Mixed Method Study: Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel

(Sahel CVE Research)

Cooperative Agreement No. 72062420CA00002

Literature Review

Revised, Final

Submitted: August 17, 2020

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This Literature Review is made possible by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), under Cooperative Agreement No. 72062420CA00002. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of FHI 360 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

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Acronym List

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ACSS	Africa Center for Strategic Studies
ACLED	Armed Conflict Local Event Data Project's
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
CT	Counterterrorism
DSF	Defense and Security Forces
FLM	Force de Libération du Macina (Macina Liberation Front)
GATIA	Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés
IMRAP	Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS)
JNIM	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest
SGBV	Sexual- and gender-based violence
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID/WA	USAID West Africa Mission in Accra, Ghana
VE	Violent Extremism
VEO	Violent Extremist Organizations
WFP	World Food Programme

Introduction

In March 2020, the USAID West Africa Mission in Accra, Ghana (USAID/WA) awarded FHI 360 Cooperative-Agreement (Co-Ag) No. 72062420CA00002 to implement the project *A Mixed Method Study on Gender Differentiated Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Sahel.* Known as the *Sahel CVE Research* project, it aims to fill a knowledge gap about how regional factors and drivers relating or contributing to violent extremism play out differently for men and women.

The Sahel CVE Research project will use mixed methods research to examine key VE drivers and their interactions with gender in the Liptako-Gourma region shared by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. The project consists of: 1) a quantitative study examining the effects of individual characteristics and context on male and female attitudes towards VE; and 2) a qualitative study that analyzes data from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) to unpack the relationship between male/female attitudes towards VE and VE drivers. Together, the quantitative and qualitative components will provide a robust and evidence-based analysis of gender-differentiated VE drivers in the three target countries. The findings and lessons learned will enable USAID/WA to draft more nuanced policies and implement more effective programs to counter violent extremism (CVE) tailored to the local context.[1]

The overarching research question for the entire study project is:

> *What are the key VE drivers in three Central Sahelian countries — Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger — and how do these drivers differ by gender?*

The initial scan of the literature that we conducted during the proposal phase found several key risk factors for violent extremism (VE) in the Central Sahel region, including conflict over natural resources, especially in combination with inter-ethnic polarization; weak or absent governance; and abuses by security sector forces (Raineri, 2018; Bagayoko and Koné, 2017; Djontu and Gatelier, 2017; McGregor, 2017; Finkel et al., 2016; "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" 2016). While there appears to be no direct link between unemployment, underemployment, and VE in this region, the absence of job opportunities has arguably led some young men to join extremist groups for the social status and recognition they offer (Raineri, 2018). Research on the relationship between religious or ideological influences and VE reveals that, for the most part, local populations see religion as more of a guise for other factors behind joining VE groups than a motivator in and of itself (Raineri, 2018; Théroux-Benoni and Assanvo, 2016).

While there is a substantive amount of literature on women, gender, and VE globally as well as some which addresses this intersection in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Matfess, 2017), our initial scan of the literature uncovered limited analysis on gender dynamics and VE in the Central Sahel. This more in-depth review uncovered more sources that add to our understanding of how and why women participate (both directly and indirectly) in violent extremism in the Central Sahel.

[1] *Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism and Conflict*

This literature review deepens and updates the one initially conducted during the proposal phase and will be used to inform the subsequent qualitative field research. Search terms included: violent extremism, terrorism, violent extremist organizations, terrorist organizations, terrorist groups, drivers, gender, women, Central Sahel, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Liptako-Gourma, and West Africa. We also searched using the names of specific VEOs, including Macina Liberation Front/Katiba Macina, Ansaroul Islam, ISGS, JNIM, and Ansar Dine. Most reports that focused on a specific country focused on Mali, whereas only a handful of sources focused on Burkina Faso and Niger. We reviewed over 50 sources, including almost a dozen French-language sources. We focused our review on sources from 2017 to the present. To address gaps, we scanned bibliographies of the original 50+ sources, conducted some forward and backward searches, and conducted several targeted searches, bringing the number of documents included in this review to around 70.

Sources reviewed include a mix of journalism, policy commentary and analysis, grey literature (e.g., NGO reports), and peer-reviewed journal articles. One dissertation (Ibrahim, 2018) was also included. When information from journalistic sources is used — including outlets such as the New York Times as well as reporting from humanitarian agencies like the World Food Programme — we highlight that it is a journalistic source. Journalistic sources are primarily used to describe a situation on the ground (e.g., number of refugees), rather than to make an argument. We describe the strength of the evidence in more detail in the sections on VEOs in the Central Sahel, Women's Involvement in VEOs and Other Armed Groups; and Drivers and Dynamics of Violent Extremism.

Current Status of Violent Extremism Threat in the Central Sahel

A. Nature and Scope of the VE Threat

Since the onset of the 2012 Malian crisis, jihadist groups[2] have proliferated in the Central Sahel,[3] and in the past year deadly attacks on civilians have multiplied, leading not only to increased fatalities but also massive displacement ("Violent Events Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel in 2018," 2019). According to the International Organization on Migration, 1.2 million people were displaced across the Central Sahel as of mid-May 2020 ("West and Central Africa—Liptako-Gourma Crisis Monthly Dashboard 5," 2020). Reported violent attacks linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel have more than doubled on a yearly basis since 2017, with 465 attacks in 2018 and an exponential increase to 2,600 fatalities in 2019 ("The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," 2019; Le Roux, 2019d).

Prior to 2012, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) dominated the VEO landscape. By 2018, there were more than 10 active violent extremist organizations (VEOs) across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso ("Violent Events Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel in

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[2] The term "jihadist group" is frequently used in the literature but usually not defined. We follow Ibrahim's (2017) definition that sees jihadism as initially a global ideology, but one which has morphed into politicized and violent insurgencies where statehood is limited. Ibrahim's explanation that "not all jihadists are ideologues. Some, perhaps most, have found themselves within jihadist movements for situational and strategic reasons" (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 13) is particularly apropos for the Central Sahel region.

[3] "The central Sahel encompasses the areas adjacent to the curve formed by the River Niger between the cities of Ségou (Mali) and Niamey (Niger), and roughly covers the administrative regions of Ségou, Mopti, Tombouctou, Gao and Ménaka (Mali), along with Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger)" (Raineri, 2018, p. 9).

2018," 2019). Although jihadist groups are the main perpetrators of violence, community-based militias and government forces are also responsible for attacks on civilians. The European Council on Foreign Relations has attempted to map jihadist and non-jihadist groups as of May 2019 (Lebovich, 2019); however, very recent reporting from the New York Times shows how, in reality, it remains difficult to identify whether gunmen are jihadists, government soldiers, vigilantes, or otherwise (MacLean, 2020).

The Armed Conflict Local Event Data Project's (ACLED) documentation of violence against civilians by state forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso shows an overall increase in fatalities by government forces between January 2019 and April 2020 and a dramatic spike in fatalities from a little more than 10 in January to around 250 in March (ACLED, "State Atrocities in the Sahel," 2020).[4] Burkina Faso has seen a steep increase in attacks against civilians since 2017; on July 7th, 2020, the New York Times and Human Rights Watch documented the uncovering of the bodies of at least 180 men "thought to have been killed by security forces" in Djibo,[5] in fields, by roadsides, and under bridges (MacClean, 2020).

In Central Mali's Mopti region, fighting between community-based militias from the Peulh/Fula and Dogon communities has increased during the past few months, with MINUSMA documenting 83 "incidents of fighting across communal lines" that led to 210 deaths (MINUSMA, "In central Mali, community fighting and impunity, 'overwhelming' efforts to protect civilians," 2020). Similar levels and dynamics of violence are occurring in the Tillabéri region of Niger, which has forced thousands to flee their homes ("The violence in Mali has spread into the Tillabéri area of Niger," 2020). There have been some strategic counter-terrorism wins, most notably with a French-led strike in June 2020 that killed Abdelmalek Droukdel (AKA Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), but, for the most part, these "wins" have not been sustained (Demuynck and Coleman, 2020).

B. Context

Coronavirus Context

Although, so far, the impact of coronavirus in the three countries appears to be limited, according to a brief from Refugees International, government responses to its spread may negatively affect livelihoods, food security, and humanitarian responses (Lamarche, 2020). By mid-March, all Central Sahelian countries had declared a health emergency and enacted social distancing measures. With 25 million people in the Sahel working in the agropastoral industry, these measures have not only affected livelihoods and pastoralists' access to food, but also wider food availability. According to the World Food Programme and Refugees International, this is happening in the context of a "severe lean season" characterized by severely constrained access to food and already massive levels of food insecurity (WFP, "COVID-19: External Situation Report #7," 2020; Lamarche, 2020). The governments' ordering non-compliant markets to close has caused food prices to double, according to some NGO representatives in Mali and Niger; however, pressure from traders has led to the reopening of some markets, at least in Ouagadougou (Lamarche, 2020; Antil and Djellat, 2020). Reporting from Reuters

[4] In this case, ACLED is analyzing data across all three countries, not only in the Central Sahel region. However, it is apparent that most of the events are concentrated in the Central Sahel.
[5] Djibo is a Fulani-majority town, and most of the men were thought to have been Fulani.

indicates that border closures have also limited food availability, as trucks transporting food have been stalled at borders by authorities (Ross, 2020). With concerns over the spread of COVID-19 compounded by a rapidly deteriorating security situation, it is notable that the Malian legislative elections, which had been postponed several times since 2018, took place in March and April as planned (Antil and Djellat, 2020).

Although this review did not uncover secondary source data on how VEOs in the Central Sahel are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to imagine that this is already happening, especially in an environment where jihadist groups already exploit local populations' grievances with poor governance, corruption, and severe security sector abuses. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (which both have affiliate organizations in the Central Sahel: JNIM with the former and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) with the latter) both issued statements about the COVID-19 pandemic early on, emphasizing hygienic practices inherent to Islam, but also strategic and tactical guidance (Coleman, 2020). In its six-page statement released in April, Al Qaeda linked the pandemic to the oppression of Muslims, emphasized its economic destructiveness for the West, and called on people to convert to Islam during self-isolation. The Islamic State's guidance called followers to use the pandemic's effect on governments' security capabilities to carry out attacks. The pandemic has already tangibly affected the counter-terrorism response in the Central Sahel, with four French soldiers deployed to the Sahel testing positive for COVID-19 in early April and three returning to France ("Coronavirus : l'armée française touchée par le virus," 2020).

