

# Lassoing the Haboob

## Countering Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in Mali, Part II

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The preceding article argued that Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) activity in Mali and the greater Sahel, coupled with the group's integration into society, represents an existential threat to Mali. It illustrated how the gradual degradation of the Malian state is advantageous to JNIM and fits into its narrative of state weakness and lack of governance. As state power declines in Mali, the possibility of the government's efforts to thwart JNIM similarly devolving into something resembling Afghanistan increases precipitously. The objective of the first article was an increased understanding of the root causes of Mali's current instability and the characteristics of its most dangerous extremist group. Armed with such understanding, one can begin to develop strategies that work toward the goals of simultaneously combating JNIM and improving Malian stability and governance—thereby avoiding a fate similar to that of Afghanistan. Providing and explaining strategies with those objectives is the main thrust of this article.

This piece provides two strategic recommendations, both of which are inspired by lessons learned from US and international actions in Afghanistan. I argue that by developing policy based on the successes and failures of international efforts in the Middle East and South Asia, the international community might be able to ensure that the situation in Mali does not follow a similar path.

The first strategy, defense institution building (DIB), is intended to reform and revitalize the Malian security apparatus so that it can be independently responsible for the protection of Malian citizens and interests. DIB as a strategy eschews training and equipping, which are tactically important but short-term. Instead, as the name implies, it focuses on building the military institutions from which a stable, just, and effective security force can grow and be resilient.<sup>1</sup>

The second strategy argues for community engagement and reconciliation. It is based on the recognition that a significant portion of Mali's violence is intertwined with intercommunal conflict. This is especially true where state presence is weak. Groups like JNIM take advantage of these disputes and “provide safety and protection to populations as well as social services in exchange for loyalty.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, to be effective, reconciliation efforts must be accomplished in a local context. In-

stead of only security, Mali also must pursue programs for healing ethnic divides around access to justice and local authorities.

DIB and community engagement are recommendations that derive some of their inspiration and development from lessons learned in Afghanistan since 2001. Both policy recommendations come in part from analysis of the errors made by the United States and its allies and attempt to learn from those mistakes so as not to repeat them in Mali. Given the similarities between the situation in which Afghanistan found itself in 2001 and the circumstances in which Mali finds itself today, the comparisons are not only appropriate and timely but also will illustrate the likelihood of efficacy of the strategic recommendations contained in this work.

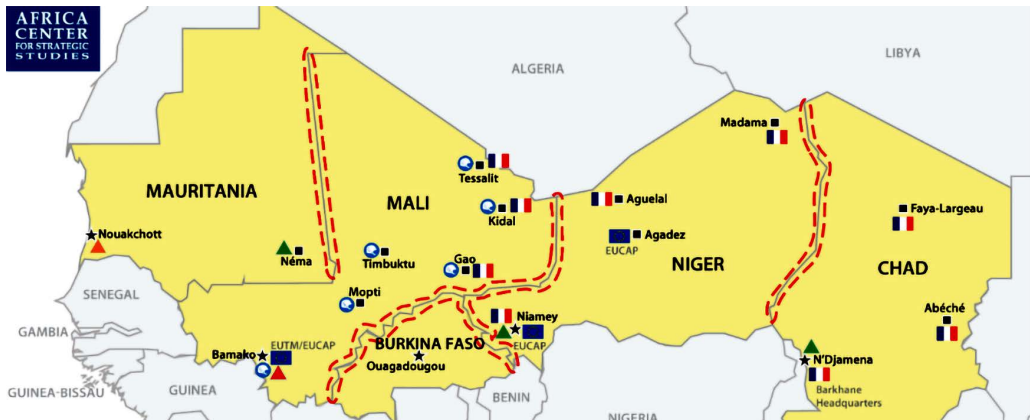
Unfortunately, even since the original publication of my previous article in fall 2020, the political situation in Mali has had a tectonic shift that demands, at a minimum, recognition. Overnight, on 18 August 2020, an argument over promotions—mixed with built up tensions between the government, the Malian people, and the military—boiled over into a coup d'état. The immediate results were the ousting of the democratically elected sitting president and the installation of a military junta. As of this writing, the military leaders have promised elections in a “reasonable” amount of time, but meetings with Malian civilian leadership and representatives from Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have failed to produce concrete plans for a transition to civilian rule.

As the landscape in Mali has changed and the future is more uncertain than it has been in years, the feasibility and potential of these strategies is similarly in flux. If the military coup is evidence of an ever-weakening state, applying the lessons of similar conflicts and situations is all that much more vital. Unfortunately, though the recommendations themselves and the lessons upon which they are based remain valid and would be effective if implemented, the current state of affairs in Mali likely means that such implementation represents an even greater challenge than before.

