senior Official explains the general situation in Mali and the North-South divide as “the situation is a cocktail of drugs, terrorism, and a thoroughly corrupt government,” it seems that the government does not understand the Western concept of security, as one Senior Official from the EU Delegation acknowledges:

> Security is too often directly perceived by the Malian government as personal security or as direct security measures rather than as a more fundamental concept related to a desired long-term situation… The military for example should always be included in the discussion on long-term security, but in the Security Interior group I have to fight to open the door to the military…the Security Sector Reform should use technical tools, but instead they are using political tools.

This topic of corruption within the government has been noted by many respondents, accompanying the public sentiment of distrust and negative outlook on the future, a JMAC Senior Official states that “IBK [the Malian president] was elected with a great majority but didn’t do anything… the government officers of Mali are like children, they need to be taken by the hand… the situation is dramatic, way worse than anyone thinks… it is Bamako versus the rest.”

An International Alert Official added to this that “the reality on the ground is very different from 'the island of Bamako'. In Mopti region the competition for control of access to land and water has produced the most violent conflicts.” Further, a JMAC Senior Official added that government officials are very corrupt and might not want the situation to change. “Border police are the most corrupt, [more than] regular police. They profit from the system. For us the goal is important, for them the process, because the process means money.” Additionally, as an Official from the French Embassy noted, “The police for example are the least respected of all agencies in Mali, so Malian civilians do not look to the police for help or view them as a legitimate force and that is highly problematic.”

The North-South divide, according to the interviewees’ statements is one large catalyst for the ongoing and increasing problems in Mali. Whether it is the geographic condition, the economic disparity, historic tribal, and ethnic tensions between the regions, the unwillingness or inability of adapting a Western concept of statehood, or the lack of positive future outlook and hope, due to state-identity issues or distrust in a corrupt government.

### 7.3 International Involvement

The main (international) actors countering crime and terrorism in Mali are Barkhane, the French counterterrorism force; MINUSMA, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali; G5 Sahel, a joint force partnership of Western African countries, and the Malian army (*Forces armées maliennes,* FAMA) or the Malian government in general. A UNDSS Senior Official stated, “The shared objective of all actors is restoring some kind of peace and regain ground on the terrorists and criminal activity.” Though working with the best intentions, the majority of the respondents in the individual interviews (21 out of 27), ranging from embassy staff to MINUSMA staff, criticised the work of international actors in Mali. According to them, international organisations do not work well together, and are too limited in their own mission mandates. In addition to this, 12 out of

17 respondents noted that the colonial background has weighed on France's involvement in Mali. Soon after the Malian government requested the French government to get involved, the international community supported France's efforts and created MINUSMA, although "the Malian situation has always been seen as a mainly francophone affair" a Senior Official from the EU Delegation mentioned.

Through developments in the last years, the focus has shifted and "the geographical scope is the North and Center; the Macina region is a bottleneck," a UNDSS Senior Official stated, noting the increased level of violence moving from North to Central over the past years, which delivers new threats to population and stability in the more populated areas, "(…) and if we cannot gain control of the North, we lose the Center." A US former Intelligence Officer pointed to the importance of the involvement of international actors to prevent Mali from becoming a failed state:

> We [the US] cannot allow Mali to become a failed state, that's how terrorists find training and safe haven; if Mali becomes a failed state, that's exactly how 9/11 happened, how Sudan happened, how Afghanistan happened; you get a sanctuary for terrorists. After [the drone strike] in Libya, where do those people go?... they are probably headed south, to Mali, to Timbuktu.

The chance that Mali could become a terrorist safe haven is a great concern for most of the international actors, as many respondents noted. Aside from Western concerns, "Citizens from neighboring countries have kept a close eye on Mali's dynamics [as well]… for them, what happens here is potentially replicable in their own country, for better or worse," a Senior Official from the EU Delegation stated.

Since the initial international involvement after the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, countries have become involved on a bilateral basis as well. The US has expanded its presence in Mali while France has started decreasing investment due to budget limitations in as well as political fatigue, and France's President Macron's election promise to "get out of Mali", as explained by a Mercy Corps Official. A US former Intelligence Officer stated that "the government here [in Mali] knows they need the international community" to secure fair and democratic elections. He then speculated on why some countries are involved, saying "the US is involved because [they] have to react to this tidal wave [and] engage." The reason for US involvement in Mali is twofold, a Senior Official from the US Embassy said. First, it focuses on countering narcotrafficking, and second, on supporting allies. "The US approach to Africa can be summarized as 'African solutions for African problems'", but at the same time he said the US focused on "vacating leadership positions to Western European allies."[581] He claimed that the France and the US have diverging long-term strategies for Africa. The US favours African Leadership with a bilateral approach and bilateral funds for G5 without the UN, Paris, or Brussels' involvement, whereas France likes to take the lead on the situation in "France Afrique." A US former Intelligence Officer said:

> France wants to leave. President Macron already made that clear during his campaign. To a certain extent, they ended up in the Afghanistan scenario here in Mali. Powell's famous pottery barn rule 'if you break it, you own it' is very relevant to them but staying requires a big investment. The French have 4,000-6,000 French Special Forces on the ground, which is the equivalent of for example 10% of the US army. To France, this is their Mexico.

An Official from the Canadian Embassy stated: "for France, that's particularly difficult because they still view it very much as their backyard; they want everything to be

[581] perhaps meaning allies should take the lead, which is contradictory to the first approach

decided in Paris." At the same time, a UNDSS Senior Official stated that the French involvement does not accurately represent neo-colonial French authority, but rather a common-sense approach due to historical links between France and Mali, focused on the prevention of terrorist threats, rather than past guilt. If the region further destabilises, he continued, "There is a higher threat for terrorism in France and a flux of migrants to Europe, and although there has only been one Malian terrorist so far in France, this will increase because it is only a four-hour flight from Bamako to Paris." Regarding US interests in Mali, he noted "perhaps for economic or future market reasons; states don't have friends, they have interests." A US former Intelligence Officer, comparing US involvement to the French involvement, said that "The US is viewed as the most respected partner… the French are kind of this ex-wife type of thing, [the Malian government] appreciate their value but are also willing to work with the Germans and the Dutch, the French not so much, they still have this colonial love/hate relationship with one another."

It is a shared perception of the respondents, with fourteen participants noting that the US is not taking over from France, but that there is an increased influence and long-term strategic interest among various international actors. "The Netherlands is becoming more involved too, since they have a seat at the UN Security Council. They [participate] in the joint ISTAR unit for military and tactical intelligence," an ASIFU Senior Official said. A UNDSS Senior Official further commented that "one shared objective is restoration of peace." For this objective, an Official from the Canadian Embassy detailed the US interests further, stating:

> The US wants more focus on the ground, both in terms of special ops and capture and kill forces. For quite some time, the US had no attention for what was going on here [in Mali] but especially after the incident earlier this year where Americans were killed [on the border with Niger], that changed; they now have a lot of attention, and they increased their presence here; right now the US embassy is the largest delegation here after the EU Delegation.

Two respondents spoke to the fact that they were worried that the French CT-force Barkhane might leave the region. A JMAC Senior Official stated: "Barkhane is our life insurance, they help us, they transport the wounded, [without them] many more people would be dead. And the terrorists are afraid of them, but there are only 5,000 people patrolling five countries." And a JMAC Operational Analyst added that "the biggest frustration of the Malian people is they thought we were coming to provide security and leave after two to three years, but we didn't do either… and if Barkhane leaves, Mali falls apart; they are the only ones who fire back." These statements indicate the Malian government's dependence on Barkhane for security.

Generally, most respondents agreed that the presence of MINUSMA has normalised the situation, and that increased international presence has been important. The Mercy Corps Official said:

> … The first terrorist groups in the North, in revolt, are now fragmented, and have merged with drug smugglers and drug gangs, and then you see that the country is becoming increasingly destabilized, [which is why] MINUSMA is much more concerned with stabilizing the situation instead of peacekeeping... it's much more about creating safety than 'keeping peace'.

At the same time, many respondents spoke of the disconnect between the UN mission and the various other missions and organisations in the country. For example, a UN Security Sector Reform Official mentioned that:

> From an intelligence perspective, the plans that are developed at the [UN] headquarters are sometimes detached from reality; there are completely different dynamics in the field in Gao and Kidal, from what is seen at the headquarters… [there are] three layers, New York, the headquarters in Bamako, and the places in the field in Mali that are far outside the capital. These are three different perceptions of reality.

A JMAC Senior Official summarised the relationship with the UN headquarters in New York by saying: "They are very hypocritical. Now they say 'okay intelligence is allowed, but no operations', so we are allowed to gather intelligence, we are allowed to analyze it, but then comes the 'for what?' or the 'why' question." Two respondents criticised the UN's work as well; a UN Security Sector Reform Official stated that MINUSMA's legitimacy is tainted, because "MINUSMA is there on the invitation from the government in Bamako… but [they – the government] are one side of the warring parties, and as such, they are actually no longer independent," and thus claimed that the mission cannot be independent. A JMAC Operational Analyst criticised the work of the UN altogether, claiming: "MINUSMA sends weapon intelligence teams to figure out what type of IEDs were used. [They] have the capacity and mandate to fire at convoys of ten cars carrying black flags and shooting, but that never happens," speaking to the frustration of other organisations as well as the local community, regarding MINUSMA's mandate and effectiveness.

