The Last Frontier: Prisons and Violent Extremism in Mali

Authors: Liesbeth van der Heide and Julie Coleman

As the number of violent extremist attacks in the Sahel has expanded rapidly in recent years, the number of Violent Extremist Offenders (VEOs) in prison has grown in parallel at an alarming pace. This policy brief focuses on VEOs held in prisons in Mali, using primary data gathered during semi-structured interviews with VEOs conducted between 2016 and 2019. The brief provides a profile of the VEOs, including their backgrounds and, crucially, their reasons for engagement with terrorist groups. It also provides an overview of the prison structure, in order to illustrate the system for managing the VEO population, and identifies gaps or opportunities for improvement, particularly in relation to managing risk and implementing rehabilitation interventions. Finally, this brief provides recommendations for additional efforts needed to ensure that both Malian and international policymakers are able to tailor their responses to the growing issue of VEOs in a manner that will ensure that prisons become places that contribute to successful (eventual) reintegration of inmates, rather than places that exacerbate the problem of extremism and radicalisation.

ICCT International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

Introduction: Reaching the tipping point? Terrorism in the Sahel

With almost daily attacks on civilian and military targets, such as police stations, schools or military convoys in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, terrorist and other militant groups are rapidly gaining ground in the Sahel. Nearly one million civilians have been displaced in border regions and, in much of the Sahel, the state has virtually lost its authority. Fear is increasing that terrorist organizations like Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) or Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have set their sights on taking advantage of the instability in the region to strengthen their presence and role, having lost their caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

Although the region has suffered from poor governance and instability for some time, violence in the Sahel has recently increased explosively. In 2019, 4,000 people died in hundreds of attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a fivefold increase since 2016. A total of 900 thousand civilians have fled terror in the three countries and at least 3,000 schools have been closed, rendering hundreds of thousands of children unable to attend school. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres warned earlier this year at the World Economic Forum in Davos that "a war with terrorist organizations" is going on in the region and, gravely, "that we are losing." He also warned that extremism is spreading towards the countries on the coast of West Africa: Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin and Ghana.

Concerns expressed by UN officials regarding the rapid deterioration of the security situation are well-founded – all the more so given that MINUSMA is not only the third largest but also the "most dangerous" UN peacekeeping operation worldwide – but Guterres is not the only one sounding the alarm bell. Gathered at the Pau Summit held on January 13th 2020, President Macron and G5 Sahel countries' heads of state reaffirmed their willingness to join forces and revive counter-terrorism efforts under the new "Coalition of the Sahel". While announcing the sending of an additional 220 soldiers to reinforce its already 4,500 strong Operation Barkhane, France also called upon other countries to maintain their support in the region – perhaps prompted by the announcement made by US President Trump of its intention to withdraw forces from Africa. Besides the impact it may have in Eastern parts of the continent - where the vast majority of U.S. military forces are concentrated - a US military disengagement from West Africa would also result in the withdrawal of around 1,400 troops mainly positioned in Niger, where the US has furthermore built the largest drone base on the continent.

Regardless of the level of involvement of foreign troops, there seems to be widespread agreement that military interventions alone will not address the root causes or curb the spread of violent extremism across the region. Extremist groups are indeed well rooted in the local context, notably exploiting existing intercommunal tensions in the region to fuel violence and gain ground. Long-standing conflicts have traditionally been waged between some communities, most notably nomadic pastoralists and sedentary farmers, over access to fertile land, cattle, mines, water, or the monopoly on trans-Saharan trade routes through the desert. Terrorist groups active in the region have sought to exacerbate these conflicts through various means, including by adapting their extremist narratives to local grievances, providing civilians with weapons, and eventually offering their protection against the very violence that they have largely fuelled. The Islamic State's affiliates arming of Fulanis on a large scale to defend against, among others, rival

Tuareg nomads and Dogon farmers, but also against Mali's army, just provides one example of the levers used by terrorist groups in the region.

At the same time, local gangs battling for a share of the region's lucrative trade in weapons, drugs, migrants and medicines often turn to terrorist groups for 'protection'. In this spiral of violence, more and more citizens are using weapons for self-defense. As a result, constantly emerging defense militias have become a new actor in an already complex conflict. And whether drawn from defense militias or established violent extremist groups, there is a steady stream of young recruits being offered weapons and protection in exchange for their engagement.

One of the consequences of this dynamic is a dramatic uptick in the number of people being arrested for terrorism-related offenses and the subsequent influx of these individuals into Sahelian correctional institutions. As countries in the Sahel grapple with the steady inflow of suspected violent extremists into their judicial and correctional systems, this situation highlights the role that prison can play in either spreading or containing radicalising forces, as well as the importance of understanding who the arrested individuals are and what drove them to join extremist groups in the first place.

Prisons and Radicalisation

Radicalisation to Islamic extremism has long been touted as a significant strategic threat in a number of countries across the globe.[1] In particular, radicalisation in the prison setting has been identified as a particular issue of concern.[2] From the fear of the potential contagion effect of radical charismatic preachers to an anxiety around the deliberate targeting of young and vulnerable inmates, radicalisation in prisons has become recognised as a threat to the stability and safety of inmates but also to broader society, given the potential violence radicalised individuals might carry out upon their release.[3]

Radicalisation to extreme ideas leading to violence in prison is not limited to Islamic inspired processes.[4] Radicalisation in the prison setting has been an ongoing feature of prison life for generations of inmates across a range of violent campaigns.[5] For example, in the case of Northern Ireland, prison offered the opportunity for education and debate but also hosted episodes of violence, which often emerged independent of a sophisticated supportive ideology.[6] In the United States, the prison experience has long been acknowledged as having a radicalising effect.

A relatively significant amount of research has been conducted on prison radicalisation in the years since Islamic extremism came under scrutiny in the post-9/11 world. Although much of this research has provided vital insights into the processes of radicalisation within the somewhat unique context of prison, some research has served only to propagate existing myths and sensationalise the phenomenon; other research has relied on limited empirical evidence and has led to the construction of generalised

....

[1] Basra, R., & Neumann, P. R. (2016). Criminal pasts, terrorist futures: European jihadists and the new crime-terror nexus. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *10*(6), 25-40.

[2] Silke (Ed.), Prisons, *Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform* (2014).

[3] Goldmann, B. (2009). Radicalization in American Prisons. Publications in Contemporary Affairs (PiCA) http://www.thepicaproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Radicalization-in-American-Prisons.pdf;
 Useem and Clayton, "Radicalization of US Prisoners," Criminology and Public Policy, (2009).

[4] See, e.g., the work of EXIT Germany and Sweden.

[5] Useem and Clayton, "Radicalization of US Prisoners," Criminology and Public Policy, (2009).

[6] Bigo, Bonelli, et al, "Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU," (2014).

recommendations that exceptionalise the phenomenon.[7] More problematically, some reports have made claims about the nature of individuals incarcerated for terrorism offences.[8]

Moreover, once convicted and imprisoned, the natural tendency if given no alternative is to return to a familiar life.[9] For those who have nothing to lose, re-engaging in violent extremism after release from prison may seem a very legitimate option. Bearing in mind this risk of recidivism, in conjunction with the prevalence of radicalisation within prisons, a sound understanding of prison systems and the process by which individuals become open to radicalisation and/or ultimately violence in the first place is a vital element in countering the threat.

