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Rethinking external intervention in the context of the rise of non-state armed groups as de facto authorities: The case of Mali

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ABSTRACT
Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, have emerged as key power brokers, shaping local governance by filling gaps left by weak state institutions. While external actors such as France, the United States and Russia prioritise counter-terrorism and state-building, they often overlook the governance functions of NSAGs, which may in some cases provide essential services and gain local legitimacy. These dynamics challenge conventional interventions that focus solely on defeating these groups or reinstating centralised state control. This study argues that security solutions alone are insufficient and advocates a more nuanced approach that integrates the potential for NSAGs with regard to governance, legitimacy, and local agency.

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Introduction

Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) pose a direct challenge to the Westphalian project of constructing sovereign states that possess both the Weberian legal and practical monopoly over the legitimate use of force within a given territory.[1] NSAGs remain significant due to their capacity for violence and destruction. Their predatory and rent-seeking activities at local, regional and transnational levels are widely noted, as is the harm they inflict, jeopardising human rights, public security, the rule of law, and inclusive social and economic development.[2] Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, NSAGs have undergone significant transformations in their roles, structures and interactions with state authorities, reflecting broader changes in global conflict dynamics. In particular, the post-Cold War era has been marked by the fragmentation of ideological conflicts, the erosion of state authority in many parts of the Global South, and the expansion of transnational economic and security networks. These dynamics have reshaped the drivers of NSAGs' mobilisation.[3]

Three motivational dimensions of NSAGs can be identified in the post-Cold War era: economic, communitarian, and existential dimensions.[4] The evolving nature of warfare, organisational structures, and individual agency shapes these motivations. During the Cold War, NSAGs were primarily driven by ideological and geopolitical factors, often aligning with superpowers' interests. In the post-Cold War era, their motivations have become

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more diverse. Economic motivations have become increasingly dominant, particularly in warlord-led contexts, where NSAGs seek control over resources or engage in illicit trade. Communitarian motivations, based on loyalty to ethnic, regional, or ideological communities, remain significant but are now further influenced by grievances stemming from weak state governance and social exclusion.[5]

Existential motivations, which encompass personal survival, identity, and the pursuit of meaning in conflict, have also gained prominence as individuals and groups navigate complex and shifting security landscapes.[6] Moreover, according to Tanguy Quidelleur, the motivations of individuals and groups have become more fluid, with fighters transitioning between economic, communitarian, and existential drivers based on changes in their organisations or personal circumstances.[7] For instance, a combatant might start fighting for communal defence but shift toward economic survival or existential attachment to warfare as conflicts evolve.[8] This complex interplay of motivations underscores the need for multidimensional approaches to understanding and addressing the effects of NSAGs.

These broader transformations are particularly visible in the Sahel where, since 2012, NSAGs have emerged with greater intensity due to a complex mix of local grievances, weak state authority, and the manipulation of socio-political dynamics.[9] These groups have capitalised on issues such as land disputes, corruption, and resource competition to gain legitimacy, often aligning with community tensions, including ethnic divides.[10] The weakness of state institutions and security forces has allowed groups like *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to consolidate power, especially in Mali. These NSAGs have adapted by forming alliances and tailoring their narratives to local grievances, prioritising immediate issues over ideological objectives.[11] Their geographical reach and violence have grown since 2012, intensifying security challenges and complicating counter-terrorism efforts in the region. The dynamics of NSAGs and their governance capabilities reflect their adaptive strategies to gain legitimacy, consolidate territorial control, and fill the voids left by weak state structures.[12] Their governance activities, such as the provision of security, justice, taxation, and public services, vary widely based on their objectives, resource access, and interactions with local populations.[13] Some groups prioritise inclusivity and long-term community support, while others employ coercion and exclusivity, driven by ideological or strategic goals.[14] This has contributed to the emergence of hybrid governance arrangements in which formal state institutions coexist, compete, or overlap with armed non-state actors.[15]

Despite this reality, external military interventions in Mali have largely continued to conceptualise NSAGs as illegitimate spoilers whose influence can be dismantled primarily through military force and the restoration of state authority. This state-centric approach overlooks how NSAGs derive legitimacy from governance practices that are embedded in local norms and grievance structures.[16] External military interventions inevitably reshape governance dynamics in conflict zones. By influencing both state institutions and NSAGs' governance, military actions affect the distribution of public goods and services in rebel-controlled areas that are crucial for civilian life.[17] Some NSAGs may initially respond to military pressure with coercion and repression, especially if they lose territory. However, over time, many shift toward governance-based strategies to bolster legitimacy and secure their survival in an evolving political landscape.

This article, therefore, asks the following questions: How and under what conditions do NSAGs in Mali evolve into de facto governing authorities, and how does this transformation reshape the effectiveness and limits of external military interventions? Addressing this question challenges conventional, state-centric models of governance and intervention by foregrounding the political and social dimensions of the role of NSAGs. This article advances two core propositions. First, NSAGs in Mali have become de facto authorities not only through coercion but also through selective governance practices embedded in local norms and grievance structures. Second, external interventions fail not only because of military overstretch but also because they misdiagnose the hybrid governance orders produced by NSAGs.

The findings seek to contribute to the development of more effective and context-sensitive external interventions. Empirically, this article contributes by triangulating expert interviews with recent scholarship on civilian perceptions and governance practices in Mali. Conceptually, it bridges rebel governance theory and constructivist legitimacy debates to move beyond purely coercion-based explanations of non-state authority. Policy-wise, it offers a cautious, evidence-based reassessment of engagement strategies, being careful not to endorse proxy warfare or to justify material support for NSAGs.