Another example of this perceived lack of effectiveness is the apparent lack of intelligence cooperation between the different organisations with intelligence capabilities within the UN such as the JMAC, the UNDSS, and the newly created ASIFU. As explained by an ASIFU Senior Official, "ASIFU has three main lines of operation: focused intelligence, centralized steering/decentralized execution, and a multidisciplinary environment information approach," but unfortunately, "ASIFU has a tendency to secrecy when it comes to HUMINT [Human Intelligence]" as the JMAC Operational Analyst states. "ASIFU was founded by a number of Scandinavian parties [countries], Germany, and the Netherlands, and other parties look at it with suspicion" the JMAC Operational analyst stated, giving the example that "if the Netherlands makes a contribution, it does so first and foremost with Dutch interests and concerns of what is best for the Netherlands."

In general, the majority of the respondents agreed on the main problems with international involvement in Mali. The lack of interagency coordination as well as the disconnect between different layers within organisations, such as the three-layered structure of the UN, were viewed as the main problem. MINSUMA is viewed as being tasked with creating stability but lacking the means or political will to do so.

### 7.4 Counterterrorism operations

Numerous counterterrorism measures have been implemented in Mali, both by national and international actors. According to the respondents, counterterrorism efforts are burdened by the same lack of information agency that plagues international actors, partially a result of sheer number of organisations involved. Nine respondents placed the blame with the Malian government, arguing they are not efficiently and constructively implementing or facilitating international efforts. One overarching theme most respondents noted is that MINUSMA's mission is not counterterrorism related.

A US former Intelligence Officer characterised the situation as "the legitimacy of having MINUSMA here is huge from an external international view. No one likes to see people with machine guns driving around." However, MINUSMA's role in counterterrorism was viewed by this former Intelligence Officer as challenging because "their mission

statement is not counter-terrorism but stability, but the areas we work in are overall faced with counter-terrorism issues." A Mercy Corps Official agreed, saying:

> The offensive part [of the mission] is mainly carried out by the French mission Barkhane. While some capacities are there, I also have the feeling that there are MINUSMA troops who are frustrated that they cannot do anything, from an offensive perspective. But at the moment that is not the mandate…the UNSC has authorized MINUSMA to 'prevent the return of armed elements'... and that is a big struggle because formally it is still the idea that the UN does not do that, and as a result the mandate does not match the reality on the ground.

She continued, predicting a grim future for Mali, "There is actually no positive scenario... the situation has deteriorated from month to month. If you look at maps of attacks, crime, armed assault, unrest, etcetera; you see that destabilization is expanding from the North to the South, so right now the best thing that can happen is to stabilize the situation that is there currently."

Most respondents, though, had a more positive outlook. "Over the past four to five months the rate and pace of attacks have changed. The Prime Minister went to Kidal last week, which is good; it had been two years since the last time he visited," a US former Intelligence Officer stated, talking about how the government is trying to unite the country again. A UNDSS Senior Official compared the counterterrorism situation in Mali to the situation in Afghanistan, stating:

> In Afghanistan there was big focus on the threat, the military and criminal enemy focused intelligence picture, and in Mali they [the international community] have started to take a much broader perspective. It is important to know who the fighting groups are, what they know and what they can do. But it's also important that we have a grip on the political structures of the underlying socio-economic factors.

In line with other respondents, he said it was of utmost importance for both the Malian government and the international actors in the country to recognise that the given the complexity of the problems in Mali the focus should not solely be on counterterrorism; but it should include a political and socioeconomic perspective as well.

A US former Intelligence Official also remarked on the role of the Malian government by saying that "the Malian government is a very willing partner, but they lack the capacity to do something. They might have failed in providing for their citizens, but are they supporting terrorists like the Tunisian government does? No." In order to support the government, he continued, "do we give them things like bullets and guns, or do we focus on capacity with training, community policing, and human rights? Where is the balance? And how do we make that the Malian solution?" Participants agreed that without humanitarian efforts, counterterrorism efforts would not be successful.

A UN Security Sector Reform Official said: "You have AQIM, the ideological organizations, the people who want a free Azawad, the Tuareg, and just people who want peace. All this runs together, which is what makes it so complex," and further burdens counterterrorism efforts. According to an Official from the Canadian Embassy, counterterrorism efforts, should counter three factors:

> The social acceptability of terrorism, the economic profit associated with it, and the danger of participating in terrorism. Right now, the military action by Barkhane is mainly focused on addressing number three. The underlying idea is 'some bad guys are going to have to die', to deter others. That might work, but not as a standalone effort.

Moreover, an International Alert Official noted that: "the peace process excludes the majority of Malians, including some major armed groups like the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) who are increasingly politically active." A JMAC Operational Analyst stated that "mixed patrols of FAMA with Platform/GATIA won't solve anything but everyone focuses on it because it is the one thing they can do." Overall, counterterrorism efforts in Mali face many problems, including a disconnect between the organisations that are involved, as well as the fact that MINUSMA's mandate does not formally include offensive efforts. The participants agreed that counterterrorism efforts should address what they perceived of as the underlying factors driving violent extremism in the country, such as socioeconomic, ethnic, and political exclusion factors.

**7.5 Terrorism**

All respondents stated that terrorism is a severe and growing problem in Mali, whereas the respondents have various perspectives on the situation, resulting from the variety of occupations and exposure to terrorism the individual respondent has. According to a JMAC Senior Official, the terrorism situation in Mali can be summed up as "unequivocally deteriorated and everyone agrees on that." There is an increasing number of attacks, and counter to what was anticipated with missions like the French counter-terrorism military operation Serval, "the terrorists did not disappear." On the topic of the number and evolution of the terrorist activity, a US former Intelligence Officer said that "the sophistication of the attacks increased. Now we see IEDs, we never had them before. We also see a new brand of strong violence… if you didn't know the geography this could just as well be Helmand Province [Afghanistan]… there are only two posts in Africa that have this level of danger: Juba and here."

This statement clearly indicates his perception of the severity of the situation in Mali. Most respondents agreed that the situation regarding terrorism is getting worse. An Official from the Canadian Embassy described the status quo as "Jihadist groups are trying overwhelmingly to defeat a very difficult peace process, while questioning the capabilities of the Malian government and international forces (MINUSMA, G5 Sahel and Barkhane) to bring peace and restore a weakened Malian state."

According to a UNDSS Senior Official, the terrorist groups or violent extremists have developed new strategies, using the North as a stronghold and area to recruit, to expand their influence southward. They use a strategy of warfare by targeting what represented state authority, such as the police, the Malian army, and customs in outposts. In the power vacuum they created with this, they then specifically target the people who present the nucleus of the social fabric, for example magistrates, mayors, marabout, imams, prefects, and sous-prefects, who support of the government's vision.

One thing that many respondents noted, is that the Malian violent extremists or terrorists are not just like al-Qaeda or the so-called 'Islamic State'. A JMAC Operational Analyst noted that in 2014-15 al-Qaeda created new *Katibas* in the Mopti region to expand their operations, causing many more victims: "The Mopti-Segou and Macina-Katiba, local Fulanis, operate under Ansar Dine and Al Qaeda, but have no intellectual ties. They are threatening teachers, interrupting weddings, saying these are un-Islamic. It is all social engineering; they have no ideological ground with Al Qaeda, it's more Boko Haram style."

A JMAC Senior Official stated that IS and al-Qaeda do not fit with the mindset of Malians, but that the Malians themselves are also divided in their understanding of terrorism. He explained that "The militia for the Songhai and the Peul is MUJAO who protects their families and gives them the possibility to protect themselves… MUJAO is represented more in Menaka, Niger, and Burkina Faso… and Ansar Dine is represented with the Ifoghas/Tuareg in Mopti."

He added that the brutal methods of IS are not the methods of the Malians, but regardless, the Malian government thinks: "MUJAO, Ansar Dine, and Al Qaeda are all the same. And Tuareg – they are all terrorists, and against Mali," showing that according to him, the government itself does not understand the complexity of Malian terrorism. A Senior Official from the US Embassy put it this way, "the problem is: we as the international community have progressed, we have learned and grown by maybe 40%, so we are doing well. However, the terrorists or jihadists also learned and progressed and have grown by as much as 80%."

While the 2015 Algiers Peace agreement aimed to establish the first steps to peace, but as a US former Intelligence Officer explained, "the problem is that the signatories to the Algiers agreement are not the bad guys, so you can't solve it just with them. The real problems are Al Qaeda and ISIS." According to a JMAC Senior Official "In Mali we are facing an insurgency situation, like in Algeria before [in the 1990s]. The difference is this time there are more Kalashnikovs, more mines, and more combatants, and there is no presence or service from the state." An Official from the French Embassy added that "They [the terrorists] are mostly just a bunch of young men or groups who have no power, so others tell them: 'here's a Kalashnikov." A JMAC Operational Analyst stated that a great issue in this perceived change from the known methods of al-Qaeda and ISIS is "the technological transfer from Iraq and Libya to Mali with technical knowhow." He argues that the trend in Mali is going towards homemade explosives, making Mali a "terrorist playground", giving several groups the freedom to try new tactics with enough time to practice, such as IED training. On the other hand, the Mercy Corps Official mentioned that

> what you see is that those groups [terrorists in the North] are fragmented, and slowly coming under pressure from Barkhane and the presence of MINUSMA in the North, and from the desire to really split the country, to exert more pressure. For these two reasons you can see that it slowly drops to the central region, the Mopti region between North and South.

Overall, the main issues which respondents mentioned are the sophistication of the terrorist attacks, as well as the evolution from and difference to known al-Qaeda or IS methods.