The Present Study

As of mid-2016, Mali's main prison in Bamako housed roughly 62 alleged and convicted violent extremist offenders (VEOs)[10]; the number has risen sharply to over 270 VEOs as of early 2020. Given the combination of an enormous backlog in judicial cases, harsh prison conditions, and a general lack of resources ranging from infrastructure to trained staff to rehabilitation and reintegration interventions, the prospects for the VEO prison population are grim. At the same time, the likelihood that most of these VEOs will eventually be released is high, whether it be due to a result of the judicial process, prisoner exchanges as part of larger negotiations, or simply because they have served their time. Thus, the prisons (can) play a critical role as 'universities of terrorism' and hotbeds of radicalisation, or alternatively, as incubators for positive change. To that end, this paper aims to shed light on Mali as a case study, zooming in on (1) how the Malian prison system is structured; (2) what the background is of some of the (suspected) VEOs in prison in Mali; and (3) what their general reasons are for engaging with terrorist groups. The paper ends with a set of policy recommendations for both national and international actors when it comes to intervening in the prison environment.

Methodology

In the context of a series of initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism in prisons and fostering community resilience against violent extremism in Mali, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), together with the United Nationals Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), have developed and implemented a set of activities in Mali over the past four years. A number of activities have focused on the prison context, including for example awareness-raising training for prison staff on violent extremism and radicalisation in prison, training on conducting risk assessment of VEOs, and on conducting semi-structured interviews with VEOs. Thirty semi-structured interviews with individual prisoners were conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Bamako's central prison, focused on gathering information on the background of VEOs, as well as their reasons for engagement with terrorist groups. All 30 interviewees were

....

[7] Neumann, P. R. (2010). *Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*. ICSR, King's College London; Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalisation and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (2013).

[8] Neumann, P. R. (2010). *Prisons and terrorism: Radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries*. ICSR, King's College London.

[9] Exemplified by the exceptionally high recidivism rates in US prisons. Durose, M. R., Cooper, A. D., & Snyder, H. N. (2014). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

[10] In this paper, the term violent extremist offenders is used interchangeably with terrorists; collectively, it refers both to individuals who have been accused of but not yet convicted of terrorism-related offenses, as well as those who have been convicted and sentenced.

selected by prison staff but participated in the interviews voluntarily: a social worker informed the inmates one day before the arrival of the research team, briefly presenting the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation. A research team consisting of two researchers interviewed the 30 inmates. The interviews were not permitted to be audio-recorded but written notes were taken and transcribed immediately after each interview. In general, the interviews took 45-90 minutes each. Finally, limited data was gathered on an additional 22 VEOs in Bamako Prison in 2019. This data, together with data from government reports and secondary sources like news articles, have been used to provide an answer to the main questions guiding this paper.

How does the Malian Prison System work?

Mali's prisons are managed by the National Directorate for the Prison Administration (*Direction National de l'Administration Pénitentiaire et de l'Education Surveillée*, DNAPES), which falls under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. As of 2014, the total prison population was estimated to consist of 5,209 offenders, however this excluded all prisoners in Mali's three northern regions (thus the full number would have been higher).[11] Pre-trial detainees comprised 52.8% of the population in 2014, rising to almost 60% in 2015. This population was formerly spread across 59 prisons in the country, however, according to a 2014 update by the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations on Justice and Corrections, 14 (slightly less than a quarter) of Mali's 59 prisons were destroyed during the conflict that started in 2012. The official capacity of the Malian prison system was 3,000 as of 2009, whereas the actual occupancy rate of 5,209 in 2014 would translate to a general congestion rate of roughly 175%—even higher if the reduction of 14 prisons is taken into account. As of 2018, Bamako's Central Prison housed almost 2000 detainees, while its official capacity is only 400. The overpopulation rate keeps growing with recent estimates reaching a congestion rate of 615%. In the past two years, a new prison has been constructed in the town of Kenieroba, located in the district of Koulikoro roughly one and a half hours outside of Bamako. At the end of 2019, a group of approximately 200 low-risk offenders were transferred to Kenieroba Prison on a trial-basis and, if the pilot is successful, in the future it may be possible to alleviate the congestion in Bamako Prison by transferring high-risk prisoners to Kenieroba.

The VEO population (consisting of both those arrested for, as well as those sentenced for terrorism-related offenses) is housed in two correctional institutions: one in Mali's capital and the other in nearby city Koulikoro, approximately 60 km from Bamako. While prisoners are generally arrested by the Malian police forces, VEOs are often arrested by French counter-terrorism forces active in Operation Serval in 2013 or Barkhane from 2014-onwards. VEOs are generally transported from the northern and central regions of Mali to the capital by the French forces and then transferred to the Malian police forces. Upon arrival in Bamako, the majority of VEO prisoners are brought to Gendarmerie Camp One for further questioning, as well as for categorising and determining whether to house them in Bamako or Koulikoro Central Prison. A number of terrorist offenders also reported spending time in the State Security Prison (*Sécurité d'état*), an unofficial detention centre where they were interrogated for periods ranging from days to weeks before being transferred (back) to the main prison.

Whereas in Bamako two designated units have been established for this population, in Koulikoro VEOs are mixed with the general prison population. Koulikoro housed 174 offenders as of February 2020, having an official capacity of 200 inmates, as compared

....
[11] Available data from 2014 excludes the prison population of the three northern regions, which seems to be a result of the conflict ongoing in northern Mali at the time.

to Bamako prison's increase from approximately 62 alleged and condemned terrorist offenders mid-2016, to over 270 offenders as of early 2020. As of 2020, the majority of VEOs in Mali remain unsentenced. At Koulikoro only 10 of 49 VEOs have been sentenced (20%), whereas at Bamako the number is even lower with only seven of 270 VEOs (3%) having been sentenced – the others being in pre-trial detention. Koulikoro prison effectively consists of one large cell.

Koulikoro prison is currently under reconstruction to extend the overall size of the prison. Due to limited resources and capacities in terms of security and surveillance, the VEO population in Koulikoro does not presently have access to the courtyard, which is the only outside space available in the prison. Interestingly, Koulikoro prison also houses a number of high-level offenders who are incarcerated for offenses related to the Rwandan genocide - however they are housed in a separate unit, established with the support of the United Nations, and are managed by DNAPES on a different regime.

Within Bamako Prison, the VEO units consist of two quarters generally known as the "jihadist block" and the "rebels' quarter". These quarters are divided based on group affiliation and consequentially to a certain extent also based on ethnicity. Whereas the "jihadist block" mainly houses what the prison staff view as 'foreign jihadists', i.e. Tuareg, Arabs and foreign individuals from neighbouring countries, the rebel quarter houses mainly VEOs of other ethnic backgrounds, e.g. Fulani or Bambara. The jihadist block consists of an open courtyard with a number of open cells around it, all with access to the courtyard. Each smaller cell is built to house up to seven detainees although given the rise in the number of VEOs it is likely that the actual number housed in each is now even higher. Inmates housed in the "jihadist block" usually spend their day in the larger courtyard and are housed in their respective cells during the night, where they sleep on mats places on the ground. The courtyard provides washing and eating facilities and is used for daily activities such as prayer, socialising with other detainees, or for inmates generally biding their time. Bamako is a high-security prison and, in addition to the VEO population, also houses offenders who are charged with or sentenced for a range of crimes including murder, aggravated assault, or rape. The terrorist offender population is viewed as a high-risk population and, as such, is not allowed time outside their unit to participate in any of the other activities offered within the prison environment. For other categories of offenders and following an assessment of the security circumstances, the prison offers the opportunity to attend courses in a tailoring or mechanical workshop, as well as participate in other vocational training activities, such as working on a plot of agricultural land or in the prison kitchen. The prison also contains a library, a mosque and a church, but these are not accessible to the population accused of or convicted of terrorism. Terrorist offenders do have access to a doctor and, if need be, can be hospitalised in the infirmary within the correctional facility.