### **Strategic Recommendations**

JNIM represents an existential threat to Mali. Therefore, countering the organization must be a high priority. It is a complex problem requiring many actors, much funding, and adequate time. For simplicity, this work has broken the recommended strategies to the jihadist threat into two broad solutions: DIB and community engagement & reconciliation. These strategies represent differing levels of foreign influence. DIB requires significant international participation with Malian cooperation. Conversely, because community engagement involves interaction with local actors, the onus of success is on the Malian state—with the international community in support.

Since 2012, Mali's military has been unable to counter JNIM and other jihadist groups without international assistance. That assistance comes from the 15,000 military and police personnel of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).<sup>3</sup> Also present are the 4,500 French troops of Operation Barkhane and the 5,000 soldiers of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5S)—a five-member partnership among Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad, aimed at coordinating efforts against terrorists operating in the Sahel. Both operations are intended to support MINUSMA but have commitments spread over the entire Sahel region (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> The US military does not have a significant footprint in Mali but does provide intelligence and logistics support to Operation Barkhane.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in 2018, Washington spent 9.3 million USD on various training-and-equipping programs.<sup>6</sup> These programs are vital to maintaining security in Mali. Without them, the Malian Army would have been unable to stop the jihadist advance in 2013 and would be unable to respond to violence now.



(Image courtesy of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies)

### Figure 1. Regional security efforts in the Sahel

Unfortunately, these efforts have not been enough. As previously discussed, violence is increasing and is spreading to neighboring countries like Burkina Faso and Niger. Operation Barkhane, which was created for counterterrorism operations, has neutralized more than 600 terrorists; however, JNIM shows no signs of ceasing its attacks.<sup>7</sup> The EU has conducted training in Mali since 2013, yet today the Malian Army remains unable to sustain operations against jihadist groups. MINUSMA has experienced 206 fatalities since 2013, earning it the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous UN mission in the world.<sup>8</sup> Threat of attack has forced the mission's leaders and personnel into a myopic, short-sighted fight for survival: "UN peacekeeping compares to counter-insurgency, counter-

terrorism or imperial pacification, but such comparisons have been limited to tactical and operational concerns, thus largely missing the ‘big picture.’<sup>9</sup> The reason for this litany of failure is these operations, while somewhat effective, represent stopgap tactical solutions to long-term, strategic problems.

If the international community wants Mali to be able to counter JNIM and ensure resilient stability, then the best long-term strategy is to build the Malian Armed Forces into a high-capability partner. However, without a significant strategic adjustment, Mali is unlikely to become fully independent of outside aid in the long term.<sup>10</sup> The prevailing wisdom of the last two decades says that providing low-capability partners with more training, more equipment, and inevitably more money would result in a more effective military. However, as Dr. Mara Karlin puts it in her book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, “Simply training and equipping these militaries will not enable them to effectively exert the government’s sovereignty throughout its territory.”<sup>11</sup> While “train and equip” may have its uses tactically, it is short-sighted and ineffective at the strategic level.

One does not need to go far to see the unfortunate effects of the overreliance on short-term security assistance programs. Mali’s recent history is a lesson in what can happen when foreign powers focus security cooperation efforts on the tactical rather than the strategic level. Between 2003 and 2011, Mali was provided with over 13.9 million USD—worth of training, weapons, and support.<sup>12</sup> However, the train-and-equip methodology prioritized training individuals and specific units on tactical or technical matters.<sup>13</sup> Again according to Dr. Karlin, “The U.S. approach consisted of ad hoc assistance programs, which failed to comprehensively strengthen Mali’s military or address issues such as organization, discipline, and mission.”<sup>14</sup> The result was that the Malian Army was unprepared for the Tuareg onslaught and 2012 coup d’état, and it was only the French intervention that saved the government.

Even after 2012, international focus remained on train and equip at the cost of institution building. In 2015, Mali was receiving significant military equipment and training as a part of the Security Assistance Initiative. When US security cooperation officers landed in Mali to evaluate the program, they found most of the equipment was not only unused but, in many cases, unopened or unaccounted for. None of the new equipment had been transported to conflict areas. Moreover, none of the training offered to the army was being utilized.<sup>15</sup> Such institutional capacity deficits will never result in Malian military success.<sup>16</sup> In his 2017 article for the Brookings Institution, “Reconstructing Local Orders in Mali,” Andrew Lebovich explains that “reinstating central government authority in northern Mali must also come with a thorough reform and reorganization of the Malian Armed Forces. These reform efforts must go beyond the training currently

underway.”<sup>17</sup> If the international community seeks to make the requisite strategic changes and internalize the lessons of 2011–2013, it will have to begin focusing on Mali’s defense institutions and building them for the long term.

It is important to be clear that a cessation of all these programs is not the solution for Mali. Building defense institutions may be the right long-term solution, but it cannot be pursued without continued short-term security efforts. MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, and the G5S represent a vital part of Mali’s defense infrastructure and will continue to be such until the Malian defense sector can take over for itself. Also, programs like the International Military Education and Training, though specifically focused on training and equipping, can play a role in strong defense institutions.<sup>18</sup> However, none of these programs represents a path to an operative and resilient Malian security sector.

