Mali:
Conflict, Social Order and the Crime-Terror Nexus

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between conflict, social order, and the crime-terror nexus, with a focus on non-state armed groups in Mali, particularly Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Using anarchist political theory, the study challenges the view of these groups as purely chaotic, instead suggesting their primary aim is to establish social order. The crime-terror nexus is explored to understand its role in new governance structures created by these groups. The study underscores the importance of re-evaluating the frameworks used to interpret armed groups, emphasizing their role in creating social order and stability in conflict zones. The research offers insights into the complex dynamics of armed groups in Mali and encourages further investigation into their influence on regional stability.

Keywords: Mali, armed groups, social order, terrorism, governance, conflict, crime-terror nexus.

Introduction

Despite its natural, greater propensity for engaging directly with the theoretical topic of non-state armed groups, the field of conflict studies suffered from tendencies that are usually more visible in political science and international relations: to view most problems through the eyes of the state. Some scholars may still argue that one goal of the social scientist is to provide meaningful interpretation and suggestions for governmental or intergovernmental intervention toward ensuring the peace, security, and stability of a conflict-ravaged region.

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This article departs from this perspective, arguing instead that providing meaningful interpretations of social phenomena and processes should be the proper focus of social investigation. In its theoretical leanings, the perspective from which social processes are analyzed here owes much to the anarchist political literature of the last decades. This literature has delineated clear separations between a state perspective on social and political processes and one that takes into account other, competing social actors. It has been argued that in many societies, past and present, non-state actors have created parallel, overlapping, or alternative social orders, be they territorial or not, some of them more stable and successful than those created by central governments (Perlman, 1983; Scott, 2009; Gelderloos, 2017; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Even more radically and in a clear departure from Weberian social science, it argues that the legitimacy of such groups and the social orders they create is real and can be a serious competitor to the legitimacy claimed by central governments.

This is the perspective that one seeks to bring to the study of conflict, armed groups, and social order in Saharan and Sahelian Africa, particularly in the case of Mali. Essentially, this article portrays how certain particular Malian non-state armed groups have created order through conflict, by using violent approaches to governmental authorities, foreign interventionist forces as well as restive civilian populations. These forms of social order, sometimes supported by what governments call criminal activity, are not only stable but can be expanded on a greater scale (Stoddard, 2023). In recent years, Malian armed groups have sought, with varying degrees of success, to export their particular brands of political and social order to the neighboring countries (Rupesinghe *et al.*, 2021). One particular success of their approach is visible in the tectonic changes in the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which have all undergone coups since the beginning of the 2020s. These internal political changes have resulted in changes in the international orientation of these countries, with French and US influence being rapidly replaced by a significant Russian security presence, first under the aegis of the Wagner Group and later the Africa Corps (AFP, 2023a).

This should be seen as a theoretical study, resting mainly on academic literature, as well as on some video documentaries and video evidence from the area and on raw information coming from news agencies. However, it should not be considered a proper, historical, or anthropological study of Malian armed groups, for the completion of which both field trips and a knowledge of local languages would be necessary. Therefore, the study remains mostly an intellectual exercise, with all its inherent limitations. The structure of the study involves first a political, social, and historical incursion into the roots of the post-2012 crisis involving Mali, proceeding towards a more in-depth discussion of the linkages between conflict, armed groups, and social order in that area, seen from the perspectives of recent research on non-state armed groups, as well as anchoring of the conversation in the crime-terror nexus perspectives that have shaped so much of the contemporary conversation on these topics.

Historical Processes

Like all its neighbors, Mali is the product of conflicting imperialisms in the Saharan and Sahelian regions of Africa, roughly circumscribing the last two decades of the 19th century. Kicking out Ottoman influences and resurgent diplomacy in the area (Minawi, 2016) and managing to secure a diplomatic agreement with Britain that kept London out of the Lake Chad basin while keeping Paris away from the Upper Nile, France built at the beginning of the 1900s a vast colonial empire in the region (Porch, 2005). In truth, direct French political control over these regions was rather short in historical terms, barely encompassing two generations. An officer such as Octave Meynier, who had military command roles in the conquest of present-day Mali, Niger, and Chad back in 1899 was still alive in 1960 when these states gained their independence. However, French influence was decisive, for instance by dismantling the traditional political structure of these territories, prevalent since at least the 13th and 14th centuries. For all this time if not longer, the lands between the upper Niger and Lake Chad had been organized in local kingdoms and empires, independent for many centuries, and now and then submitted to foreign authority such as the sultan of Morocco (Gomez, 2018). At the same time, Saharan trade routes, linking West and Central African commerce to the markets of the Maghreb, and further under the control of the Tuareg.