Given the size of the prison cells, the main challenge for the prison administration generally is the fact that prisons are dangerously overcrowded, especially in Bamako. This congestion has obvious implications, including a higher need for strict security measures given the staff-to-prisoner ratio, lack of personal space, and poor heat, food, and hygiene conditions. Additionally, the prison system generally struggles with poor administration and recordkeeping and the lack of a specific ombudsman for prisoners complaints. Koulikoro prison is used as a "transit prison" for inmates coming from different regions over the country and the number of inmates can vary quickly and greatly (in the last quarter of 2019, the prison was for instance below capacity), which makes the overall management of the prison and the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration activities challenging. The problem in Koulikoro prison is that the

violent extremist offender population is mixed with all other offender types, increasing the risk that they might radicalise other inmates.

Figure 1 **Intake process in Malian prisons**

The majority of prison staff in Mali is comprised of guards or security officers. Within the detention centres all security-related aspects are managed by a chief security officer and, when applicable, a deputy, while all personnel are managed by the prison director. They are charged with managing the prison population on a daily basis and maintaining operational security within the facility. Given the generally overcrowded prisons in Mali, the security situation and the stability within the prison settings is, to a certain extent, dependent on cooperation and good relationships between the prison personnel and the prisoners. All prison cells (usually housing larger groups of inmates ranging from five to 100 inmates) have a cell leader, often elected or appointed by the other prisoners in agreement with the prison staff. According to information collected through the interviews with inmates, the cell leader functions as the in-cell liaison to maintain order, deal with smaller everyday problems, mediate conflicts between inmates and convey complaints or requests to the prison authorities. In Mali, as in many prison systems that are subject to overcrowding and limited resources, prison staff to a certain extent rely on the cooperation of the cell leaders. For instance, in addition to the prison staff, the cell leader ensures that newly arrived inmates are aware of the prison rules and regulations. Prison guards have contact with the inmates on a daily basis and can also be specifically tasked with gathering information on specific individuals or networks in prison, although Malian prisons do not have institutionalised forms of prison intelligence.

Additionally, every prison carries out administrative functions, usually performed by a small team of staff (one to four individuals) who are responsible for keeping the general prison administration up to date, registering new inmates and visitors, and managing the prison archives. Some Malian prisons—often the bigger ones with more resources at their disposal—also employ one or two social workers to focus on prisoner welfare and rehabilitation and reintegration interventions. Social workers also play a role in the intake process of a new inmate, interviewing every new arrival and conducting a social (investigation) report. When it comes to health care, some prisons have a doctor or nurses working in prison, while in other prisons they visit at regular intervals.

While life in prison can differ for inmates based on their security classification (high-, medium -, or low-risk) and the specific prison conditions (what specialised staff and what type of interventions are available), the intake process of new inmates is relatively similar across Malian prisons. New inmates are usually transferred to the prison authorities by the Malian police. The police also hand over a warrant of arrest detailing some basic demographic information (name, date of birth, region) and the charge or sentence of the individual. The prisoner first is brought to the security office, where they are informed of the prison's rules and procedures, and they are assigned to a prison cell. Prison guards also immediately perform a physical security check to ensure that the newly arrived inmate does not carry any weapons or other prohibited items. The prisoner is then taken to the administration office, where demographic data is registered along with the biometric data of their fingerprints. The administration officers also create a file on the prisoner and keep the warrant of arrest within that file. Next, in the prison registry, their personal belongings (including for example a cell phone, identification documents and money) are registered and taken. The inmate undergoes a medical check by the doctor or nurse. Finally, the inmate meets with the prison director and/or—dependent on the availability—with social workers who conduct a general interview focused on the prisoner's background, family history, and the motivations for their alleged criminal offence. For a schematic overview of the intake process, see Figure 1.

Finally, when it comes to external actors in the prison environment, most Malian prisons know three types of external actors: family members; religious leaders; and international organisations, civil society, or non-governmental organisations (IOs/CSOs/NGOs). Family members generally visit on pre-approved days and times (e.g. Fridays are generally days for family visits) and in many Malian prisons families also play a central role in providing basic services such as additional food, with many bringing meals to their incarcerated family members. Religious leaders also generally visit once a week, for example to conduct the Friday sermon for Muslims or to lead Sunday prayer services with Christian inmates. IOs/CSOs/NGOs may also play a role in providing basic services (e.g. the International Committee of the Red Cross is active in some Malian prisons providing kitchen machinery like cooking pots) or assisting in rehabilitation and reintegration activities (e.g. through providing basic education materials or equipment for vocational occupations such as cloth-making or agriculture). Other organisations (including for example ICCT, UNICRI, MINUSMA[12], Think Peace, INL[13] and ICITAP[14]) provide capacity-building for prison actors through training of prison staff on issues such as risk assessment, transport of high-risk prisoners, dynamic security or other adherence to/observation of international prison standards such as the Mandela Rules. Such organisations can also play a role in connecting inmates to outside actors (e.g. through facilitating, when possible, contact from inmates to their family members, monitoring prison abuse or torture, and/or researching and analysing prisons and prison conditions.)

Socio-Demographic Overview of VEOs

Comprehensive socio-demographic information on the suspected and sentenced VEO population in Malian prisons, estimated to be around 319 VEOs at the time of writing, is gravely lacking mainly because the prisons themselves generally lack information on the individuals transferred to them by the police forces. Many violent extremist offenders are arrested by the French counter-terrorism force Barkhane, who are active in the

[12] The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
[13] The United States Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
[14] International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program

8

central and northern regions of Mali. To date, the French forces often do not share evidence or information about these offenders when they are handed over to the Malian police. Thus, the full profile of the VEOs being held at the prisons in Bamako and Koulikoro is unknown. However, drawing upon data collected from 30 VEOs (who participated in semi-structured interviews between 2016 and 2019 at the high security prison in Bamako)—including details such as age, ethnic group, geographic origin, occupation, educational background, and other factors—it is possible to extrapolate a likely overview of the common characteristics seen in individuals who have—or who are thought to have—engaged in violent extremism in Mali. [15] Amongst the thirty interviewees, only two had been sentenced, which one was appealing while the other was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. The remainder were still awaiting trial.
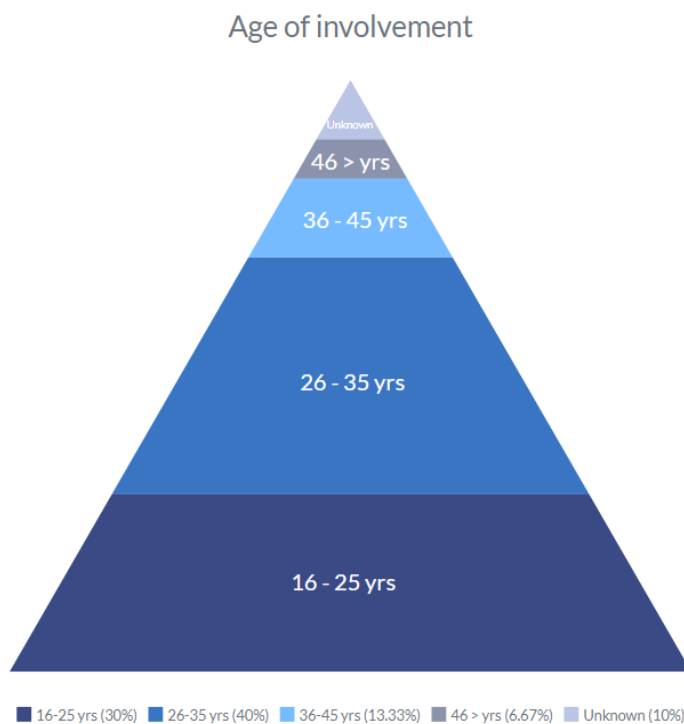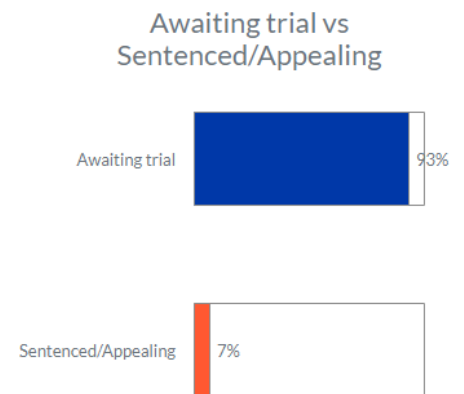
Figure 2 **Type of Involvement**