### *7.5.1 Involvement with terrorist groups according to individual interviewees*

According to the respondents, recruitment is tremendously important for terrorist groups. The three main factors that make recruitment easy for terroristr groups according to the respondents, are (1) a lack of state authority and the corresponding power vacuum, which the armed groups effectively use to gain power and expand; (2) the infrastructure that is not distributed equally across the country, making the rural North an easier target for recruitment, due to the lack of opportunity in financial, economic, or educational aspects; and (3) the various kinds of motivations the armed groups have, some being genuinely interested in the Azawad project, some only using it as pretext. A UN Human Rights Official introduced the grounds on which recruitment is made possible:

> For many Malians in the North, there is not really an alternative to living under and engaging with terrorist groups. After the military success of Serval, the stabilization of North-Mali required control over the territory, which, due to a lack of resources, the French troops have not been able to establish. In a way, Paris allowed the Malian government in Bamako to reclaim the North, without requiring a clear plan for long-term stability and peace.

From his perspective, through targeted terrorising and increased violence, armed groups force the state to withdraw from the region. They then recruit, making terrorist groups stronger and creating the possibility for expansion. According to a UNDSS Senior Official, terrorist groups use this advantage, as well as other techniques in recruitment, such as intimidation campaigns and destruction of infrastructure. Connected to what lays the grounds of making recruitment possible, a US former Intelligence Officer commented that "most Malians definitely have no connection at all with their government, the control of government outside of the main areas is maximum 20 kilometres". A number of respondents listed this disconnect with the government as a main factor in recruitment efforts of terrorist groups. A Political Officer from the Dutch Embassy summarised this as "The main driver for terrorism in Mali is dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement with the Malian state… the availability of arms, combined with a state that has a legitimacy problem as well as is unable to control the country, provides a toxic mix. There is no trust in the Malian state, it is viewed as corrupt and rotten from the inside."

This was confirmed by a University of Bamako Researcher, who pointed out the role of the state as a catalyst in the terrorist recruitment strategy. According to him, power sharing is often not well-balanced across different ethnic groups. He described how the Peulh have been marginalised, (since 2015 and the creation of the Katiba Macina whose leader and most of its members are Peul) stigmatised and equated with Islamic terrorism for years:

> In 2012, when the government of Mali retreated from the central region, rebel movements took power in the region and the tensions between the Peul and the Tuareg increased. This situation led to a collective decision by Peul leaders to take up arms to protect themselves in light of the absence of the Malian state. The Peul requested arms from the government, which the government refused out of fear the Peul would eventually take up arms against the government.

He continues to describe how the terrorist group MUJAO struck a deal with the local Peul community, promising to protect them in return for young recruits that would be trained by the group. When the Malian army returned to the region, the Peul were accused of having affiliations with terrorist groups, which led to many illegal arrests. "As a result, the Malian government pushed the Peul into the arms of jihadist movements. Although the Malian state had returned, people still rely on the protection provided by violent extremist groups because they do not trust the government."

Due to attacks, free movement and mobility are close to impossible for many Malians. A UNDSS Senior Official sees this as a problem "as the Center holds 40% of the population, but also a significant portion of GDP. If people cannot move freely [because roads are blocked or destroyed] economic prospects are limited and impoverishment results." He further explained, when detailing the sophistication in planning of strategic recruitment of jihadist/extremist groups, whereby ultimately forcing people to join the armed groups, as this being the only way left to earn money for living: "It leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, when all the negative forces, criminals, terrorists, narco-traffickers, and armed groups use this economic decline to create opportunities for people who have no prospects."

A US former Intelligence Officer adds: "Al Qaeda and ISIS are the two groups that have taken root on the ground. Al Qaeda for a long time already; ISIS is the 'new kid on the block'. It's not real jihadists, it's all about economic issues," factoring in that the main reason people join terrorist groups is not, as in al-Qaeda's case previously, for the religious or motivating reasons the group stands for, but instead, because of economic reasons. This was supported by a University of Bamako Researcher who explained that, while half of the population is under 15 years old, youth unemployment rates remain very high. This is seen as

a great opportunity for radical groups to recruit hopeless young people seeing no viable alternatives. Additionally, based on to their ethnic origins, young people do not have the same employment opportunities. An International Alert Official stated that "Many employment opportunities are not created for nomadic people. In a pastoralist family with ten children, only two who can become herders of the cattle – for the others there are no jobs, so they join terrorist groups because they have no work."

The economic factors can also expand to sheer survival, as a Mercy Corps Official noted:

> Due to climate change, counterterrorism, [and] the presence of all these groups, the population is confronted every day with a changing situation in which they themselves are primarily focused on their own survival… There are always individual considerations, not so much driven by ideology or economically opportunistic reasons, but much more by survival…there are also people who are frustrated and radicalize. But in the end, it is all about their own survival.

One Senior Official from the EU Delegation also noted that in relation to the financial incentives,

> One issue is the fact that many Western countries pay ransoms for the release of hostages, and that is a serious mistake. Because of that, Europe shares responsibility for the terrorism situation Mali faces today because it financed jihadist groups for years through paying ransoms demanded for the release of the hostages. As a consequence, engaging in terrorism has become a profitable trade for many individuals.

According to him, in this way Western countries play an indirect, and probably counterproductive role in the profitability of being a member of a terrorist group. An International Alert Official further detailed the economic reasoning including trust and believing the armed groups provide stability; she said:

> Often, when terrorist groups manage to gain control of an area, the local communities view them as providers of law and order and thus, a certain degree of stability in the region. Despite the brutality of some jihadist groups who impose Sharia law, locals still prefer the presence of these groups and the law and order they bring to the corrupt impunity of poor governance. As a result, even though the majority of the Malian population does not approve of the brute methods used by some individuals, they appreciate the 'justice' provided by some terrorist groups. Land disputes and conflict over access to resources have decreased in some areas under the control of jihadist groups because the groups have taken matters in hand, and they settle things fairly.

An International Alert Official added to that the issue of deep-rooted gender norms that play a significant role. He referred to the concept of masculinity through which mainly young men are pushed to join terrorist groups. According to him, status and role-seeking appear more important than salaries to young men that have been instilled with a sense that boys are born to be warriors.

Religious reasons have also been used, including inter-tribal religious tensions, and religious differences between North and South. As a UN Human Rights Official stated, "Religion is definitely also an element of explanation, we should not underestimate its impact. But it is often not the main motivation, but rather part of a justification for engaging with or joining jihadist groups."

Moreover, an International Alert Official underlined the existence of so-called "resilient areas" in Mali where there is no local support for or engagement in fighting; those areas are not in any way linked to the presence or absence of Salafi or radical preachers. Although religion seems to be a motivation on a group-scale

> On a more individual level, I believe that religion is not the first motivation. Unemployment is often part of the motivation of the Tuareg and the Fulani, but the search for money is not the only factor. The absence of the state or the perceived corruption of the state where it is present leaves a fertile ground for terrorist groups in particular in the center of the country to function as an alternative to the state.

according to the UN Human Rights Official.

According to the professional respondents, in addition to using religious motivations for larger groups, or the Azawad project as a pretext, the armed groups have also used international, especially French involvement, in their recruitment narratives. "The Malian population had very high expectations for the French forces, and when France couldn't meet them, people became bitter and anti-France or anti-UN, accusing them of a hidden agenda," a UNDSS Senior Official notes about the French involvement in the conflict. The problem with the international involvement is that even "Some African countries, including some Malian officials, have criticized France, but also the US, for carrying out what they see as a neo-imperialist and neo-colonial campaign in Northern Mali," a Senior Official from the EU Delegation explains. According to a JMAC Operational Analyst, the sentiment, which the armed groups spread under the pretext of France's negative intentions for the involvement, is that "according to them [the armed groups], the French crusaders are invading Muslim lands for resources to oppress Muslim people. The UN are mercenaries, the government of Mali are apostates and they want to implement Shari'a Law."

The modernity of connecting to people is a challenge for any counter-recruitment efforts, as the ASIFU Senior Official told, "every crook starts to tweet and Facebook as soon as they have buried a bomb." All in all, the participants stated that recruitment efforts are based on many factors, with the main ones being a disconnect between the population, especially northern Malians, with the government; economic reasons, including the lack of other ways to provide for survival, if not joining a terrorist group; and religious/ideological reasons, which can range from pure religious motives to propaganda against the presence and influence of international actors.

### *7.5.2 Involvement with terrorist groups according to focus group interviewees*

More specific questions related to terrorism included what participants viewed as the specific factors driving involvement with terrorism. With ethnic tensions fuelling the problematic political situation and feeding into radicalisation, a Political Officer from the Dutch Embassy stated,

> there are two main issues with the Malian state. First, the colonial state model, as copied from the French, does not function here in Mali, [because] that model presents a centralized model where the state is mainly oriented inwards and focuses on its own protection rather than protecting its citizens and advancing their interests... the second issue is the divide between the nomadic (cattle-herding) and the agrarian populations in Mali that have to live together... these two issues provide fertile grounds for preaching extreme narratives.

Where the individual interviews focused on the main developments in Mali's security and terrorism situation and respondent's perspectives on the reasons for individuals to become involved with terrorist groups, the focus group interviews (and questionnaires) that

were conducted during two workshop sessions with 35 Malian religious leaders and 15 Malian prison staff focused mainly on causes of radicalisation and violent extremism. In the focus group interviews with religious leaders, several participants concluded that the factors contributing to violent extremism in Mali relate to poverty, poor governance, lack of education and job opportunities, and tensions between different ethnic groups. With regard specifically to the element of religion and the role it might play in engagement with terrorism, the following elements were identified by the participants: a lack of understanding of Islam, a misinterpretation of the Quran, a lack of proper teaching of Islam, and tensions between different religious groups within Mali. Focus group interviewees also mentioned Mali's proximity to other countries in conflict as a compounding factor for the situation in the country, due to the influence of foreign radicals. Overall, respondents agreed that it was not so much religion per se, but rather, radical or extremist interpretations that include support for or an acceptance of using violence, which contributes to terrorism in Mali.