Research design and data

This study employed a qualitative design, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data comprised seven semi-structured interviews with subject matter experts, while the secondary data included reports and scholarly articles. Ethics approval for the primary data collection was granted by the Ethics Committee of the African Institute for Research in Economic and Social Sciences.[18] The interviewees provided informed consent for both participation and the use of their data for publication, with anonymity ensured through the assignment of pseudonyms.

Expert interviews were selected as an appropriate methodological tool given the significant access constraints and security risks associated with conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected areas of Northern and Central Mali during the period of this study (July to October, 2024). Ongoing insecurity, the presence of NSAGs, and the potential risks to both researchers and participants make direct, sustained engagement with local populations ethically and practically challenging in this region. In this context, expert interviews offer a feasible and ethically responsible means of gaining insights into conflict dynamics, governance practices, and intervention outcomes while minimising harm to vulnerable communities. The experts interviewed included Sahelian scholars, international analysts, and practitioners with direct professional experience in Mali's security and governance landscape. Their perspectives provide informed assessments of NSAGs behaviour, local governance arrangements, and the evolving role of external military actors. Importantly, these interviews do not aim to speak on behalf of civilian populations, but rather to contextualise and interpret broader patterns identified in existing empirical research.

This study explicitly acknowledges the absence of direct interviews with affected civilian communities. While civilian perceptions of legitimacy, security, and governance are central to the analysis, conducting interviews with local populations was not feasible due to ethical considerations, access limitations, and security concerns. This constitutes an important limitation of the study, particularly given the article's focus on legitimacy and trust. To address this limitation, the analysis relied on triangulation with established data sources, including SIPRI research on local perceptions of security actors, governance, and conflict dynamics in Mali.[19] While this approach cannot fully substitute for original fieldwork among civilian populations, it allows the study to ground its claims in a broader and methodologically diverse body of empirical evidence.

The interview data were analysed using a thematic coding approach. Interview transcripts and notes were coded around key analytical themes derived from the theoretical framework, including governance practices, legitimacy, civilian compliance, and the effects of external military interventions. This thematic structure allowed the interviews to inform specific analytical claims, clarify mechanisms linking governance and legitimacy, and highlight variation across regions and NSAGs. Rather than serving as the primary empirical foundation of this article, the interview material is used to interpret, refine, and critically engage with existing empirical studies on rebel governance and security in Mali. In this sense, the interviews functioned as a complementary source of evidence, helping to assess how broader patterns identified in the literature are understood by experts working on or in the Malian context.

NSAGs governance dynamics in the Sahel and external military interventions: A literature review

The presence of NSAGs in the Sahel is an integral part of the historical process of state construction in the region. From the 1960s to the 1990s, ideological competition and autonomy-related conflicts shaped the organisation and mobilisation of armed actors across the region.[20] In the post-Cold War period (from 1991 onwards), the dynamics surrounding these groups evolved further, particularly in response to the Global War on Terror after 2001 and the regional destabilisation that followed the 2011 intervention in Libya, both of which significantly transformed the Sahel's security landscape.[21] These dynamics have evolved into recent conflicts characterised by a mix of secessionist insurgencies, violent extremism, and struggles over the control and management of legal and illegal resources. State authority failure has been identified as a key factor behind the proliferation of NSAGs.[22] NSAGs are often characterised by the partial replacement of state authority with sub-state or trans-state structures. In Libya, for instance, the roots of insecurity lie in the legacy of the Muammar Gaddafi regime, which was marked by corruption, the tribalisation of power, and the incapacity of state security institutions.[23]

State-building failures have contributed to state weakness and challenged the legitimacy of those efforts by NSAGs. It has been argued that African elites inherited colonial structures primarily to serve their interests.[24] The subsequent fragmentation of state authority and the erosion of the social contract have fostered governance hybridity and new forms of political regulation.[25] This fragility has allowed NSAGs to enter the security market.[26] However, the disappearance of state institutions does not imply a lack of governance, as conflict zones often see the emergence of other institutions in their place.[27] NSAGs establish governance structures to consolidate power, extract resources, and adapt to the nature of conflicts in which they engage.[28] When states are too weak to exercise their authority, the result is not necessarily a Hobbesian state of anarchy. Instead, NSAGs often step in to perform key governance functions, with the provision of security being the most widely recognised; by ensuring security, insurgents can gain the trust and support of civilians, foster loyalty, and encourage the population to sustain their group.[29] In the Sahel, extremist groups have gradually emerged as key actors in local governance, employing strategies that combine violence with persuasion.[30] These approaches enable them to establish themselves within communities and position themselves as alternatives to the Malian state, which is weakened and absent in these regions.[31]

Following the 2012 Malian coup d'état which overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré and triggered a collapse of state authority in northern Mali, NSAGs such as AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO established governance practices in areas under their control, including systems of taxation, judicial mechanisms, and the regulation of economic activities.[32] In Timbuktu under the control of AQIM and Ansar Dine during 2012-2013, residents reported receiving free water and electricity, medical care, food supplies, and funding for religious marriages, services previously unavailable. In certain areas, MUJAO co-opted young men by providing families with economic advantages, including regular financial support for food and reduced costs for marriage expenses.[33]

These NSAGs have developed ideologies, leadership structures, and civilian support networks, effectively creating proto-states that fulfil a distorted social contract.[34] These informal governance systems often operate parallel to or independently of formal state structures, challenging conventional notions of sovereignty.[35] In the Sahel, NSAGs use coercion, service provision, and social mobilisation to position themselves as local governing entities despite their use of violence.[36] Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective policy responses.