Economic Context

Mali

According to available evidence and literature, as well as reports from international organizations present in the field, the economic and living conditions continue to be extremely harsh in Mali, especially in rural regions and areas where the population density rates are the highest (Thiam 2020). At the macro-economic level, because Mali is a net importer of oil, the country is currently benefitting from the sharp drop in the price of crude oil. Mali's most important export is gold, which provides an 'economic safety net' in times of crises; thus, it is anticipated that the crisis could enable the country to improve its terms of trade. (The World Bank in Mali - Country overview, 2020) However, this potential positive could be countered by the potential collapse of its agricultural exports. Additionally, the country's food deficit remains concerning and its economy remains volatile, with 4.3 million people requiring humanitarian assistance in 2020.

In Mali, poverty affects 78.1 percent of people of the total population. According to the World Food Programme's study, "The Cost of Hunger" 2018, estimated that the annual loss in economic productivity due to malnutrition is equivalent to a 4.06 percent decrease in the country's gross domestic product (GDP). More specifically, food insecurity varies from one region to another with the north and central regions (Gao, Mopti, Timbuktu) particularly affected. (World food Program 2020 and FAO Country fact Sheet on Food and Agriculture Policy Trends).

Central Mali is considered a strategic area for the national formal economy: the Niger Delta region is an important commercial hub and supplies a large portion of the country's exports

through its main production systems: pastoralism and livestock rearing, agriculture (cereals in the dry zone and rice in wet zones) and fisheries. The growing insecurity in the region has already started disrupting these livelihoods systems, impacting an already fragile local and regional economy (Rupesinghe 2019).

In the Mopti region in particular, herd size has significantly shrunk after successive droughts and poor harvests which, in turn, have reduced demand and increased livestock prices across the region's markets. Recent estimates suggest only 33 percent of livestock in Mopti are sold and generate revenue for their owners. With over 70 percent of its population living in severe poverty, the Mopti region is still suffering from egregious levels of poverty, (Rupesinghe 2019 and World food Program 2020).

The tourism sector in the northern regions of Mali, which represents roughly 25 percent of the regional economy, has been extremely affected by the insecurity and increasing violence. Consequently, a significant increase in unemployment rates has forced many to turn to illicit activities to ensure their livelihoods, expanding an already-predominant informal economy in the region. In addition to exacerbating conflicts over land, the economic crisis continues to disenfranchise unemployed youth, who eventually turn to violence and banditry. The economic crisis and its regional impact is considered as a key catalyst for many of the tensions and disputes in the region. (Rupesinghe 2019)

Niger

In addition to COVID-19, insecurity will continue to pose a risk to economic growth. Still, Niger's military spending actually decreased by 20% between 2018 and 2019, from about $212 million to $170 million in 2019 (Tian et al., 2020). Although Niger is rich in uranium, prices of raw uranium have been persistently low, according to the African Development Bank (AFDB) ("Niger Economic Outlook," 2020). According to the World Bank, Niger's economy depends heavily on agriculture, which comprises 40% of the country's GDP ("Overview: Niger," 2020). Further, the AFDB attributes Niger's strong GDP growth of 6.4% in 2019 to "investments in infrastructure, extractives, and services, as well as to structural reforms, especially actions aimed at developing the private sector and strengthening the resilience of agriculture" ("Niger Economic Outlook," 2020). The economy also benefitted from infrastructure development for the African Union Summit in July 2019. Nonetheless, an estimated 41.4% of the population continues to live in poverty ("Overview: Niger," 2020).

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's economy is primarily based on agriculture, with cotton and gold being key exports ("CIA World Factbook: Burkina Faso"). GDP growth in 2019 was strong at 6%, which the AFDB attributes to a "dynamic secondary sector … and services … as well as by sustained growth in private consumption" ("Burkina Faso Economic Outlook," 2020). According to the World Bank, gold exports have increased in recent years, contributing to an expected trade surplus of approximately 1.5% of GDP on average for 2020-2022 ("Overview: Burkina Faso," 2020). Despite this positive forecast, the World Bank's Poverty & Equity Data Portal indicates that, at least as of 2014, approximately 43.7% of the population was considered to be living in poverty, underlining that many people are not benefitting from the gold mining industry. In fact,

analysis of survey data by GLOCON[6] shows that the opening of mines in rural areas has damaged local people's livelihoods and health rather than generating jobs for them (Schäfer, Dreschel, and Engels, 2019).

In recent years, the percentage of the national budget devoted to defense has dramatically increased. Data from SIPRI shows a 64% increase in military spending from 2017 to 2018, from $190 million to approximately $310 million (Tian et al., 2019). By 2019, military spending was at $360 million (Tian et al., 2020). Now in 2020, reporting from Bloomberg cites documents released by Finance Minister Lassane Kabore indicates that defense spending accounts for 13% of the annual budget or $3.8 billion (Gongo, 2019).

Political and Security Context

Mali

The current political crisis in Mali is the culmination of years of continued insecurity and instability among populations especially in the north and center regions of the country.

President Keïta has faced increased opposition over a rise in jihadist violence and an economic crisis; despite securing a second five-year term in 2018, the election was particularly contested and targeted by the protesters. Among the principal sources of the population's discontent are Keïta's failures to (i) enforce the rule of law in the Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal regions and (ii) implement real and concrete reconciliation processes to ease the tensions in the northern regions despite signing an agreement with the Tuaregs in June 2015. (Thiam 2017)

The opposition's official political figure was previously the former minister Soumaïla Cissé, who has competed against Keïta since 2002 for the heritage of former President Konaré. However, the real opposition force to the regime is an unprecedented alliance between the traditional leadership mainly controlled by clerics of Sufist sheikhs, syndicates and civil society organizations that was able to mobilize the street. Soumaila Cissé, was kidnapped by an unidentified group just days before the parliamentary elections March 25. He was still elected to the National Assembly but remains captive. His kidnapping exacerbated the fear that the political crisis will play into the hands of the jihadists who are behind the escalating violence in the north and centre of the country (Wing 2020).

The power of the new opposition alliance manifested in weak turnout registered in the legislative elections organized in late March 2020, which had been delayed for two years. Following the boycott, the results were rejected by a large number of politicians and members of the judiciary, in addition to the civil society at large, led by the opposition. The invalidation by the Constitutional Court of about thirty results of the legislative elections was perceived as the last straw for protesters who continue to intensify their dissent. Finally, protests broke out in June 2020. (Emirates Policy Center, 2020)

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[6] GLOCON, "Global Change – Local Conflict", is a junior research group funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and is working on the correlation between global change and local conflicts over land. The research project explores, analyses and compares conflicts over land in a range of sub-Saharan and Latin American countries.

The opposition movement, known as the Rally of Patriotic Forces yet referred to as M5, or June 5 Movement, is a large network of political activists, representatives of civil society, and youth and women movements. Officially, the movement calls for the cancellation of the results of the legislative elections, the dissolution of the Constitutional Court, and the formation of a national unity government that would oversee an inclusive political dialogue and run a transitional period leading to transparent and fair legislative and presidential elections. However, there is also a growing demand for President Keïta to resign (Al Jazeera 2020).

The M5 movement is led by Imam Mahmoud Dicko who endorsed his nomination for president in 2002, and supported his candidacy in the 2013 elections, but started to gradually distance himself from Keïta since 2018. (Franceinfo 2020)

Niger

Current President Mahamadou Issoufou was elected in 2011 after a transition phase following the coup d'état led by Salou Djibo in 2010, which ousted then-President Tandja. Issoufou was re-elected in 2016 in a tense election during which several opposition candidates were held in prison after being accused of participating in a coup attempt and/or illegal protests. In 2018, other members of the opposition were also arrested on similar charges (Elischer, 2018). The political environment in Niger is very tense as the country currently prepares for municipal and regional elections. Initially scheduled for May 2016, the elections will finally take place at the end of 2020, with the next presidential and legislative elections scheduled to take place in 2021 (RFI 2019).

President Issoufou pledged to abide by the constitution and refrain from running for a third term. Since February 2019, Mohamed Bazoum (Minister of Interior up until June 2020), was nominated by the presidential party, the Nigerian Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) as a candidate for the 2021 presidential election (Jeune Afrique 2019). The opposition, represented by the Moden/FA Lumana Africa party, is led by Hama Amadou, Issoufou's most popular opponent, who was jailed during the entire electoral process in 2016 as he was accused of being involved in a child-trafficking scandal. Since then, political tensions have continued to build up with, for example, civil society activists regularly being arrested and imprisoned for voicing their opinion on social media. In 2017, Hama Amadou, while in exile in France, was sentenced to one year in prison and in November 2019, he returned to Niger only to serve his sentence in prison (Freedom House, Country Overview , 2020).

The main demands and concerns of the opposition party are related to issues surrounding the electoral process which is perceived as centralizing authority within the ruling PNDS party. In 2017, a new electoral law established the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) with a board dominated by members from the ruling coalition, leaving small parties from the opposition as well as from the ruling coalition excluded from the election planning process. With the December 2020 municipal and regional elections and the 2021 presidential elections approaching, the opposition maintained its boycott of the electoral process, rejected the electoral commission and the electoral code adopted in June 2019 and refused to engage in any kind of dialogue with the ruling party (Elischer, 2018 and Freedom House Country Overview 2020).

The PNDS-led government continues to be accused of persecuting opposition leaders and co-opting key opposition figures to impede them. Simultaneously, the opposition has suffered from a lack of leadership as it is divided into five different coalitions and, thus far, seems unable to challenge the dominance of the ruling coalition (DW, 2020). Members of the opposition have repeatedly raised strong concerns over rising insecurity, particularly in Tillabéri, which is their stronghold. They claim that the insecurity hampers campaigning and could potentially serve the interests of the ruling party (Raineri 2018).