When discussing signs of radicalisation in the focus group interviews with religious leaders, four participants mentioned rejection of others and three mentioned the exclusion of others within the same religion or intolerance towards other Muslims. Other responses include a violent interpretation of religion and the problem of a strict *one and only truth*. One imam said radicalisation was "the sum of unemployment, poverty, bad or lack of education, and bad governance".[582] Another religious leader noted that "according to my thoughts, radicalisation is permeated by the increased extremism of religious practices and the rejection of other religious practices or religious beliefs."[583]

In the workshop with Malian prison staff (15 total), poverty was named as the main cause of violent extremism in Mali, with 10 respondents listing it in the questionnaire. Eight prison staff listed religion, and specifically incorrect or alternative interpretations of religion. Unemployment was listed five times, and injustice and politics/bad governance were each listed four times. Responses less mentioned, but also relevant were ethnicity (3), racism (2), and education (2), as well as a general loss of hope, religious fanaticism, inequality, stigmatisation, ignorance, and hate against the West, each mentioned once.[584]

In questionnaires and focus groups concerning the signs or radicalisation, three of the prison staff members responded that non-verbal communication such as gestures, clothing, beards, etc. were a sign. Other external reasons mentioned were violence and aggressive language (3), refusing compromising (1), revolt (1), suicide to protect others (1), and rejection of others (3). The underlying signs of radicalisation, which were mentioned, were religion (3), a lack of information and awareness (1), intimidation (1), drugs (1), unemployment (1), recruiting and propaganda (2), and isolation (2).[585]

Overall, the responses from the religious leaders and the prison staff are fairly similar and fit into the general responses from the individual interviews as well. Governance issues, a general disconnect between the government and the population – often along ethnic lines –, economic factors such as unemployment, and religious reasons were mentioned both in the questionnaires and focus groups, as well as in responses from the individual interviews. The religious leaders also offered potential solutions relating to the prison environment and related to the role of the religious leaders in society. According to them, the main focus should be on the promotion of a moderate Islam and the foundation of the religion: peace and tolerance. They added that religious leaders should avoid preaching violence or any rhetoric of exclusion and that they should remain politically neutral. Additionally, suburban and rural areas should not be neglected and it was deemed essential for religious leaders to address the

[582] Religious Leaders focus group 4 – Signs of Radicalisation
[583] Religious Leaders focus group 1 – Signs of Radicalisation
[584] Prison Staff Survey – Causes of Violent Extremism
[585] Prison Staff Survey – Signs of Radicalisation

issue of social injustice while sensitising young people to the danger of radicalisation. In the opinion of both the religious leaders and the prison staff, religious leaders have an important role to play when it comes to raising awareness and educating members of local communities. With regard to the prison environment, the religious leaders suggested in the focus group interviews that places of worship should be led by moderate imams who could provide inmates with a basic theological knowledge and foster social reintegration.

## 7.6 Conclusion

Through focus group interviews and questionnaires with Malian respondents as well as individual interviews with international actors in Mali, this chapter presented their perspectives on security and terrorism in the country, the role of the international community, and reasons for individuals to engage in terrorism. Overall, both the international as well as the Malian participants agreed that increased criminal activities (mainly narcotrafficking), as well as the North-South political divide heavily burden the country and its development. The respondents view especially the North-South divide as a major driving force in the deterioration of stability in Mali because it feeds into feelings of neglect and discrimination, which in turn are exploited by terrorist groups and other armed actors. As such, the respondents view the rural and politically neglected North of Mali as a breeding ground for terrorist and armed groups in recruitment and radicalisation efforts. Through the governmental disconnect, religious pretexts, and the harsh socioeconomic status of many Northerners, armed groups have used these circumstances as an impetus for recruitment with the promise of survival and economic benefits. International involvement, especially the role of France and the US, is viewed by the respondents as problematic in many ways. Although respondents viewed Franxe and the US as being present for reasons such as peacekeeping and creating stability, their efforts are regarded as being hampered by factors including unclear mandates, France's colonial history, inter- and intra-organisation disconnect, competing perceptions of reality as well as the government's lack of capacity to coordinate international efforts.

In the next chapter, the perspectives of Malian and foreign actors on terrorism and involvement in terrorism will be compared and contrasted to the perspectives of those who are incarcerated for terrorism. Additionally, these perspectives will be placed in light of the academic literature along the lines of the three levels of analysis presented in chapter two, namely the micro, meso, and macro level.

# 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.

# Summary

*Deconstructing involvement in terrorism in Mali*

How can we understand involvement in terrorism in Mali? That is the overarching question posed in this thesis. The analysis focuses specifically on Mali as a case study, a country that has been struggling since 2012 with the rise of various terrorist and armed groups. The country is a notorious example of how a seemingly stable situation can suddenly take a turn for the worse and of how the rise of terrorism can plunge a country into chaos over a very short time span. The country owes this status mainly to the Tuareg uprising that ensued in 2012, and the subsequent growth of – and fragmentation in – the number of terrorist groups to this day. Meanwhile, the international mission MINUSMA has been labeled the deadliest UN mission ever and the country is regularly shaken by large-scale terrorist and armed attacks. Both the media as well as academic literature have frequently described the impact of geopolitical events such as the fall of Ghadaffi in Libya, the influence of countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia through extremist ideologies through religious teaching on Mali, and the effects of the presence of the UN Mission MINUSMA and the French counter-terrorism operations Serval and Barkhane on the country. These factors, coupled with local and regional problems such as trafficking in everything from drugs to weapons and people, an absent or not functioning government and the ethnic and political tensions between ethnic groups provides the complex background of this PhD research.

Almost a decade after several terrorist groups marched towards the capital Bamako, and in response France decided to intervene to prevent the fall of the capital, Mali remains in the grip of terrorism. During every visit to Mali between 2016 and 2020 (sixteen in total), I found that the overall security situation in Mali had deteriorated yet again. At the same time, Mali turned out to be a highly relevant case to learn more about how and why people become involved in terrorism in a non-Western context. Fist of all, because involvement in terrorism, while being a very local phenomenon in Mali, has many similarities with other terrorist groups that manifested themselves in neighboring countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso, but also more widely in North Africa and the Middle East during the same period. Although the findings on involvement in terrorism in Mali cannot be translated one-to-one into comparable processes in those neighboring countries or further away, they do offer insights that are relevant to similar terrorist groups and the individuals who join them. In addition, Mali has become perhaps the most famous case in the scientific literature on the rise of terrorism in the Sahel. Many insights into terrorism in (West) Africa and the Sahel region are partly derived from Mali as a case study, however, generally not based on primary sources. That makes it of particular interest to analyze the involvement of a number of individuals in terrorism in this country.

The question of how people become involved in terrorism in general has puzzled researchers for decades. Research often focuses on the ‘why’ question: why do people join terrorist groups? The academic body of literature contains a variety of explanations - based on different disciplinary perspectives. However, the majority of these explanations are not based on research in a non-Western context - where most attacks take place - and moreover, there is often a lack of primary source case material. This leaves the question whether and to what extent the existing theoretical and empirical insights also apply to countries such as Mali. The shortage of primary sources can partially be explained by the specific difficulties surrounding the quest to do scientific research into a sensitive phenomenon such as terrorism. Terrorists

are not always easy to find or approach, and if it *is* possible, governments are not always keen on facilitating access to researchers. In addition, research into terrorism can take place in a specific and potentially dangerous context that has implications for ethical and security criteria in scientific studies. This is even more the case in countries that are victims of widespread violence by terrorist groups. This means ethnographic or anthropological research is often dangerous and even research in a government-controlled environment (such as prisons) is often characterized by a security situation that is difficult to control. In addition, relevant information about individual terrorists or terrorist groups is often not accessible to investigators, either because it has been collected in the context of intelligence or criminal investigations or because it is simply not documented.

As a consequence, studies of terrorism are generally based on secondary data collected in a Western context. This also means that many of the existing explanations for involvement in terrorism have not or have hardly been tested against empirical evidence, let alone in countries such as Mali. If research is done at all, it is likely not conducted by individual scientists but rather by large international organizations that have access to potential research target groups through their activities. As such, a number of excellent studies have been published by international or non-gouvernmental organisatoins such as UNDP and ISS Africa, rather than by academics, including a number of studies that make use of interviews with (former) terrorists. At the same time, the above-described situation meant that there was still much room for research in this context based on primary source material to contribute to knowledge about involvement in terrorism in general and in Mali in particular.

With that situation as a starting point, the idea for this PhD-thesis was developed, namely that access to prisoners who were suspected of *or* convicted for involvement in terrorism in Mali (and thus access to primary sources in a non-Western context) is of great importance in terms of added value to increase our understanding of this process. The two main forms of primary sources used in this research are firstly the interviews with prisoners accused of or sentenced for involvement in terrorism and secondly, the interviews with professionals involved in terrorism in Mali, including ministries, police and prosecutors, prison staff, religious leaders, embassy staff and representatives of the UN mission MINUSMA. While both sources come with their own limitations when it comes to bias and reliability or the ability to verify information, they provide unique insights into involvement in terrorism in Mali and allow for a critical evaluation of some commonly used explanations for involvement in terrorism.