Figure 3 **Status of Case**

Age of involvement

Unknown
46 > yrs
36 - 45 yrs
26 - 35 yrs
16 - 25 yrs

■ 16-25 yrs (30%) ■ 26-35 yrs (40%) ■ 36-45 yrs (13.33%) ■ 46 > yrs (6.67%) ■ Unknown (10%)

Awaiting trial vs Sentenced/Appealing

Awaiting trial — 93%

Sentenced/Appealing — 7%

In general, Mali has a young population, with 48% being 14 or under and a median age of 16 years old.[16] Amongst the thirty interviewees, ages ranged from 18 to 64 years old. Almost half (40%) were between 26 and 35 years old, with 30% between 16 and 25 years old. Although violent crime is generally seen as a phenomenon of young men (18-24), terrorism does not generally fit this mould and while the relationship between age and engagement in terrorism is not entirely clear, the demographics seen amongst this group—with the largest cohort being between 26 to 35—mirror broader trends in terrorism.[17]

Of the 30 participants, the majority were from one of two ethnics groups: Tuareg or Arab/Moor, which together account for an estimated 10% of the Malian population. In total, 11 (37%) were ethnic Tuaregs (also known as Tamasheq). Another 11 (37%)

....

[15] All VEO participants in these interviews, and thus all VEOs for which we have socio-demographic data were male. As of 2016, there were only two women who were in prison for terrorism-related acts, both held at the Women's Detention Centre at Bollé.

[16] CIA Factbook, Mali, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html

[17] Klausen, Morrill, & Libretti, "The Terrorist Age-Crime Curve: An Analysis of American Islamist Terrorist Offenders and Age-Specific Propensity for Participation in Violent and Nonviolent Incidents," 2016, 24.

identified themselves as Arab/Moor (also known as Azawagh or Azawad Arabs). Given that violent extremism in Mali starting in 2012 was primarily focused in northern Mali, largely following the secessionist attempts put forward by Tuareg and Arab groups, the figures showing that a majority of VEOs held were from these two ethnic groups largely reflects that at the time, most individuals in prison as alleged terrorists had been arrested in the north by French counter-terrorism forces. This dynamic is mirrored in the geographic origin of the 30 participants, the majority (24) of which were from the north of Mali, primarily from (the vicinity of) the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. Moreover, the majority of participants interviewed were drawn from the "jihadist block," which likely influenced the ethnic composition of those interviewed.

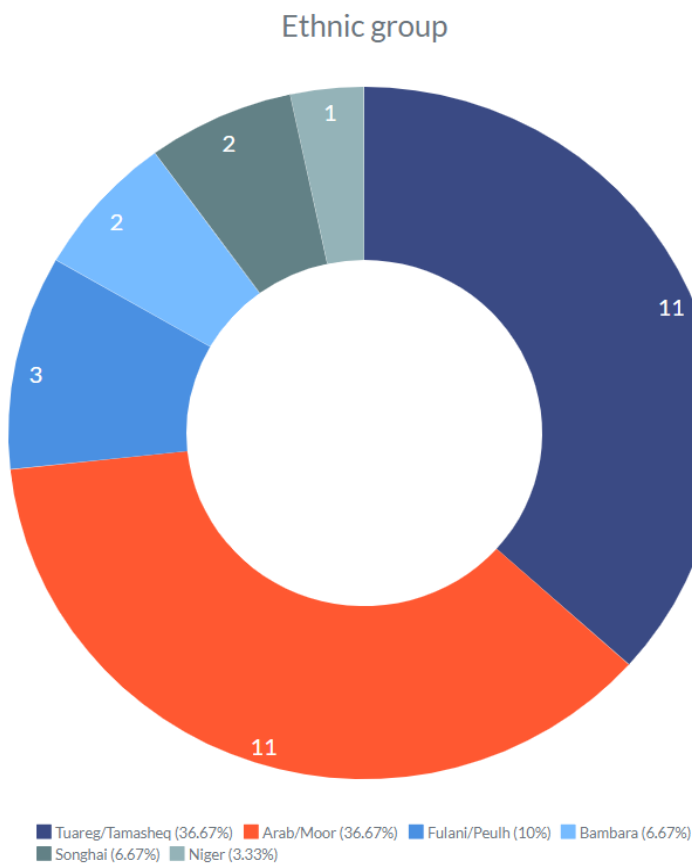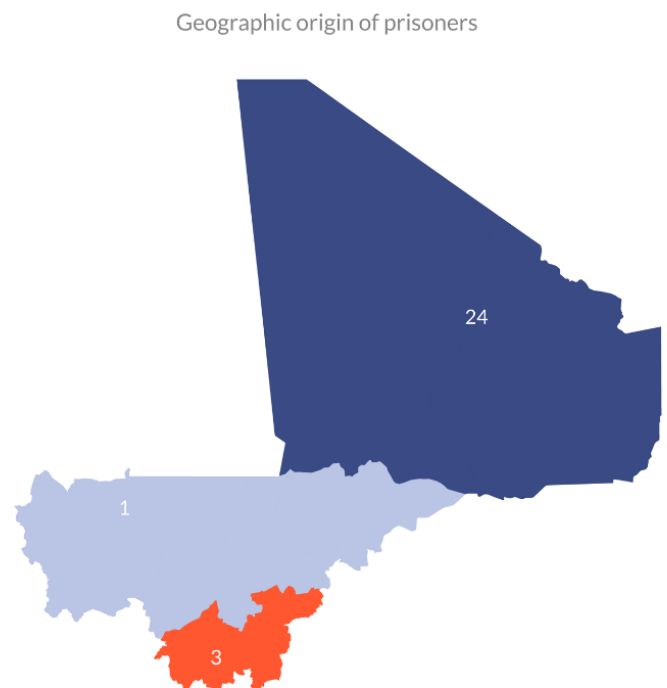Figure 4 **Ethnic Group of Prisoners**

Figure 5 **Geographic Origin of Prisoners**

In the years since, the conflict in Mali has shifted, with a greater number of attacks being carried out in central Mali, rather than in the north. Violent extremist groups have also co-opted the traditional tensions between groups of nomadic herders (namely, the Fulani) and ethnic Dogon farmers. Thus, a shift has occurred in the ethnic composition of terrorist and armed groups in the country, which has had an effect on the prison population accused of or convicted for terrorism offences: nowadays, the ethnic affiliation and geographical origins of VEOs reflects a higher number of individuals from the predominant ethnic groups found in central Mali, particularly the Fulani, in addition to the Tuareg and Arab ethnicities that previously dominated the VEO population.[18] According to data collected by the prison personnel in 2019-2020 on 22 of the additional

....

[18] Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, an al Qaeda-afilliated coalition in Mali) has conducted attacks that it claims are in retaliation for attacks on the Fulani. Foreign Policy, "Radical Islamists Have Opened A New Front in Mali," 29 March 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/29/radical-islamists-have-opened-a-new-front-in-mali/.