In addition, growing popular discontent with the current Issoufou government continues to fuel tensions and protests. His incapacity to alleviate poverty, corruption and unemployment among youth were perceived as his main failures and increased the sentiment of frustration among the vulnerable populations (Freedom House, Country Overview, 2020).

While there is a parity law which seeks to improve women's representation and participation in policymaking by stipulating that women should hold 10 percent of parliamentary seats and 25 percent of cabinet positions, it is rarely respected and women continue to be underrepresented both in elected and cabinet positions. It is also important to note that while Hausa and Zarma ethnic groups have dominated many government positions throughout the past years, members of ethnic minorities such as Tuareg and Arabs are increasingly represented and active in the political institutions (Freedom House, Country Overview, 2020).

Corruption remains widespread in Niger, despite governmental and international efforts to promote good governance and transparency (Freedom House, Country Overview, 2020). The International Crisis Group (ICG) reported evidence of politicians being involved in trafficking and crime in the past years.

Burkina Faso

In recent years, Burkina Faso has experienced a complex political transition, characterized by the fall of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014, a failed coup in September 2015, and presidential and legislative elections in November 2015 (Leclercq and Matagne, 2020). In the aftermath of this transition, petty crime increased due to an influx of small arms from the 2011 mutiny[7], porous borders, and weak security capacity (Leclercq and Matagne, 2020; Chouli, 2012). This period also witnessed an increase in violence by armed groups, likely more directly linked to Compaoré's loss of power in that it signaled a "tacit accord between Burkina Faso and different rebel movements'" (Hagberg et al. 2018, p. 58, cited in Leclercq and Matagne, 2020). Attacks by VEOs, previously rare in Burkina Faso, also began to take place in the rural north of the country and central Ouagadougou and have been increasing in geographic scope since mid-2018 (Leclercq and Matagne, 2020).

In this context, a virtual security vacuum has emerged, allowing non-state self-defense groups to exert increased influence. The Koglweogo movement, or "bush guardians" in Mooré, is perhaps the most prominent of these groups. They identify themselves in contrast with the state, often engage in violent tactics to protect local communities from cattle theft and extortion, and live

[7] In April 2011, members of the Presidential Guard began to mutiny because of unpaid housing allowances. Calm returned once the wages had been paid. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13090094

mostly on fines collected from individuals captured in their operations (Da Cunha Tupuy and Quidelleur, 2018; "Burkina Faso: Casting a shadow CRU Policy Brief over the polls?" 2020). While widely accepted in some communities, they have been in violent confrontations with others, such as the population of Tialgo in 2017 (Da Cunha Tupuy and Quidelleur, 2018). The Koglweogo and other groups claim to be apolitical, but at the same time, are strategically enmeshed with national politics. The current administration seems to benefit from the Koglweogo presence, as it has countered the expansion of Dozo groups which support the rival MPP (Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrés) party ("Burkina Faso: Casting a shadow over the polls?" 2020). The role of these self-defense groups in Burkina Faso's developing democracy is unclear, and electoral violence around the 2020 general elections in November is a real risk ("Burkina Faso: Casting a shadow over the polls?" 2020).

Natural resource conflicts and socio-tribal divides

The literature describes how jihadist groups have exploited and intentionally exacerbated existing tensions over access to water and pasture between herders/nomadic herders and sedentary farmers (Ammour, 2020; Raineri, 2018; Boukhars, 2018). These tensions previously existed, but jihadist groups' interventions have stoked and transformed them into violent conflicts. As poor land ownership regulation, land-grabbing by elites, climatic shocks, and high population growth have intensified conflicts over land and natural resources, jihadist groups have directly intervened in natural resource conflicts (Pellerin, 2019; Assanvo et al., 2019). For example, VEOs have supported Fulanis' access to natural resources as Fulanis compete with other groups such as the Bambara and Dogon farmers in central Mali and the Daoussakh herders in northwest Niger (Boukhars, 2018).

On the one hand, VEOs have purportedly tried to promote an inclusive Islamic identity that supersedes ethnic and tribal identities. For instance, yad Ag Ghali, the leader of JNIM/Ansar Dine called for the union of all Muslims in northern Mali – Tuareg, Arabs, Fulani, Songhai, and Bambara – to fight against "Western crusaders" and their local allies (Ibrahim, 2017). Yet at the same time, VEOs are also formalized, albeit loosely, around those same divides. The founder of ISGS, Abu Walid al Sahrawi, recognized early on the utility of instrumentalizing intercommunal conflict (Le Roux, 2019a). For example, in June 2017, al Sahrawi threatened to attack Tuaregs if pro-government, non-state, Tuareg armed groups failed to disavow the Malian, Nigerien, and French governments (Le Roux, 2019a). According to security risk analyst Rida Lyammouri, in attacks against Malian civilian nomad camps, markets, and villages in 2017-2018, ISGS targeted Tuaregs directly, leading to retaliation by some Tuareg non-state armed groups and exacerbating Tuareg-Fulani tensions in the region (Lyammouri, 2018). The Guardian reported in April 2018 that ISGS massacred 40 Tuaregs from the Daoussakh tribe, furthering the cycle of violence ("Suspected jihadists in Mali kill more than 40 in two days of violence," 2018).

At a global level, climate change is and will continue to be a highly salient issue for the Central Sahel. While there are differing views on whether the Sahel is becoming wetter or drier, there is consensus that changes in either direction will affect the livelihoods of smallholders and pastoralists (ECC Platform, "Climate change and violent extremism in the Western Sahel," 2019). The resulting frustration and anger are likely to play into recruitment by VEOs such as AQIM and ISGS (Middendorp and Bergema, 2019). Given the Islamic State's strategy to

'weaponize' water and food, it is possible that ISGS will adopt similar strategies (Middendorp and Bergema, 2019).

Key institutions, Policies, and Practices

Unintended consequences from Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Governments' use of non-state armed groups as proxies in counterterrorism (CT) efforts have further complicated and added to communities' need for protection. This strategy has also fueled the perception that the government aims to turn CT operations into an ethnic conflict (Raineri, 2018). Specifically, in July 2017, Nigerien authorities reportedly allowed two Malian armed groups, the Tuareg, Imghad and Allied Armed Group (GATIA), a militia formed by Tuareg fighters, and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), a mostly Daoussahak armed group, to lead CT operations in western Niger. GATIA and MSA reportedly killed many Fulani civilians under the guise of counterterrorism. Jihadist groups reportedly defended some of these communities, which primed community members for recruitment (Cherbib and Jezequel, 2017).

Counter-terrorism efforts against existing insurgencies or terror groups have already contributed to communities' grievances in ways that may lead to higher levels of VE recruitment (Ibrahim, 2017). For example, in Central Mali, following the Army Chief-of-Staff's decision to prohibit the use of motorcycles and pick-up trucks by the general public, the number of attacks by armed individuals on motorcycles decreased. However, this action was ill-received by local populations as it limited their livelihoods and access to services (Maïga, 2019).

International and Regional Entities

In the aftermath of the 2012 Malian crisis, states and their international partners deployed the military as part of their counter-terrorism efforts. The G5 Sahel joint task force, a result of Sahelian state military cooperation, began counter-terrorism operations in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Cherbib, 2018). The French also deployed forces, but their presence and actions were perceived as a foreign force. In the larger context of the absence of the state, this perception is furthered by human rights abuses by the military actors (discussed in the section on Abuses by Defense and State Security Forces, and Non-State Armed Groups). For instance, the United Nations reported and attributed 288 alleged cases of human rights violations to "state actors" between January 2016 and June 2017 in Mali (Cherbib, 2018). Moreover, as part of the military support to state actors, international partners have provided states with weapons. Many of these, however, have ended up with local militias and actors, contributing to arms proliferation (Vellturo and Dick, 2020).

C. Violent Extremist Organizations in the Central Sahel

This section and Table 1 draw on:

- **policy commentary and analysis** (Le Roux, 2019 a, b, c, and d; Demuynck and Coleman, 2020; Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; Powell, 2018; and Cherbib, 2018);
- the European Council on Foreign Relation's **map** of armed groups in Mali and the Sahel;
- the Africa Center for Strategic Studies' (ACSS) (2019) **map** and description of Violent Events Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel in 2018;

- the ACSS's **map** and description of "Progress and Setbacks in the Fight against African Militant Islamist Groups in 2018";
- the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) **"Terrorism Backgrounders" resource** on JNIM;
- Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation's (2018) **"Mapping Militant Organizations" resource;**
- a **qualitative analysis** of about 800 structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews (Assanvo et al., 2019);
- a Congressional Research Service **brief** (Arieff, 2017); and
- a **news article** ("Burkina Faso: une gendarmerie attaquée près de la frontière malienne," 2015).

Although more groups are currently active in the Central Sahel, the following three groups are responsible for most of the violence perpetrated by VEOs:

- Macina Liberation Front (also known as: FLM, *Force de Libération du Macina*; Macina Liberation Movement; Katibat Macina; or "Kouffa's men"), a faction of JNIM, focused around the Mopti-Segou region of central Mali;
- Ansaroul Islam, concentrated around the Djibo municipality of northern Burkina Faso; and
- the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), primarily active along eastern Mali/western Niger border and some of the Burkina Faso-Niger border (Le Roux, 2019a, 2019b), and 2019c

All three have targeted not only security forces but also community members for alleged cooperation with government representatives (Le Roux, 2019d). In such operating environments, communities often ally themselves with VEOs for protection and then become trapped between violence by VEOs and violence by government security forces. Both FLM and Ansaroul Islam have used government violence to their advantage, by incorporating it into a narrative about government and security sector abuse (Le Roux, 2019d). ISGS, on the other hand is less cohesive or ideological in its messaging, focusing more explicitly on its geographic spread (Demuynck and Coleman, 2020).