Drawing on the literature that informs our view of involvement in terrorism as deviant behaviour, this study defines involvement in terrorism as 'the psychosocial process ranging from associating or engaging with to disengaging and disconnecting from terrorist groups or movements'. Based on extensive fieldwork, including thirty one-on-one interviews with Malian prisoners accused of terrorism-realted offenses and 75 interviews with Malian and international professionals working in the field of counter-terrorism, this thesis seeks to improve our understanding of how individuals become involved in terrorism in the Malian context.

This study started with an extensive literature review of explanations for involvement in terrorism, which concluded that this process can be approached by three different levels of analysis. The three levels of analysis focus on micro (or individual), meso (or group), and macro (or structural) explanations. The micro or individual level zooms in on factors that are characterized by their personal nature such as psychological or psychiatric factors or a specific cognitive mindset. The meso or group level of analysis focuses on processes that are related to social settings such as social identity, peer pressure, or the influence of charismatic

leaders. Finally, the macro or structural level examines the influence of environmental factors such as geopolitical events, the influence of international actors and neighboring countries and the degree of economic development of a country. Even though there is agreement in the academic literature that none of these levels of analysis can provide a complete picture of the phenomenon of involvement in terrorism on their own, it remains unclear exactly what role the explanations play at these three levels - also in relation to each other. In this research the empirical findings have been analyzed and have been assessed against the explanations across these three perspectives. The empirical findings and the subsequent analysis cover three chapters and form the heart of this thesis (chapters five through seven). This is preceded by an introductory chapter (chapter one), a chapter that sets out the theoretical framework (chapter two), a chapter that provides the necessary background information about Mali (chapter three) and a chapter that presents the methodological approach of this thesis (chapter four). The thesis is completed with a concluding chapter (chapter eight), in which the most important findings are summarized.

The findings show that involvement in terrorism is a uniquely individual trajectory that is influenced by the broader cultural context and by specific group dynamics. The findings also demonstrate that involvement is not a linear process in which a number of clear steps necessarily lead to terrorism, but rather, that it is a dynamic process characterized by sidepaths, stagnation and progress, triggers and environmental factors that can attract an individual to terrorist groups. And it became clear that explanations or descriptions of this process are by definition subjective in nature - and dependent on the perceptions and narration of the person involved as well as the researcher who gathers and analyses the data. On the basis of the interviews with (suspected) terrorists, seven domains were identified that provide insight into involvement in terrorism in Mali, namely state-citizen relations, survival, foreign influence, societal tensions, economic opportunities, ideology and a lack of information. Subsequently, it was examined to what extent the perceptions of professionals in Mali (both working in the national and international domain) about how and why individuals become involved in terrorism correspond with this.

Overall, the results show that involvement in terrorism in Mali can be best understood from a meso-level perspective with the respondents identifying the factors related to state-citizen relationships, societal tensions and identity as playing a dominant role in that process. The role of foreign influence on the macro level was also compelling. The factor identity also played out on the micro level – with individuals strongly linking personal identity to group identity – and at the macro level – where it was linked to concepts of statehood and legitimacy.

With regard to the specific levels of analysis, this research finds that at the micro level, two factors played a role: survival instinct and ideology. As such, the empirical findings do not support the scientific literature that seeks explanations on psychopathological or psycho-sociological grounds. However, the findings are in line with cognitive explanations for involvement in terrorism. Especially Kruglanski's concept of the ‘quest for significance’, in which individuals who become involved in terrorism are primarily seen as driven by a search for meaning or purpose in life, mirror the finding that some of the respondents saw their involvement in terrorism primarily as a vocation and as a logical consequence of their ideological beliefs.

At the meso or group level, this study underlines the importance of the social aspect of the urge to survive (where individuals cooperate with terrorist groups to ensure the safety

of family or friends). In addition, all aspects of the domain of state-citizen relations can be traced back to the meso level, specifically what was seen by respondents as a lack of political responsibility on the part of the government (no political inclusion), a lack of institutional capacity (whereby the state was seen as reluctant or unable to provide basic services such as justice, education, electricity or water), and identity, with respondents indicating that they do not see the state as a legitimate actor in any case or regard the borders of the country of Mali as arbitrary. The domain of social tensions, including themes such as conflict between the north and the south of the country, tensions between different ethnic groups and a perceived lack of community spirit, all fall on the meso level. Finally, a finding of this study was that the domain of lack of information (due to inadequate information or a lack of education) and the domain of economic opportunities (especially when it comes to being able to provide for family or the broader social group with which one identifies oneself) were important as factors that provide insight into why individuals become involved in terrorism in Mali.

These insights support, among other things, explanations for terrorism that focus on terrorism as a form of social control and terrorism as an organized form of collective violent resistance by non-state actors as an expression of grievances against a (perceived) negligent government. Additionally, the academic literature on groupthink as a possible explanation for involvement in terrorism in which the group adheres to a collective identity that opposes 'the other' or the outsider (in the form of other ethnic groups or the government or international actors as outsiders) is supported by the findings.

At a macro or structural level, the factor of foreign influence is most evident (including the themes 'direct influence of neighboring countries' such as Libya and Algeria, 'influence of international actors' such as France and MINUSMA, and 'foreign jihadist influence' from Qatar and Saudi Arabia). Some aspects of the domain of economic opportunities (often in the sense of existing cross-border trade networks) and the theme of identity (as an abstract concept in which one feels a citizen of a country where the government is seen as a legitimate actor) can also be perceived as being of a structural nature. The frequently recurring explanation of a correlation between poverty and terrorism in the academic literature is not supported by this research. However, the relative deprivation theory in which engagement with terrorism is seen as the outcome of deep social inequality and a perception of deprivation in relation to other groups in society is reinforced by the results of this analysis.

A final important finding of this research is that involvement in terrorism in Mali, and therefore likely also in similar contexts, can be seen as a prime example of a well-functioning supply-and-demand economy. Reasons for involvement in terrorism lie between highly contextual needs for security and income on the one hand and a greater need for a sense of purpose (such as meaning, value and/or political inclusion) on the other. And many terrorist groups know very well how to tailor to that demand at the individual level. The offer of these terrorist groups is often simply seen as better than the alternative (compared to what the government or international actors (can) offer). In many cases, therefore, a choice or explanation for involvement in terrorism in Mali can be best viewed as placed somewhere between belief and benefit; as a mixture of an expression of personal identity and a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis, rather than a means to pursue concrete political or religious goals.

At the same time, this research has its own limitations, mainly as a result of the methodological choices that have been made. The choice to reflect on the empirical findings using a broad analytical framework consequentially leads to a more superficial analysis of specific theories or explanations for terrorism at the expense of a more in-depth and nuanced explorations based on, for example, only one or two theories. At the same time, this provides

an impetus for further research that could, for example, focus on a more extensive analysis on the basis of a specific theory. This research also involves a possible selection bias, in which individuals may be included or excluded consciously or unconsciously, for example through selection by the cell leaders or prison staff. Given that the selection of participants in the prison context is limited to thirty individuals, a second step for follow-up research could therefore be to conduct comparative research using the same approach into individuals who do not become involved in terrorism under similar circumstances. Finally, this research has the inherent limitation that a narrative approach entails: it is based on the selective and subjective interpretation of the participants, which are in turn co-constructed through the questions and interpretation of the researcher.

With the combination of access to and the analysis of unique primary sources in light of the existing body of literature, this study provides a nuanced and data-driven contribution to both the scientific and societal debate about involvement in terrorism in Mali - and the wider Sahelian context. The analysis of the narratives of detainees suspected of or sentenced for involvement in terrorism and the perspectives of national and international actors in the counter-terrorism field in Mali provide us with unique insights into this process of involvement. Given that stories play an essential role in bringing and keeping groups (including terrorist groups) together, the co-constructed narratives in this thesis provide us with unique and important insights into how people in Mali have become involved in terrorism in the specific cultural and geographic context within which they have shared their stories.

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# Annex A – Interview outline inmate interviews

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Part 1 – Introduction</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Researcher(s):<br>• Introduce themselves as part of an international research group focused on conflict areas and post-conflict situations. Include: name, nationality, institute/organization.<br>• Explain the goals of the research project and elaborate on how the interview can contribute to these goals. Goal: to gain better understanding of the background of individual inmates charged with violent extremist/terrorist crimes.<br>• Discuss how the information during the interview will be collected and how the privacy of the interviewee will be guaranteed. It will also be explained that data will be treated anonymously and confidentially and that the interviewee can at any point during the interview state if he does not know the answer to a question, is not willing to answer, or wants to end the interview. After explaining this, the researcher(s) will ask for verbal informed consent of the inmate to participate in the interview.<br>• End with asking the inmate whether they can provide some information about themselves (‘Can you tell us something about your background and how you ended up here?’) – and note the demographic information (name, age, nationality, marital status, charge).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Part 2 – Current situation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Main Questions</td><td>Additional questions</td><td>Expanding questions</td></tr>
<tr><td>How are you doing at this moment?</td><td>• How are you doing today?<br>• How do you feel?<br>• What is your daily routine?<br>• How long have you been here / in prison?<br>• To what extent do you receive visitors?<br>• Can you tell us something about your life here?</td><td>Can you explain further?<br><br>Would you like to add something to this?<br><br>Can you give some examples?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Part 3 – Life history</td></tr>
<tr><td>Main Questions</td><td>Additional questions</td><td>Expanding questions</td></tr>
<tr><td>What is the background of the inmate / what did his life look like before prison?</td><td>• Can you tell us something about what your life looked like before prison?<br>• Where were you born / what region are you from?<br>• How did you end up in this situation?<br>• What is your family background?<br>• Can you tell us something about why you are here?<br>• Can you elaborate on the group you identify with / can you elaborate about your role in this organization?<br>• Can you tell us something about how you</td><td>Can you explain further?<br><br>Would you like to add something to this?<br><br>What factors played a role in that process?</td></tr>
</table>

