

Policy Brief

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Central Mali: The Niono Accord, from hope for peace, to a resurgence of conflict

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Cease-fire in Niono between jihadists and donso hunters

On October 6, 2020, an armed group broke into the village of Kourmari (Niono circle, Segou region, central Mali) during the weekly fair. They took twenty civilian hostages and blocked all access to the village, which they have continuously besieged for several months. The identity of the assailants varies according to sources: initially the local villagers said they were bandits. Later, the gunmen who carried out the attack claimed to be affiliated with the jihadist group, Katiba Macina, which is linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and is primarily active in central Mali. After months of continuous attacks, traditional chiefs, community leaders, the mayors of Niono and donso hunters, a community militia and self-defense group, began negotiating with the jihadists. This negotiation, which lasted four months, was conducted under the mediation of the High Islamic Council of Mali, an institution that groups and represents all Muslims and Muslim associations in Mali. The parties agreed to a temporary cease-fire for one month that later became definitive for the entire Niono circle. This article analyzes the situation of the conflict between Katiba Macina jihadists and donsos in the Niono area (Segou region, central Mali), and the peace accord process between the groups. The conflict dynamics and the peace accord provide insight into the complex violence mechanisms in central Mali.

Niono's context

The Malian crisis began in the north of the country in 2012², spread to the central Mali, (mainly in the regions of Mopti and Segou), and has transparently increased in violence, since 2015.³ The upsurge in conflict in the central areas of both east and west of the Niger Delta, has increased the spread and

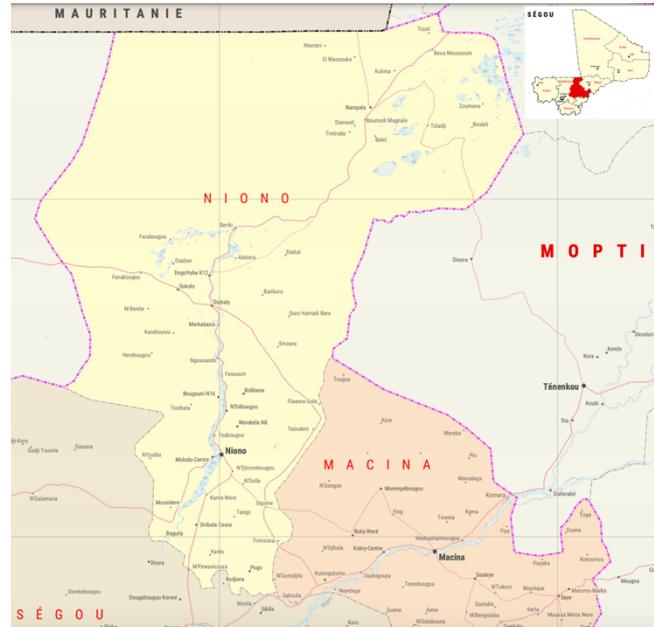
¹ Image source © ISSOUF SANOGO / AFP

² Adib Benchérif, Aurélie Campana. *Alliances of Convenience: Assessing the Dynamics of the Malian Insurgency*. Mediterranean Politics 22. 2017. p. 115-134.

³ Adam Sandors. *Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust, and Armed Actor Governance in Central and Northern Mali*. Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix | Project report Stabilizing Mali. 2017.

presence of Katiba Macina fighters. This jihadist group has taken control of both territory and resources in the strategic area around Niono. They exploit inter- and intra-community tensions regarding access to, and control of, land and water in an effort to recruit populations frustrated with the traditional order.⁴

The involvement of donso hunters in securing spaces and territories in the absence of state defense and security forces reflects the strong differences between actors on the ground. Faced with a state that is unable to control violence, the local population has mobilized self-defense militia groups since late 2018 to protect themselves from banditry. According to several specialists the failure of the political elite explains the overall failure of the state. First, the state security forces are confusing Peul⁵ and jihadist communities. This confusion favors the communalization of violence and strong militarization in the context of resurgence of old antagonisms between groups for territorial control. With the cycles of reprisals, the self-defense groups are transformed into community militias (Karerri, Kourmari and inter-river donsos, etc.). This identity drift reflects the unease of the communities who feel their existence threatened.