External military interventions to address the challenges posed by NSAGs in the Sahel have primarily focused on military operations, capacity-building, and political approaches. Military efforts, such as France's Operation Serval in 2013, had initially aimed to stabilise Mali by countering extremist threats on several levels before evolving into Operation Barkane, which expanded across the region under a counter-terrorism framework that often prioritised force over peacebuilding.[37] Critics increasingly advocate for integrating political solutions into military strategies, emphasising governance and development to tackle the root causes of instability in the region.[38] Efforts lacking these elements have sometimes alienated local populations, who may see international forces as indistinguishable from national armies and turn to NSAGs for protection.[39] External geopolitical rivalries among actors such as France, the US and Russia add another layer of complexity, as differing agendas undermine coherent international efforts.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature remains fragmented. Studies of NSAGs in the Sahel provide valuable insights into NSAGs' governance, legitimacy, and civilian support, while analyses of external military interventions focus largely on counter-terrorism effectiveness and state capacity-building. However, few studies have systematically examined how NSAGs' attempts to exercise governance functions shape the outcomes, limits, and unintended consequences of external military interventions. As a result, interventions are often assessed without adequate attention to the hybrid political orders produced by NSAGs' role and civilian reliance on non-state governance. This highlights the need for a cohesive and multidimensional approach to ensure a sustainable response to the Sahel's complex security and governance challenges.

Conceptual clarifications and theoretical framework

NSAGs in Mali do not constitute a homogeneous category. Treating them as unitary actors risks obscuring important differences in their organisational structure, political objectives, governance practices, and relationships with the state. To avoid analytical overgeneralisation, this article distinguishes between three broad categories of NSAGs that operate within Mali's conflict landscape: extremist groups, separatist movements, and community-based militias or auxiliaries.[40] These categories differ not only in their ideological orientations and strategic goals, but also in how they engage with civilian populations and interact with state authorities.

First, extremist groups, notably JNIM and ISGS, pursue transnational ideological projects rooted in the Salafi-jihadist doctrine.[41] These groups explicitly reject the legitimacy of the Malian state and, in some cases, aim to dismantle its existing state structures. Therefore, their governance practices are not oriented toward integration into formal political processes but toward the construction of alternative moral, legal, and security orders.[42] While extremist groups engage in governance activities, such as dispute resolution, taxation and social regulation, these practices are closely intertwined with coercion and ideological enforcement, and they vary significantly across regions and communities.

Second, separatist movements, particularly those associated with the *Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA), pursue territorially bounded political objectives centred on autonomy, decentralisation or self-determination in Northern Mali.[43] Unlike extremist groups, these actors have sought formal political recognition and have participated in negotiated settlement processes, most notably the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement.[44] Their engagement in governance is often linked to claims of political representation and administrative control rather than an outright rejection of the state system, even if relations with the central government remain highly contentious.

Third, community-based militias and auxiliaries, including self-defence groups and pro-government paramilitaries, emerge primarily in response to local insecurity and perceived state failure.[45] These groups are often embedded in specific ethnic, communal or territorial contexts and may operate with varying degrees of state tolerance or support.[46] While some engage in local governance functions such as policing or dispute mediation, their authority is typically fragmented and contingent, and their long-term political ambitions are often ambiguous or limited.

The emphasis of this article on extremist groups in Mali is based on their distinctive position as de facto authorities exercising control over territory and populations while remaining formally excluded from political negotiations and international engagement frameworks.[47] Importantly, this analytical focus does not imply a normative endorsement of these actors, nor does it advocate material or military support for NSAGs. Rather, it seeks to examine how governance practices emerge under conditions of protracted conflict and how external interventions interact with various forms of non-state authority.

The analysis of NSAGs' governance must factor in the risk of conflating governance, coercion, and legitimacy, particularly in contexts where armed actors simultaneously provide services and employ violence. To avoid this analytical slippage, this article adopts a clear conceptual distinction between governance practices, forms of civilian compliance, and legitimacy. Governance is understood here as the set of practices through which NSAGs regulate social, political, and economic life in areas under their influence. These practices may include the provision of security, dispute resolution, taxation, regulation of land and markets, and the enforcement of social norms.[48] Importantly, the existence of such governance arrangements does not indicate civilian approval or political legitimacy. Rather, governance refers to functional authority and the capacity to impose order and regulate behaviour, regardless of the degree of consent involved.

