The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali

Edoardo Baldaro[a] and Yida Seydou Diall[b]

[a]Free University of Brussels; [b]University of Bamako

ABSTRACT

Until the beginning of 2020, the Sahel was something of an exception with respect to international rivalry between jihadists. This came to an end when violent clashes involving supporters of Al-Qaeda and those affiliated with the Islamic State were recorded in central Mali. The violent escalation that has taken place between *Katiba Macina* and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara in the inner Niger Delta should be framed as a battle between a dominant power whose position has begun to be contested, and a rising challenger trying to exploit the situation. More specifically, the rise of Islamic State appears directly connected to the material and symbolic crisis of the system of governance established by *Katiba Macina* in the area under its control. As the result of a process that cuts across various developments in the recent history of Mali, the conflict between the two jihadist movements threatens to unlock a new and more violent phase in Mali's longstanding crisis.

Some among us rose up against us. These are the same people we trained. They received weapons thanks to us. We showed them how to fight a war. We showed them how to fight against the unfaithful. They learned the tactics of war with us: how to fight against France, how to fight against the American army, how to fight against the Malian army. With us, they understood how to fight against the *diassoussou* [state informants]. They were among us. We let them settle where we are settled. We gave them the same name we use, the *mujahidin* [...]. And they defected to join another group. Why did they defect?[1]

With these words, originally recorded in Fula and aimed primarily at Fulani inhabitants of central Mali, Amadou Kouffa – *nom de guerre* of Hamadoun Hassana Barry, the leader of *Katiba Macina*, also known as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF)[2] – publicly addressed one of the most pressing issues currently affecting his group's survival. Since the end of 2019, violent clashes have been recorded in the region of Mopti (in central

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CONTACT Edoardo Baldaro ✉ edoardo.baldaro@ulb.be 🐦 @EdoardoBaldaro

[1]WhatsApp audio message from Amadou Kouffa, obtained through our interviewees' network, April 2020. All quotes in the articles are translations by the authors.

[2]The group is affiliated to Al-Qaeda and a member of the JNIM. Macina Liberation Front is a name used mostly by international observers and practitioners, while the group usually calls itself by the name *Katiba Macina*, which could be translated as 'the battalion of the Macina'. The term *Katiba* was used to refer to the fighting units of the *Armée de Libération Nationale* (ALN, National Liberation Army) during the Algerian War. More recently, various jihadist insurgencies in North Africa have employed the term *Katiba* to name their different sub-units. This also explains why the name *Katiba Macina* better captures the participation of the organisation in the wider jihadist alliance led by Iyad ag Ghali.

Mali) and Gao (northeast Mali), setting members of *Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM, Group to Support Islam and Muslims) – the alliance of the various Sahelian groups linked to Al-Qaeda and led by Iyad ag Ghali – against the fighters of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui (Berger 2020). This open confrontation followed the defection of numerous fighters and supporters, who had joined ISGS ranks over the previous months (Daniel 2020). The initial success of ISGS in its attempt to expel Al-Qaeda fighters from a region where they had been effectively installed since 2015 (International Crisis Group 2016) was a major shift in the Sahel's complex and multidimensional crisis, and deserves to be analysed and understood.

For many years, the Sahel was presented as an 'exception' within the global rivalry between Al-Qaeda and its affiliates and the groups claiming allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) (Nasr 2020). In a context in which patterns of fragmentation and recomposition among groups are influenced by ethnic allegiances and personal relationships as much as by ideological factors, the local branch of Islamic State first made its appearance in 2015, as a splinter group of the Qaedist coalition in the Sahel. In particular, the initial core of ISGS was formed by fighters previously enlisted in *Al-Mourabitoun* (The Sentinels) – the group of Mokthar Belmokhtar allied with Iyad ag Ghali and the local branch of Al-Qaeda. In May 2015, the leader of these defectors, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, released an audio message in which he declared his allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State, explicitly sanctioning the new cleavage within the jihadist galaxy in the area (Nsaibia and Weiss 2020).

With the exception of a violent clash that took place in June 2015 – a few days after the *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) of al-Sahraoui and his followers to Islamic State (Lounnas 2019) –, over the following years, the two jihadist coalitions[3] seemed to have entered into an uneasy peace. Rumours suggested that the leaders of the two groups, ag Ghali and al-Sahraoui, had been negotiating (*Jeune Afrique* 2018). On the whole, information from the ground seemed to suggest that JNIM and ISGS had agreed on a sort of informal geographical division of labour allowing them to manage the persisting tensions between them (Sandor and Campana 2019). IS-affiliated insurgents were more active in various areas around Niger and Burkina Faso and in the region surrounding Ménaka in Mali, leaving JNIM unchallenged in the inner Niger delta and the areas around Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. Some observers had begun to write about effective and ongoing cooperation between the various jihadist insurgents (Zimmerman 2020), and the hypothesis of a possible reconciliation between the two insurgent coalitions, with a consequent reunification of the jihadist front in the area, was openly discussed by various experts (Demuynck and Coleman 2020).