Although some of the jihadist groups operating in the Central Sahel are nominally affiliated with international organizations, the literature reviewed[8] underscores the "intensely local" nature of violent extremism in the Central Sahel (Powell, 2018). However, while VEOs have displayed a great ability to adapt and appropriate grievances, they also have opportunities to ally with larger and more powerful groups in order to gain legitimacy and power. For example, Katiba Macina's alliance with JNIM provides it with legitimacy, access to resources, and allies (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). VEOs may use religion as an entry-point to gain followers (see section on **Error! Reference source not found.**) but are much likelier to frame their goals explicitly in terms of intercommunal conflicts and grievances directed towards the state (grievances which resonate with local communities).

[8] For examples, see: see Ammour, 2020; Cherbib, 2018; Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; ICG, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," 2017; and Velturo and Dick, 2019.

In Table 1, we present a summary of the primary VEOs and coalitions of VEOs operating in the Central Sahel. We focus on the main three mentioned above — FLM, Ansaroul Islam, ISGS — as well as Ansar Dine, and the JNIM and AQIM in the Sahel coalitions. We also present information on MUJAO given their recent relevance in the region until their 2015 split (European Council on Foreign Relations, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," 2019).

Trends in VE Activity

Using ACLED data, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) offers a helpful summary of trends in VEO activity in the Sahel[9], with the period between 2010 and 2018 ("Violent Events Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel in 2018," 2019) characterized by:

- Doubling in attacks on a yearly basis
- Expanding violence against civilians, which comprised 20% of all violent episodes in 2016 and 34% of all violent episodes in 2018.
- Spreading geographically: during this period, Mali was the focal point of militant violence; Burkina Faso experienced a rapid growth in attacks beginning in 2015
- Rapid acceleration in the number of VEOs operating in the region:

It is difficult to compare these trends without knowing precisely how ACSS delineates the Central Sahel region in terms of administrative regions. Nonetheless, it is apparent that violence against civilians has continued, especially in Burkina Faso, and that the number of overall attacks is likely on the rise as well.

Please see Annex 1 for maps of VEO attacks (violent extremist incidents) which supplement the information contained in Table 1. All the maps are based on ACLED data and are produced by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, the Center for Global Policy, and the European Council on Foreign Relations.

[9] Although they refer to "the Sahel," their visual analysis indicates that they primarily mean the Central Sahel. The analysis covers the border areas of the three countries as well as parts of central, eastern (nearing the border with Algeria), and southwestern Mali.

Table 1. Central Sahel VEOs

Group	Years Active	Founder	Allies	Strategies of Recruitment / Narrative Formation	Tactics / Strategies of Violence	Regional Spread	Trends in Operations
Macina Liberation Front (FLM) /Katiba Macina	2015 – present	Amadou Koufa (deceased?), a Fulani preacher	Ansar Dine affiliate In March 2017, FLM merged with AQIM Sahara, Ansar Dine, and Al-Mourabitoun, into JNIM ("Backgrounder: JNIM," 2018)	FLM has framed its goals in terms of re-establishing the historical Macina empire (the Fulani-dominated empire which spread across Ségou, Mopti, and Timbuktu) and taking over the Malian state in central Mali (Le Roux, 2019c) Anecdotal evidence from interviews with researchers, academics, and consultants suggests that FLM (as of 2017) had started recruiting across ethnic groups, "positioning themselves as a protector of all Muslims … to expand their membership" (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019, p. 11)	"Selective violence" against community members through targeted assassinations and threats against critical journalists (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019) Use of violence and intimidation to force state officials out of office (Le Roux, 2019c) Social entrapment methods, whereby the group strengthens social bonds with communities "as a means of ensuring collaboration and allegiance" (e.g., child recruitment and marriage) (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019, p. 15)	Mostly active in Mopti-Segou region of Mali (Le Roux, 2019a)	**2017 - 2018**: Fatalities increased dramatically (ACLED data, cited in Le Roux, 2019c)
Ansaroul Islam	2016 – present	Abdoul Salam Dicko (2017–present) Malaam Ibrahim Dicko (2016-2017; deceased)	Following 2017 Death of Dicko, speculated that a number of militants joined FLM or ISGS (Le Roux, 2019b)	Dicko framed Ansaroul Islam's mission in terms of social inequalities represented by long-standing systems of social stratification in n. Burkina Faso (Assanvo et al., 2019; Le Roux, 2019b)	Reportedly targeted civilians accused of opposing them (ICG, 2017). 55% of attacks attributed to Ansaroul Islam have targeted civilians (Cherbib, 2018)	Based in Soum Province of Burkina; expanded further south in 2018 Significantly diminished presence since 2018 (Le Roux, 2019b)	**2016 - 2018**: Over half of militant Islamist attacks in Burkina Faso attributed to Ansaroul Islam **Mid-2019:** Dramatic decrease in attacks (Le Roux, 2019b)

Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS)	2015 – present	Abu Walid al Sahrawi	Formally allied with Islamic State Despite formally splitting from AQIM, ISGS maintains close ties and coordinates with Al Qaeda-affiliated groups (specifically, JNIM members) (Le Roux, 2019a and 2019d)	Narrative focused on expanding its geographic reach (Le Roux, 2019a)	Exploits and participates in intercommunal violence; has targeted government representatives perceived as supporting the government (Le Roux, 2019a).	Initially operated primarily in Mali's Gao region, and sometimes in Mopti region. Now most geographically expansive of all groups and present in 3 countries (Le Roux, 2019a) Primarily active along eastern Mali/western Niger border and some of the Burkina Faso-Niger border (Le Roux, 2019a)	As of 2018, linked to almost 30% of all militant Islamist attacks in Burkina Faso (Le Roux, 2019a)
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)	2017 - present	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Reported hierarchical structure, whereby AQIM oversees allied militant groups Purported "ideological, operational, and logistical ties with Ansaroul Islam" (Mapping Militant Org'ns. JNIM 2018).	Merger of AQIM in the Sahel, Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and FLM Goals closely aligned with AQIM's to build up Salafi-Islamist state (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 2018).	Attacks on external military forces; since 2017, engaged in violence against civilians Has been involved in intercommunal conflict. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. JNIM. 2018)."	Primarily operational in Algeria, Mali, and Niger, but also in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Chad (Mapping Militant Org'ns. JNIM, 2018.)	
AQIM in the Sahel	1998* - present (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" 2018).	AQIM: Abdelmalik Droukdel (deceased Jun. 2020) AQIM in the Sahel: reportedly led by Algerian national Yahya Abu el Hammam (reportedly deceased) (Arieff, 2017)	Formally allied with Al Qaeda	Narrative focuses on overthrow of local governments and the establishment of an Islamist regime and countering of Western influence (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 2018; Arieff, 2017).	Known for kidnapping-for-ransom (mostly of Westerners). Also has engaged in attacks on military and police and smuggling (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 2018; Arieff, 2017)	2018 expansion of area of operations from north and central Mali to parts of Burkina Faso ("Progress and Setbacks in the Fight against African Militant Groups in 2018," 2019)	**2018**: Escalation of activity from 144 violent events in 2017 to 322 in 2018 ("Progress and Setbacks in the Fight against African Militant Groups in 2018," 2019)

Ansar Dine	2011 - 2017	Iyad Ag Ghali	Considered a domestic affiliate for AQIM before 2012, although AQIM never officially recognized it After 2012 coup, Ansar Dine allied with MNLA, AQIM, and MUJAO. In March 2017, Ansar Dine merged with Al Mourabitoun, Macina Liberation Front, and AQIM's Sahara branch to form JNIM (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Ansar Dine," 2018).	Best known for the role it played in the 2012 coup. Founded in 2012, Ansar Dine was part of coalition of jihadist groups allied with Tuareg separatists in an offensive to take control of northern Mali (Le Roux, 2019c). The group's narrative focuses on the establishment of a unified state under Sharia and hostility towards Western influence in the region. Its ideological discourse is close to AQIM'S. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Ansar Dine," 2018.)	The group targets Western civilians including peacebuilders. Ansar Dine was funded primarily by hostage ransoms, opium trafficking, and money from AQIM. They carried out suicide attacks, using explosive-laden vehicles, or used rockets, mortars, grenades and rifles to attack French and Malian militaries, the Malian police force, MINUSMA as well as the MNLA. The group also possessed anti-aircraft weapons. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Ansar Dine," 2018.)	Focused operations on control over the Northern Region of Mali. Its influence centered around Kidal. The group also established 2 branches or Katibas which have more regional reach ("Burkina Faso: une gendarmerie attaquée près de la frontière malienne," 2015). Since its alliance to other groups and the founding of JNIM, Former Ansar Dine combatants have participated in attacks both in Mali and Burkina Faso. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Ansar Dine," 2018).	Since **2017** and the creation of JNIM, Ansar Dine continues to carry out attacks against French, UN, and Malian forces. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Ansar Dine,"2018).
Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), Or Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa	2011 - 2013	Ahmed el-Tilemsi and Hamad el-Khairy	From 2011 to 2013 , MUJAO cooperated with AQIM, Ansar Dine and the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to take control of northern Mali in March 2012. As a splinter group from AQIM, MUJAO merged with the Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB) to form Al Mourabitoun in 2013 (which then merged with other organizations to form JNIM.	MUJAO wanted to focus its efforts on moving into West Africa, as AQIM was dominated by an Arab, specifically an Algerian. Closely aligned with Al Qaeda's ideological foundations, MUJAO aimed to establish Sharia law in West Africa and directed its belligerence towards Western forces and the West in general. (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest," 2018).	MUJAO secured funding through drug /weapons smuggling. The group also and, most importantly, used kidnappings and abductions of aid workers and civilian foreigners for ransom. MUJAO is also known for carrying out suicide bombings, IED attacks, landmines, and small arms attacks. MUJAO primarily targeted French and Malian military bases, as well as diplomatic stations.	MUJAO's first attack was carried out in Tindouf Algerian; another followed in June 2012 against Regional Command of the Gendarmerie headquarters in Ouargla, Algeria. MUJAO and AMB carried out coordinated suicide bombing attacks against a military camp in Agadez, Niger and a French-run uranium mine in Arlit, Niger in 2012 (Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Mouvement pour	MUJAO was officially inactive after 2013.