This article distinguishes between three analytically distinct forms of civilian compliance. First, coercive control refers to compliance secured primarily through violence, intimidation, and the credible threat of punishment. In such contexts, civilians may obey the rules imposed by NSAGs to avoid harm without accepting the group's authority as rightful or desirable.[49] Coercive control is particularly salient in areas where extremist organisations rely on targeted killings, collective punishment, and forced taxation to maintain territorial dominance.[50] Second, pragmatic accommodation describes a form of conditional acceptance rooted in predictability, survival, and the absence of viable alternatives. Civilians may comply with NSAGs' rules not because they endorse their ideological project but because they offer a degree of order, dispute resolution, or security that the state is unable or unwilling to provide.[51] In such cases, compliance reflects strategic adaptation rather than political support. Pragmatic accommodation is often observed in contexts of prolonged state absence, where populations prioritise stability over normative alignment.[52]

Third, social legitimacy denotes a deeper form of normative acceptance, grounded in shared values, identities or moral frameworks. Social legitimacy exists when civilians recognise an armed group's authority as appropriate or justified, even if they disagree with certain practices; this form of legitimacy is typically more fragile and uneven, varying across regions, social groups, and issue areas.[53] In the Malian context, claims to social legitimacy may be linked to the resolution of land disputes, alignment with local religious norms, or perceived fairness in justice provision, but they are rarely comprehensive or uncontested.[54] This conceptual distinction is central to the article's analytical approach. The presence of governance practices does not imply popular legitimacy, nor does civilian compliance indicate political support; NSAGs may govern effectively while remaining deeply unpopular, just as populations may tolerate or accommodate violent actors without endorsing their authority or legitimacy. By disentangling governance from coercion and legitimacy, this article avoids romanticising NSAGs while still taking seriously their capacity to shape local political orders.

Rebel Governance paradigm

This article employs the Rebel Governance paradigm. This framework is relevant for studying extremist groups in the Sahel, where rebel groups employ diverse strategies to establish and maintain governance in the territories they control, often mirroring state functions to enhance their legitimacy. As noted in the literature, such groups often create political institutions and bureaucratic structures to regulate order and enforce rules, sometimes resembling formal state governance.[55] Rebel groups differ from criminal gangs engaged in similar activities because they control territory with a political objective, whether to overthrow, secede, or reform the state.[56] This distinction is evident in their efforts to encourage civilian participation, establish administrative structures, or mobilise civilians for substantial material benefits.[57] Economic governance is another critical aspect, as rebels often regulate production, taxation and trade to sustain their operations while fostering legitimacy among civilians. Many groups engage in this process, using social service provisions to build loyalty and minimise resistance.[58] Legitimacy is further reinforced through media portrayal, local engagement and symbolic governance, where rebels invoke cultural narratives to strengthen their rule. Governance strategies are highly adaptable and influenced by local conditions, levels of civilian support and regional political dynamics.[59] While some groups govern through coercion, others seek cooperation from local authorities or populations.

Civilian preferences for rebel governance are primarily shaped by their perceptions of the state and their compatibility with the rebel group. When civilians view the state as illegitimate, ineffective or absent, they may turn to rebel groups as alternative providers of governance, especially if these groups offer better solutions.[60] Additionally, the degree of alignment between civilians and rebels in terms of values, ideologies, identities and socio-political preferences plays a crucial role. When civilians perceive strong compatibility with a rebel group's goals and governance style, they are more likely to accept or even demand its rule. Conversely, significant ideological or cultural differences reduce civilian support for rebel governance.[61] The Rebel Governance paradigm highlights how NSAGs mirror state functions, adapt to local contexts, and depend on civilian perceptions and compatibility.

In Mali, JNIM has positioned itself as a de facto authority in areas where the state is weak or absent, enforcing security, regulating civilian life, and providing essential services such as justice and social governance.[62] Through the *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM), JNIM consolidates its control by using violence to intimidate populations while implementing Islamic justice and regulating social life in regions where state governance is ineffective.[63] Economic governance is also central to its strategy, as the group engages in extortion, controls trade routes, and exploits natural resources to ensure financial sustainability and embed itself in local economies.[64] Civilian acceptance of JNIM's governance practices depends on citizen perceptions of state legitimacy and ideological alignment, with marginalised communities more likely to accept its rule.[65] However, resistance arises when JNIM's violence undermines its legitimacy, demonstrating the limitations of its governance.[66]

Constructivism also offers a useful perspective for analysing the emergence and governance strategies of NSAGs in the Sahel. Rather than perceiving these groups solely as security threats or challengers to state authority, constructivism highlights the centrality of ideas, identities, and social interactions in shaping their behaviour and legitimacy.[67] Constructivists argue that human associations are shaped primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces and that actors' identities and interests are socially constructed rather than pre-determined.[68] Social structures are created and sustained through reciprocal interactions, shaping how actors define their identities and objectives.[69] This perspective is particularly relevant in the Sahel, where the legitimacy of governance structures, whether state or non-state, is deeply influenced by prevailing norms, beliefs and local expectations. Legitimacy extends beyond formal institutions to encompass the informal social and political contracts that structure state-society relations.[70]

The Malian case illustrates that political legitimacy of the central state cannot be assumed to be universally recognised by all citizens, as evidenced by the ability of NSAGs to establish governance structures in areas where the state is absent or contested.

Political legitimacy is rooted in the willingness of citizens to accept the state's authority,[71] but when the state fails to meet expectations, alternative actors can step in to fill the governance vacuum. In this context, NSAGs leverage legitimacy not only through coercion but also by embedding themselves within local communities, aligning with existing norms, and providing essential services.[72] This underscores the need to understand NSAGs not only as military actors but also as political and social entities engaged in constructing alternative orders. Analysing them through a constructivist lens provides deeper insight into their governance dynamics and legitimacy-building strategies.