Until 2019, the facts had tended to confirm this impression: by avoiding fighting each other, both JNIM and ISGS dramatically increased the quantity and lethality of their operations against non-jihadist targets. With attacks on local populations and members of the 'self-

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[3]The JNIM and ISGS should not be treated as two unitary and clearly hierarchically organised agents, but rather as more or less loose alliances established between partially autonomous groups. Fragmentation and fluidity tend to characterise the Sahelian jihadist landscape, both at the level of leadership and of members and supporters. For example, ISGS officially joined ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) in March 2019, but the former has maintained its operative and strategic autonomy (see Berlingozzi and Stoddard 2020). For these reasons, we prefer to employ the term "coalition" along with that of "group" when talking about the insurgent actors in Mali and the Sahel.

defence' militias, as well as the Malian security forces and international interveners, the two coalitions participated directly in the killing of thousands of people (*UN News* 2020).

Starting from these premises, we believe that proposing a preliminary answer to Kouffa's (rhetorical) question is important in both academic and empirical terms. With regard to the article's theoretical contribution, we claim that an examination of the open conflict which exploded first in central Mali between JNIM, and *Katiba Macina* in particular, and ISGS can serve as a crucial contribution to the scholarly debate on conflict and terrorism in the Sahel and beyond. In particular, considering jihadist insurgencies as a peculiar, but not unique form of armed contestation (Kalyvas 2018), the case of the inner Niger Delta offers precious insight into the deployment and functioning of systems of "rebel governance" in civil war contexts (Arjona *et al.* 2015).

At the same time, the inter-jihadist conflict between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS allows us to explore the dynamics of competition and fragmentation among non-state armed actors in general (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Staniland 2014) and within the 'Big Man' networks in particular (Utas 2012). By this, we do not deny the importance of ideological factors in shaping inter-rebel patterns of cooperation and conflict. References to Islam and its presumed precepts permeate the declarations of the jihadist leaders, since religion plays a dual role for these groups: on the one hand, it creates fundamental linkages with wider transnational jihadist networks and their associated symbolic and material resources; on the other, it is a powerful, albeit not always crucial, tool for increasing internal cohesion and furthering the recruitment of local supporters (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). Regarding the latest developments in the Malian conflict, the situation on the ground continues to evolve at the time of writing (September 2020): during the first half of 2020, the strong resistance and ability to counterattack demonstrated by JNIM had already caused the death of hundreds of fighters on both sides (Nsaibia and Weiss 2020). Nevertheless, our contribution aims to provide the instruments with which to advance a preliminary analysis of the rapidly changing security situation in one of the most conflict- and violence-plagued areas of the African continent.

The phenomenon of rebel fragmentation and terrorist competition in a wartime context is a widely debated issue among scholars and practitioners. Within the vast academic literature, some scholars invite us to consider the power asymmetries between groups (Gade *et al.* 2019), the access to strategic resources and the relative strength and presence of the central government (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012) as decisive elements that can explain the opening of a 'window of opportunity' (Pischedda 2018) for inter-rebel conflict. A second approach lays greater stress on the need to consider rebel and terrorist groups as complex organisations embedded in specific institutional networks, which influence their capacities and shape their behaviour (Moghadam and Fishman 2011; Staniland 2012). Nevertheless, these strands of literature are not in opposition, and both emphasise the importance of context and the social and power relations that characterise it in exploring the trajectories of the various rebel groups (Kalyvas 2003; 2006). Accordingly, this article claims that an analysis of the armed struggle between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS has to take into account the social and communitarian 'anchoring' (McAdam *et al.* 2001) of these groups, and consider how the two organisations interact with the local system of political economy (Raineri and Strazzari 2015).