VEOs in Bamako Prison, there is now an increased number of inmates from central Mali among the VEO population. Of the 22, at least 13 (60%) are from central Mali. A region populated mainly by Bambara (the country's largest ethnic group, comprising 33% of the country), Dogon, and Fulani (13% of the country), it is anticipated that a majority of those arrested from central Mali will belong to the Fulani ethnic group, given the links—both perceived and real—between the Fulani and violent extremist groups operating in the country.

In terms of educational background, previously held notions of the strong links between a lack of or low levels of education and engagement in violent extremism have largely been shown to be false, with research demonstrating that "[a]ny connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is indirect, complicated and probably quite weak."[19] Despite this, the 30 interviewed participants had lower levels of education than the national average, with 48% having received no formal education, compared to the national average of around three years of education.[20] Only one individual reported having been educated at a madrassa
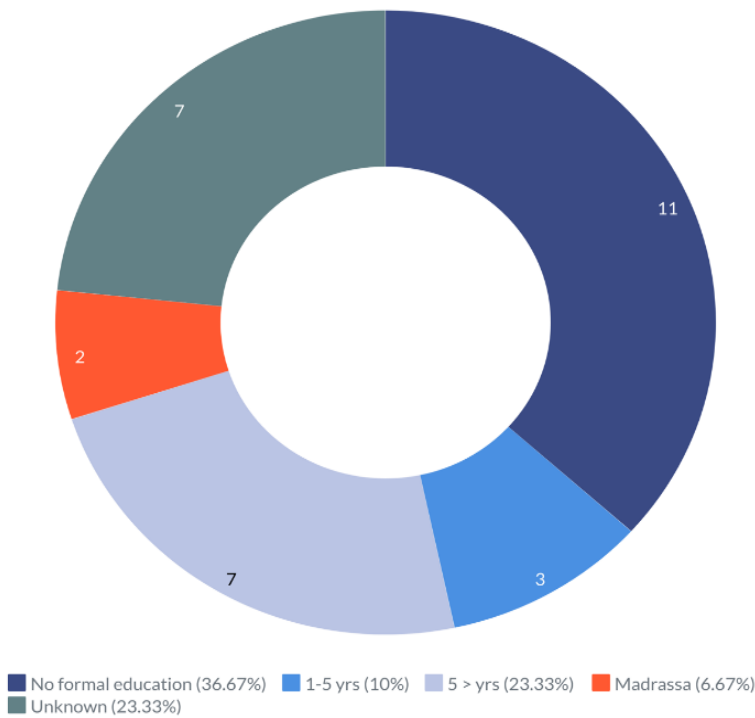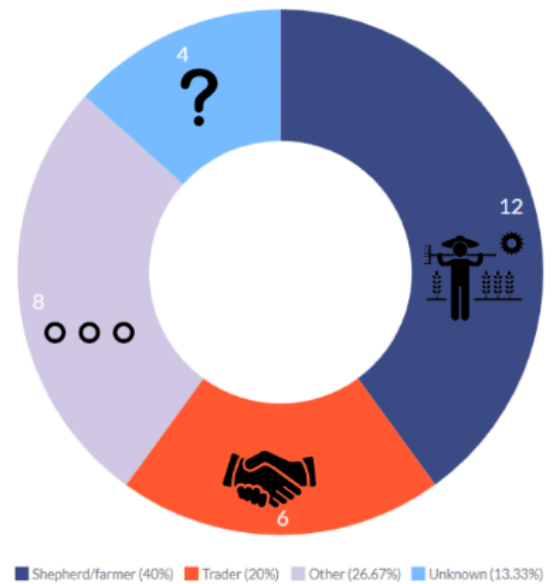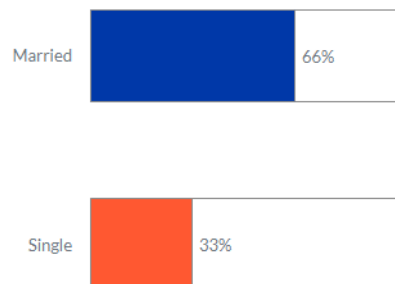
Figure 6

Educational background

No formal education (36.67%) ■ 1-5 yrs (10%) ■ 5 > yrs (23.33%) ■ Madrassa (6.67%)
■ Unknown (23.33%)

Figure 7

Occupational background

■ Shepherd/farmer (40%) ■ Trader (20%) ■ Other (26.67%) ■ Unknown (13.33%)

Married vs Single
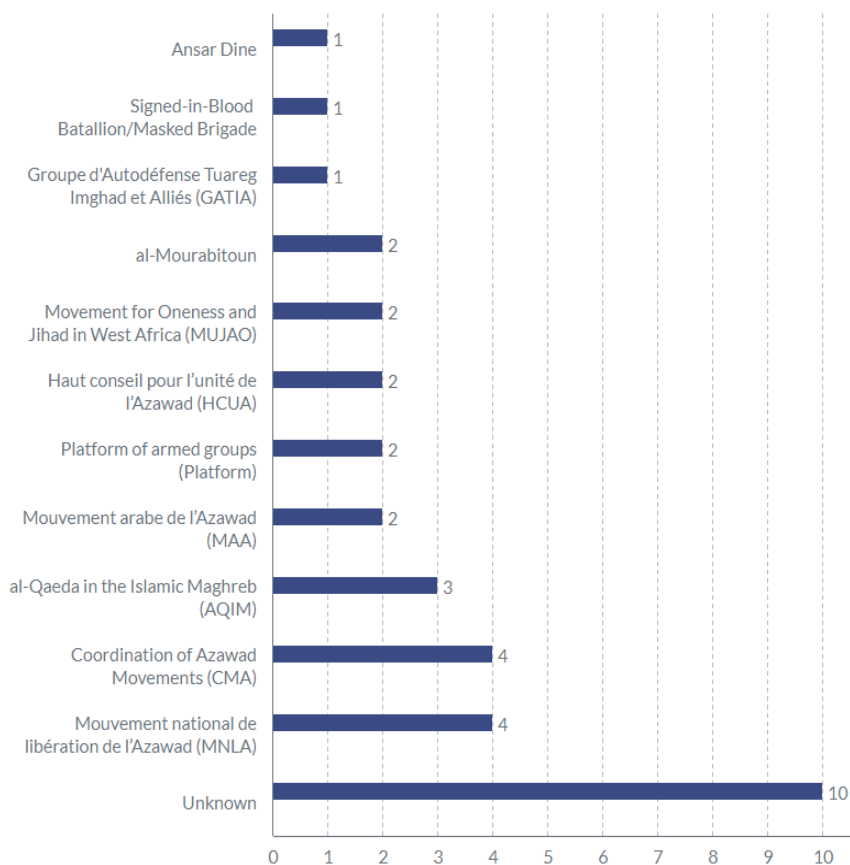
Figure 8

| Married | 66% |
| Single | 33% |

[19] Krueger and Maleckova, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?," (2002), 1.

[20] http://www.factfish.com/statistic-country/mali/average+years+of+schooling,+ages+15+and+above,+total

Given the religious composition of Mali, which is around 95% Muslim,[21] it is unsurprising that all of the interviewed participants identified as Muslims. Two-thirds of the respondents were married, and at least half had children (those with children had on average four to five children). In terms of occupation, the largest proportion (12) were occupied as either shepherds or farmers. Six noted that they were traders, with an additional three of the shepherds/farmers acknowledging that they were traders on the side. Others were tradesmen of some kind (electrician, plumber, etc), one religious scholar (*marabout*), and one a hunter. Notably, only one participant self-reported his occupation as a scholar of the Koran.