The landscape of NSAGs in Mali: Key actors and governance strategies

Mali has witnessed the rise of several extremist groups that have significantly shaped the country's conflict landscape. Initially fragmented, these groups evolved in response to military interventions, security vacuums and local grievances, positioning themselves as key actors in governance and territorial control. Over time, extremist factions such as JNIM and ISGS have consolidated power, leveraging both coercion and community-based strategies to expand their influence.[73] The adaptability of NSAGs in Mali is evident in their ability to exploit political instability, historical grievances and economic vulnerabilities to gain legitimacy among local populations. While they often compete for territorial control, their governance structures have allowed them to provide alternative justice systems, regulate land disputes, and integrate into the local economy.[74] Their influence is further reinforced by their capacity to exploit local conflicts and porous borders, enabling them to evade security forces and sustain their operations.[75] This complex interplay between governance practices, violence and contested claims to legitimacy poses significant challenges to both Malian state authorities and international military interventions. Understanding the structure and strategies of these major NSAGs is crucial for assessing their impact on Mali's security and stability.[76]

Major NSAGs in Mali

Dispersed by the external interventions of international forces in Mali between 2014 and 2015, some extremist groups relocated to the Mopti and Segou regions, rural areas in the north, to regroup and adapt their operations. This restructuring shifted the earlier focus from urban areas, which had been viewed as strategic political centres of conflict. The hasty withdrawal of defence and security forces from rural regions in response to earlier attacks in urban areas created a security vacuum that allowed new extremist formations to thrive.[77] Starting in 2016, NSAGs adopted a new strategy aimed at 'Sahelising the jihad' by merging locally active groups (Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, and Al-Mourabitoune) into a single organisation, the JNIM.[78] This group introduced new narratives centred on equitable access to natural resources, ending hereditary privileges over agricultural and pastoral land, and denouncing the corruption of certain aristocratic Fulani lineages tied to political authorities.[79]

Apart from JNIM, the ISGS is the most active coalition of extremist groups in Mali. This group operates along the borders that Mali shares with Burkina Faso and Niger, and competes with JNIM for control over certain territories and resources.[80] The ISGS was founded by elements of the MUJAO and was officially recognised by ISIS in September 2016.

Initially, its presence was limited and weaker than that of Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as JNIM. ISGS developed an operational strategy focused on border areas, taking advantage of the porous borders between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to evade security forces. Its ability to exploit local conflicts and disputes has also played a key role in its effectiveness and recruitment strategies (Figure 1).[81]

NSAGs' governance strategies in Mali

NSAGs fill governance gaps by positioning themselves as de facto authorities in areas where the state's presence is weak or absent. They often act as security providers, enforcing order in unstable regions and sometimes being perceived as protectors when state forces are seen as illegitimate.[82] Additionally, they engage in judicial governance, conduct summary trials, and implement local forms of justice. NSAGs also extend their influence through political and economic administration, offering basic services such as education and healthcare, thereby establishing themselves as more dependable than state institutions.[83] Their ability to adapt governance strategies to local contexts, including the integration of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, further strengthens their influence. By delivering essential services that the state fails to provide, they solidify their legitimacy and weaken the state's authority.[84]

A group like JNIM exerts influence over the areas it controls in multiple ways. The group seeks to establish authority, particularly in Central Mali, through the *Front de Libération du Macina*. It employs violence to consolidate its presence and intimidate the local population. Since 2019, Central Mali has been the region most affected by extremist

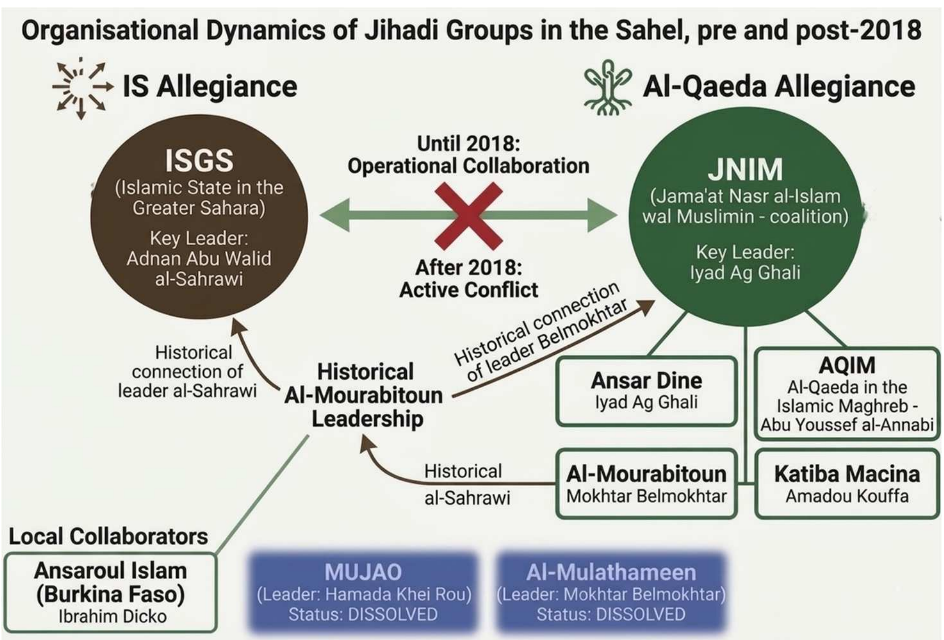

Figure 1. Organisational dynamics of extremist groups in Mali.