A mostly lighter-skinned population of ancient origins, the Tuareg had never built state-like structures but could boast enough military force and local acumen that few dared to contest their control over central Saharan lands. While rejecting a state-like structure for their governance (as well as, in a substantial way, the patriarchal model so prevalent in most other Muslim societies), they were nevertheless a highly stratified society with clear caste barriers, as well as embracing, in many cases, a racialized perspective on social relations, mainly through the possession and exploitation of black slaves, a practice that has continued throughout the colonial and post-colonial period (Disappearing world, 1970).

Colonization put an end to these structures, though social processes and racial imaginations are harder to shatter than political institutions are. French colonialists preferred to base their power on settled, black populations from the south of the country, upending the traditional military dominance of the camel-mounted, often nomad Tuareg (Garnier, 2018). The post-independence period however marked a longer-term but clearer departure from traditional structures of political power and social practices. The central governments in Bamako, led by black elites from the south of the country, despite infighting and a succession of coups, remained loyal to the Françafrique, the Paris-built pattern of domination of former Western and Central African colonies based on military pacts, frequent interventions as well as economic dominance through the mechanism of the Banque de France controlled CFA (Borrel *et al.*, 2021). More importantly though and much like in the rest of the decolonized world, Bamako remained

dedicated to the project of building a modern national-state modeled on the European example. This meant a thorough process of crushing traditional power structures, social mores, and local justice customs. It also implied a conscious and relatively sustained policy of sedentarizing the local nomad populations, of which the most important are the Tuareg of the northern and eastern regions and the black Fulani living closer to the Niger (Go Wild, 2023).

These pressures, depressed the Tuareg of their traditional mode of living (much like in neighboring Algeria and Niger, for instance), challenging their control over Malian Saharan routes, upending their social structures through the emancipation of their black Bella servants/slaves as well as depriving them for a stake in governing the country created the perfect local context for the multiple rebellions waged by this population (Jubber, 2016; Baldaro, 2018). Since independence, no less than four times have the Tuareg contested the authority of the Malian government by force of arms.

Leading directly to the present-day conflict, which began in 2012, is the Arab Spring and particularly the collapse of the North African security framework brought by the Libyan civil war and the botched Western intervention of 2011. Substantial numbers of Tuareg men, former mercenaries in the forces of the slain Colonel Gaddafi now without an employer, returned home to their communities in Niger and Mali, carrying them the weapons that served them through the initial phases of the civil war (Java Discover, 2023b). They returned to find that not much had changed in the relations between their communities and the central government, as pledges of autonomy made after previous rebellions had been ignored and leaders marginalized. But they also returned to an ideologically and economically changed social framework. Continuous infiltration from southern Algeria of Salafi jihadists and preachers had radicalized many youths in the area, who were now willing to seek a better future as soldiers in the ranks of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Ammour, 2013; Roetman *et al.*, 2019). Simultaneously, a shift in the main routes used by drug smugglers to get their merchandise from Latin American production grounds to South European market hubs privileging land routes from West African to south Mediterranean ports had offered a new way of making serious profit through the centuries-old mastery of the commercial routes crisscrossing the Sahara desert (Rizk, 2021; Raineri, 2022b).

These conditions aided the ignition of conflict in Mali in 2012. Tuareg nationalists wishing, for the first time in their long history, the establishment of a separate state in the northeast of Mali (Azawad), joined forces with jihadists mostly led and recruited within their own community (and later from among the Fulani of the south). The success in taking over all of Mali from the Algerian border to the bend of the Niger created the conditions for the jihadists to become more assertive, eventually pushing the nationalist groups to the wayside (Investigations et Enquêtes, 2023). The newly dominant jihadists were confronted by a weak Malian government, boosted in 2013

by the forces of the former colonial power France who was in turn replaced, since the series of military coups that rocked Bamako in the early 2020s, by Russia through its Wagner proxies (Mcallister, 2023).

By the mid-2020s, the central Malian government and its new allies were confronting a substantial array of armed groups controlling substantial regions of the country and threatening major cities (Raineri, 2022a). No longer confined to the traditional Tuareg territories north of the Niger River, these armed groups projected power in the south of the country but also in the east, across, the border with Niger and south, provoking instability and vicious repression from the military junta-led government in Burkina Faso (Afriyie, 2019). But while war ravaged the country, these armed groups, often in conflict with each other—sometimes on ideological, other times on ethnic lines—have produced alternative social orders in controlled territories, delivering security, public goods, governance as well as their own pattern of justice to territories and people they ruled. In this, they have proven solid competitors to a central government unable to provide security in troubled times and disappointing in providing good governance in previous, less violent eras (Java Discover, 2023a).