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | became involved with this group / organization (when, why and how)? | Can you give some examples? |
| **Part 4 – Conclusion of the interview** | | |
| 'Are there any topics that have not been discussed that you would like to discuss?'<br>'Is there anything you would like to add to what has just been discussed?'<br><br>Researcher(s) end with thanking the inmate for participation, again emphasizing the anonymous, confidential and voluntary nature of the interview and provide the inmate with an information sheet that lists the contact details of the research team. | | |

# Annex B – Interview outline professional interviews

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Interview outline focus group interviews with pofessionals<br>Part 1 – Introduction</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Researcher(s):<br>• Introduce themselves as part of an international research group focused on conflict areas and post-conflict situations. Include: name, nationality, institute/organization.<br>• Explain the goals of the research project and elaborate on how the focus group interview can contribute to these goals.<br>• Discuss how the information during the interview will be collected and how the privacy of the interviewees will be guaranteed. It will also be explained that data will be treated anonymously and confidentially and that the interviewees can at any point during the interview state if they do not know the answer to a question, are not willing to answer, or want to end the interview. After explaining this, the researcher(s) will ask for verbal informed consent of the inmate to participate in the interview.<br>• End with introductory round – name/affiliation and experience with (counter)terrorism</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Part 2 – Reasons for involvement in terrorism / radicalisation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Main Questions</td><td>Additional questions</td><td>Expanding questions</td></tr>
<tr><td>Why do you think individuals join terrorist groups in Mali?</td><td>• Can you list some reasons?<br>• Why those reasons?<br>• What are the most important factors?<br>• Do you all agree with this?<br>• Is there a difference between terrorist groups?</td><td>Can you explain further?<br><br>Would you like to add something to this?<br><br>Can you give some examples?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What are causes for radicalization?</td><td>• Why do people radicalize?<br>• Is this unique for Mali?<br>• Is there one factor that is the most important factor?<br>• Do you think this is different for other countries?</td><td>Can you explain further?<br><br>Would you like to add something to this?<br><br>What factors play a role in that process?<br><br>Can you give some examples?</td></tr>
</table>

| **Part 3 – Conclusion of the interview** |
|---|
| 'Are there any topics that have not been discussed that you would like to discuss?'<br>'Is there anything you would like to add to what has just been discussed?'<br><br>Researcher(s) end with thanking the group for participation, again emphasizing the anonymous, confidential and voluntary nature of the interview and provide the respondents with an information sheet that lists the contact details of the research team. |

| **Interview outline individual interviews with pofessionals**<br>**Part 1 – Introduction** | | |
|---|---|---|
| Researcher(s):<br>• Introductions: what is the affiliation of and role/position of the interviewee? | | |
| **Part 2 – Terrorism in Mali** | | |
| Main Questions | Additional questions | Expanding questions |
| How would you describe the current situation in Mali? | • In what context do you do your work?<br>• Can you describe the security / political situation in the country?<br>• Is terrorism a problem in Mali?<br>• To what extent is terrorism a problem in Mali?<br>• How did this situation come about? | Can you explain further?<br><br>Can you give some examples? |
| What is the role of international actors in Mali? | • What international actors are active in Mali?<br>• Which ones are the most important actors (and why)?<br>• What is the impact of international actors on Mali's security / political situation?<br>• Do international actors / does their presence contribute to or hinder terrorism in Mali? | Can you explain further?<br><br>What factors play a role in that process?<br><br>Can you give some examples? |
| Why do individuals become involved with or join terrorist groups in Mali? | • What factors play a role?<br>• Why do people radicalize in Mali?<br>• Why do individuals engage with terrorist groups?<br>• How do people become involved with terrorist groups? | Can you explain further?<br><br>Can you give some examples? |
| **Part 3 – Conclusion of the interview** | | |
| 'Are there any topics that have not been discussed that you would like to discuss?'<br>'Is there anything you would like to add to what has just been discussed?' | | |

# Annex C – Anonymised list of professional respondents

| **Respondent category** | | **Specific background** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Semi-structured interviews* | | *ID in text* | *Name / position* |
| | Embassy staff | Official from French Embassy | Political Advisor |
| | | Official from Canadian Embassy | Political Affairs Advisor |
| | | Senior official from US Embassy | Acting Ambassador |
| | | Political Officer from Dutch Embassy | Political Officer |
| | | Security Advisor from Dutch Embassy | Security & Ruleof Law Advisor |
| | NGO/CSO staff | Mercy Corps Official | Senior Political Advisor |
| | | International Alert Official | Programme Manager |
| | | Think Peace Mali Official | Program Manager |
| | | Center for Humanitarian Dialogue Official | Local Advisor |
| | | SNV Official | Local Country Manager |
| | MINUSMA staff | UNDSS Senior Official | Deputy Director |
| | | JMAC Senior Official | Director |
| | | JMAC Operational Analyst | Analyst |
| | | ASIFU Senior Official | Commander |
| | | UN Human Rights Official | Senior Advisor |
| | | UN Security Sector Reform Official | Senior Advisor |
| | Other | University of Bamako Researcher | Researcher |
| | | US former Intelligence Officer | CIA |
| | | Senior Official EU Delegation | Director |
| *Focus group interviews* | | | |
| | Religious leaders | 23 | |
| | Prison staff | 15 | |
| | Ministry of Justice | 2 | |
| | DNAPES Headquarters | 3 | |
| | MINUSMA Justice and Corrections | 5 | |
| | Judge | 1 | |
| | Prosecutor | 1 | |
| | Ministry of Religious Affairs | 5 | |

# Nederlandse samenvatting

*Betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali begrijpen*

Hoe kunnen we betrokkenheid bij terrorisme (beter) begrijpen? Dat is de overkoepelende vraag die in dit proefschrift wordt gesteld. De analyse richt zich specifiek op Mali als casus, een land dat sinds 2012 te kampen heeft met de opkomst van diverse terroristische groeperingen. Mali geldt als berucht voorbeeld van hoe het ineens mis kan gaan in een land waar alles uiterlijk gezien stabiel lijkt en hoe de opkomst van terrorisme een land in korte tijd in chaos kan storten. Het land dankt deze status vooral aan de opstand van de Toeareg rebellen die in 2012 begon, en de daaropvolgende groei en fragmentatie in het aantal terroristische groepen tot vandaag de dag. Ondertussen is de in het land aanwezige VN-missie MINUSMA bestempelt tot de dodelijkste VN-missie ooit en wordt het land regelmatig opgeschrikt door grootschalige aanslagen. Dat het in Mali gaat om méér dan een duidelijke groep mensen met gewelddadig extremistische ideeën wordt onderstreept door de veelvuldig beschreven connecties tussen geopolitieke factoren als de val van Ghadaffi in Libië, de invloed van landen als Qatar en Saoedi Arabië, de aanwezigheid van MINUSMA en de Franse contra-terrorisme operaties Serval en Barkhane en de lokale problematiek zoals de handel in alles van drugs tot mensen en wapens, een afwezige overheid en de etnische en politieke spanningen tussen de verschillende bevolkingsroepen. Deze complexe situatie vormt de achtergrond van dit PhD-onderzoek.

Bijna tien jaar nadat verschillende terroristische groepen richting de hoofdstad Bamako marcheerden en Frankrijk besloot in te grijpen om de val van de hoodstad te voorkomen blijft Mali in de greep van geweld en terrorisme. Tijdens elk bezoek aan Mali tussen 2016 en 2020 (achttien in totaal) moest ik constateren dat de veiligheidssituatie wederom was verslechterd. Desalniettemin, en deels juist daarom, bleek Mali een ontzettend boeiende en relevante casus om meer te weten te komen over hoe en waarom mensen betrokken raken bij terrorisme. Ten eerste doordat terrorisme in Mali een heel lokaal verschijnsel is terwijl het tegelijk veel overeenkomsten kent met de vele aanwezige terroristische groeperingen die zich in dezelfde periode in directe buurlanden zoals Niger en Burkina Faso, maar ook breder in Noord-Afrika en het Midden-Oosten manifesteerden. Ook al zijn de bevindingen over betrokkenheid bij terrorisme zeker niet één op één te vertalen naar vergelijkbare processen in die buurlanden of verder weg, ze bieden wel inzichten die relevant zijn voor soortgelijke groepen en de individuen die zich daarbij aansluiten. Daarnaast is Mali uitgegroeid tot de meest bekende casus in de wetenschappelijke literatuur over de opkomst van terrorisme in de Sahel. Veel inzichten over terrorisme in (West) Afrika en de Sahel-regio zijn aan Mali als casestudie ontleend, waardoor het voor mij bijzonder interessant is geweest om gedurende enkele jaren – met toegang tot nieuw en uniek bronnenmateriaal – het land en het proces van betrokkenheid bij terrorisme te analyseren.