Source: Adapted from Marie Signe Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba, Unpacking 'New Climate Wars': Actors and Drivers of Conflict in the Sahel (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS Report 2022: 04, 2022).

violence in the country. Reported violent incidents targeting civilians in Mali have surged in recent years, with JNIM and ISGS driving a sharp escalation in attacks, particularly in the regions of Mopti and Ségou, which have emerged as the principal epicentres of such violence. In 2023 alone, violence against civilians in these areas increased by 38% compared to the same period in 2022, underscoring the intensifying threat posed by extremist groups.[85]

Through territorial control, NSAGs claim a form of authority over local communities. In areas where the Malian state is perceived to be absent or ineffective, NSAGs provide an alternative form of governance. They offer services such as 'Islamic justice', social regulation, and conflict resolution, which can attract local support, particularly where state services are lacking.[86] Economically, these groups engage in extortion, control trade routes and exploit natural resources, ensuring financial sustainability while embedding themselves within local economies.[87] They also recruit members by promising security and stability, particularly among marginalised youth who feel oppressed by the authorities.[88] By offering a form of governance and economic opportunities, NSAGs gain acceptance from the population. However, JNIM fighters have reportedly carried out attacks against civilians accused of collaborating with state authorities, leading to resistance in some areas.[89]

To foster local support, a group like JNIM aligns itself with community grievances against the state, exploiting social and economic frustrations. Amadou Koufa, who is a key figure in JNIM and AQIM and responsible for organising the groups' attacks, recruitment and strategy in Mali and the Sahel, has facilitated JNIM's territorial expansion. His extremist rhetoric has emphasised emancipation for subordinate classes, challenged traditional hierarchies and exposed corruption among local and state elites.[90] While some of JNIM's fighters advocate for *Sharia* implementation, conflicts in Central Mali are often rooted in land disputes rather than ideological motivations.[91] While their governance strategies allow them to maintain control, resistance from local populations and ongoing conflicts over land and resources continue to shape Mali's evolving security landscape.

External military interventions in Mali

Since 2012, interventions in Mali by France, the US and Russia in response to the upsurge in extremist activity have differed in approach, reflecting the respective strategic interests of these external powers as well as the region's evolving security challenges.[92] France has maintained a strong military presence through Operation Barkhane to combat extremist groups, but growing anti-French sentiment has weakened its influence. The US has focused on counter-terrorism training, economic development and governance support, emphasising long-term stability. Meanwhile, Russia has expanded its role through military cooperation and arms sales, particularly via the Wagner Group (now rebranded as the Africa Corps), positioning itself as an alternative to Western powers. These interventions face resistance, fluctuating government support, and the region's complex socio-political dynamics, highlighting the difficulties in achieving lasting security and development in Mali.

As noted earlier, France's military intervention in Mali through Operation Serval began in January 2013 in response to a request for assistance from the Malian government following the advance of NSAGs toward the south, threatening the capital, Bamako.[93] Another key objective of this military intervention was to prevent further deterioration of the situation leading to a regional humanitarian crisis.[94] Subsequently, France's Operation Barkhane was launched in August 2014 as a continuation of efforts to prevent the reconstitution of extremist groups and disrupt their mobility across borders while supporting regional partners within the G5 Sahel framework.[95] On the operational level, the French intervention achieved significant success in the fight against NSAGs in the region.[96] It managed to halt the advance of NSAGs toward Bamako. Operation Serval is estimated to have caused between 600 and 1,000 casualties among extremist groups.[97] However, it did not eradicate the extremist threat in Mali. Considering the primary objective of preventing the proliferation of extremist groups in the Sahel, the operation, through both interactions, was not entirely successful. Nevertheless, French authorities argue that 'Barkhane alone cannot be held accountable for the failures of other aspects of the strategy implemented since 2013 to stabilise Mali and, more broadly, the Sahel'.[98]

US engagement in Mali has largely followed an indirect counter-terrorism model, centred on training, equipping and advising local and regional forces.[99] Initiatives such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative and its successor, the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), were designed to strengthen state capacity and prevent the spread of extremist networks rather than to conduct direct operations.[100] In response to the escalating crisis, the US transitioned to a more direct role in the Sahel. Following the 2020 coup, it suspended all security assistance to Mali due to legal restrictions that prohibit support for governments established through military coups.[101] This change prompted questions regarding the effectiveness of previous security assistance efforts. During this period, the US intensified its support for French forces in Mali and other regional partners, such as Niger. This collaborative effort aimed to stabilise the region and counter the extremist threat, with the US providing operational support and intelligence, marking a move toward more direct military engagement in the Sahel.[102] By 2020, the trajectory of US involvement in the Sahel had become increasingly uncertain due to a strategic shift towards great power competition, as outlined in the National Defence Strategy of the first administration of US President Donald Trump. This strategy raised concerns about the long-term viability of US counter-terrorism initiatives in the region and the possibility of reduced military presence and support.[103]

Following the 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali, the transitional authorities in Bamako sought alternative security partnerships amid deteriorating relations with Western actors. Russia capitalised on this opening through its expanded military cooperation.[104] Wagner began operations in Mali in 2021, supporting the government's fight against insurgent and extremist groups. This marked a significant step in Russia's military and strategic engagement in the Sahel, aimed at consolidating its influence and expanding its regional presence. Although Malian authorities shifted their counter-terrorism strategy and alliances due to the perceived failure of previous partners, Wagner's approach had yet to prove successful by 2022.[105] The Wagner Group's presence in Mali further complicates the country's security and political landscape by blurring the distinction between state and private interests, strengthening Russia's geopolitical influence, and intensifying competition with Western powers.[106]