### **Defense Institution Building**

Therefore, the best strategy for improving and professionalizing the Malian Armed Forces is DIB. Whereas most security assistance and cooperation efforts to this point have been oriented toward providing tools and training, DIB focuses on the foundational institutions of a nation’s military. It focuses on the “people, organizations, rules, norms, values, processes and behaviors that enable oversight, governance, management, and functionality of the defense enterprise.”<sup>19</sup> The objective is to transform an ineffective partner into an effective one and to have those results last.

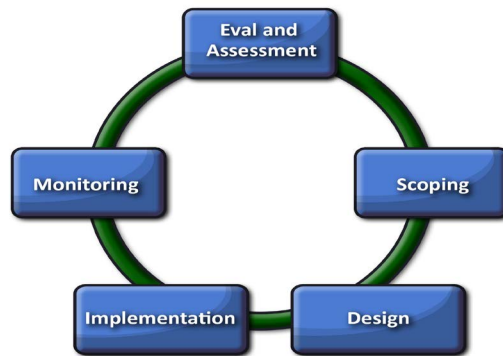
US engagement in institution-building efforts is not only for the benefit of the partner nation. While the objective is the improvement of their military institutions, this is done in the service of US interests as well: “In order to be effective defense partners countries, need professional defense sectors, which in turn require effective defense institutions. If a country’s defense sector is unaccountable, poorly managed and not subject to civilian control it will be difficult for the rest of government to govern efficiently.”<sup>20</sup> With effective partners, the investments of the United States and other international allies can pay strategic dividends in the long term. It is the job of those executing DIB to find the ideal solution between the often-competing US objectives, partner-nation objectives, and general DIB requirements and principals.

#### ***The DIB Team and DIB process***

Thus, DIB represents the first recommendation for improving Mali’s security forces, but it is important to lay out tangible ideas for implementation. To do this, I propose the creation of a “DIB team,” ideally at the US embassy in Bamako. This

team, under the administrative leadership of the Department of State, should be comprised of representatives from applicable government organizations such as the Department of State, Department of Defense, and USAID. The requirements in Mali may dictate other departments be included, but that decision will fall to the experts on the DIB team. Additionally, the team should have representatives from the Malian Army and governmental organizations as well as reach-back capability to academicians and experts in the United States. Once formed, the job of the DIB team will be to plan and execute the DIB model for building partner capacity (fig. 2).<sup>21</sup>

The first step is scoping, which is the process of transforming guidance into recommendations and goals that communicate the intent of the DIB process. Once solidified, the DIB team would then be charged with designing a plan for how best to build partner capacity. Step three is implementation. Step four is monitoring the implementation to ensure it stays on task and necessary adjustments are made to bring it to fruition. Finally, step five is evaluation, and depending on the assessment, the process repeats, with new objectives and requirements.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 2. The DIB model for building partner capacity**

### *Curbing Abuses*

Though prioritization will be in the purview of the DIB team during the scoping and design phases, there is a critical area that requires immediate consideration: alleged abuses carried out by Malian security forces against local communities. This work will not litigate culpability for potential atrocities, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Malian security forces have been responsible for serious human rights violations: “Since late 2016, Malian forces have committed extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary arrests against men accused of supporting Islamist armed groups.”<sup>23</sup> These abuses are

among the most powerful tools that JNIM can use against the government and, thus, addressing this issue should be the priority for building defense institutions.

Malian security forces play directly into JNIM's narrative. If JNIM can portray the Government of Mali (GoM) as malevolent, people will look to other authorities for protection and leadership and may settle on jihadists. Moreover, even if Malians do not join JNIM directly, they will be more disposed to provide JNIM with freedom of movement, supplies, and financial support. According to the International Crisis Group, "Violent extremist groups prosper in areas of tension where the state is absent, where its authority is contested or where it is only present in the form of its security forces, especially if those commit abuses."<sup>24</sup> Extreme actions by the state or the perception of state-sanctioned victimization leads to disaffection and the mass appeal of jihadist groups.<sup>25</sup>

Preventing abuses by the Malian security forces is, in part, a requisite of professionalization. The US government, as part of its DIB efforts, should highlight professionalization as a vital line of effort: "Military professionalism is much more than an administrative concept. The stability and vibrancy of the society depends on militaries conducting themselves in a disciplined and honorable manner. The pursuit of professionalism in African militaries will begin with inculcating the fundamental values of ethics."<sup>26</sup> Until the Malian security sector has strong institutions in place that can counteract the possibility of human rights violations, any other strategy for countering JNIM will be fruitless. Simultaneously, the United States should ensure that individuals involved in such abuses are identified (through Leahy vetting or similar procedures) and not permitted to work with international partners engaged in professionalization efforts.