Our analysis of the dynamics of fragmentation and conflict between jihadist insurgents in the inner Niger Delta is organised in three sections. The first section accounts for

the development of *Katiba Macina*, which progressed in a few years from being a violent and 'revolutionary' outsider to becoming the ruling power in the inner Niger Delta. This evolution is contextualised within the different phases of the Malian conflict. The two subsequent sections discuss the 'crisis' of *Katiba Macina* and the rise of ISGS, focusing on the "dual nature" of the group as a Big Man network and a classic guerrilla insurgency (Rupesinghe and Bøås 2019). Both elements must be considered if we are to understand the successful implantation of ISGS in the area, and the defection of various fighters and supporters from JNIM and *Katiba Macina* to it. Finally, provisional conclusions concern the potential effects that this clash may have on the Malian civil war. The article draws principally on primary sources and investigative work, and relies on extensive fieldwork carried out by the authors in Mali, including a number of in-depth interviews with key informants and first-hand witnesses conducted in Bamako and the Mopti region in December 2019 and March 2020.[4]

From revolution to power: How *Katiba Macina* conquered the inner Niger Delta

Although it may sound counterintuitive, in civil wars rebel groups tend to spend more time fighting each other than the central government (Cunningham *et al.* 2009) – and Mali is no exception. In certain circumstances, this can even happen to groups that share similar ideological beliefs or the same ethnic constituency (Gade *et al.* 2019). Accordingly, in order to explain the 'fratricidal' war between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS, the first step is to reconstruct those specific circumstances. The struggle between the two groups did not arise in a vacuum. On the one hand, the inter-jihadist clash can be seen as the outcome of a process that is closely connected with previous developments in the Malian crisis. On the other hand, this struggle has intercepted and furthered pre-existing dynamics of conflict that characterise the inner Niger Delta. More specifically, the clash between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS can be framed as a battle between the dominant power whose position had begun to be contested, and a rising challenger trying to exploit the situation. Consequently, this section focuses on the developments that allowed *Katiba Macina* to become the ruling force in a large part of central Mali.

As of 2015, *Katiba Macina* has progressively imposed itself as the *de facto* dominant actor in an area roughly corresponding to the inner Niger Delta and the administrative region of Mopti. This area has historically been characterised by a rural economy that has been significantly affected by extreme climate events and droughts over the last forty years. As a patchwork of different ethnic groups and a vulnerable environment affected by institutional and political mismanagement, central Mali has become a space that is particularly exposed to the risk of violent unrest (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019).

Within this context, the success of Amadou Kouffa, a former Fulani preacher who joined *Ansar Dine* (ag Ghali's group) in 2012 (*RFI* 2015), and his men was prompted by various factors linked to the wider picture of the Malian conflict. The Malian crisis can be divided into three phases (Campana 2018).[5] The first corresponds to the Tuareg and

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[4]Because of the extremely sensitive subject of this article, all interviews have been anonymised.
[5]Debate exists as to whether or not the inter-jihadist struggle and episodes of ethnic cleansing that are taking place in central Mali represent the beginning of a fourth phase in the Malian conflict.

jihadist rebellion that took place in the northern part of the country, and ended in January 2013 when a French military intervention stopped the insurgent advance and progressively re-conquered northern cities. The second phase, which lasted approximately from January 2013 until the signing of the Bamako peace agreement in May 2015,[6] was characterised by numerous political obstacles to the peace process in the north, as well as fragmentation of the rebel front, which led to the multiplication of armed groups and self-defence militias, organised along clientelist, ethnic and socio-economic lines. At the same time, the jihadist groups also experienced a process of strategic redeployment and internal fragmentation. By exploiting their knowledge of the territory and their linkages with rural communities and traditional leaders, the jihadist groups that had participated in the 2012 insurgency successfully survived the counter-offensive of state and international forces. They also implemented a strategy of regionalisation that paved the way for the expansion of the crisis beyond Mali's borders, and furthered the emergence of new autonomous or splinter branches within the jihadist galaxy (Pellerin 2019). It is in this period that the conditions enabling the establishment of "tribalized armed politics" that characterise the third phase of the Malian conflict (Bencherif and Campana 2017) arose. From 2015-16 onwards, the Malian crisis ceased to be marked by the north-south cleavage, turning, rather, into a more complex and horizontal interconnection of various grievances and conflicts (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017).

Given these new conditions of rising violence and fading state control, Iyad ag Ghali reactivated his contacts in the centre of Mali, and officially supported and endorsed the formation of *Katiba Macina*, the group led by his old ally, Amadou Kouffa, made up mostly of Fulani fighters who had previously been enlisted in the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) (Sandor and Campana 2019). *Katiba Macina*'s strategy is mixed, alternating between the use of violence against the Malian army, representatives of the state and local and customary leaders, and 'revolutionary' rhetoric denouncing the abuses committed by the state and its local clients.[7]