Different armed groups, whether self-defense militia or jihadist, have occupied various areas as conflicts have intensified and have imposed their authority in a fluctuating, incomplete, and often overlapping or entangled manner. As one Niono insider warned in early 2020⁶:

“Today, with the exception of the town of Niono, the presence of the state is not felt anywhere else in the Circle, not even in one village or camp. The entire Circle is under the control of the bushmen, as they are called here (Katiba Macina). The danger is manifold, with the risk of suffocating the local economy, especially agriculture and the cattle trade, which depends on the immediate surroundings, especially the markets in north of Niono and in Tenenkou”.

Inter-communal tensions and local antagonisms

After understanding the context of the Niono region, the next section looks at the relationship between nomadic peul pastoralists and bambara agriculture communities. Relations between the two groups have recently deteriorated due to agricultural policies favoring sedentary groups over pastoralists. According to several testimonies from local farmers, the land allocation process does not follow the chronological application procedure. Without any contact in the administration, the application is not processed. On the other hand, due to demographic pressure and growing food

⁴ Map source: OCHA Mali; May 2019.

⁵ The Peul, also called Fulbe, Fulani or Fulani, are one of the largest and most widespread ethnic-linguistic groups on the African continent. Their population is estimated at about 40 million and they are present in about 20 countries in West and Central Africa. Beatriz de León Cobo, Patricia Rodríguez González. *Recruitment and radicalization of Peuls by terrorist groups in the Sahel*. Opinion paper IEEE 125/2020.

⁶ Both this testimony and the following are from interviews conducted with individuals from the Niono region during 2020 and 2021.

insecurity, there is an increase in the number of large rice fields, which makes it difficult for pastoral communities to access traditional transhumance corridors. Finally, the increasing possession of cattle by farmers has changed the traditional terms of trade between the two groups, with strong competition over natural resource management.⁷

As mentioned earlier, jihadist groups exploit these tensions between communities, using a discourse of class equality against the traditional order. Based on the premise that all Muslims are equal before God, they seek to end what they see as unequal relations between indigenous landowning and non-landowning lineages/castes.⁸ For example, the Katiba Macina has recruited Nampalari pastoralists, who, despite their age-old presence in the region, still have the status of an allochthonous population. This group accuses the politico-religious and traditional elites of taking unfair advantage of them and of being the auxiliaries of a Malian state, against which they are called to rebel. This call for insurrection is echoed among pastoralists, who feel aggrieved by decades of agricultural policies perceived as anti-pastoral.⁹

Jihadist governance: modalities of action and legal pluralism

In the context of the Niono area, four determining factors explain the advance Katiba Macina fighters. The first is regarding the stigmatization and violent responses to certain elements of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), who were accused of passivity towards the massacres committed by donso militias against the peul population.¹⁰ Secondly, pastoralists feel marginalized by agrarian policies that favor sedentary groups, which push them to challenge the social order through violent means they consider legitimate. Thirdly, the porosity and extent of the border areas with Mauritania are heavily exploited by armed groups to organize attacks and finance themselves through smuggling (arms, cigarettes, fuel, etc.).

Finally, traditional and state elites are not recognized as legitimate by the local population. The reasons for this include problems of corruption, nepotism, lack of public services, injustice and impunity. According to the testimony of the imam of the great mosque of Segou:

“We have no country; the leaders of the country do not care about the citizens. Sharia is better than justice as we see it. Cutting off arms is better than impunity. The state is weak and absent”.¹¹

The local population views some leaders as predators who manage the region's vital economic resources on a clientelist basis. Similarly, most of the population perceives government officials as corrupt. With the social pact between citizens and government broken, a large majority turn to other non-state mechanisms to resolve their differences and, in times of crisis, take up arms and support Katiba Macina fighters, who offer a seemingly more just alternative.

Katiba Macina is taking advantage of the chaotic vacuum left by state officials and local elites after the 2012 Arab-Tuareg Rebellion and substituting the State in several areas essential to the survival of the

⁷ Boubacar Ba. *Pouvoir, ressources et développement dans le Delta central du Niger*. L'Harmattan. 2010.

⁸ For example, the pre-eminence defining the order of entry into the delta of the herds of the different lineages, the imposition of taxes for access to pastures...

⁹ Tor A. Benjaminsen, Boubacar Ba. *Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation*, The Journal of Peasant Studies. 2018.