### ***Professionalization***

Professionalization is a part of the broader institution of human resource management (HRM). Helping the Malian Armed Forces develop strong policies, plans, and programs for managing its people is vital to long-term strategies. Strategic HRM involves developing personnel systems to better manage the role, structure, and mission as defined by its personnel.<sup>27</sup> Examples of HRM systems that a DIB team can establish or improve are the systems of compensation and benefits, promotions, quality of life, performance assessment and management, and succession planning.<sup>28</sup> All these systems can benefit from the efforts of a dedicated DIB team.

HRM, and any effort to develop the institutions therein, is a challenge for many reasons, but one in particular stands out: the sensitivity of personnel issues. If the United States intends to be effective in building HRM as an institution, Washington will have to involve itself in some of the more sensitive parts of

Mali's security sector. The reality is, "deep US involvement in a particular state's sensitive military affairs is critical for transforming a military."<sup>29</sup> It is for this reason that the DIB team should fall under the Department of State and have host-nation members. While the Department of Defense will be the foremost entity for practical planning of the DIB process, these "sensitive conversations" will likely be best served by interactions between US diplomats and Malian governmental representatives.

It is in these sensitive discussions that we see the most important GoM role in the DIB process. Though DIB itself is the responsibility of the US government, it will be ineffective and wasteful without active and willing participation from the partner nation: "Lack of long-term, sustained engagement decreases the effectiveness of training programs and allows little time or space for institution building. But sustained engagement requires both recipient and donor participation and planning."<sup>30</sup> Washington can provide the process, funds, and personnel, but without a willing partner, the DIB team or any DIB efforts will be futile.

DIB faces other challenges and pitfalls. Systemic corruption undermines any institutions that need reform and renders them foundationally weak. Corruption among the Malian Armed Forces was one of the causal factors behind the military's collapse in 2011 and 2012.<sup>31</sup> Also with train and equip, it is simple to show how many weapons were sold, how many students were trained, and how many exercises were managed. However, effective DIB is a slow process that often lacks definitive tools for measuring success. Furthermore, that success may not be tangible until a decade in the future.<sup>32</sup>

These obstacles, particularly the gradual pace of reform that DIB requires, mean that it cannot be the only line of effort for countering JNIM or for dealing with Mali's crisis. Moreover, as discussed before, DIB is mostly the responsibility of foreign governments. The GoM must be open to security reforms but is, by and large, the beneficiary of DIB, rather than the executing entity. That said, the effects of the 2020 coup d'état have yet to be completely understood, particularly from the perspective of military aid. The UN and the French forces of Operation Barkhane have stated that, for the time being, their counterterrorism efforts will not be curtailed or changed.<sup>33</sup> However, an effective DIB program will be extremely difficult without a civilian government with whom to partner.

### ***Comparison: DIB in Afghanistan***

As the situation in Mali regresses and the northern parts of the country become more lawless, it is beginning to seem eerily reminiscent of Afghanistan. Vast swaths of ungoverned space, a growing and violent extremist element tied to al-Qaeda, and tribal and ethnic tensions accompanied by and funded through illicit

cross-border trade all combine to give the astute observer the feeling that the international community has seen this before. The good news with this historical facsimile is that Western powers have been dealing with the situation in Afghanistan for well nearly 20 years, meaning there are lessons to be learned from those failure and applied to ensure Mali avoids a similar fate.

Learning from the errors of the Afghanistan experience begins with identifying those errors. Since the beginning of the war in 2001, the United States has been engaged in some form or another of train-and-equip programming with the various forms of Afghan security forces. Though these efforts often looked good on paper, they have rarely resulted in sustainable and effective security organizations. Rather, they repeatedly have proven to be costly façades of efficacy with weak defense institutions at their core. As described by the Project on Government Oversight,

... the U.S. has spent over \$13.7 billion providing the Afghan government with equipment in an effort to create a modern military force. Unfortunately, a great deal of the equipment the U.S. provides to the Afghan government is for a military force it cannot possibly hope to sustain independently ... providing advanced weapons and management systems to a largely illiterate and undereducated force without also providing the appropriate training and institutional infrastructure created long-term dependencies, required increased U.S. financial support, and hampered efforts to make the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] self-sustaining.<sup>34</sup>

Two decades of warfare and billions spent on training and equipping the various Afghan security forces with little to show for it throws the reality of the situation into stark relief; no amount of money, armament, or training can be sustainably effective if the institutional framework on which it stands is weak. The same thing that has been true in Afghanistan, will hold true in Mali; security assistance efforts must focus on institutions first to be effective in the long term.