Kouffa's preaching specifically targeted the Fulani community: as the most populous ethnic group inhabiting the area and one that had historically practised pastoralism, the Fulani have a long history of political marginalisation and socio-economic discrimination by the Malian state (Banjaminsen and Ba 2019). During the initial years of the conflict in Mali, Fulani civilians and chiefs suffered various attacks perpetrated both by rebel groups and the Malian army. The need for protection, along with the desire to seize new economic and socio-political opportunities produced by the conflict, drove a certain number of Fulani, in particular youths and people from lower classes, to joining *Katiba Macina* (Raineri 2018; Cissé 2020). It should be noted, however, that the 'Fulani question' is not limited to Mali. Similar dynamics of economic marginalisation, socio-political stigmatisation and state abuses against this community can be seen in both Burkina Faso and Niger. As the case of *Ansarul Islam*, the group linked to JNIM that operates principally in Burkina Faso, suggests, jihadist organisations are demonstrating their ability to exploit the Fulanis' grievances throughout central Sahel. This is driving

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[6]The Bamako agreement was signed by the Malian government and representatives of the northern rebels – with the exclusion of the jihadist groups – after two years of negotiations brokered by Algeria and other international and regional actors.
[7]Interview with Fulani activist, Bamako, December 2019.

a cyclic process of repression and radicalisation, whose effects are already expanding beyond Mali's borders (Raineri 2018; International Crisis Group 2020).

The instrumental reactivation of Fulani grievances fuelled a vicious cycle of inter-ethnic stigmatisation and violence, which ultimately reinforced *Katiba Macina*. On the one hand, in official state discourse and practices, the Fulani question was superimposed on and blurred with the jihadist threat, a fact that caused a rapid and dramatic increase in the number of abuses, exactions and indiscriminate killings committed by the Malian security forces against civilians (Fidh/Amdh 2018). On the other hand, from 2016 onwards, various ethnic self-defence militias, organised principally by armed individuals from the Dogon and – to a lesser extent – Bambara ethnic groups, appeared in the area, usually with the tacit support of the central government.[8] The widespread violence and various episodes of ethnic cleansing, which caused the forcible displacement of thousands of people, finally crystallised in two main areas of influence: the inner Niger Delta under the control of *Katiba Macina*, and the *cercles* (administrative provinces) of Bandiagara, Bankass, Koro and Douentza mostly occupied by Dogon militias.[9] Within this new and unstable equilibrium, the presence of Malian security forces and civilian representatives has been limited in practical terms to the main cities of the region.

At the same time, *Katiba Macina* has not only militarily conquered but also progressively imposed its rule over a vast area comprising parts of the administrative regions of Mopti and Ségou. It has established and refined a unique system of governance, whose principal characteristics can be understood only by taking into consideration the 'dual identity' of the group as a jihadist organisation and Fulani insurgency. In an area where the theocratic Fulani Macina Empire of the 19th century remains a powerful point of reference and symbol of legitimacy and belonging (Ba 2010), *Katiba Macina* has tried to build a system of norms and rules, presumably inspired by that historical experience, and driven by a literalist interpretation of Islam. Nonetheless, the way *Katiba Macina* has imposed its presence has evolved over time, apace with the group's increasing capacity to create stronger links and obtain the support of a specific constituency within the Fulani community (Jourde *et al.* 2019).

During an initial phase, *Katiba Macina* penetrated the area of the inner Niger Delta with a strategy based principally on violence and fear. The group organised targeted killings of mayors, judges, customary leaders and anyone suspected of collaborating with the group's opponents.[10] In accordance with Salafi doctrine, the initial aim of Kouffa and his men was to eradicate the institutions and representatives of what they continue to consider an impious and externally imposed political order – identified with the term 'democracy' in their preaching.[11] At the same time, as the group began to secure its position of power militarily, it also refined its governing approach with the objective of obtaining support, through co-optation and/or association, from at least a part of the local population (Jourde *et al.* 2019).

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[8]Interview with local security expert and employee of the United Nations, Bamako, December 2019. The most (in)famous militia in central Mali is *Dan Na Ambassagou*, a Dogon armed group responsible for various mass killings in the region. Its founder Youssouf Toloba recently confirmed that the group was formed with the support of the former Malian Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga (Sogoba 2020).

[9]Interview with investigative journalist and reporter, Bamako, December 2019.

[10]Interview with Fulani activist, Mopti, March 2020.

[11]Interview with Fulani activist, Bamako, December 2019.

It has to be pointed out here that Fulani society is not monolithic, and that the customary rules and traditions that govern intra-ethnic relations are not uncontested. In the inner Niger Delta, inter- and intra-ethnic relations of power and rule tend to overlap with socio-economic factors and the roles occupied in the local chain of production. Many observers have underlined how the conflict between the Fulani and the Dogon is also a conflict between herders and farmers. In a similar vein, even within the Fulani community, there are profound differences between those who own the land and the herds, and those who have to pay for having access to pastures – all of which fosters grievances (Raineri 2018; Benjaminsen and Ba 2019). The system of governance implemented by *Katiba Macina* is discussed in the third section of the article. What must be underlined here is that once the group became the uncontested ruler in the area, it started to limit its revolutionary ambitions and implement stronger collaboration with the Fulani 'upper classes'. These aspects are key to identifying the factors that subsequently favoured and furthered ISGS contestation.