Since the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of Wagner Group, in 2023, Russia has restructured its overseas military footprint, with Wagner's operations in Mali integrated into the Africa Corps, a structure more directly linked to the Russian state.[107] This shift has not reduced concerns about accountability. Conversely, it has reinforced the risks associated with the blurred lines between state authority and private military forces, civilian harm, and the instrumentalisation of sovereignty narratives.[108] Similar dynamics are observable beyond Russia, as private military and security companies are increasingly used in external military interventions, raising broader questions about their oversight and responsibility. The interventions landscape must also be understood in light of Mali's post-2023 political trajectory. The junta's withdrawal from the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2024 marked the collapse of the country's primary framework for managing its relations with northern-based NSAGs.[109] This decision triggered renewed fighting with former signatory movements and further fragmented the security environment. Simultaneously, the authorities embraced a strong sovereignty discourse, rejected external political conditionality, and deepened their reliance on military solutions.[110]

The failure of external military interventions in Mali

External military interventions in Mali have failed to address the issue of NSAGs for several reasons. While these interventions remained heavily focused on counter-extremism objectives, they largely failed to address the governance deficits, political grievances and social marginalisation that underpin armed mobilisation.[111] As Interviewee-1 observed, 'the mistake was to think security could be fixed first and governance later; on the ground, it does not always work like that'.[112] This strategic misalignment between military actions and actual conflict dynamics limits the effectiveness of their efforts. Without addressing these issues, military operations alone fail to undermine the support base of NSAGs.[113] French-led operations halted extremist groups' advances and disrupted their leadership networks, but they did not dismantle NSAGs' governance structures. Interviewee-2 noted that 'Operation Serval stopped the fall of Bamako, but Barkhane fragmented the enemy rather than defeating it,' allowing extremist groups to disperse into rural areas and embed themselves more deeply in local communities.[114] In Central Mali, this dynamic contributed to the spread of violence along communal lines, particularly between Fulani and Dogon communities, reinforcing grievances that extremist groups exploited.

The limited impact of external interventions is also reflected in Mali's persistent institutional fragility. Although these interventions sought to restore stability, they did not contribute to building a legitimate and capable Malian state.[115] The lack of investment in strengthening local governance and security institutions has created a vacuum, enabling NSAGs to exploit the state's weaknesses. Mali's Fragile State Index (FSI) score has remained consistently high, reflecting ongoing fragility. In 2024, Mali scored 97.3, a slight improvement from 99.5 in 2023, yet still well above the global average of 64.56.[116] As Interviewee-6 stated, 'people do not compare jihadists to an ideal state; they compare them to the army unit that never comes or that abuses them when it does'.[117] The weakness of local security institutions in the Sahel is due to external interventions and the political choices of regional leaders. Many leaders deliberately maintain fragile institutions to consolidate their power and engage in corrupt practices. Several interviewees noted that leaders often prefer fragmented security arrangements that consolidate regime survival rather than long-term reform. This governance vacuum allows NSAGs, such as JNIM and ISGS, to establish themselves as de facto authorities.

Empirical evidence suggests that civilian engagement with NSAGs is primarily shaped by their lived experiences of insecurity and persistent governance failures. SIPRI's 2021 perception survey indicates that, although insecurity remains a central concern for civilian populations, many communities rely on NSAGs or self-defence actors for protection and dispute resolution.[118] This reliance does not necessarily reflect ideological support, but rather an adaptive response to the limited reach and effectiveness of state institutions. Evidence from SIPRI's 2019 fieldwork further illustrates how civilians navigate these governance vacuums.[119] Populations frequently turn to armed actors, customary authorities, or religious figures for justice and protection, not out of ideological affinity, but because these mechanisms are accessible and embedded in local norms. Civilian engagement with NSAGs governance thus reflects adaptive strategies under constrained conditions rather than stable political support.

Geopolitical competition, particularly between Western countries (the US/France) and Russia, undermines the coherence and effectiveness of intervention strategies.[120] France, which led counter-terrorism operations through Operation Serval and Barkhane, initially positioned itself as Mali's key security partner. However, growing anti-French sentiment, fuelled by perceptions of neocolonialism and military ineffectiveness, led to France's withdrawal and the Malian government's pivot toward Russia for security assistance.[121] The External Intervention indicator of the Fragile States Index for Mali (8.0 out of 10) reflects the complex dynamics of international involvement in Mali.[122] The geopolitical competition between France and Russia, which has led to strategic misalignments and policy incoherence, has been detrimental to Mali's stability.

Another major limitation is the exclusion of extremist groups from peace negotiations. While justified through counter-terrorism norms, this exclusion foreclosed avenues for conflict de-escalation at the local level.[123] Interviewee-5 emphasised that 'whether we like it or not, these groups already negotiate daily with villagers, traders, and herders'.[124] However, since the military took power in 2021, the transitional authorities have emphasised the possibility of engaging in dialogue with extremist groups, as evidenced by the recommendations of the 2024 Inter-Malian Dialogue.[125] This shift illustrates the growing recognition that purely military strategies have reached their limits.

Although historical abuses, particularly France's colonial legacy, have entrenched distrust in the Sahel, local populations often view contemporary interventions as neocolonial rather than developmental.[126] This scepticism has allowed actors like Russia to capitalise on anti-French sentiment and position themselves as alternatives.[127] Rebuilding trust requires prioritising local ownership and community-led initiatives that align with local needs rather than imposing top-down solutions. Long-term stability depends on local leadership; however, international efforts in Mali have inadequately empowered local actors in peacebuilding.[128] For instance, the French forces failed to strengthen the Malian military or G5 Sahel forces, perpetuating reliance on external support and undermining self-sustaining security structures.[129] This highlights the need for interventions that prioritise local agencies and address the socio-political realities to achieve sustainable peace.