Understanding Armed Groups and the Creation of Social Order at Times of Internal Conflict

Sub-Saharan Africa has been a theater of persistent conflict and instability for decades now, largely driven by the actions of non-state armed groups (Amghar, 2015). These groups, varying in their motivations, structures, and affiliations, have profoundly impacted social order in the regions they operate. This segment examines the connection between African non-state armed groups and social order within the context of ongoing conflicts, with a particular focus on the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali. The analysis draws from multiple sources to provide an understanding of how these groups create, shape, influence, and sometimes undermine social order in sub-Saharan Africa.

Understanding the role of non-state armed groups in social order requires a multifaceted theoretical approach. This review employs a combination of political theory, political ecology, governance, and conflict theory to frame the analysis. Political ecology helps understand the interaction between political, economic, and environmental factors that drive conflicts and the emergence of non-state armed groups (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Governance theory provides insights into how these groups establish control and legitimacy in areas where state presence is weak or absent (Sandor & Campana, 2019). Conflict theory explains the dynamics of violence and the conditions under which non-state actors thrive (Bøås & Torheim, 2013).

Working from a perspective informed by anarchist political theory, we previously argued (Miroiu, 2019) that AGs are foundational to the creation and sustenance of social

order, arguing against the traditional view that sees states as the primary actors in this process. One can introduce a comprehensive classification of AGs, distinguishing between permanent and impermanent groups, and further categorize them based on their motivations as either political-ideological or economic-exploitative. This classification underscores the diverse nature of AGs and their varying impacts on social order.

Central to this argument is the assertion that AGs operate at a fundamental level of social order, preceding even the state itself. The perspective suggests that the emergence of states and structured societies often results from the actions and organization of AGs (Miroiu & Ungureanu, 2015). This perspective challenges the orthodox view that the state is the ultimate guarantor of social order, instead positing that AGs can create, enforce, and contest social norms and hierarchies. Such argument delves into the historical roots of AGs, tracing their evolution from early human communities to contemporary state and non-state formations. This literature argues that AGs have always been integral to the establishment of order, whether through the defense of community boundaries or the imposition of internal governance. Historical analysis further reinforces the centrality of AGs in shaping political and social landscapes. This perspective also critically examines the relationship between AGs and the state, challenging the binary distinction between state and non-state actors. It highlights how AGs can function both within and outside the state framework, serving similar purposes of order creation and maintenance (Miroiu, 2020). This nuanced approach encourages a reevaluation of how we understand political authority and governance.

Non-state armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa have diverse origins, often rooted in historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and socio-economic disparities. The collapse of state structures, as seen in Mali, has provided fertile ground for these groups to emerge and gain control (Hassan, 2019). The Arab Spring and the fall of Libya's regime significantly influenced the rise of such groups by destabilizing the region and providing access to arms and combatants (Issaev *et al.*, 2021). The return of armed Tuaregs from Libya to Mali catalyzed the formation of groups like the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which later fragmented, giving rise to jihadist factions (Desgrais *et al.*, 2018).

Non-state armed groups in Africa often fill the governance vacuum left by weak or absent state institutions. In Mali, groups like JNIM have established themselves as alternative governance actors, leveraging local grievances and providing services that the state fails to deliver. According to Sandor and Campana (2019), these groups mediate disputes, enforce justice, and offer security, thereby gaining legitimacy among local populations. This dual strategy of violence and governance helps them maintain control and expand their influence (Baldaro & Diall, 2020).

The ability of these groups to adapt and integrate into local social structures is crucial. Jihadist groups in Mali, for instance, have forged ties with various communities, presenting themselves as protectors and arbiters in conflicts over resources (Benjaminsen

& Ba, 2019). Their involvement in local governance is not just coercive but also includes negotiation and cooperation with local leaders, making their presence more acceptable and sometimes preferred over the state's corrupt and inefficient administration (Bøås & Torheim, 2013).

JNIM in Mali

JNIM, formed in 2017 from the merger of several jihadist groups, exemplifies the complex role of non-state armed groups in social order. JNIM has strategically positioned itself as a governance entity in parts of Mali, combining militant operations with efforts to provide basic services and enforce Sharia law. This dual approach helps JNIM to sustain its operations and garner local support (Roetman *et al.*, 2019).