The next logical question is; which institutions should receive the bulk of the attention? Again, one can look to the experience in Afghanistan for answers. One of the most important aspects of the DIB programs in Afghanistan has been the importance of combating corruption. Corruption can create enormous resistance to change and to the development of a system of checks and balances, while simultaneously ensuring those who are responsible for institutional failures are protected.<sup>35</sup>

As previously discussed, Mali today is in a similar situation, which, if left unattended, will only deteriorate much like the one in Afghanistan: "Corruption is widely recognized as one of the fundamental drivers of conflict in Mali. . . . by reducing the operational effectiveness of the Malian armed forces, corruption undermines the state's ability to field a defense and security apparatus that can guar-

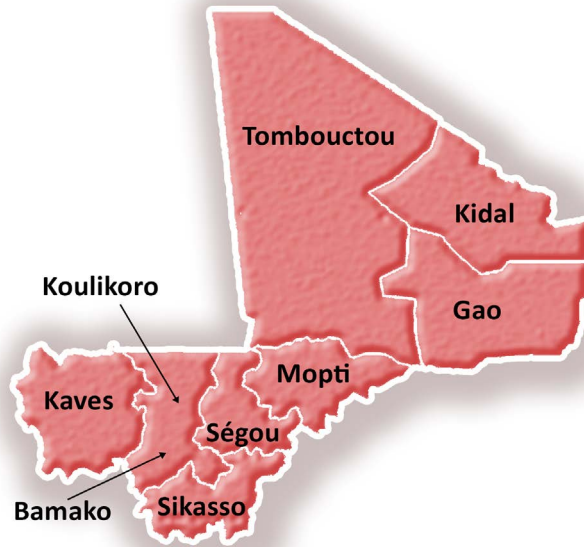
antee the population protection from insurgent groups.”<sup>36</sup> In both countries, a critical piece of the institutional framework that must be addressed is the corruption within the defense sector. Unfortunately, this lesson has been 20 years in the making for Afghanistan, but proactively dealing with the prevalence of corruption would mean that it need not be so hard in Mali.

Secondly, it became apparent in Afghanistan that education and literacy of security force members are vital components of an institutionally strong organization. Without literacy, DIB programs have little chance of ever even getting off the ground, much less causing long-term change. Once again, this took many years to learn in Afghanistan, and when it finally did become clear, addressing the issue “required an all-out-effort to immediately to incorporate literacy education at all levels.” As valuable as this was, it was also resource-intensive and would have been unnecessary had the United States understood literacy’s value from the beginning. Mali has a literacy rate that is lower than that of Afghanistan (35 percent and 43 percent, respectively)<sup>37</sup> and so will face similar challenges, particularly if not addressed early and with vigor.

Granted, DIB programs can address literacy, but at great cost in both time and money. Ideally, literacy is something that might be addressed by the government in the local communities with children, prior to enlistment into the security forces. This is outside the purview of a DIB program; however, in one example of the interconnectedness of the two strategic recommendations presented in this article, illiteracy (particularly in marginalized areas) is something that might be ameliorated through community engagement.

### **Local Community Engagement and Governance**

While DIB represents a remedy for endemic problems within the Malian defense sector, it is not a panacea. DIB represents a methodology by which the international community can partner with Mali to directly fight JNIM and improve the professionalism of Malian forces. However, this is an incomplete solution and fails to entirely counter JNIM’s success. As Bruno Charbonneau states, “The focus on the war on terror, however, does not help resolve the conflicts in Mali. At best, this war can only be a bandage on symptoms that hide deeper wounds.”<sup>38</sup> To be comprehensive, the GoM must also employ strategies to combat JNIM in the minds of Malian citizens. It must address social problems with as much vigor as it does military ones, by improving the integration of the communities in the central and northern parts of the country that the Malian state have historically neglected or marginalized (this article defines the central provinces as Segou and Mopti and the northern provinces as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal).



*(Image courtesy of Acntx at English Wikipedia)*

**Figure 3. Provinces of Mali**

Two of Mali’s most pressing social problems can be distilled into the following interconnected categories: state absence and intercommunal conflict. Both sets of problems act as a cause for the other, meaning addressing one requires effective lines of effort for the other. The entire effort also requires a balance between incorporating communities of different tribal and ethnic affiliations under the central government in Bamako, while simultaneously permitting an appropriate level of autonomy and self-determination. This balance can be struck by focusing on two keys to community integration and governance: access to justice and empowering traditional leaders.