Inter-jihadist clashes and the crisis of Kouffa's network

On the way towards hegemony in the inner Niger Delta, *Katiba Macina* never really faced major challenges from members of ISGS. In 2017, a group of Fulani Toleebe defected from *Katiba Macina* and, at the beginning of 2018, its leaders, Ould Bady and Mohamadou Kouffa, officially declared their allegiance to the Islamic State (Sandor and Campana 2019). Nonetheless, this defection did not result in open confrontation. The fighters who left *Katiba Macina* moved across the Nigerien border into the region under ISGS control, and actively participated in the escalation of attacks organised by the group in the so-called Liptako-Gourma tri-border region (Assanvo *et al.* 2019). It was in 2019 that a new defection created the conditions for the following conflict.

As suggested by Natasja Rupesinghe and Morten Bøås (2019), *Katiba Macina* can be seen as a Big Man network created around the figure of Amadou Kouffa. According to the literature, a Big Man is an individual who is able to transform his/her social relations and capital into informal power and authority, and who acts as a 'nodal point' within a loose network that connects other individuals with positions differentiated in geographical, material and symbolic terms. The Big Men do not directly control the other members of the network, but exert their authority over autonomous 'subleaders' through the distribution of material incentives and the constant reaffirmation of their legitimacy. Consequently, Big Man networks are by definition weak and potentially subject to defections (Utas 2012). The internal structure and functioning of *Katiba Macina*, and the events leading up to the clash with ISGS, tend to confirm this view.

Figures regarding the composition of jihadist groups are usually limited and ambiguous. In a report published in January 2019, the United Nations Security Council calculated that JNIM and various affiliated groups could count on around 1000 combatants distributed over the entire territory of Mali (UNSC 2019). At the same time, experts and practitioners tend to agree that it is necessary to distinguish between three main subgroups that make up a jihadist organisation. The first is the 'core' of the organisation, namely the leaders and all those combatants who can be considered 'professional' jihadists, who may have previous experience in other armed insurgencies and who do not necessarily come from the country where they are combating. A second group is

composed of fighters who have been recruited among local populations, and who seem to be motivated more by local grievances and/or self-interest than by ideological factors. Finally, the third subgroup consists of those who support and facilitate the jihadist struggle, but do not necessarily participate in armed combat. Movement between subgroups is always possible and, apart from those who form the core of the organisation, the other members tend to move back and forth and even return to their civilian life. That is why it is not always possible – or useful – to evaluate the strength of a jihadist group in terms of numbers.[12]

In accordance with this outline, *Katiba Macina* has a decentralised management and governance system, with Amadou Kouffa and his nearest counsellors at its summit, and the *chefs de markaz*, the military and political leaders of the sub-provinces that make up the territorial organisation of the group, as autonomous leaders controlling those provinces. Until 2019, *Katiba Macina* had three different *markaz* in the areas around Dialloubé, Ténenkou and Serma.[13] The chief of each province manages all the activities of the group on the ground: he collects *zakat* (a sort of religious tax), delivers justice with the support of the *qadis* (Islamic judges), organises attacks and administers the treasury.

According to both investigative sources and the majority of our interviewees, the turning point in the relationship between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS was the defection of a group of fighters led by *chef de markaz* Abou Mahmoud[14] and his lieutenant Alpha Issa (*Menastream* 2019).[15] A few days after the failure of a crisis meeting between JNIM members and the leaders of ISGS (Berger 2020), in September 2019, Abou Mahmoud and his men left the *cercle* of Douentza to move east, towards the tri-border area controlled by ISGS.

Abou Mahmoud and Alpha Issa are the only high-ranking cadres to have left the group. Some rumours suggest that the decision was taken by Mahmoud prior to his removal as *chef de markaz* of the Serma area.[16] However, the two leaders were able to convince a large number of subordinates to follow them in their defection to Islamic State. On the one hand, they relied on the personal ties they had built in the Serma and Nampala regions, respectively the former stronghold and *commune* of origin of Abou Mahmoud and Alpha Issa. On the other, they exploited intra-ethnic cleavages for recruiting in the region between Dialloubé and Koro.[17] In the same period, an unspecified number of ISGS fighters moved from Burkina Faso and Niger into the areas around Serma and Nampala.