			(Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest," 2018).		(Mapping Militant Org'ns. "Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest," 2018).	l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest," 2018).	

(*) We use this data to indicate that AQIM formed in 1998 when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat split from the Armed Islamic Group (Mapping Militant Organizations. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 2018).

D. Women's Involvement in VEOs and Other Armed Groups in the Central Sahel

There is a small, yet growing and strong evidence base on women's involvement in VE in the Central Sahel.[10] Most of this evidence focuses on Mali, although one study looks across all three countries (Raineri, 2018), and one looks at Mali and Niger (Abatan, 2018). We qualitatively assessed the evidence based primarily on method of data collection and analysis and list it below in order of strongest to "least strong":

- A descriptive **analysis of survey data** from 387 participants (281 women; 102 men; and 4 individuals who did not specify their gender) from 10 regions in Mali (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019[11]);
- A **qualitative comparative analysis** of 36 FGDs and 54 interviews from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Raineri, 2018);
- A **qualitative analysis** of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 71 people, mainly youth, in Central Mali (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018);
- A **qualitative analysis** of data from 10 focus groups and 24 interviews, including 11 with women, in Mali (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016)
- A **policy brief** that primarily draws on on interviews with 63 youth from Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou, Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, the district of Bamako, and the regions of Taoudénit and Ménaka (Abatan, 2018);
- A **policy brief** that synthesizes the findings from several studies, ACLED data, and 30 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019); and
- A **policy report** based on several series of interviews with the main political and military stakeholders, diplomats, members of civil society and religious leaders in Bamako and Mopti region (Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, 2016).

For the most part, the literature frames women's involvement and/or engagement with violent extremism in the Central Sahel in three ways: indirect support to VEOs; direct support to VEOs and other armed groups; and victimization.

Indirect Support

Women's indirect support to VEOs may take the following forms:

- **Providing supplies, shelter, good, or supplies** to support fighters (Raineri, 2018; Gorman and Chauzal, 2019)
    - Although less recent, some young women participated in the 2012 conflict in northern Mali by **saving money to help supply combatants with ammunition** and **treating wounded combatants** (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016)
- Acting as **cooks or laundresses** (Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, 2016; Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018)

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[10] See: Gorman and Chauzal, 2019; Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018; Raineri, 2018; Abatan, 2018; Théroux-Bénoni Assanvo, 2016; IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016.

[11] This study also integrates findings from three accompanying qualitative studies also conducted in Mali.

    - In one case, a woman was arrested by Mali's intelligence services for allegedly supplying fertilizer for explosives to Katiba Macina (Abatan, 2018)
- Reportedly, women were told by Katiba Macina to stop working and **act as informants**—i.e. inform Katiba Macina about the presence of state representatives, the Malian armed forces, Operation Barkhane, or the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019)
- **Encouraging family members** to join (Raineri, 2018; Gorman and Chauzal, 2019)

According to SIPRI's 2017 survey across Mali (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019), women are most likely to support VEOs in the following ways, from most to least likely: providing information; providing goods or supplies; marriage; providing economic services and work; encouraging family members to join; and joining groups directly (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019).

Direct Support

In contrast with Boko Haram, VEOs in the Central Sahel do not appear to have strategically used women in their operations (e.g., in suicide attacks). Abatan (2018) suggests this decision, at least in the case of JNIM, is a strategic one to "retain the support of local populations by aligning itself with norms and expectations of the role generally attributed to women." In an April 14th, 2018 attack by JNIM on MINUSMA, Barkhane commander General Bruno Guibert reported the involvement of a female suicide attacker in the operation. JNIM openly denied this, stating that women do not participate in JNIM operations and that enough men were willing to participate in combat roles (Abatan, 2018).

Still, while there is little research on direct support provided by women to VEOs in the Central Sahel, evidence suggests that some women do indeed participate directly — even if these women are the exception, not the rule. IMRAP/Interpeace's 2016 participatory research study in the Gao region in Mali and the coastal areas up to Abidjan of Cote D'Ivoire highlighted both the indirect and direct participation of women in armed groups. However, they note that because the sample of women VEO members is so small, the findings are not generalizable. Most of their discussion of women's direct participation in violence relates not to VEO participation but to women's participation in non-state armed groups. They discuss how some women joined these groups when the traditional path of success for women in their communities — meaning, get married and start a family — was no longer an option. One woman's husband accused her of adultery shortly after the arrival of MUJAO in their community, and MUJAO members condemned her to stoning. An imam helped her flee to Ansongo in the Gao region of Mali where she had to make a new life for herself and eventually joined a non-state armed group. In another case, a woman from Mali fled to Niger; after returning home as one of the few family members who could safely do so, she found that her hair salon (her livelihood) had been destroyed. In both cases, armed groups played a similar role:

> *"assurer leur propre sécurité; s'autonomiser, notamment sur le plan économique; mais également, retrouver un sens à leur vie, une nouvelle avenue vers la réussite des suites de l'effondrement de leur modèle initial"*

[Translation: to ensure their own security; empower themselves, especially economically; but equally, to find a direction with their life, a new avenue towards the success following the collapse of their initial model] (p. 33).

Once in the armed groups, women combatants reported feeling "traitées comme des hommes" *[translation: treated like the men]* (p. 33).

SIPRI's 2017 survey found that a high number of women from the Liptako-Gourma region, relative to the other regions surveyed, were reported to have joined armed and jihadist groups. As mentioned above, the types of support provided primarily consisted of serving as informants or providing supplies; however, 9% of respondents overall and 15% of respondents in the Centre regions reported that women join groups directly.

Mercy Corps' interviews with 27 female respondents in central Mali provide anecdotal evidence about the roles women may play in VEOs. Interviews with four female soldiers who had joined pro-government armed groups revealed that they had left home to join these groups with the hope (like some of the young men interviewed) of being integrated into the army. The women reported receiving the same training and performing the same duties as men, and one woman described having become a corporal (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018).

Victimization

Lastly, some of the literature discusses the victimization of women by VEOs, the DSF, and other armed groups. SIPRI's 2017 survey shows that 72% of women interviewed described a very negative or some negative impact of the conflict on their personal life. Survey results show that men and women perceive the impact of the conflict to be similar, except in the case of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (see Figure 6 on p. 10 of Gorman and Chauzal, 2019). Survey respondents identify women (particularly unmarried women) and young girls as the most vulnerable to violence from armed and jihadist groups, and young people, especially boys, as the most vulnerable to targeting from drug traffickers. Young boys, men, and poor are seen as the most vulnerable to recruitment by all three groups (armed groups, jihadist groups, and drug traffickers).

Katiba Macina and AQIM have both used forced marriage to "solidify social bonds with communities" (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019, p. 5), a strategy also used by MUJAO (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). International Alert's field research (Raineri, 2018) cites cases of rape, abduction, and forced marriage not by VEOs but by the defense and security forces (DSF) during the 2012 Battle of Konna, which in turn led some young men to join VEOs to seek revenge. Participants also discuss mistreatment by armed groups that were signatories to the 2015 Algiers Accord[12] and "armed bandits" (Raineri, 2018, p. 45). Interviewees from SIPRI's research in Mali explain, among other key points, that

- "Rape has become a sort of weapon of war";
- "The perpetrators of rape are diverse: they are not only terrorist groups…"; and

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[12] These groups consist of the Platform and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA) – an alliance of rebel groups (ICG, 2020).

- "These cases of gender-based violence existed well before the crisis. But since 2012, they have become the norm. Nobody is spared. Even women in their 60s are violated..." (quoted in Gorman and Chauzal, 2019).

VEOs' introduction of Sharia — most notably Katiba Macina in central Mali — has led to the restriction of civil liberties, such as freedom of movement and access to education. Research by Rupesinghe and Bøås (2019) and Bøås (2015) describes resistance by local communities and resentment, especially, to closure of schools. It is unclear how women specifically perceive these restrictions. Women from Ouro Guérou interviewed in International Alert's 2018 study explained: "Some preachers encourage Muslims to go and fight jihad and many of them are against freedom for women. But it's good to take up arms to defend the Sharia" (Focus Group in Ouro Guérou, quoted in Raineri, 2018).

Drivers and Dynamics of Violent Extremism

The following sections and sub-sections explore the drivers and dynamics that influence vulnerability of men and women to VE.

A. Structural Drivers of Violent Extremism

Existing research points to four key structural factors that drive vulnerability to VE in the Central Sahel:

1. Weak or absent governance combined with negative experiences of government corruption and injustice;
2. Abuses by the security sector (in combination with communities' need for protection);
3. A desire for social status and recognition, especially in contexts of high unemployment and underemployment; and
4. The use of religion and ideology as a framing device by VEOs, but arguably also a salient factor for individuals

Absence of and Negative Experiences with Governance

Evidence Base

This topic is well-researched and supported by a diverse evidence base, most of which focuses on the issue of access to justice. All of it except one article (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019) is gray literature; all of the empirical studies are qualitative in nature, and the rest are policy briefs/commentary or longer reports. Mali is more researched than Burkina Faso and Niger. We qualitatively assessed the evidence based primarily on method of data collection and analysis and list it below in order of strongest to "least strong":

- A **qualitative analysis** of 800 open-ended, structured and semi-structured interviews with individuals associated, involved, or implicated with/in trafficking, local conflicts, and violent extremists; people who know individuals with these associations; and experts on these topics, focused on Liptako-Gourma region (Assanvo et al., 2019);
- A **qualitative comparative analysis** of 36 FGDs and 54 interviews from Mali, Burkina Faso (Raineri, 2018);

- A **qualitative analysis** of 600 “consultations or interviews” with participants including imams, griots, municipal councilors, relatives of youth who joined and/or are victims of armed groups in North and Central Mali (Thiam, 2017);
- A journal article that includes **analysis of data** from 12 IDIs with individuals from the Mopti region, regular phone conversations with stakeholders in the region, consultancy reports, available unpublished reports on recent developments in central Mali, and a recorded speech by Amadoun Koufa (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019);
- A **qualitative analysis** of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 71 people, mainly youth, in Central Mali (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018);
- A **qualitative analysis** based on around 50 interviews with members of the security forces, local and national authorities, the government, political parties, civil society, researchers and the population of Soum in Burkina Faso (“The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North”);
- A **policy brief** that synthesizes the findings from several studies, ACLED data, and 30 semi-structured interviews with different Malian stakeholders (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019);
- **Policy analysis** of secondary sources, including ACLED data, journal articles, and NGO/think tank reports (Ibrahim, 2017);
- **Policy analysis** of secondary sources, including NGO/think tank reports, journal articles, and news articles (Boukhars, 2018);
- **Policy analysis** of secondary sources, including journal articles and NGO/think that reports (Sangaré, 2018);
- **Policy analysis** of NGO/think tank articles and reports (Ammour, 2020);
- **Policy analysis** of NGO/think tank reports and policy commentary (Cherbib, 2018);
- **Policy analysis** of think tank/NGO reports and news articles (Le Roux, 2019c); and
- **Policy commentary**, that includes analysis of some NGO/think tank articles and reports (Morland, 2018).