Before elaborating on each of the major problem sets and providing recommendations for addressing them, it is important to make two caveats. Like with the recommendation for fixing the security sector, the following strategies are intended to be long-term. However, efforts to ameliorate immediate and short-term problems should not be curtailed or eliminated. On the contrary, short-term humanitarian efforts are vital to establishing and maintaining conditions in which the following strategies can be effective. A survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2017 indicated most Malians identify food security, health, poverty, and water as the most important issues facing the country.<sup>39</sup> In 2018, the United States spent

just under 220 million USD on foreign assistance to Mali—of which most went to health services, humanitarian assistance, and economic development.<sup>40</sup> Though my recommendations do not address urgent humanitarian needs, it is important that the international community continue its development aid and assistance “judiciously and with diligent monitoring.”<sup>41</sup> Aid should play a continued role in fostering Malian institutions and robust foundations for peace and development.<sup>42</sup>

The second caveat has to do with the ever-present balance between security and development. Former Secretary-General of the UN Kofi Annan said, “I argue that we will not enjoy development without security or security without development.”<sup>43</sup> Mali is no exception to this rule, and I recognize that any of the following recommendations are reliant on an improved security situation. Development in the volatile areas of the country is critical, but it is impossible if violence remains at its current level. Similarly, improvements to the security sector proposed in the previous section will only be resilient if social and economic conditions in Mali improve.

### *Access to Justice and Rule of Law*

The first problem set is the lack of state presence or representation in the central and northern parts of the country. A combination of lack of political will, ethnic divisions, antigovernmental violence, and the inability of the GoM to manage this complex sociopolitical landscape has driven most viable government representation into the southern regions around Bamako.<sup>44</sup> In 2017, only 20 percent of officials were in place in northern communities. In Mopti, only 33 percent of officials were present. Dr. Daniel Eizenga, a research fellow at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, explained the situation succinctly when he said that the GoM has largely had a highly centralized system since independence. This centralization makes governance challenging and increases the difficulty of extending state presence into rural areas.<sup>45</sup> It also contributes to JNIM’s ability to recruit and operate in areas far from the government’s sphere of control.

Without governmental support and protection, communities in regions like Mopti and Gao have no reason to rely on the state, and so “various armed groups and multiple international actors make up for its absence or incapacity.”<sup>46</sup> Again, according to Dr. Eizenga, of possible community engagement efforts, the provision and delivery of justice is the most important and should rank highest in the priorities for improved governance.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, “not only is state-provided justice largely absent from the north of Mali, but it is also contentious, given the unresolved identity and governance issues.”<sup>48</sup> According to a separate 2017 Afrobarometer survey, “responses in Mali suggest that access to justice remains severely compromised. Public trust in the judiciary is low and perceptions of cor-

ruption are high. Malians have some of the lowest contact rates with the judicial system among the 36 African countries surveyed.”<sup>49</sup> Weak governance brings with it a myriad of problems and deficiencies, but a lack of rule of law is the most detrimental to any efforts at community engagement.

To amend this problem, my first recommendation is the GoM must focus on improving access to justice and rule of law in remote regions. Mali is riven with ethnic and racial conflicts and is severely limited in its ability to redress crimes or atrocities that occur within its borders. With this impotence paired with the perception of bias, vulnerable communities are likely to use local sources of justice, even if those leaders are loyal to groups like JNIM. When asked why they choose not to use the government court system, 32 percent of Malians said they prefer to take disputes to local authorities, and 20 percent did not expect fair treatment from the courts.<sup>50</sup> With the power over justice, JNIM and other extremist groups can control lives, manipulate violence, and control the narrative that the state has no authority in those communities.

Rule of law is vital on an even larger scale, however, as it is a critical piece in defining overall state legitimacy. Rule of law has a profound impact on how the state relates to society. When there is mutual respect, accountability, and transparency in the security forces’ everyday interactions with citizens, then there is a higher likelihood that the populace will trust state institutions. That could also lead to a greater sense that those institutions are legitimate.<sup>51</sup>

Access to justice creates the conditions by which the state can exert its authority over communities and redress wrongs done to its citizens. More importantly, it can also ensure that the narrative is one of accountability, openness, and efficacy under the law, thereby restoring trust between communities and the state. This serves to directly counter JNIM’s success by limiting the organization’s ability to recruit and its freedom of operation in formally ungovernable areas.

Arguably more important to the idea of trust and legitimacy than holding citizens accountable is the government’s willingness to hold its security forces to account. As previously discussed, abuses by the security forces have been a serious problem in Mali as violence and civil conflict worsen in the country: “Local communities often view Malian security forces as part of the problem and some soldiers have been implicated in gross human rights abuses. (The GoM) should prioritize identifying, arresting and prosecuting the main perpetrators of attacks to send a clear signal that these atrocities will not be tolerated.”<sup>52</sup> Many Malians see the government as providing its forces with impunity while prosecuting anyone less represented. This renders the government no more trustworthy and reliable than the local militias and jihadist groups and furthers the extremist narra-

tive. Reining in abuses (or the perception of abuse) by government security forces and prosecuting those who carried them out must be priorities for the GoM.