According to various declarations recorded by Kouffa and his lieutenants,[18] and claims made by Islamic State in its *Al-Naba* newsletter (Joscelyn and Weiss 2020), the administration and redistribution of resources collected through *zakat* or pillaged during attacks, along with the level of violence to be employed against representatives of the state

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[12]This outline of jihadist organisations was based on information collected during three different interviews, with: 1) employee of the European Union Military Training Mission in Mali (Bamako, December 2019); 2) local security expert and employee of the Spanish Cooperation (Bamako, December 2019); and 3) employee of the French Ministry of Defence (Paris, November 2015).

[13]Interview with local witness and activist, Mopti, March 2020.

[14]Killed in March 2020 by a Malian army airstrike.

[15]Interview with local witness (previously kidnapped by *Katiba Macina*) and member of civil society, Mopti, March 2020.

[16]Interview with Fulani member of civil society, Mopti, March 2020.

[17]Interview with customary leader, Dialloubé (Mopti region), March 2020.

[18]The declarations we are referring to here were circulated as audio and video messages through the principal social networks, especially WhatsApp. This material was shared with us by local informants and Fulani inhabitants of the region of Mopti, and we possess a copy of it.

and other opponents,[19] were fundamental issues leading to the definitive schism within *Katiba Macina*. While *Katiba Macina* tends to centralise the management of resources obtained through violence and taxation, ISGS insists on every combatant having the right to keep and use freely whatever spoils he takes during an attack.[20] In a similar vein, ISGS also gives its fighters a certain freedom in managing their free time.[21] A horizontal mechanism of resource redistribution is not only functional to the recruiting process, but also coherent with the strategy of ISGS, which aims to increase the number and violence of attacks in the area (Daniel 2020). In the fight for 'the hearts and minds' of the combatants and, more generally, the local population of the inner Niger Delta, the principles that rule the internal organisation of ISGS reinforce what is presumed to be the group's 'revolutionary' and 'more radical' message. Thus, a growing portion of local jihadist fighters and supporters began listening closely to the preaching of ISGS and then endorsing it, transforming the group into a growing threat for *Katiba Macina*.

In the months that followed Mahmoud's defection, *Katiba Macina* tried to resolve the dispute through the intercession of local *marabouts* and *ulamas* (religious leaders and experts on the Quran), invoking the need to keep the Sahelian *Ummah* and Fulani front united. Nevertheless, the impossibility of reintegrating Mahmoud's fighters through negotiation, along with the growing presence of ISGS members in the inner Niger Delta, probably convinced *Katiba Macina* of the need to react, and initial clashes were observed in January 2020 around the village of Dogo. The supreme leader of ISGS, al-Sahraoui, attempted a final reconciliation when he wrote a letter to Kouffa in the days that followed the initial skirmishes, aiming to halt escalation and obtain recognition of the presence of ISGS in the inner Niger Delta (*Mondafrique* 2020). Subsequent events have demonstrated that relations between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS were already too compromised to be peacefully restored.

Material incentives go a long way in explaining the defection of Abou Mahmoud and his men from *Katiba Macina* to Islamic State. ISGS' alternative organisational and distributive principles brought Kouffa's leadership into question, contributing to the partial collapse of his network. At the same time, other elements weakened the hegemony of *Katiba Macina*, influencing and furthering the struggle between the two main expressions of the jihadist insurgency in central Mali. These are explored in the next section of the article.

Competing insurgent governances in the inner Niger Delta

It is now known that the manner in which jihadist groups imposed *sharia* law after their occupation of the cities of Gao and Timbuktu in 2012 was at the centre of a harsh controversy among their leaders. Various letters found in Timbuktu by the French troops who liberated the city in 2013 prove that the former emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abdelmalek Droukdel, contested his fellow *mujahidin's* decision to start implementing Islamic law in the occupied territories immediately. According to Droukdel, this choice alienated the population who, he argued, required a preparatory Islamic education beforehand (Guidère 2014).

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[19]Requests for a more aggressive and violent strategy against concurrent jihadist groups and civil servants came in particular from fighters in Nampala: Skype interview with security expert based in Bamako, June 2020.
[20]Interview with security expert and employee of the United Nations, Bamako, December 2019.
[21]Skype interview with security expert based in Bamako, June 2020.

The debate about the implementation of the *sharia* is a reminder that jihadist groups are not only Islamist combatants or components of a Big Man network, but also insurgent actors embedded in specific socio-political and economic contexts. Every insurgent group needs the support and collaboration of the local population for its survival and success. Once they militarily occupy and start to control a territory, they create a condition of co-dependence with the local communities: on the one hand, they rely on the population for the provision of resources, combatants and informants; on the other, through the implementation of an insurgent form of governance, they begin to deliver basic and essential services to local communities (Bøås and Dunn 2017). *Katiba Macina* was no exception, and the struggle between them and ISGS was driven by the common desire to obtain the support of the same constituency.