Discussion

Since the 2012 conflict in Mali caused a withdrawal of the state in the north, there has been a virtual governance vacuum in those parts of the country that jihadist groups have been able to take advantage of and fill (Morland, 2018). This governance vacuum extends to northern Burkina Faso[13] and western Niger as well.[14]

Fieldwork conducted by International Alert in the Central Sahel (Raineri, 2018) as well as by Mercy Corps in central Mali (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018) both identify experiences of corruption and abusive conduct by state authorities as a key reason youth join armed groups. In the International Alert study, it is the most commonly cited reason by former combatants for

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[13] In the aftermath of a complex political transition in Burkina Faso and an increase in insecurity, state and non-state security forces volleyed for security governance at the local level. Self-defense groups, most notably the Koglweogo groups, have emerged in an attempt to fill a security vacuum (Leclercq and Matagne, 2020).

[14] In the Sahelian regions of Niger (Tillabéri and Tahoua), as well as the Mopti region of Mali and the Sahel region of Burkina Faso, the state has a very limited presence, and traditional chiefs play a key role in terms of providing rule-of-law (Molenaar et al., 2019). However, their legitimacy has been more recently questioned and undermined (Raineri, 2018).

joining VEOs. Mercy Corps' study found that *perceptions of* deprivation relative to other groups was a key differentiator between youth who had joined anti-government and VE groups and youth who had not. Non-joining youth were more likely to describe government service provision as poor, but similarly poor to or slightly better than the services in other communities (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018).

In Mali, landowners and government officials have historically colluded with other government officials to exploit herders by levying heavy taxes for personal financial gain. For example, representatives of the Malian justice system are seen as being part of and benefitting from this system and thus entirely non-neutral in dispute resolution (Thiam, 2017). Peulh respondents of the Mercy Corps study described a desire to participate in violence after the government had singularly and unfairly taxed their community. To them, the taxation was unfair due to their perception that the government is especially likely to demand high taxes from Peulh communities (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018). This is in the context of long-standing "feelings of political and economic marginalization" by Fulanis[15] in Mali due, in part, to abuse, discrimination, and stigmatization by the DSF (Le Roux 2019c; Raineri, 2018). At the same time, there is a sense that Fulanis were excluded from the 2015 Algiers Accord which they see as having benefitted groups who attacked and stole Fulani herds (Le Roux, 2019c).

Interviewees from Mopti described the perception that justice is "sold to the highest bidder" and "serves the wealthy" (Focus Group in Konna, cited in Ranieri, 2018; Focus Group in Boni, cited in Raineri, 2018). A civil society representative from Niamey interviewed for the same study explained: "The impunity and partiality of the justice system create more frustrations than jihadism." In addition to disillusionment and mistrust of government, traditional institutions which once regulated the social disputes and conflicts over access to natural resources are also perceived as corrupt and politically co-opted because of their involvement with the government (Assanvo et al., 2019).

Compounding the unfair taxation, lack of access to justice and a corrupt justice system, the literature reviewed described other aspects of corruption and injustice — including rampant impunity of government officials, illegal trafficking, and misuse of financial resources, including international development aid — that can drive individuals to join VEOs (Raineri, 2018; Morland, 2018). This is especially frustrating for impoverished communities given the region's rich agricultural, pastoral, and mining resources. For example, Burkina Faso has experienced a mining boom in recent years, but most local people have not benefited from it ("The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Fasos North," 2017; Schäfer, Dreschel, and Engels, 2019).

How VEOs Exploit this Grievance

Disillusioned and disenfranchised communities who feel excluded and abandoned by the state are sensitive to messages challenging the status quo (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). To attract these individuals, VEOs focus their narratives on the failure of official forms of governance (Boukhars, 2018). VEOs also position themselves as a fair alternative to traditional authorities for dispute resolution (Sangaré, 2018). Seeking to further feed the sense that they are the only

[15] Peulh and Fulani are used interchangeably in this literature review. Peulh derives from the French use of the original Wolof word, Pël; Fulani is the anglicization of the word in their own language.

acceptable option for the most vulnerable groups, VEOs have used the growing discontent and disappointment towards traditional authorities to garner support from local populations (Ammour, 2020).

Jihadist groups have provided communities with services (in some cases, discriminately), including basic services, Sharia-based justice mechanisms; and weapons and training so that vulnerable communities can protect themselves (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; Cherbib, 2018). In some areas in the central Sahel, VEOs have been able to put in place a governance system which communities view as more efficient and effective than the government's. Additionally, VEOs have provided mechanisms for communities to express their grievances. To many in these communities, VEOs represent structure compared to the government's failure to respond to citizens' needs and intervene in a protracted conflict (Ibrahim, 2017). For example, part of Katiba Macina's strategy in central Mali has been to provide some limited basic services; in the *cercles* of Douentza, Ténenkou and Youwarou, Katiba Macina brought food to try to win over the local population (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019).

For the most part, the services provided have been in the form of access to justice and security, often along existing intercommunal lines of tension. The provision of these services has addressed the problem of an under-resourced justice system seen as highly partial and corrupt (Raineri, 2018). Where states and traditional authorities have failed to resolve disputes and restore peace, VEOs are viewed as the solution to escaping the status quo (Assanvo et al., 2019; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2018). The longer the conflict lasts, the more VEOs can position themselves as capable arbitrators and mediators. For example, in Ténenkou in Central Mali, in Gabero in the Gao region, and in Oudalan province in Burkina Faso, jihadist groups have positioned themselves as arbitrators between livestock farmers and crop farmers (Assanvo et al., 2019). (We describe this dynamic more in the section on **Error! Reference source not found.**, page 21.)

Jihadist groups have also directly provided security services and protection to local communities in ways that change local power dynamics. In central Mali and western Niger, for example, jihadist groups provided Fulani youth with weapons and training, and intervened directly in conflicts to protect herders' cattle from banditry (Cherbib, 2018). (We describe this dynamic more in the section below, Abuses by Defense and State Security Forces, and Non-State Armed Groups.)

Abuses by Defense and State Security Forces, and Non-State Armed Groups

Evidence Base

This topic has some supporting evidence, but the evidence base is neither as wide nor as rigorous as the evidence base on the topic of governance. The evidence base reviewed includes two of the **qualitative studies** cited above (Raineri, 2018 and Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018), as well as some of **the policy analysis** referenced (Boukhars, 2018; Sangaré, 2018). There is also supporting evidence from **policy analysis** of ACLED data, NGO think tank articles and reports, and news articles (Le Roux 2019a); and **policy analysis** based on several series of interviews with the main political and military actors, diplomats, members of civil society and religious leaders in Bamako and the Mopti region ("Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" 2016).

Discussion

Some of the literature reviewed described abuse by each of the three countries' defense and security forces (DSF), and that communities perceived the DSF much more as a security threat than as providers of stability. After the 2013 French intervention in Mali, state security forces committed abuses against nomadic Fulani and Tamasheq communities ("Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" 2016). Seventy-five percent of villages surveyed by International Alert listed the DSF as an entity threatening communities' peace and security (Raineri, 2018). There are some nuances to this dynamic: for example, in Tillabéri, communities, especially Fulanis, are more critical of the DSF for its absence. Mercy Corps' 2018 study cites youth's experiences of direct abuse by the army, as well; the youth describe how military personnel in pursuit of MUJAO indiscriminately questioned and beat people. Boukhars (2018) similarly describes how members of the security forces targeted and abused members of the Fulani community they suspected of being allied with MUJAO. This dynamic is worsened by the fact that Fulanis are under-represented in the DSF in the Central Sahel (Raineri, 2018).

Power considerations may drive Fulani youth to join armed groups offering not only immediate protection (against cattle theft and direct physical violence) but also an alternative socio-political model (Boukhars, 2018). The literature focuses primarily on the ways in which Fulani communities across the Central Sahel seek out protection against non-state armed groups and other VEOs. An interview with the leader of the Dewral Pulaaku association —"a group established in 2014 to presumably defend the interests of the Fulani"— described how MNLA occupation of his community motivated him "to recruit able-bodied men of good fighting age in my area and send them to train in the MUJAO camps in Gao" (quoted in Boukhars, 2018). Other sources describe similar situations in which members of Fulani militias joined MUJAO in an alliance against Tuaregs (Sangaré, 2016). ISGS' singling out of Tuaregs only further exacerbates the conflict (Le Roux, 2019a). (See section C/Natural resource conflicts for more information on this dynamic.)

How VEOs Exploit this Grievance

VEOs do not always interfere in local conflicts in the Central Sahel region; however, they have continuously sought to instrumentalize the tensions to either gain support from local communities or recruit combatants and expand their influence in the region (Boukhars 2018). In order to appeal to the most marginalized and disenfranchised communities, VEOs exploit the ethnic and identity-based tensions to further exacerbate the feeling of stigmatization of certain groups. This allows them to later pose as their liberators from the oppression and discrimination by both the government and the armed militias which threatened their security. In Central Mali for example, VEOs have specifically targeted the Fulani community for recruitment; at the same time, they have conducted armed attacks on their opponents (Ammour, 2020).