Questions of affiliation with violent extremist groups have proven difficult to answer in Mali, given not only the number of groups, the shifting alliances and affiliations, but also the complex and ever-shifting relationships between individuals, violent extremist groups, and other criminal groups such as traffickers, smugglers, and rebel groups. However, of the 30 questioned, 15 identified as members of secessionist organisations, such as *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA), whereas nine identified as belonging to a terrorist organisation, such as Ansar Dine or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Amongst the 30 questioned included four respondents who mentioned two different groups when asked about their affiliation and ten offenders whose alliance remains unknown.

Figure 9

Distribution across organization

Organization	Count
Ansar Dine	1
Signed-in-Blood Batallion/Masked Brigade	1
Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA)	1
al-Mourabitoun	2
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	2
Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA)	2
Platform of armed groups (Platform)	2
Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (MAA)	2
al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	3
Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA)	4
Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)	4
Unknown	10

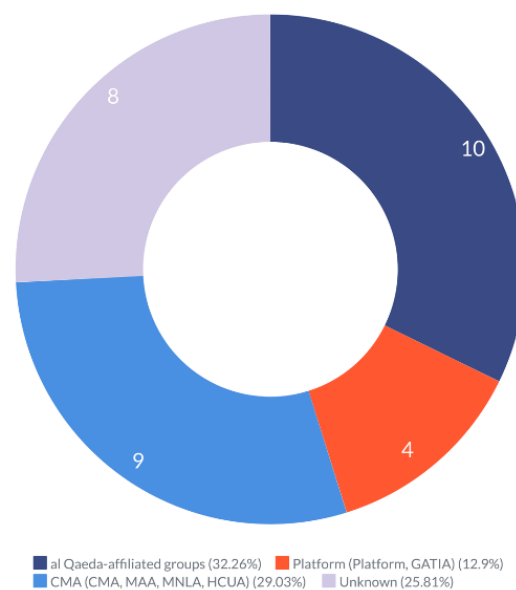[21] US State Department, "Mali 2018 International Religious Freedom Report," (2018), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MALI-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf.

Whether the affiliations of the VEOs have significantly shifted since the semi-structured interviews took place is formally undocumented, but it is highly likely that they have. The peace agreement signed in 2015 largely ended violence between two coalitions of armed groups that had been fighting the government and each other (Coordination of Azawad Movements, CMA) and the pro-government Platform of Armed Groups (the Platform). This can be expected to have dramatically reduced the number of individuals who would be arrested in the north of Mali for taking part in secessionist actions; however, at the same time, extremist groups have proliferated in both north and central Mali and it is likely that the majority of VEOs who have been arrested in more recent years will mostly be those linked to such groups, the majority of which are affiliated with al Qaeda (since 2017, these groups have been under the umbrella of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin - JNIM) and, more recently, with the Islamic State.

Figure 10

Distribution across merged groups

al Qaeda-affiliated groups (32.26%) Platform (Platform, GATIA) (12.9%)
CMA (CMA, MAA, MNLA, HCUA) (29.03%) Unknown (25.81%)

Sixteen of the 30 interviewees acknowledged that they voluntarily joined violent extremist groups, whilst two acknowledged they had joined but stated that they were forced to do so. Eight denied involvement with terrorist organisations, while the remaining four were vague about their involvement and thus it was difficult to determine their involvement or affiliation, and whether it was voluntary or forced.

Motivations for Engagement

There is no one agreed upon framework for understanding the drivers of radicalisation. Rather, there are numerous theories on what interplay of factors may lead an individual not only to be radicalised, but to engage in violent extremism. Although there is not uniform agreement on the subject, what does seem to be clear is that understanding the motivations behind the complex phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism is context-specific. What may be relevant factors in Western Europe may be wholly irrelevant in non-Western countries, including Mali. Thus, an understanding of what factors drive this type of violence in Mali—and thus what steps can be effective in preventing or countering it—should be based on an understanding of local drivers. From

13

the semi-structured interviews conducted with VEOs, several strands of motivations or causes for engagement with violent extremism became apparent.
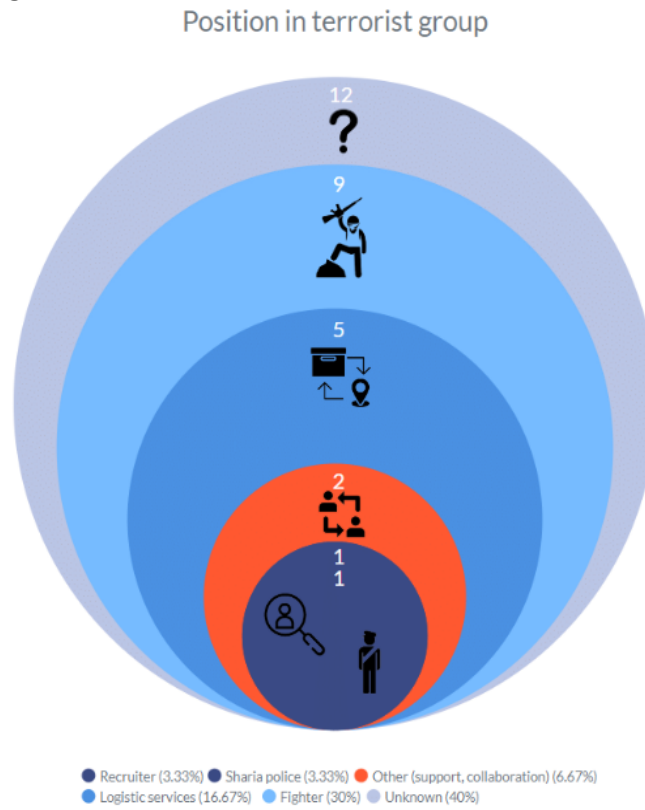
Figure 11

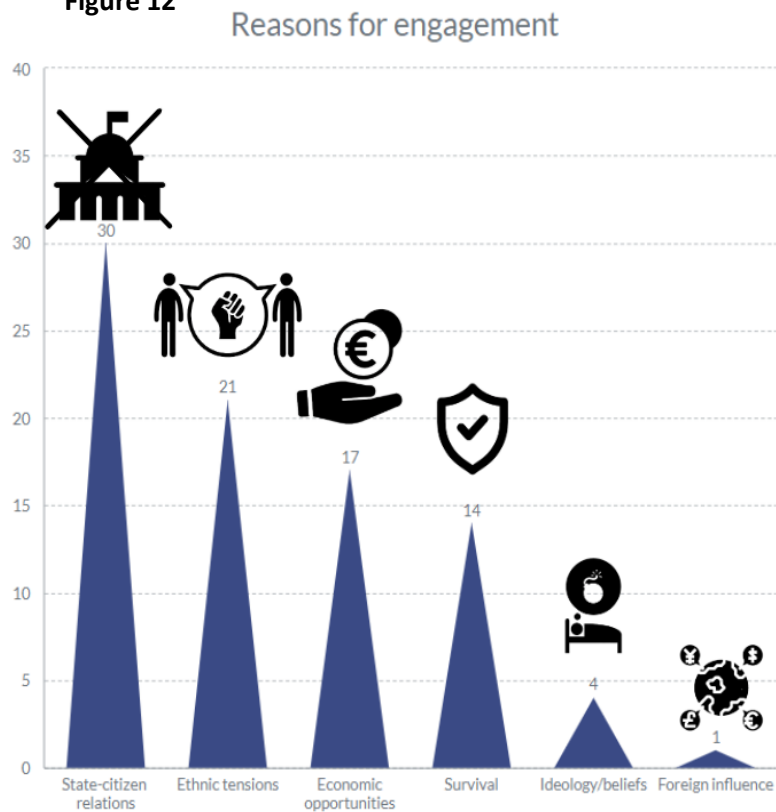## Position in terrorist group

- Recruiter (3.33%) ● Sharia police (3.33%) ● Other (support, collaboration) (6.67%)
- Logistic services (16.67%) ● Fighter (30%) ● Unknown (40%)

Figure 12

Reasons for engagement

Figure 13
Organisational Roles

Recruiter

Sharia police

Other (support, collaboration)

Logistic services

Fighter

Unknown

As noted in the section above covering the socio-demographic breakdown of the 30 interviewees, a significant majority originated from the north of the country and were of Tuareg or Arab ethnicity. Notably, 11 of the 30 (37%) stated that their involvement with terrorist groups was linked to either their identification as a "Northerner" (specifically as someone who recognises or fights for the independence of Azawad and does not acknowledge the authority of existing states in the Azawad region, including Mali), their identification with their ethnic tribe, or their identification with regional groups. In particular, those in the north of Mali, including 13 of the respondents (43%), perceive the central government as failing in carrying out core tasks or responsibilities in relation to the north, including inter alia things like the lack of infrastructure, education, electricity, and security. Interviewees acknowledged their feelings of abandonment by the government, putting forward the idea that the lack of delivery is not a capacity issue, but rather an issue of willingness.