As implementing programs that focus on the justice sector should be a priority, those efforts should also be accompanied by similar programs to link security with justice. Even if the GoM can provide a fair and accountable system of courts that have the capacity to address terrorism, the formal justice system will have limited effectiveness if the security forces, investigators, and magistrates do not develop more frequent and closer technical linkages. If these links existed, they would enable the referral of criminals into the state justice system on the evidentiary basis that is needed to consider hearings or prosecution.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Community Integration and Reconciliation***

JNIM's primary area of operations is in the northern provinces of Gao and Kidal; yet, the most significant escalation in fighting over the past two years has actually taken place in central Mali, particularly in the central provinces of Mopti and Segou. Though JNIM is generally involved in either exacerbating or supporting tensions, it is warring ethnic communities that are responsible for the gradual increase in civilian deaths in central Mali. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, intercommunal violence alone (not including Islamist groups or security forces) killed more than 650 civilians in 2019.<sup>54</sup> Not only are casualties mounting but the fighting also has driven thousands from their homes, destroyed local economies, and caused widespread hunger.<sup>55</sup> To make matters worse, due to the impotent judicial system, these events go without any intervention from the GoM.

Though ethnic Tuaregs were responsible for the 2012 uprising and are often identified as the antagonists in Mali's history, they are not the only ethnic group involved in the crisis. Instead, over the past 3–4 years, the dramatic increase in ethnic violence stems mostly from friction between the agricultural Bambara and Dogon people and the pastoral and quasi nomadic Fulani (also called Peuhl). The diminishing of their traditional grazing areas in North Mali due to both environmental issues and the presence of JNIM has forced the Fulani to move south into Dogon and Bambara lands. With increased contact and dwindling usable land comes tension on both sides. Farmers accuse herders of stealing land and destroying crops. Herders accuse farmers of cattle rustling.<sup>56</sup> These issues, mixed with deep-seated colonial and precolonial prejudices, enflame the already hostile environment.

In response, ethnic communities have turned to "self-defense militias" that carry out raids and the majority of the fighting. Perhaps the most infamous example of a self-defense militia is a society of "sacred hunters," known as Dozos. Though not a unique ethnic group, Dozos protect villages and, therefore, generally

side with the sedentary Bambara and Dogon as a paramilitary force in their fights against Fulani militias.<sup>57</sup> The increase in intercommunal tensions causes attacks such as the one in March 2019. Allegedly carried out by Dozos, the attack was on a Fulani village and left more than 130 people dead.<sup>58</sup> This, in turn, led to reprisals from Fulani armed groups (at times supported by JNIM) perpetuating “tit-for-tat” violence. This empowers armed ethnic militias and creates the spike in intercommunal violence in Mali’s center.

Before 2012 there were traditional methods by which both sides of a communal conflict could mediate and seek redress. However, JNIM has filled this power vacuum. In the absence of state justice or government security, jihadists use the conflicts to their ends: “Employing asymmetric tactics and close coordination, these militant groups have amplified local grievances and intercommunal differences as a means of mobilizing recruitment and fostering antigovernment sentiments.”<sup>59</sup> JNIM also uses the legitimacy of its subgroups like the Macina Liberation Front to act as arbiters in conflicts, favoring their supporters, while simultaneously legitimizing reprisals against opposition communities.<sup>60</sup>

Ameliorating the problem of ethnic and intercommunal violence is a complex and complicated problem. However, any efforts made in that direction must be done after or in conjunction with security reform and increased judicial availability. Without those two strategies being in place and effecting change, any movement toward mediation of tribal conflict or resolving herder–framer disputes will be ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst.

Therefore, the first proposed solution is to begin or to enhance efforts to work with the leaders of these marginalized communities. The GoM should imbue local leadership (both religious and secular) and local orders with more responsibility and agency. This might mean that “forms of policy are put in place by establishing a dialogue between the states and local actors known for their integrity more than their opportunism, and initiatives to rehabilitate rebels and religious extremists.”<sup>61</sup> Traditional leaders have moral legitimacy from their communities and historically played a part in dispute arbitration. They are key in regulating intercommunal tensions and acting as intermediaries to diverse ethnic groups.<sup>62</sup> By seeking their counsel on controversial topics, the state will instill in these leaders “top-down” legitimacy. Conversely, strong relationships between government entities and traditional leaders help give the government legitimacy where it had little before.

As a similar line of effort, the GoM should not only imbue traditional leaders with more state authority but also conversely seek to incorporate those leaders into government institutions in Bamako. As a model, Mali could look to its neighbor Niger. Starting from independence in the 1960s, Niger has had a policy of inclusion regarding traditional Tuareg leadership. As of 2014, Niger has had a

Tuareg prime minister, chief of staff, deputy chief of staff, deputy chairmen of the joint chiefs, and a myriad of other Tuareg in important positions throughout the government and military. This has not completely stopped Tuareg unrest in Niger; there was an uprising in 2007. Yet afterward, the Nigerian government was able to quickly reintegrate Tuareg leaders and even former rebels into the national dialogue.<sup>63</sup>

It is important to note that the GoM wrote the peace accords with an almost exclusive focus on the Tuareg. Thus, it says little about ethnic struggles in Mopti and Segou. As Charbonneau states, “although it is unsuitable for the situation in central Mali, it seems to us that the 2015 Agreement and its implementation processes must be preserved.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, I recommend first that the GoM implement the reforms promised in the accords and do so with inclusivity for all Mali’s ethnic groups. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the GoM should not carry out any inclusivity efforts in the clientelist approach of colonial France, instead any, “appropriate political and security arrangement today would have to be done in the context of democracy and a general concern for equity.”<sup>65</sup> Though I am advocating the inclusion and legitimization of traditional leaders, this must be approached with the understanding that not all leaders would make positive contributions to the country’s development.