VEOs target state institutions both in discourse and in practice to demonstrate the inability of security forces to protect the communities, attacking official buildings, state representatives and educational institutions (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). VEOs also use protectionist discourse to fuel nationalist sentiment by accusing external and international forces present in the region of serving the interests of the corrupt governments (Cherbib, 2018).

Desire for Social Status and Recognition

Evidence Base

This topic has some supporting evidence, but like the evidence base on security sector abuses, this evidence base is not as wide and as rigorous as the evidence on governance. Much of the evidence linking participation in VE with desire for social status comes from Raineri's (2018) **qualitative comparative analysis** and Mercy Corps' **qualitative analysis** (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018). Rupesinghe and Bøås's (2019) **policy analysis** paper and UNDP's (2017) Journey to Extremism **survey**[16] also finds supporting evidence for this factor, although only 1% of the 718 respondents surveyed by UNDP came from Niger (the only Central Sahelian country included in the study). Like in Raineri (2018), there is a significant discussion of the ways in which restrictive gender norms may drive participation in VEOs and/or vigilante groups in IMRAP/Interpeace's **qualitative analysis** of data from 10 focus groups and 24 interviews, which we integrate in the section on Gender Differences in Drivers of Violent Extremism.

More literature exists to support the idea that VEOs exploit this desire for social status by positioning themselves as a reformist alternative that challenges the status quo. This evidence consists of several previously cited sources, including a **qualitative analysis** of 800 open-ended, structured, and semi-structured interviews (Assanvo et al., 2019); a **qualitative analysis** of 50 interviews ("The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," 2017); and a **policy brief** (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019).

Discussion

There is some evidence to indicate that some youth see joining VEOs as a way to increase their social status (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). Once recruited, this "VE pathway" gives young men access to resources that will help them project the necessary image of economic wealth to secure and/or improve their social status among peers and their communities (including, and perhaps especially, women) (Raineri, 2018). UNDP's Journey to Violent Extremism survey reveals that 35% of male participants aspired to be part of "something bigger" and felt "hope and excitement" when they decided to join VEOs (UNDP, 2017). In contrast, the "traditional pathway" for youth is characterized by a rigid social structure, declining access to natural resources, and under-/unemployment (Raineri, 2018). In a unique example of how joining VEOs is connected to status, Mercy Corps' research found that Central Malian youth join armed groups, including VEOs, because they think it may help them achieve their goal to join the national army (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018).

Community perceptions of VEOs as positive or negative are highly influential on young people's decision to join VEOs or, alternately, to participate in community decision-making (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018). For example, in the Tillabéri region, recruitment into VEOs provides an opportunity for "social redemption" for those that may not be engaged in employment or other activities (Raineri, 2018). In central Malian communities with broad

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[16] This was a survey of 718 individuals unevenly spread across Cameroon, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan. Of the 718 surveyed, 495 were former or current members of VEOs who had joined voluntarily; 78 were individuals who reported being forced to join a VEO; and 145 were individuals who had never been members of VEOs. The total sample was 81% male and 19% female.

support for armed groups (not necessarily only VEOs), it is considered normal for youth to join armed groups, and many youth have family members already in a group. In contrast, interviews in communities that did not support armed groups found that youth in these communities were typically not involved. In both types of communities, these decisions flowed down from community leaders (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018).

How VEOs Exploit this Grievance

Research indicates that VEOs in the Central Sahel have at times positioned themselves (and continue to position themselves) as a reformist alternative that challenges the existing rigid social order[17] (Assanvo et al., 2019; Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North, 2017). This especially appeals to young, disenfranchised men who are unable to climb the ladder and secure a stable social and economic status. In order to gain women's approval, many youth will join a VEO because it offers a shortcut to success (i.e., having a family, being able to provide for and protect them economically, and becoming a valued member in the community) through access to resources which enable them to project an image of economic and social power. In some communities, this also makes young men more attractive to women through their projection of a "provider" identity (Raineri, 2018).

The absence of job opportunities has arguably led some young men to join extremist groups for the social status and recognition they offer. Similarly, because recruitment into a VEO indicates some type of allegiance, it can serve to protect a family's capital. This drive towards recruitment for economic reasons has been the most apparent in the Tillabéri region (Raineri, 2018).

Religion and Ideology

Evidence Base

The evidence base linking religion and ideology with VE is less clear. While some sources recognize religion and ideology as salient factors in the Central Sahelian context, they tend to view it primarily as a framing device that VEOs use in their recruitment to make their narratives relevant to the local context (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; Raineri, 2018; Boukhars, 2018; UNDP, 2017; Pellerin, 2017; "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," 2017; Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, 2016; "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" 2016). Perhaps for this reason, religion or ideology as a factor that drives individuals to join VEOs remains under-investigated. However, some contrasting findings focus on the ways in which religion is indeed a salient factor for individuals. These include findings from Gorman and Chauzal's (2019) descriptive **analysis of survey data** from 387 participants; Ibrahim's (2017) **policy analysis** paper; and Oumarou and Gazibo's (2016) **analysis of data from a small survey** of data from 100 Nigeriens; ten **KIIs**; and **secondary literature** (which they describe as information

[17] Societies in the Central Sahel are stratified in ways that hinder social mobility, especially for the "lower" social categories which are referred to as "cadets sociaux" or "social minors" and, in this context, include youth and women (Raineri, 2018). These social minors, particularly youth, will seek to jostle the status quo in order to improve their conditions and status. In contrast, "social elders" whose higher authority, position in the tribal lineage, and material or non-material wealth is based on age, are usually averse to change since it can threaten their position (Raineri, 2018).

gathered on the Tillabéri northern strip in the department of Banibangou, and with contributions from national experts on the subject). Other sources which discuss the relevance of religion for youth but do not necessarily link this to VE participation include Raineri (2018) and Arnaud's 2016 technical report, which analyzes mostly French secondary sources from NGOs and think tanks and some academic literature.

Discussion

Analysis of the relationship between religious or ideological influences and VE in the Central Sahel generally depicts the use of religion as marginal to other drivers such as grievances against government corruption or the security sector (Raineri, 2018; Théroux-Bénoni and Assanvo, 2016; "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" 2016). Rupesinghe and Bøås (2019) describe religion as "important … but not a critical factor" explaining VEO mobilization (p. 12), and Raineri (2018) describes it "the least relevant of all the factors … to explain vulnerability to violent extremism in the Central Sahel" (p. 39).

Some contrasting findings stand out. SIPRI's 2017 survey across 10 regions in Mali shows that the 387 respondents surveyed view religion as the primary motivator for women to join jihadist groups. (See also the section on **Error! Reference source not found.**, page 17, for more i nformation.) This is not to say that religion may not be a motivator for men. Ibrahim (2017) describes religious belief as important for many recruits to jihadist groups, describing the case of a MUJAO recruit who explained his enrolment in MUJAO in terms of a religious experience. Ibrahim's argument emphasizes the "doctrinal proximity with jihadism" of Salafism, the Tabligh Jama'at, and the Wahariji sect,[18] all of which have gained some traction in the Central Sahel since the early 1990s (Ibrahim, 2017, p. 11). Oumarou and Gazibo (2016) describe, a trend in Niger of many young people "transforming themselves into preachers and presenting programmes on television and radio," with some of these young people condemning other practices as un-"un-Islamic" (p. 22). The authors describe a developing "radical current" of Islam in Niger, which some of these young preachers fall into, alongside the "traditional current" (Oumarou and Gazibo, 2016, p. 22).

Thus, it is unclear to what extent religion by itself is a driver for individuals to join VEOs, warranting further exploration. Moreover, religion and social and political grievances appear closely linked. Salafist movements, in particular, provide a lens through which young people can challenge traditional and formal authorities and break from tradition (Raineri, 2018; Arnaud, 2016). Religion thus provides language for individuals to voice their grievances. Jihadist groups understand this. They use religious messages to legitimize their positions and frame their narratives within a broader ideological framework (Ibrahim, 2017). By doing so, they intend to appeal to a larger number of individuals who might not be on the extremist end of the religious spectrum, but who may perceive religious principles of justice and fairness as a solution to their grievances (Boukhars, 2018). Affiliation with a religious group can thus serve as a way to rationalize and normalize violence. Groups like the MUJAO, for example, which relied on banditry and crime to secure resources for their combatants, used religion and ideology to

[18] The Wahariji sect refers to a radical sect that emerged in the 7th century and that considers all Muslim who do not agree with their view of Islam as infidels. Adherents are known for their disinterest in learning and knowledge and their zealous devotion in the practice of Islam. The use of the term is considered derogatory. (Ibrahaim, 2018)

justify their use of violence (Boukhars, 2018).

Further, VEOs rely on charismatic religious leaders to distill their political agenda throughout communities, sometimes using media such as radio broadcasting. These preachers usually propagate the idea that the religion is threatened from all sides. This type of discourse typically facilitates the recruitment of youth who do not have an extensive knowledge of the religion (UNDP, 2017).

VEOs instrumentalize religion in different ways. Some groups promote a reformed yet fundamentalist Islam as an insurrection platform against traditional and religious authorities, while others use it to challenge and weaken the social structures in place and replace cultural and social norms (Pellerin, 2017). Ansaroul Islam, for example, deliberately makes it difficult to separate social arguments from religious and ideological ones, which sets a moral foundational basis for community grievances ("The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," 2017).

The religious narrative is particularly useful for VEOs to attract and appeal to Talibés, children attending Quranic schools who are already sensitive to this discourse, especially when it challenges traditional and religious authorities who are deemed corrupt (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019'; "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys,'" 2019). However, while religion may be a necessary enabler for VE, it is by itself not a sufficient factor (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019). For example, in the context of Mali, socio-economic - rather than religious - pressures have likely played a larger role in leading Talibés to join Katiba Macina (Boukhars, 2018).