De vraag hoe mensen betrokken raken bij terrorisme houdt onderzoekers al decennia bezig. Vaak richt onderzoek zich op de waarom-vraag: waarom sluiten personen zich aan bij terroristische groeperingen? De wetenschappelijke literatuur kent inmiddels een variëteit aan verklaringen – vaak gestoeld op verschillende disciplinaire invalshoeken. Het merendeel van die verklaringen zijn echter niet gebaseerd op onderzoek in de niet-Westerse context – waar de meeste aanslagen plaatsvinden maar op onderzoek in met name Europa en Noord-Amerika. Bovendien ontbreekt het vaak aan primair bronnenmateriaal. Daarmee blijft de vraag of en in hoeverre de bestaande wetenschappelijke inzichten ook van toepassing zijn op landen als Mali. Het tekort aan primaire bronnen laat zich deels verklaren door de specifieke

moeilijkheden rondom wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar een sensitief fenomeen als terrorisme. Terroristen zijn niet altijd makkelijk te vinden of te benaderen en als dat toch mogelijk is zijn overheden vaak niet happig op het faciliteren van toegang voor onderzoekers. Daarnaast – vanwege de mogelijk gewelddadige aard van individuele terroristen – betekent onderzoek naar terrorisme ook dat er een specifieke en mogelijk gevaarlijke context bestaat die implicaties heeft voor ethische aspecten en veiligheidscriteria bij wetenschappelijke studies. Dit is vaak nog meer het geval in landen die slachtoffer zijn van grootschalig geweld door terroristische groeperingen; dat maakt etnografisch of antropologisch onderzoek gevaarlijk en zelfs onderzoek in een door de overheid gecontroleerde omgeving (zoals gevangenissen) wordt vaak gekenmerkt door een moeilijk beheersbare veiligheidssituatie. Bovendien is relevante informatie over individuele terroristen of terroristische groepen vaak niet toegankelijk voor onderzoekers, dan wel omdat het is verzameld in de context van inlichtingen- of opsporingsonderzoek of omdat het simpelweg niet wordt gedocumenteerd.

De consequentie is dat studies naar terrorisme vaak gebaseerd zijn op secundaire data verzameld in een Westere context. Dat betekent ook dat veel van de bestaande verklaringen voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme niet of nauwelijks zijn getoetst aan empirisch bewijs, laat staan in landen als Mali. Als er al onderzoek wordt gedaan zijn het vaak niet individuele wetenschappers maar eerder grote internationale organisaties die door hun activiteiten toegang hebben tot de doelgroep en dus ook enkele uitstekende studies hebben gepubliceerd die wel gebruik maken van interviews met (voormalige) terroristen, zoals bijvoorbeeld UNDP en ISS Africa. Tegelijk betekent bovenstaande situatie dat er nog veel ruimte was voor onderzoek in deze context op basis van primair bronnenmateriaal om een bijdrage te leveren aan de kennis over betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in het algemeen en in Mali in het bijzonder.

Vanuit bovenstaand vertrekpunt is het idee voor dit proefschrift tot stand gekomen, namelijk dat de toegang tot gevangenen die verdacht werden van – of veroordeeld waren voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali (en daarmee toegang tot primaire bronnen in een niet-Westerse context) van grote meerwaarde zou zijn om onze kennis van en inzicht in dit proces te vergroten. De twee belangrijkste vormen van primaire bronnen die zijn gebruikt in dit onderzoek zijn allereerst de interviews met gevangenen die beschuldigd worden van betrokkenheid bij terrorisme en daarnaast de interviews met professionals die zich in Mali bezighouden met contraterrorisme; waaronder medewerkers van ministeries, politie en het Openbaar Ministerie, gevangenispersoneel, religieuze leiders, ambassadepersoneel en vertegenwoordigers van de VN-missie MINUSMA. Hoewel beide bronnen beperkingen met zich meebrengen als het gaat om *bias* en betrouwbaarheid, of de mogelijkheid tot verificatie, bieden ze unieke inzichten in betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali en maken ze het mogelijk om enkele veelgebruikte en als algemeen geldig beschouwde verklaringen voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme kritisch tegen het licht te houden.

Deze studie is gestart met een uitgebreid literatuuronderzoek naar verklaringen voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme, waarbij de conclusie was dat dit proces wordt verklaard op basis van drie verschillende analyseniveaus. Het deconstrueren van betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali – zoals de titel aankondigt – is vertaald naar het structureren van de empirie waarin de elementen van betrokkenheid op drie niveaus werden geanalyseerd, te weten micro- of individuele, meso- of groep en macro- of structurele verklaringen. Het micro-of individuele niveau kijkt naar factoren die worden gekenmerkt door hun persoonsgebonden karakter zoals psychologische of psychiatrische factoren of een specifieke cognitieve mindset. Het meso-of groepsniveau van analyse richt zich op processen zoals sociale identiteit, groepsdruk of de invloed van charismatische leiders. Het macro- of

structurele niveau, ten slotte, onderzoekt de invloed van omgevingsfactoren zoals geopolitieke gebeurtenissen, de invloed van internationale actoren en buurlanden en de mate van economische ontwikkeling van een land. Ook al bestaat in de wetenschap overeenstemming over het feit dat geen van deze niveaus van analyse op zichzelf een compleet beeld kan geven van het fenomeen betrokkenheid bij terrorisme, tegelijk blijft onduidelijk welke rol de verklaringen op die drie niveaus precies spelen – ook ten opzichte van elkaar. In dit onderzoek zijn de empirische bronnen aan de hand van deze drie perspectieven geanalyseerd. De empirie en de daarbij horende analyse beslaat drie hoofdstukken en vormen het hart van dit proefschrift (H5-H7). Dit wordt voorafgegaan door een introducerend hoofdstuk (H1), een hoofdstuk dat het theoretisch kader uiteenzet (H2), een hoofdstuk dat de nodige achtergrondinformatie over Mali biedt (H3) en een hoofdstuk dat de methodologische aanpak van dit proefschrift presenteert (H4). Het geheel wordt met een concluderend hoofdstuk afgerond (H8) waarin de belangrijkste bevindingen zijn samengevat.

Uit de resultaten komt duidelijk naar voren dat betrokkenheid bij terrorisme een uniek individueel traject is dat wordt beinvloed door de bredere culturele context en door specifieke groepsdynamiek. Ook werd helder dat het geen lineair proces is waarbij een aantal duidelijke stappen noodzakelijkerwijs leiden tot terrorisme maar dat het een dynamisch proces is, gekenmerkt door vele zijwegen, door stilstand en vooruitgang, triggers en omgevingsfactoren, waardoor een individu zich aangetrokken voelt door terroristische groeperingen. En het werd duidelijk dat verklaringen of beschrijvingen van dit proces per definitie subjectief van aard zijn –afhankelijk van de percepties en de vertelling van de betrokkene. Op basis van de interviews met (verdachte) terroristen werden zeven domeinen geidentificeerd die inzicht geven in betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali, te weten staat-burger relaties, overlevingsdrang, buitenlandse invloed, sociale spanningen, economische kansen, ideologie en gebrek aan inzicht. Vervolgens is gekeken in hoeverre de percepties van professionals in Mali (zowel werzkaam in het nationale als internationale domein) over hoe en waarom individuen betrokken raken bij terrorisme hiermee overeenstemden.

Wat betreft de specifieke analyseniveaus laat dit onderzoek zien dat op micro-niveau twee factoren een rol speelden: overlevingsdrang en ideologie. Daarmee ondersteunt de empirie niet de wetenschappelijke literatuur die verklaringen zoekt op psychopathologische of psycho-sociologische gronden. Wel zijn de bevindingen sterk in lijn met de cognitieve verklaringen voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme. Onder andere Kruglanski's *Quest for Significance* theorie, waarbij individuen die betrokken raken bij terrorisme primair worden gezien als gedreven door een zoektocht naar betekenis of zingeving in het leven, weerspiegelen de bevinding dat een deel van de respondenten hun betrokkenheid bij terrorisme vooral zagen als een roeping en een logische gevolgtrekking van hun ideologische overtuiging.

Op het meso- of groepsniveau zien we het sociale aspect van overlevingsdrang (waarbij individuen meewerken met terroristische groepen vanwege de veiligheid van familie of vrienden). Daarnaast zijn alle aspecten van het domein staat-burger relaties terug te voeren tot het meso-niveau, specifiek wat door respondenten werd gezien als een gebrek aan politieke verantwoordelijkheid van de overheid (geen politieke inclusie), een gebrek aan institutionele capaciteiten (waarbij de staat werd gezien als onwillig of niet in staat om te voorzien in basisvoorzieningen als rechtspraak, onderwijs, elektriciteit of water), en identiteit, waarbij respondenten aangaven de staat sowieso niet te zien als een legitieme actor of de grenzen van het land Mali als arbitrair te beschouwen. Ook het domein sociale spanningen, met thema's als conflict tussen het noorden en het zuiden van het land, spanningen tussen verschillende etnische groepen en een gevoeld gebrek aan

gemeenschapzin kwam terug op het meso-niveau. Ten slotte was een bevinding van dit onderzoek dat ook het domein gebrek aan inzicht (als gevolg van gebrekkige informatie of onderwijs) en het domein economische kansen (met name waar het gaat om het kunnen voorzien in onderhoud van familie of de bredere sociale groep waarmee men zich identificeert) van belang waren als factoren die inzicht bieden in de betrokkenheid bij terrorisme.

Deze inzichten ondersteunen onder andere verklaringen voor terrorisme die zich richten op terrorisme als een vorm van sociale controle (Black) en terrorisme als een georganiseerde vorm van collectief gewelddadig verzet door non-statelijke actoren als uiting van grieven jegens een nalatige overheid. Ook de wetenschappelijke literatuur op het vlak van groepsdenken als mogelijke verklaring voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme waarbij de groep een collectieve identiteit kent die zich afzet tegen de ander of de buitenstaander – Jervis' *groupthink* en *in/outgroup thinking* – (in de vorm van andere etnische groepen of de overheid of internationale actoren als buitenstaanders) wordt ondersteund door de bevindingen. En het sociaalpsychologische proces wat *fusion* wordt genoemd, waarbij door omgang met een groep mensen overdracht van waarden en normen en ideologie plaatsvindt, was zichtbaar in de empirie.