The group's leadership, particularly figures like Iyad Ag Ghaly, have utilized historical grievances and local conflicts to strengthen their position. Iyad ad Ghaly's career encompasses such different roles as a veteran of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, a negotiator with the Bamako government in the name of his people (he belongs to the noble caste of the Ifogha branch of the Tuareg), a diplomat serving in Saudi Arabia and now a radicalized Salafi jihadist highlights the complexities of these grievances and conflicts. His selection as leader underscores the importance of personal histories for understanding the dynamics of non-state armed groups (Hassel, 1977; Cunningham & Sawyer, 2019). Under his command, JNIM's integration into local governance involves both coercive and cooperative strategies, allowing the jihadis to influence local power dynamics and resource distribution (Ladini, 2023). Their ability to adapt and reconfigure their strategies in response to military pressures underscores their resilience and the challenges they pose to state authority (Sandor & Campana, 2019).

The role of non-state armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa is deeply intertwined with ethnic and social dynamics. In Mali, the Fulani community's involvement in jihadist activities highlights the ethnic dimensions of the conflict (Cline, 2023). Groups like Katiba Macina, part of JNIM, have capitalized on Fulani grievances against the state and other ethnic groups, using these tensions to recruit and mobilize support. The manipulation of ethnic identities and historical grievances is a common tactic among these groups to legitimize their actions and gain local backing (Diallo, 2017). These developments parallel similar conflict dynamics in other former French colonies such as the Central African Republic, where the Christian-Muslim conflict overlaps ethnic divides (Kah, 2013; Alecu & Miroiu, 2021).

The economic motivations of non-state armed groups are also significant. Many of these groups engage in criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking, and smuggling, to finance their operations (De Danieli, 2014). This blend of ideological and economic objectives complicates efforts to counter these groups, as they have diverse revenue streams and local economic ties (Chelin, 2020). In Mali,

JNIM's involvement in criminal enterprises highlights the hybrid nature of such groups. Their control over smuggling routes and engagement in illicit trade not only funds their operations but also integrates them into local economic networks, further entrenching their influence (Ammour, 2013). The relationships between terrorism and organized crime are intricate, with groups like JNIM engaging in both ideological and financially motivated activities, often blurring the lines between the two (Hutchinson & O'Malley, 2007; Wang, 2010; Dishman, 2005).

International interventions in sub-Saharan Africa have had mixed results. In Mali, the French-led Operation Barkhane and other international efforts have managed to reclaim key territories but have not fully addressed the underlying issues driving the conflict. The resilience of groups like JNIM and their ability to adapt to military pressures indicate the limitations of purely military solutions (Baldaro & Diall, 2020). Recent abilities to take over military bases and strike deep into the south of Mali and northern Burkina Faso underscore the solidity of jihadist groups such as JNIM or its rival, the Islamic State-Sahel Province (VOA Africa, 2023). Mounted on motorbikes, which are very hard to hit by attack drones due to their small size and high speed, and able to swarm military bases from multiple directions, the jihadists are more than a match for governmental armed forces (Zimmerer, 2019; RFI, 2024).

The involvement of private military companies and foreign armed forces, as seen in Mali, Niger, and the Central African Republic, adds another layer of complexity (AFP, 2023b). These actors often pursue their own interests, sometimes aligning with local factions, which can exacerbate conflicts and undermine state sovereignty (Amoah, 2023). The strategic use of counterterrorism assemblages, involving international and local stake-holders, has shown both successes and limitations in addressing the root causes of jihadism in the region (Baldaro & D'Amato, 2023). So far, this governmental approach has at most provided security for certain areas, usually of interest for Western powers or Russia (such as gold or uranium mines), but has done little to pacify the country or to provide public services that could induce the population to support the government more than they support the non-state armed groups.

The influence of non-state armed groups on social order in sub-Saharan Africa is profound and multifaceted. These groups thrive in environments of weak state presence, leveraging local grievances, ethnic tensions, and economic opportunities to establish themselves as alternative governance actors (Hernann, 2016). The case of JNIM in Mali illustrates how such groups can integrate into local social and political structures, providing both challenges and limited forms of stability in conflict-ridden regions. Addressing the role of non-state armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond military intervention to include governance reforms, economic development, and the resolution of local grievances. How jihadist governance manifests itself on the ground is a harder nut to crack, as the evidence comes mostly

from refugees from conflict zones, as well as from other opponents of radical Islamists (Elischer, 2019). Comparative work with governance patterns of the Islamic State in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan could be useful in a larger study, though the latter, of course, do not have an internationalist dimension.