B. Individual-Level Vulnerabilities

Most of the evidence-based research addressing drivers of violent extremism in the Central Sahel focuses on structural drivers that contribute to vulnerability to VE. However, these factors alone rarely influence individuals' decision to join VEOs. While structural factors can in certain cases push individuals to join VEOs, factors linked to personal trajectories may predispose individuals to become more or less receptive to VEOs' narratives and incentives or make them more inclined to take risks ("Countering militancy in the Sahel: What works and what doesn't?", 2019). We address these individual-level vulnerabilities below, as well as the ways in which drivers can lead to these individual-level vulnerabilities.

Evidence Base

Most of this evidence base comes from countries outside of the Central Sahel. Individual-level factors like childhood trauma rarely emerged in the literature on VE in the Central Sahel; however, it is important because of the strong supporting findings from UNDP's (2017) **survey**, which includes sub-Saharan African countries (e.g., Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, Kenya, and Somalia) that have some shared characteristics with the three target countries (UNDP's survey also had a small amount of data from Niger). We also include supporting evidence from a **rapid review** synthesizing findings on links between childhood experiences of violence and VE (O'Driscoll, 2017) and from a **desk review and rapid interviews** with key stakeholders involved in responses for refugees and IDPs (Harild et al., 2014). Considering that this evidence base is thin relative to the evidence on structural factors, we recognize that micro- or meso-level factors such as pressure from peers, families, and elders to participate in VEOs may be more

relevant drivers of VE in this context than individual factors such as childhood trauma. More research on this topic is warranted.

Discussion

Adverse childhood experiences and trauma

Increasing evidence links adverse childhood experiences and trauma to subsequent adherence to VEOs. When a person's pathway since childhood is filled with negative experiences, they may become more susceptible to having a dissenting social attitude, adopting risky conduct during adolescence, and engaging in violent behavior when they reach adulthood, thus becoming more vulnerable to the pull of violent groups (UNDP, 2017). UNDP's Journey to Extremism dataset shows a relationship between childhood unhappiness and propensity to adhere to violent extremism. Participants who were forced to join VEOs reported the highest ratings in childhood happiness while participants who joined VEOs voluntarily reported the lowest scores.

Exposure to traumatic stress and violence as a child also has a strong, long-term impact that increases the risk of negative outcomes, including recruitment to violent groups. Exposure to trauma causes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is associated with increased mental and behavioral problems, including anger and vengeance-seeking (O'Driscoll, 2017). According to the CDC, traumatic events that occur during childhood — such as witnessing or suffering abuse and violence in the home or the community; being abruptly separated from members of the family unit; or having a family member assassinated, abducted or arbitrarily arrested — are considered Adverse Childhood Experiences. They can damage an individual's sense of security, stability, and belonging. These traumatic events can also alter the decision-making capacities of youth and their ability to make positive choices (O'Driscoll, 2017).

Trauma can also lead to an increased need for identity development or assertion, which in turn sets the stage for easier recruitment by VEOs. In terms of relationships, traumatic experiences can lead individuals to become unable to trust and form meaningful and healthy connections. Ultimately, people who suffer from PTSD may experience issues sustaining a balanced social life, have fewer chances to maintain a stable professional life, and be more likely to struggle economically, in addition to facing mental health problems (O'Driscoll, 2017).

Trauma is a significant vulnerability among women in the Central Sahel. This reflects the realities of the gender-based violence perpetrated towards women in the region, especially in the context of protracted conflict (UNDP, 2017). Findings from qualitative research by Interpeace and IMRAP (2017) show the propensity and normalization of sexual-based violence, especially since the 2012 conflict, including forced marriage and sexual assault as a tactic of war by soldiers and VEO members alike. One study participant explained that sexual exploitation is thriving in a context where economic opportunities are scarce (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016). (For more information on violence against women, see the section on Women's Involvement in VEOs and Other Armed Groups in the Central Sahel, page 10.)

Family Circumstances

There is also some evidence to suggest that weak family cohesion and an absence of family support can make individuals more vulnerable to VE. In the UNDP (2017) study, participants

who joined VEOs voluntarily reported the lowest ratings in parental involvement and interest in their lives (UNDP, 2017). In the Central Sahel region, family structures are impacted when members are directly involved in the conflict or are forced to seek opportunities through migration (Raineri, 2018). In other instances, forced displacement because of armed conflict can cause entire families to be separated (Harild et al., 2014). In an environment where youth do not have access to cultural and social activities, they may turn to subgroups as an alternative to socialize or look for mentors and role models outside of their community. It is therefore unsurprising that VEOs often target youth who do not have a strong family safety net and may therefore need support systems, mentors, or even a new identity.

C. Gender Differences in Drivers of Violent Extremism

There is little evidence that VEOs in the Central Sahel have adapted their discourse to attract women. Instead, recruitment efforts by Katiba Macina, for example, are generally directed to men and adapted to a male audience, while women are expected to play a facilitating role by providing intelligence or supporting the family unit (Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019; UNDP, 2017).

SIPRI's 2019 study (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019) provides valuable insight into how drivers of VE may differ for women in the Central Sahel. The SIPRI survey (conducted in 2017) of 387 participants (281 women; 102 men; 4 individuals who did not specify a gender) identifies the following factors women joined jihadist groups, in order of importance:

- Religion (50%)
- Economic security (41%)
- Physical protection (41%)
- Social pressure (32%)
- Forced marriage (21%)
- Political ideology (19%)
- Consensual marriage (9%)
- and Other (4%)

The authors refer to previous anthropological and clinical research by Konaré and Moro (2014) to explain religion as a refuge that has helped Malian women rationalize and accept their struggles as tests which will lead to salvation. SIPRI's survey indicates that, following religion, older generations highlighted the search for physical protection as a key driver to join VEOs, while younger participants cited economic drivers as more influential. At the community-level, exclusion of women from the decision-making process in the community affairs, especially when it comes to conflict resolution, can encourage women to join non-state armed groups and sometimes VEOs (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019).

Women have significant influence in the private sphere to encourage men's involvement in VEOs. Elder women are key mobilizers in Sahelian communities and may encourage men to join VEOs to avenge the family and the community or to fulfil their provider role within the household. In other instances, elder women may encourage young men to join armed groups and VEOs to improve their social status (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019; Raineri, 2018).

Within the Tuareg community, women have reinforced the idea of manhood as based on the capacity of men to provide and protect (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016). For example, mothers have

reportedly refused to marry their daughters to young men who have not "proven themselves" either through the traditional pathway, by joining armed groups to defend the community, or by taking risks in general. They may even encourage it through poetry and songs praising the courage of those who fight to protect their communities and families (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016; Raineri, 2018).

Additionally, economic pressures in a context where young men's value is grounded in the communities' perception of youth's capacity to provide for their families and communities have impacted gender norms in ways that can cause both men and women to join VEOs (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016; Raineri, 2018). An increasingly challenging economic context has made it more difficult for men to assume their traditional economic responsibilities. Pressure on men to provide for their families combined with the increasing economic emancipation of women has threatened the traditional status of men. In defense of their role as chief of the household and provider for the family, some men may join criminal and violent groups to secure more economic advantage and reinstate their centrality (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016).

Perceptions of male gender roles may vary depending on the context. In urban areas, economic capital is the most influential factor for determining men's social status. However, in rural areas, male status is more dependent on social values such as honor and courage. While economic factors have become more important in rural areas, economic gain is usually only a means to the end of improving or securing their social status (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016).

For women and young girls, the female model of success remains very much influenced by traditional social and cultural norms. While there have been small advancements, for example, in terms of perceptions of girls' schooling, female success still essentially depends on marriage, starting a family, and having children then educating them; although among some Arab communities in the region and especially the Tuaregs, marriage is not as significant (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016).

These traditional models of successful trajectories often fail to respond to youth's aspirations, leading many youth to seek out different pathways than those traditionally available (IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016). Male youth, especially, have increasingly suffered from social stigma linked to unemployment and thus have looked for alternatives to claim their position within their communities, especially in the absence of a social safety net (Raineri, 2018; IMRAP/Interpeace, 2016). Sahelian youth who turn to criminality or violence seek ultimately to advance their social standing in the community — whether by joining pro-government groups as a stepping stone to secure a military position or by joining VEOs to access resources and protect their communities (Inks, Veldmeijer, and Fomba, 2018; Rupesinghe and Bøås, 2019).

Gaps and Recommendations for Further Research

Over the past few years, research on VE in the Central Sahel has proliferated. There is now a broad evidence base, consisting mostly of small qualitative studies and policy analysis of secondary sources, but also a few in-depth qualitative studies and at least one survey (Gorman and Chauzal, 2019), on the drivers and dynamics of VE in the region. A small evidence base on women's involvement in VEOs and the gender dynamics that contribute to men and women's participation in VE is also accumulating. However, more research on the relationship between gender (and women) and violent extremism in the Central Sahel is needed. This need was also

noted in the very recent (July 2020) International Alert study on VE and gender in the Central Sahel (Raineri, 2020). As most of the research on the Central Sahel focuses on Mali, thus more research on differences within and between the three target countries is also needed. Additional research should focus on the following themes:

- How violence and demographic shifts in the region are affecting both men and women's roles in society, and how these roles affect their support and/or participation of/in VE
- How women's support and/or participation of/in VE differs by country
- How VEOs exploit societal gender norms that both men and women view as oppressive to gain their support
- A gender analysis of VEOs' strategies of violence and recruitment. In other words, how are VEOs targeting (or not) and/or engaging with women and girls differently from men and boys
- The role that religion and/or ideology plays in women's support or non-support of VE
- The protective factors that could prevent girls and women from supporting and/or joining VEOs
- The extent to which individual factors such as trauma and family support are salient factors for VE support and participation in the Central Sahel
- Programmatic strategies to gain access to women in contexts where their mobility and decision-making is restricted and ensure that programming is gender-sensitive and safe for female participants
- The role that UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2242 can play in supporting women's roles in security decisions at various levels
    - Gorman and Chauzal (2019) also highlight a need for research on how female representatives at the national, legislative, and municipal levels influence security decisions, and how this affects local dynamics

Annexes

Annex 1: Reference maps of violent extremist incidents in the Central Sahel

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