Op macro-of structureel niveau komt de factor buitenlandse invloed het meest duidelijk terug (waaronder de thema's directe invloed van buurlanden zoals Libie en Algerije, invloed van internationale actoren als Frankrijk en MINUSMA, en buitenlandse jihadistische invloed uit Qatar en Saoedi-Arabie). Ook enkele aspecten van het domein economiche kansen (vaak in de zin van bestaande grensoverschrijdende handelsnetwerken) en het thema identiteit (als abstract concept waarin men zich burger voelt van een land waarbij de overheid als legitieme actor wordt gezien) kunnen worden gepercipieerd als zijnde van structurele aard. De in de wetenschappelijke literatuur veel terugkomende verklaring van een correlatie tussen armoede en terrorisme wordt niet ondersteund door dit onderzoek. Wel wordt de relatieve deprivatie theorie waarbij betrokkenheid bij terrorisme wordt gezien als het gevolg van diepe sociale ongelijkheid (de zogenoemde *'Davies-curve'*) en een perceptie van deprivatie ten opzichte van andere groepen in de samenleving ondersteund door de bevindingen van dit onderzoek.

Een laatste belangrijke bevinding van dit onderzoek is dat betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali, en dus waarschijnlijk ook in een gelijksoortige context, gezien kan worden als een vraag-en-aanbod kwestie – en in die zin als een stuk marktwerking in optima forma. Redenen voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme bevinden zich tussen zeer contextueel-gekleurde behoeften aan veiligheid en inkomen aan de ene kant en een grotere behoefte aan zingeving zoals een gevoel van betekenis, van waarde en/of van politieke inclusie aan de andere kant. En voor die vraag op het individuele niveau bieden veel terroristische groeperingen een zeer interessant aanbod. Het aanbod van deze groepen wordt simpelweg gezien als beter dan het alternatief (wat de overheid of internationale actoren bieden). Daarmee is de keuze voor betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in veel gevallen meer een uiting van persoonlijke behoeften dan een middel om concrete politieke of religieuze doelen na te streven.

Met de combinatie van toegang tot en analyse van unieke primaire bronnen vanuit een breed wetenschappelijk analysekader, biedt deze studie een genuanceerde en empirisch onderbouwde bijdrage aan het wetenschappelijke en sociale debat over betrokkenheid bij terrorisme in Mali – en de bredere West-Afrikaanse context. De analyse van de narratieven van gedetineerden die worden verdacht van betrokkenheid bij terrorisme en de perspectieven van nationale en internationale actoren in het contra-terrorisme veld in Mali bieden ons unieke inzichten in dit proces van betrokkenheid. Tegelijkertijd kent het onderzoek zijn eigen

beperkingen, doorgaans ten gevolge van de methodologische keuzes die zijn gemaakt. De keuze voor een breed analytisch kader leidt tot een meer oppervlakkige analyse van specifieke theorieen of verklaringen voor terrorisme ten koste van meer diepgaande en genuanceerde verkenningen aan de hand van bijvoorbeelds slechts één of twee verklaringen. Dat geeft tegelijk een aanzet voor verder onderzoek dat zich bijvoorbeeld zou kunnen richten op een meer uitgebreide analyse aan de hand van een specifieke theorie. Gezien de selectie van deelnemers in de gevangeniscontext zich heeft beperkt tot dertig individuen kan weinig gezegd worden over personen die onder dezelfde omstandigheden niet betrokken raken bij terrorisme. Een tweede logische stap voor vervolgonderzoek zou daarmee kunnen zijn om met eenzelfde benadering vergelijkend onderzoek te doen naar individuen die onder soortgelijke omstandigheden niet betrokken raken bij terrorisme. Ook is in dit onderzoek sprake van mogelijke selectiebias, waarbij zowel bewust of onbewust individuen geincludeerd of ge-excludeerd kunnen zijn door bijvoorbeeld de celleiders of het gevangenispersoneel. Ten slotte kent dit onderzoek de inherente beperking die een narratieve benadering met zich meebrengt: het is gebaseerd op de selectieve en subjectieve interpretatie van de deelnemers, die mede wordt vormgegeven door de persoon en de vragen van de onderzoeker. Desalniettemin, gegeven het feit dat verhalen een zeer belangrijke rol spelen in het bij elkaar brengen en houden van groepen (waaronder terroristische groepen) bieden de co-geconstrueerde narratieven in dit proefschrift ons belangrijke inzichten in de vraag hoe personen in Mali betrokken zijn geraakt in de specifieke culturele en geografische context waarin zij hun verhalen hebben gedeeld.

# Acknowledgements

During my first trip to Mali in early 2016, our research team had a meeting with the Minister of Justice to discuss the training of prison staff in Bamako's central prison. Halfway through the meeting, he asked if we would be willing to figure out why these terrorists, held in Bamako's central prison, joined terrorist groups to begin with. Back then, I had just started researching terrorism prison policies in the Philippines, Nigeria and Pakistan with the idea of turning that into a PhD. When I returned from Mali, I discussed adding the Mali case to the research with my supervisors. Quite quickly, we concluded that instead, this would be a unique opportunity to focus on Mali as a single case. It provided me with the chance to really dive into the perspectives of not just prison staff, policymakers and the international community on involvement in terrorism – but also the perspectives of those who were accused of and or sentenced for terrorism in Mali. From 2016 to 2020, I travelled to Mali eighteen times, each time talking to new as well as the same people and to deconstruct the process of involvement in terrorism in the country.

As with most work in academia, this doctorate thesis profited from the contribution of many people. First, I would like to thank my supervisors Edwin Bakker and Marieke Liem, who have offered invaluable guidance and support throughout the project. They provided the perfect mix of great attention for structure versus detail, academic rigor and humor and a continuous belief in a successful completion of this research. I am most grateful for the cooperation with and financial support of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT – The Hague) and Clingendael; and the support of director Renske van der Veer as well as the Mali research team: Julie Coleman, Méryl Demuynck and Mika Naulais. Additionally, I would also like to acknowledge the support provided by the United Nations, and the UN-colleagues I had the pleasure of working with: Dr. Elena Dal Santo, we jointly started this research, and I could not have finished it without you. The work in Mali greatly benefited of the intellectual insights and brainstorm sessions with the UN's Jean-Pierre Esnault and Philippe Prevost, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Roelof Haveman and Mirjam Tjassing and my direct colleague Sergei Boeke.

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Liesbeth van der Heide – April 2022

# Curriculum Vitae

Liesbeth van der Heide was born in the Netherlands on the 6th of April 1986. After completing high school at the Zeldenrust-Steelantcollege in Terneuzen, she obtained an Associate of Arts Degree at Dordt College, Iowa, USA in 2005, followed by a Bachelor of Science in Political Science at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 2010. Then she completed the Master Program 'International Relations in Historical Perspective' *cum laude* in 2011, delivering a thesis on lone wolf terrorism. This thesis was written as part of an internship at the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC) at Leiden University's Campus The Hague, where Liesbeth accepted a position as a junior researcher after graduation in 2011. In 2015, the CTC was absorbed into the larger Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), and the CTC became ISGA's research group on (counter)terrorism and political violence. At ISGA, Liesbeth started the PhD-process at the end of 2016 under the supervision of Prof. dr. Edwin Bakker and Prof. dr. Marieke Liem.

In 2014, Liesbeth was offered a position as Research Fellow and Program Manager at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), a cooperative platform shared between Leiden University, the Clingendael Institute and the Asser Institute. At ICCT, she became the Centre's coordinator for its activities in the field of rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders in and after prison, bringing her to countries such as the Philippines, Nigeria, Pakistan, Indonesia, Singapore, Bosnia, North-Macedonia and Kosovo to organize and implement research and capacity-building programs for prison staff, policymakers and a range of actors in the field of counter-terrorism. In 2016, she received a grant from the United States Department of State – CT Bureau to setup a rehabilitation and reintegration program for violent extremist offenders in prison in Mali, together with the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). It was this program that allowed her access to the prison environment and the ability to gather primary resources through conducting interviews with prisoners accused of terrorism-related offenses in the country's main high-security prison in Bamako. As of 2018, the program continued with funding from the Royal Danish Embassy in Mali; and throughout the work in Mali, the data gathering, including interviews with professionals in the field of counter-terrorism, continued.

Over the years, Liesbeth has been involved in a variety of research projects, ranging from profiling lone operator terrorists for the National Police, crisis-communication in the aftermath of terrorist events for the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and evaluations of Dutch efforts to reintegrate extremists back into society for the National Coordinator of Security and Counter-Terrorism (NCTV). Besides working on a variety of research projects and her PhD thesis, Liesbeth has been involved in a number of courses on (counter-)terrorism that the ISGA offers to both students and professionals. In 2013 Liesbeth conducted archival research as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Onati International Institute for the Sociology of Law in Spain. In 2018, she became a Research Fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. In 2020, Liesbeth accepted a position at the Municipality of The Hague as the coordinator for the city's policies to prevent and counter polarization, radicalization and extremism. While staying on in a research and teaching position at ISGA, she is currently looking ahead to a variety of new research projects that combine her dedication to deconstructing societal challenges like terrorism with topics at the forefront of the current academic and societal debates on terrorism.