A Crime-Terror Nexus?

The crime-terror nexus, a complex interplay between organized crime and terrorist groups, has become increasingly significant in global security discussions (Makarenko, 2004; Makarenko, 2021; Hübschle, 2011). This nexus is characterized by the convergence of criminal activities and terrorist tactics, driven by various strategic, financial, and operational imperatives (Clarke & Lee, 2008). The Sahel region, particularly Mali, offers a critical case study for understanding this nexus due to the presence of jihadist groups that engage in both criminal and terrorist activities (Forest, 2022).

The evolution of terrorist financing, especially after the reduction of state sponsorship post-9/11, has pressured terrorist groups to diversify their revenue sources, often leading them into criminal enterprises. Hutchinson and O'Malley (2007) argue that financial necessity has driven terrorist groups to develop "in-house" criminal capabilities, with examples including FARC, the LTTE, and Al Qaeda. This shift has resulted in operational and organizational transformations within these groups, making them resemble traditional criminal organizations in many aspects (Basra & Neumann, 2016). With this, the post-9/11 developments highlighted a connection between the current practices of the jihadist armed groups to those advocated and sometimes put into practice by Latin American and Western European radical left armed groups of the "third wave of terrorism", who similarly pursued "criminal" activities such as bank robberies, kidnappings and extortion (Rapoport, 2019; Marighella, 2021).

In the Sahel, jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its contemporary offshoots such as JNIM have exemplified this crime-terror nexus (Pollichieni, 2021). Some authors such as Chelin (2020) explored AQIM's transformation from a purely ideological group into a hybrid entity combining terrorism and organized crime. This transformation has involved engaging in kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking, which have become significant revenue streams (Aguilera, 2022). AQIM's operations have expanded from Algeria into the broader Sahel region, leveraging local grievances and state weaknesses to establish control and engage in various criminal activities.

Jihadist groups in Mali, such as Ansar Dine and its successor, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), illustrate the intersection of terrorism and local governance. Sandor and Campana (2019) highlighted how these groups have rooted themselves in local communities, presenting themselves as alternative governance actors. They exploit inter-communal tensions and provide services and security that the state fails to deliver, thereby gaining legitimacy and support from local populations (Raineri & Strazzari,

2022). This dual approach of violence and governance underscores the complexity of their operations and their ability to adapt to local dynamics.

Similarly, the Fulani ethnic group's increasing involvement in jihadist activities further complicates the crime-terror nexus in the Sahel (Le Monde Afrique, 2019). Cline (2023) notes that groups like Katiba Macina and Ansarul Islam, dominated by Fulani fighters, have capitalized on longstanding grievances and economic conditions to recruit members and conduct operations. This involvement is not solely ideologically driven but also stems from economic as well as ethnic factors, highlighting the multifaceted motivations behind jihadist participation in the region (Boukhars & Kelly, 2022).

The rivalry between different jihadist factions, such as Islamic State-Sahara Province and JNIM, also plays a crucial role in the crime-terror nexus (Mcallister, 2022). According to Zenn (2022), the historical and organizational dynamics that have led to the rivalry between these groups include the fact that the Islamic State adheres to a more uncompromising approach to jihad, while JNIM follows a more restrained strategy based on AQIM's principles. This rivalry impacts their operations, recruitment, and local alliances, further complicating the security landscape in the Sahel (Guichaoua & Bouhlel, 2023).

The crime-terror nexus in the Sahel highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that address both terrorism and organized crime. Counter-terrorism efforts must consider the financial and operational interdependencies between these activities. As Hutchinson and O'Malley (2007) and Wang (2010) suggest, understanding the nuanced relationships between criminal and terrorist groups is crucial for understanding local dynamics of economic and social power. This includes understanding their financial networks as well as local grievances, as well as thinking about state or non-state governance structures to reduce the appeal of both criminal and terrorist activities, be they perpetrated by the state or by non-state groups.

Once again, this study needs to be considered in the light of its limitations, particularly regarding the lack of knowledge of Arabic, Tamazigh, or Fula as well as the inability to get unmediated information from the main actors involved, except their communiques which are relayed through traditional or social media. Its conclusions need to be seen as mostly theoretical, perhaps seeking to inspire anthropological-bent scholars who, one day, could make their way to Mali again.

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