¹⁰ *Synthèse de rapport de Alioune Tine sur la situation au centre du Mali*. Independent Expert to the United Nations, in August 2021.

¹¹ Bréma Ely Dicko. *Ségou et Mopti, le Nouveau Foyer de l'extrémisme violente au centre du Mali*. Recherches Africaines. Université des lettres et sciences humaines de Bamako. Biannual magazine. N°20. 2018.

local population. In addition to providing security, the fighters act as judges and police, settling civil disputes and enforcing sharia law.¹² According to the testimonies gathered in the field, unlike other jihadist groups, Katiba Macina allows a certain legal pluralism in the territories it controls, applying sharia law, but also relying on customary sources (local and Islamic practices) to complement the law while allowing local legitimacy to continue to apply these traditions. It is this view of the law¹³ that allowed Katiba Macina combatants to sign the Niono Accord.

Inter-community dialogue and the peace accord

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, a preliminary cease-fire was concluded in March 2021 and implemented in 12 municipalities in the Niono Circle, followed by a final peace accord¹⁴ based on a moral commitment between donsos and Katiba Macina fighters. The negotiations that led to this final agreement were conducted by several members of the High Islamic Council, donsos and Katiba Macina militiaman, and representatives of local communities. During the initial negotiations, each side made demands:

<i>Donso proposal was that the jihadists accept the following conditions:</i>	<i>The jihadists' demands as a counter-proposal were:</i>
- The population can freely cultivate their fields.	- Donsos must not interfere between the jihadists and the state and international partners.
- The population must be able to collect wood in the forest.	- The fight will be directed against the <i>djassouss</i> (accomplices and informers) denounced by the jihadists.
- Women in villages do not have to wear the veil.	- Physical abuse and fines against the civilian (Peul) population must stop immediately.
- Prohibition of preaching in the sedentary villages of the region.	- Sharia law application in the zones under control of the jihadists (payment of the <i>zakat</i> , preaching in the mosques, wearing of the veil by the women...).
- The acceptance of donsos to move freely in their traditional dress. ¹⁵	- Past acts of violence caused by both sides (killing people, destroying property and kidnapping livestock) must be forgiven and accepted by all. ¹⁶

According to the testimonies collected, after the acceptance of the ceasefire, which became the final accord on April 16, 2021, the residents of Niono were relieved by the hope of peaceful coexistence. Local population, Katiba Macina fighters, donsos and local authorities believed in this minimal accord, seeing it as a first step towards long-term peace and an end to the cycles of revenge and antagonism between the communities.

¹² Beatriz de León Cobo, Patricia Rodríguez González. *Recruitment and radicalization of Peuls by terrorist groups in the Sahel*. Opinion paper IEE 125/2020.

¹³ In addition to legal pluralism, the Katiba Macina, unlike other jihadist groups such as Daesh in Syria, practices a more defensive jihad, i.e., it does not seek to control large urban centers, but rather rural areas (forests, agricultural, pastoral, and fishing areas).

¹⁴ According to the testimonies collected from mediators, there was in fact no written and signed accord between the conflicting parties, but rather a moral compromise that gives strong legitimacy to such an act.

¹⁵ The disarmament of armed groups was not specifically agreed upon. The case of Farabougou was discussed with conditions: the requirement that FAMA leave the village within one month. The jihadists agreed to the displacement of locals to work in the fields and access fairs and markets. However, the people of Farabougou shall not venture into the forest.

¹⁶ The return of the local population expelled from the villages was discussed but not formally agreed upon, as was the issue of reparations and compensation for victims of targeted attacks.

Resurgence of the conflict in July 2021: the crisis of confidence between belligerents

After four months of relative calm in Niono, which had even allowed the return of displaced persons, Katiba Macina announced to the population that the accord had broken down. The parties' crisis of confidence in the accord was exacerbated by misunderstandings about the terms of recourse and conflict resolution, including the management of community antagonisms.

Initially, resolution mechanisms based on traditional and customary grounds were not clearly defined and their application was poorly understood by local populations. Civilians faced with local conflicts over fields, grazing land, disputed rights, inheritance, etc. had the option of resorting to the assistance of the armed groups of their choice. It was accepted that each actor (herder or farmer) could turn to the group of his choice, either jihadists or donso, depending on the nature of the dispute and the management patterns. This resulted in a two-tiered justice system, which generated misunderstandings in the application of the rules. An example is the case of eight loggers who were fined and their cars confiscated by the jihadists in June 2021. Violence quickly escalated, with incidents such as the murder of three farmers in the commune of Dogofry by armed men ordering donsos to lay down their arms. Donsos, in turn, had been accused of extorting money from villages inhabited by pastoralists and intercepting livestock.