Trying to avoid making the same mistake as its predecessors in northern Mali, the system of governance established by *Katiba Macina* has not completely subverted the customary rules applied in the area. The group has effectively imposed the *sharia*: women are now forced to veil and are not allowed to leave their houses without the presence of a male member of their family; traditional celebrations are banned, or limited at best; and the *qadis* are the only authorities who can deliver judgments.[22] Moreover, *Katiba Macina* has built a diffuse system of control and information gathering, relying on informants that are mostly recruited among local women and children (Raineri 2020).[23] Yet, some of the most violent expressions of the *sharia*, such as corporal punishments, are not always applied. Moreover, as has been suggested by various studies and confirmed by some interviewees, the rule of law established by *Katiba Macina* is generally appreciated by the population and perceived as being fair, especially when compared to the corrupt and discriminatory system of justice implemented by the Malian state (Raineri 2018; Cissé 2020).

Even more importantly, *Katiba Macina* has not called into question the customary system governing the management of land. Following an administrative scheme that was elaborated under the Macina Empire, but whose present functioning was fixed under the French colonisation and reaffirmed during the initial years of postcolonial Mali,[24] a part of the grazing lands of the Niger Delta belongs to the *Djowros*, the statutory Fulani upper class, who regularly collect tributes from other herders. In a similar vein, public lands are ruled by a sort of right of precedence and exploitation possessed by the *Djowros*.[25] According to one of Kouffa's lieutenants, whose *nom de guerre* is Imran, *Katiba Macina* decided to limit the tribute to be paid to the *Djowros* to 500,000 CFA francs (around 770 euros), but did not contest the basic functioning of the system.[26] Moreover, in a further attempt to win the support of the ruling classes in the area under its control, *Katiba Macina* eliminated all state taxes and customs, substituting them with *zakat*, effectively a tribute paid to fund the jihadist effort, as well as to the *Ummah* as a whole.[27] At the same time, by applying an instrumental logic of complementarity and

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[22]This information was confirmed by all our interviewees in the Mopti region, March 2020.
[23]The role played by children as informants for the jihadist groups was highlighted by a Fulani activist, interviewed in Mopti, March 2020.
[24]Interview with customary leader, Dialloubé (Mopti region), March 2020.
[25]Interviews with Fulani member of civil society, Mopti, March 2020; local expert and worker for the Spanish Cooperation, Bamako, December 2019.
[26]WhatsApp video message, recorded and received in April 2020.
[27]According to a former herder (now displaced in Mopti) interviewed in Mopti in March 2020, *zakat* collected by *Katiba Macina* consists of one bull for every thirty cows, and one calf for every forty cows, to be consigned to the group by every herder each year.

exploitation, the group has not evicted all (potential) concurrent actors from their territories, as they continue to maintain a sort of informal cooperation with mayors and NGOs that deliver essential services to the population.[28]

Given these conditions, the strategy deployed by ISGS could be interpreted as a sort of ongoing revolution, which is trying to reverse the current system of governance through the contestation of its ideological and socio-political bases. On the one hand, in both Abou Mahmoud's speeches and in Kouffa's replies, the question of the application of the *sharia* appears central. Reproducing a dispute which characterises the divisions between Al-Qaeda and Islamic State at the highest level (Hamming 2020), ISGS has accused *Katiba Macina* of blasphemy because of its presumed failure to enforce Islamic law. In particular, the lack of corporal punishment for thieves is considered unacceptable, and, as claimed by Mahmoud in his messages, the choice of accepting the presence of Western NGOs and the willingness to collaborate with mayors and other representatives of the central state are clear demonstrations of a certain proximity to the enemy.[29] The increasing discussions about the employment of *takfir*[30] and the degree of violence to be used against enemies are not aimed only at delegitimising *Katiba Macina* at a doctrinal level. State security forces and civil servants have been found responsible for various episodes of corruption and abuse against civilians (Bagayoko 2020). Consequently, ISGS is trying to throw into question *Katiba Macina*'s strategy of appeasing the Malian state which, according to some, is also applied towards the Dogon militias in the south,[31] in order to win the support of those who do not accept any form of collaboration with the central government.