This (perceived) government neglect and failure to provide basic services seems to have been a significant push factor for many respondents and may have been even more significant in light of violent extremism groups taking over the provision of services including health care, food, water, electricity, and security after the departure of the Malian armed forces. Four of the respondents even stated that they felt the extremist groups performed better at providing these services than the government.

No matter the region of origin, in addition to feelings of neglect in relation to service provision, 17 of the VEO respondents (57%) identified a lack of political representation, as well as a general lack of governance by the central government, as a motivating factor. Compared with VEOs from other regions, the existence of alternative systems of governance in Mali (such as through traditional governance structures) seems to have bolstered the motivations of many VEOs originating in northern Mali to radicalise and engage in violent extremism. For instance, as individuals viewed the central government as discriminatory and neglectful, they had local structures to provide representation of group interests, to take care of group members, and to mobilise. Moreover, respondents highlighted the failure of the central government to effectively govern, particularly when it came to implementing justice. Three of the respondents noted that the state had been absent in their region for a long time; with others noting that extremist groups were more effective at dispensing justice than the state.

Figure 14
Reasons for Engagement

State-citizen relations

Ethnic tensions

Economic opportunities

Survival

Ideology/beliefs

Foreign influence

Overwhelmingly, state-citizen relations were the most significant factor in driving the radicalisation and engagement in violent extremism of the VEOS interviewed. However, another key driver was survival. Almost half (14) stated that they had joined a violent extremist group as a direct survival strategy, feeling that they had no other option but to join or be killed (or have their families killed). As groups often fought amongst themselves (not just against government forces), this survival strategy was also a manifestation of protecting themselves against other extremist groups present in the area.

15

Beyond immediate physical survival, affiliation to violent extremist groups can also be subsequent to ensuring the continuity of business or trade, or sometimes as a means to obtain a job. For several of those who acknowledged that they joined a group in order to obtain employment, they coupled this with not only the monetary rewards from having employment but also in the sense that it gave them something to do—a purpose. However, economic reasons were not insignificant for the respondents: 17 (57%) identified economic opportunities as the reason why they joined extremist groups. Especially in the case of respondents identifying themselves as traders, joining extremist groups allowed them to expand their business, in particular with the smuggling of weapons and drugs. Many of the extremist groups operating in Mali have significant overlap with or ties to existing smuggling and trafficking networks and routes.

Foreign influence also played a role for a number of interviewees. Five respondents noted that the situation in Libya influenced their path towards radicalisation; following the fall of the Gadaffi regime, many Tuareg fighters returned from Libya to northern Mali, along with an influx of weapons from the regime. Experience in Algeria played a role for four interviewees, which is perhaps an outgrowth of the fact that particularly violent Islamist extremists have emerged from and operated in Algeria since the early 1990s. Moreover, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (now part of JNIM) has its roots in Algeria.

The French presence in the country, especially its counterterrorism Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane, were also named as drivers for individuals to at least continue to remain engaged in violent extremism. For instance, one of the interviewees stated that: "everyone who wants to leave al Qaeda is arrested by the French, so people do not leave the group...Both the Malian government and the French are basically pushing people towards al Qaeda."

At least one individual justified his involvement by the fact that western countries, such as the United States, are unwilling to accept Islamist governments, such as the government of democratically elected Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. As a result, democratic rule under an Islamist government is perceived as impossible, presumably leading to a belief that the overthrow of the government to establish an Islamist state is necessary. Ethnic tensions and conflicts between different tribes were given as a driver by 33% of respondents (10). One respondent explained that if you are Fulani, Tuareg, or Arab and live in the north, you are already considered a terrorist by the Bambara-dominated army. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when individuals join extremist groups as a way to seek revenge for the discrimination they see themselves as subjected to. These tensions are easily exploited by violent extremist groups, as there is no sense of Malian identity, according to many respondents. The feelings of mistrust and tension between different ethnic groups, especially the Bambara on one side and the Fulani, Tuareg, and Arab on the other, once exploited heavily in the north of the country is now being exploited in the Mopti region, in the centre of Mali, where the conflict is being played out between traditional Fulani herders and Dogon farmers.

For only a few respondents (four), ideology or religious belief was a motivating factor; seven individuals did not mention ideology or religion at all. This follows findings on the role of ideology in radicalisation more generally, where it seems few individuals are actually motivated by (religious) ideology.[22] Given this overall trend, it is unsurprising

....
22 Stepanova, "Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 9 (2008).

that 19 of the 30 respondents did not mention ideological motivation as an explanation regarding membership in violent extremist organisations.

Thus, as has been seen elsewhere in the study of drivers of radicalisation, there is clearly no one set of factors that lead to radicalisation and engagement with violent extremism in Mali. The respondents followed a range of trajectories, motivated by various factors. Significantly, however, longstanding grievances, alienation, and feelings of injustice in relation to the government played a key role in the involvement of many, as did the availability of economic opportunities through joining a group. And notably, ideology played a role for only a small number of the respondents, indicating that in terms of addressing the factors that lead to radicalisation, addressing issues of governance would have a significant impact. Given the general sense of hopelessness detected in the interviewees, working on enhancing trust among different communities as well as between the population and the institutions would also be crucial to address the current situation in Mali.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, the Sahel region has become a theatre for armed conflicts and has provided dire prospects for its inhabitants who are looking for stability, safety, and socio-economic opportunities. After the fall of Gaddafi in Libya and the Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali in 2012, the security situation has gone from bad to worse. Fatalities in the region between 2016 and 2019 increased from 770 to 4,000. This surge in violence has uprooted more than 900,000 people in the Sahel. In Mali, terrorist groups, criminal organisations, and armed militias have emerged in areas that have suffered for decades from ethnic tensions, socio-economic frustrations, and poor governance. The combination of a large youth demographic that lacks socio-economic opportunities, a weak or absent state, and perceived discrimination and injustice has created fertile ground for extremist groups to find new recruits in areas that have long been left to fend for themselves. As a result, the number of armed groups as well as the number of attacks have multiplied and violence has spread from the north to more central parts of the country. Additionally, neighbouring countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, are being impacted by an increasingly significant spillover effect.

