# A group affair: understanding involvement in terrorism in Mali
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# 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 |

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[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.

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[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/.
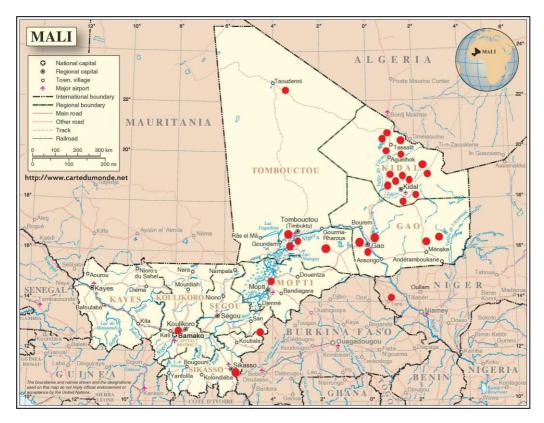[562] Andrew B. Smith, *African Herders: Emergence of Pastoral Traditions*, vol. 8 (Rowman Altamira, 2005).

*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*

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[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

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[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]

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[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.