On the other hand, ISGS initiatives sound 'subversive' with respect to the statutory system of power that rules and organises Fulani society. While *Katiba Macina* relies on and reinforces the Fulani ruling classes, and the *Djowros* in particular, ISGS is trying to mobilise and obtain the support of the Fulani lower classes and, in particular, the so-called *Peuls rouges*, who originate from an area outside the Niger Delta.[32] In the name of a 'purer' interpretation of the Quran, the group has put at the centre of its agenda the complete collectivisation of land, and pastures in particular. Most of the combatants who have joined the Islamic State come from the Fulani lower classes who practice pastoralism and have to pay for access to grazing lands during the annual transhumance. As recognised by Kouffa himself, wherever ISGS has been able to settle in the regions around Serma, Nampala, Dialloubé and other villages, two different systems of juridical and territorial governance are now clashing, furthering intra-ethnic tensions and violence.[33]

As an indirect consequence of the "Sahelisation" of the insurgent jihadist groups (Pellerin 2019), the fight for control over the inner Niger Delta has become a struggle to impose a specific system of governance deeply anchored in the local dynamics of power. This also explains the relative success of ISGS in obtaining the support of a part of the population, in particular the Fulani subaltern classes. These cleavages are generating

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[28]Interview with NGO employee and project director of a conflict-management program implemented in the region of Mopti, Bamako, December 2019.
[29]WhatsApp audio message from Abou Mahmoud, recorded before March 2020, received in April 2020.
[30]In the modern Salafi use of the term, *takfir* implies the excommunication of the impious and apostates, who shall consequently be attacked and killed by the *mujahidin*. In the case of Mali, discussions revolve around the relations to be built with the remaining representatives of the state in the area, and more generally about whether or not to accept negotiations with the central government.
[31]Interview with local security expert and employee of the United Nations, Bamako, December 2019.
[32]Interview with customary leader, Dialloubé (Mopti region), March 2020.
[33]WhatsApp audio message recorded by Amadou Kouffa (see above).

self-reinforcing mechanisms of violent contention, which now threaten to expand to other communities and ethnic groups. In this sense, the jihadist clash in central Mali could mark a new and more worrisome phase of Mali's longstanding crisis.

Conclusion

As this article has tried to show, the end of the Sahelian exception to international jihadist rivalries has been brought on by a complex mix of factors. Internal divisions, doctrinal controversies, competition for the hearts and minds of the same constituents, ambiguous relations with the state, external reinforcements: all have played a role in preparing and furthering the conditions for an armed confrontation between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS. More specifically, as soon as *Katiba Macina* secured its dominant power position in the inner Niger Delta, it began to transform into the ruling authority in the area. The organisation's choices concerning the administration of its resources, how to govern local societies and what kind of relationship to develop with the central state, created the political conditions for the rise of a new challenger. ISGS has started to exploit this new window of opportunity, simultaneously trying to intercept and integrate defectors from *Katiba Macina* and to stir up inter-class grievances within the Fulani community. And while, during the first half of 2020, the clash between the two jihadist formations and their allies had already caused the deaths of at least 250 combatants (*NordSud Journal* 2020), it is probably too early to try to predict how and when this conflict will end, and what its consequences will be. Nevertheless, a few considerations can be advanced, offering a provisional conclusion to this article.

First, the fight between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS can be seen as a new episode in the wider struggle between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to become the dominant actor of the global jihadist movement. At the same time, the clash cannot be understood without considering that it is also a specific product of the longstanding conflict in Mali, and will potentially have deep and durable effects on the Sahelian crisis as a whole. Violence is on the rise across the entire region, and this new front threatens to worsen an already very difficult situation. Second, the fight between *Katiba Macina* and ISGS is not only a confrontation between jihadists, but also part of a spiral of intra- and inter-ethnic violence that has already revealed its potentially destructive and durable effects over the past few years. Experts and witnesses agree that politics in Mali and the Sahel have been transformed by conflicting fragmentations and the spread of weapons, and that durable and effective solutions for reducing this cycle of violence have not yet emerged. Finally, local states and their international allies have not demonstrated, so far, that they are able to manage the multiple challenges posed by this complex crisis. Even more worrisomely, Sahelian states are becoming drivers of insecurity and threats rather than a factor of stability, as demonstrated by the numerous abuses committed by national security forces. In this sense, the political crisis which erupted in Mali following the military *coup d'état* in August 2020 represents a further element of concern, whose consequences could also negatively affect the conflict in the centre of the country. As long as social and political trust is not restored in Mali and its neighbouring countries, the Sahel will remain a 'perfect' battleground for jihadists and other violent entrepreneurs.

Notes on contributors

Edoardo Baldaro is a FNRS (Funds for Scientific Research – Belgium) Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Recherche et Études en Politique Internationale (REPI) of the Free University of Brussels, Brussels, Belgium.

Yida Seydou Diall is a Doctoral Student and Research Lecturer in Private Law at the Faculty of Legal and Political Sciences of the University of Bamako, Bamako, Mali. Email: diallyida@yahoo.fr

ORCID

Edoardo Baldaro http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6381-2397

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