The UN, the European Union and its member states, and other stakeholders have collectively contributed—and continue to contribute—significant financial, political and military resources to the Sahel. Mainly led by France, the EU has invested heavily in an effort to help the government of Mali and its neighbours to counter terrorism and militancy, control the border regions, and curb migration. With the growing recognition that al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and other like-minded groups cannot be defeated through military means alone, governments have also increasingly focused on developing more effective strategies to reduce the appeal of terrorist groups and limit their pool of potential recruits. Through better understanding the radicalisation process and why and how people become involved with terrorist groups it is possible to formulate the steps needed to counter the lure of dangerous violent extremist groups. As part of the effort to counter violent extremism, there is an increasing focus on prisons, for several reasons. This focus is well-founded since, in line with this vastly deteriorating security context, the situation found in many Sahel countries is placing further pressure on their respective prison systems. With prison congestion rates among the highest in the world, exceeding 230% according to the UN, prison conditions in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania raise a number of concerns related to both operational security and human rights, as well as the long term prospects for

rehabilitation and reintegration of detainees. These concerns are exacerbated by the increasing presence of high-risk prisoners suspected of violent extremist-related offenses. The presence of this specific population brings with it the threat of radicalisation or recruitment of other prisoners, alongside the risk of recidivism through re-engaging with violent extremist networks or even plotting terrorist attacks within and outside of prison.

The specific risks found in the prison environment include that, if left unchecked, they can provide a 'safe haven' where terrorists can compare and exchange tactics, recruit and radicalise new members, and even direct deadly operations outside the prison. Denying incarcerated terrorist offenders the opportunity to influence non-radicalised inmates is thus especially important. Moreover, most imprisoned or detained extremists will eventually be released. In order to reduce the likelihood that these individuals will return to engaging in terrorism after release, it is essential to find ways to help them disengage from violent activities and extremist networks.

While prisons have at times been environments where radicalism has festered, the prison setting can also present opportunities for positive change – serving as a place where the tide of violent radicalism can be reversed. Prisoners live in a controlled environment, where they can be denied the negative influences from their past that pushed them toward terrorism. They can instead be surrounded by people who encourage them to pursue a more positive path and provided with the rehabilitation tools needed to reorient them towards a life as productive citizens. Although the risks posed by VEOs can never be fully eliminated, there are many examples of individuals who entered prison as extremists, were successfully rehabilitated, were released and then have provided some of the strongest voices opposing violent extremist philosophies.

In the Malian context, it is positive to note that the Malian government and specifically the Prison Administration (DNAPES) has invested over the past few years, with the help and cooperation of international organisations, in both the infrastructure of the prison system, as well as in its staff capabilities. To alleviate the congested Bamako prison, the prison in Kenieroba has been constructed and is currently housing its first trial cohort. In Koulikoro, the prison is undergoing reconstruction to increase the housing capacity. To reinforce prison staff capacity, prison personnel have been trained in—among other things—general prison management and adherence to international human rights standards such as the Mandela Rules. Specifically related to radicalisation and violent extremism, staff in the two prisons dealing with the extremist offender population (Bamako and Koulikoro) have been trained extensively by ICCT and UNICRI on awareness and understanding of radicalisation, the role of religious leaders in prison, psycho-social counselling for prisoners, risk assessment of violent extremist offenders, and designing rehabilitation interventions in the prison context. Other organisations like Think Peace Mali, the US State Department's International Bureau of Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), and MINUSMA's Justice and Corrections Sector (JCS) have also contributed to capacity building among prison staff regarding these topics. Together with DNAPES and based on input from MINUSMA-JCS, ICCT and UNICRI have implemented risk assessment protocols for the extremist offender population as a first step to profile and assess the individual offenders and identify potential entry points and avenues for disengagement and reintegration.

Despite these efforts, our research flagged a number of key issues that need to be addressed, namely the enormous judicial backlog of cases (nearly all detainees are awaiting trial), a general lack of information and evidence-sharing on individual detainees between actors in the criminal justice sector, and, lastly, the lack of

interventions related to rehabilitation and reintegration of this population. Given these challenges, if left unaddressed, further adverse effects are likely to emerge, particularly in relation to the potential to radicalise offenders who were not yet radicalised upon entry into the prison system. The first of these effects relates to the judicial sphere and the ability to process these detainees' cases. The large number of on-remand prisoners and the enormous delay in bringing cases to trial fosters resentment and a (in some cases aggravated) sense of unjust treatment by the Malian government. Addressing this should be the main priority. Besides supporting judges' and courts' resources and capacities to issue judgements, closer cooperation and better information-sharing across the "arrest to detention chain" —from police and military forces, prosecutors, to the prison administration—would help reduce the number of people arrested and incarcerated without charge. Second, the label 'terrorist' or 'extremist' in the penitentiary context is currently used for individuals who are both suspected and convicted of a terrorist crime. This raises legitimate questions and objections, not in the least because a suspect of terrorism should be regarded with a presumption of innocence, and should therefore not yet be labelled as a terrorist. Nonetheless, for all offenders labelled as such, the label brings with it severe restrictions including no or restricted access to activities outside prison cells, no participation in rehabilitation and/or reintegration interventions, and generally a stricter security regime. Our research also indicates that this is a major source of frustration and a potentially radicalising factor in the prison context. Thus, a further recommendation is to provide the extremist offender population with the same access to activities as other prisoners to the fullest extent possible and ideally to also provide them with interventions aimed at rehabilitation and reintegration.

Zooming out from the prison context and looking at the drivers reported by the interview participants, although there is undoubtedly a diverse and complex set of factors that has led each on his path of radicalisation and engagement with violent extremism, a number of common themes have emerged that warrant attention. Primary amongst these are the longstanding grievances, alienation, and feelings of injustice in relation to the government experienced by many. These feelings are not new, having built up over years or decades of (perceived) neglect by the central government; ensuring that government invests resources back into the central and northern regions is vital to addressing the emergence of such grievances and marginalisation. Education, infrastructure, health care, and the provision of other basic services in central and northern Mali should be a priority for the government. More importantly, a focus on inclusive governance through engagement with the range of ethnic groups in remote areas is essential.

Closely linked to the frustrations of these regions that have manifested in violent extremism is the acute lack of economic opportunities. Without meaningful chances for employment or income, young people in Mali will remain frustrated, resentful, and in search of a way to not only provide for themselves and their families, but also to give them a sense of purpose and belonging. The generation of employment opportunities is critical for reducing the appeal of extremist and other criminal groups.

It is up to Mali's policymakers to tailor their responses to the growing issue of VEOs in Malian prisons, both in seeking to prevent their engagement with terrorism in the first place, but also in ensuring that they are able to return to normal life as productive citizens. While such challenges confound governments across the globe, the Malian government can start by recognising the challenge in front of it and taking those steps that are within its power to ensure that prison becomes a first step to positive reintegration rather than the last frontier.

About the Authors

Liesbeth van der Heide

Liesbeth van der Heide is a researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Leiden University in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism and the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent extremist offenders in and after prison. She is currently the Coordinator for Prevention, Polarisation and Radicalisation for the Municipality of the Hague. She is also an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) - The Hague and at George Washington University's Program on Extremism.

Julie Coleman

Julie Coleman joined ICCT as a Senior Programme Manager / Research Fellow in July 2019. Currently, her work focuses on the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism, particularly through youth empowerment and promoting alternatives to violence. She holds a Juris Doctor (JD) and Master of Laws (LLM) in International and Comparative Law from Duke University, a Master of Arts (MA) in International Relations from the University of St Andrews, and a Graduate Diploma of Law from the College of Law of England and Wales. During her studies, she focused on the intersection of national security and human rights and she has a particular interest in issues surrounding deprivation of nationality. Prior to joining ICCT, Julie worked with the ILO in Lebanon, as well on various USAID and US State Department projects in the Western Balkans. She has worked with civil society organizations and governments to increase societal resilience and build capacities to prevent and counter violent extremism.

The Last Frontier: Prisons and Violent Extremism in Mali

Liesbeth van der Heide and Julie Coleman
4 May 2020

About ICCT

ICCT The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counterterrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counterterrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Contact ICCT