Rethinking external military interventions in the Sahel

The case of Mali suggests that NSAGs are not merely security threats but also political actors that shape local governance structures, often filling the void left by weak state institutions. The interviewees consistently challenged the assumption that legitimacy is binary or ideological. Instead, legitimacy emerges as conditional, localised, and often reversible.[130] This distinction is crucial for understanding why counter-terrorism interventions have failed to dislodge NSAGs despite significant military investment. The fact that NSAGs governance often outperforms the state in specific domains, particularly dispute resolution and regulating everyday life, does not imply popular endorsement of their ideological projects but rather pragmatic accommodation in contexts where state institutions are absent or abusive. External interventions that ignore this reality risk misinterpreting civilian behaviour as political support. The interviews also revealed important regional variations. Governance practices differ between Northern Mali, Central Mali, and the border regions, as well as between extremist factions. As Interviewee-7 observed, 'JNIM and ISGS govern through negotiation in some areas, through terror in others – lumping them together hides more than it explains'.[131] This variation complicates intervention strategies that treat NSAGs as uniform actors and reinforces the need for context-sensitive analyses.

Despite early successes with Operation Serval, France's Operation Barkhane failed to address the underlying governance issues that fuel the persistence of NSAGs. While both French military operations in Mali successfully prevented extremist groups from seizing urban centres, they also unintentionally fuelled ethnic rivalries and decentralised militant networks. Interviewee-3 highlighted how the post-French intervention period saw the spread of extremist groups across Mali, deepening intercommunal conflicts, especially between the Dogon and Fulani populations.[132] Similarly, the US counter-terrorism partnership with the Malian state primarily focused on military training without adequately addressing the socio-political drivers of NSAGs' resilience. Russia's engagement through Wagner, including the post-2023 restructuring of that group into Africa Corps, was widely perceived as intensifying militarisation without addressing governance deficits. Interviewee-4 remarked that 'Wagner does not build institutions; it replaces them'.[133] Russia's involvement through such entities that straddle the distinction between private and public military forces appears to mark a shift toward security privatisation, with long-term consequences that remain unclear. These interventions, driven by external geopolitical interests rather than local governance needs, risk strengthening NSAGs by further alienating local populations.[134] Analysing external military involvement through the lens of the Sahelian 'security traffic jam' further strengthens the argument that military solutions alone are insufficient to counter extremist groups.[135] Overlapping and competing interventions actively shape the security environment by normalising prolonged militarisation and framing large areas as permanent counter-terrorism spaces. Rather than displacing armed governance, the 'security traffic jam' risks entrenching hybrid security arrangements that sustain non-state authority.

The key takeaway is the growing reliance of states on local militias to fill security gaps. Interviewees also cautioned against the growing reliance on pro-government militias.[136] While this approach offers short-term security benefits, these militias may later become autonomous actors, challenging state authority and perpetuating the cycles of violence. This insight aligns with broader concerns regarding the long-term implications of militia reliance, as seen in other conflict-affected regions.[137] This underscores the need for states to build sustainable security institutions rather than outsourcing the state's response to violence to non-state actors.

This study challenges conventional views on NSAGs and external interventions, highlighting the need for a change in thinking regarding governance and security in conflict zones such as Mali. It argues that security solutions alone are insufficient and advocates for a more considered approach. As interviewee-5 stated, 'You cannot rebuild the state by pretending it is already there'.[138] Therefore, rethinking intervention demands moving beyond seeking military dominance alone toward strategies that prioritise inclusive governance, local legitimacy, and political realism.

Conclusion

This article shows that the governance practices of NSAGs in Mali fundamentally challenge conventional approaches to countering violence through external intervention. In many areas where state institutions have long been absent or ineffective, armed groups have stepped in to provide security, resolve disputes, and regulate everyday life. However, citizens' compliance with such practices does not imply uniform popular legitimacy or ideological support. Rather, as empirical evidence suggests, civilian interactions with NSAGs often reflect pragmatic accommodation and negotiated authority under conditions of insecurity. These dynamics complicate external intervention strategies that prioritise the restoration of state authority primarily through military means.

The Malian case underscores the limits of intervention frameworks that emphasise counter-terrorism while insufficiently engaging with the political and social structures that sustain NSAGs. External military operations have repeatedly failed to dislodge extremist actors in Mali because they have not addressed governance vacuums, local grievances, and relational forms of authority that enable these groups to embed themselves within communities. Therefore, NSAGs should be understood not only as security threats but also as political actors operating within hybrid governance environments, where authority is contested, negotiated, and locally situated.

Acknowledging this hybrid governance reality does not mean endorsing NSAGs' governance or advocating their incorporation as legitimate state substitutes. Rather, it calls for a more grounded understanding of how people navigate insecurity in their daily lives to avoid being misrepresented. Insights from Rebel Governance and constructivist approaches illuminate why military solutions alone are insufficient and why interventions that ignore local governance dynamics often fall short. More sustainable approaches require engagement with community-level institutions, addressing long-standing grievances, and supporting locally meaningful and accountable forms of governance. Only by taking these lived realities seriously can international actors hope to contribute to lasting stability in Mali and across the wider Sahel region.

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