This institutional reform was supposed to be one of the key tenets of the 2015 Peace Accord and was meant to enhance local participatory governance.<sup>66</sup> However, this and many of the other reforms proposed in the accords remain unaccomplished. The deadlines for implementation have been extended several times. Yet, each time such drifting occurs, distrust, further conflict, and frustrations result.<sup>67</sup> Were Mali to make serious efforts in effectively empowering traditional leaders in their communities, it would not only stimulate positive community-based dialogue but also simultaneously deflate JNIM’s narrative of impotence and illegitimacy.

### ***Comparison: Community Engagement in Afghanistan***

In Afghanistan, as with Mali, community engagement by the central government with aid and assistance from the international community should represent one of the most effective ways to bring peace and stability. Unfortunately, over the 19 years of US involvement in Afghanistan, sustaining such interactions has proven challenging. The result of failures has left the nation in disarray and, in some cases, little better off than it was prior to US involvement. Despite years of work toward judicial reform, most Afghans still have little or no access to judicial institutions.<sup>68</sup>

This is not to say that the international community has been silent on the issue. Since 2003, academicians, politicians, and security stakeholders have argued the

importance of access to justice in Afghanistan: “Though Afghan and international officials often refer to rule of law development as one of the highest priorities in the reconstruction process, the necessary measures are not being treated with urgency . . . little progress has been made toward building a functioning justice system.”<sup>69</sup> To successfully enact such reforms in Mali, the international community should look at the challenges faced in Afghanistan and apply those lessons learned.

Many such challenges have faced Afghanistan since 2001, and similar concerns will or already do face Mali. However, one that has consistently stymied reform efforts has been government accountability. In both nations, abuses by government entities, be they security forces, high-ranking politicians, or other elite members of society, often go un-tried and unpunished. This lack of accountability and the inability to remedy the situation have proved detrimental to Afghanistan by undermining government legitimacy while adding to one of the claimed attractions to the Taliban.<sup>70</sup> If the Malian government cannot rein in the abuses of its own administration or security forces, the people will similarly look to extremists for leadership and protection.

The similarities do not end with access to justice. The call to empower traditional or religious Afghan leaders has been a tradition in and of itself over the past two decades. Unfortunately, despite these appeals from the international community, little has been done by the Afghan government. “Today, formal financial support to religious groups and organizations seems to be less common—and probably more difficult. Religious organizations are generally viewed with skepticism by the government, the international community and modern civil society organizations.”<sup>71</sup> Avoiding a fate similar to that of Afghanistan will require the Malian state to work with traditional leaders while simultaneously ensuring judicial punishment for those who partake in extremist violence.

The benefits of effective systems of justice and rule of law are not limited to improved community relations and the delegitimization of extremist forces. In another example of how both strategic recommendations are linked, one of the other lessons learned in Afghanistan that can subsequently be applied to Mali is that rule of law is a prerequisite for an effective DIB programs. “Rule of law is critical for DIB . . . One particular problem in Afghanistan was the linkage of the formal rule of law system and the traditional rule of law systems.”<sup>72</sup> A common, fair justice systems ensures order and enables development. Only with order and development can one effectively apply DIB. Moreover, if a nation has institutionally strong security forces, community engagement and justice become far easier and more common.

## Conclusion

If one is willing to plan for the future, the wisest course is to look at the failings of other countries' past endeavors. When looking at the past 20 years of warfare in Afghanistan, a multitude of lessons learned emerges. Yet, for the situation in Mali, DIB and community engagement—focusing on rule of law and traditional leader empowerment—rise to the top as being the most likely to achieve success. By taking and adapting these lessons, the GoM (when it is reestablished) and the international community can chart a course toward greater stability as well as peace and begin the process of suppressing violent extremism that has plagued the nation and the continent for decades.

It can be tempting to look at the increased instability and unclear future for Mali and decide that any strategic recommendations are pointless. As both the leadership and the citizenry of the country grapple with who they want to lead them and what shape they want their government to take, policy ideas regarding building defense institutions, community engagement, and rule of law can seem superfluous and overly optimistic. This is, however, short-sighted and, even in turbulent times, Malians and the international community should continue planning for the future even while solving the problems of the present. ★

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