Tension, disagreements and mistrust have been building for months, due to divergence over the interpretation of the clauses of the March 2021 accord. Both jihadists and donsos are trying to expand their power and territory with exactions, blackmail and savage fines, often committed at checkpoints. Other sources report that donsos are tired of sharia and the ways of governance imposed by the jihadist fighters and want a new balance of power in the area. Donso camps have been reinforced in the B3, N8 Kourani and Tiemaba (Niono) area, while each village establishes its local self-defense militia. Embargos are decreed by both sides (jihadists and donsos) depending on objectives and interests. The conflict has already spread to the villages of Tidagako, Pogo and Diabaly (Niono) communes.

Some political leaders in the area believe that the contents of the Niono Accord remain unclear and unenforceable because of the lack of inclusiveness in its implementation.

“The state is not able to deal with the armed groups and cannot secure the rural areas. The authorities have taken refuge behind the High Islamic Council to conduct negotiations with the warring groups. The state has remained absent from this accord, which complicates the task. Everyone wants to be represented in the negotiation process, which must be discreet”. - Testimony of a woman leader in the region.

With this new tension, local actors are wondering how to stop the abuses and violence suffered by the innocent victims of this asymmetric conflict. Some of the population, made up of sedentary communities, believe that the actions of Katiba Macina fighters are acts of domestic terrorism. For the pastoralist groups, the donsos accuse peul civilians of being jihadists and therefore commit brutal attacks against them. Another part of the population is willing to participate in dialogue with their counterparts and pay the necessary price to obtain peace. Despite the resurgence of the conflict, the Niono Accord between the insurgents had stabilized for a few months an area that had been under siege by armed groups, who were preventing the local population from living in peace. The truce allowed many displaced households to return to their villages and permitted NGOs to assess the needs of the population and provide humanitarian assistance.

Recommendations

The Malian state is now widely contested for its conspicuous absence in several territories in central Mali. Despite the organization of two national forums (Conference of National Understanding in 2017 and Inclusive National Dialogue in 2019), the state has not yet adopted a coherent strategy for dialogue to facilitate negotiations with the various armed actors precipitating the center of the country. The Ministry of National Reconciliation implicitly accepted the negotiation of the High Islamic Council during the crisis in the Niono Circle. Recently, with the resurgence of the conflict, the Ministry of National Reconciliation has called on the regional reconciliation support teams to become more involved in resolving the conflict.

The heavy dependence on the international community to manage the crisis (MINUSMA, Barkhane, Takuba, EUTM, EUCAP Sahel, etc.), does not facilitate the establishment of a national strategy for conflict resolution. Stressing the need to design a state that reflects the nation, communities and civil society actors are frustrated with decentralization and call for a redefinition of local institutions. They feel that decentralization has been done outside the Councils of the Ruling Families (traditional local elites). They call for decentralization from below and for these councils to take charge of conflict resolution in central Mali. Consequently, we advise the different actors involved in the conflict to follow the recommendations below:

- Evaluate the actions of the dialogue mission initiated by the High Islamic Council in the Kourmari area (Niono Circle), considering the socio-historical dynamics and community pacts.
- Continue the negotiation process with belligerent armed groups (jihadists and donsos). Mediation must be adapted to changing local realities. Transitional justice mechanisms and reparation measures that encourage the integration of insurgent actors into communities should also be explored.
- Integrate certain excluded communities into natural resource management mechanisms, particularly for agricultural land in the Office du Niger in Segou.
- Take into account legal pluralism with different types of law: traditional law, state law, Islamic law and the law of practice,¹⁷ by encouraging doctrinal debate among the different Muslim currents. This offer will allow the co-management of state judges with cadis (Islamic judges) in social, civil and community matters.
- The international community must rethink its strategy of engagement by supporting reconciliation initiatives between all parties to the conflict in the region.

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¹⁷ The law of practice combines both Islamic, traditional, and customary law.