

# A Discussion on Countering Violent Extremism and Human Security in Mali

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*'Why is terrorism always being linked to Islam? And what can we do about the lack of socio-economic possibilities for so many youth in the Sahel, which in turn drives youngsters to join terrorist groups?'* These were the first questions asked after a presentation my colleague Fulco van Deventer and I made on human security and countering violent extremism (CVE) in Mali. The discussion took place during an [international reflection meeting](#) held on April 31 and May 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. The meeting was part of our [Civil Society for a Human Security Strategy](#) in Mali project, which we as Human Security Collective are involved in along with our consortium partners WANEP (West-African Network for Peacebuilding) and GPPAC (Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict). The meeting was opened and closed by Malian government representatives and several international delegations were in attendance. Participants included both Malian and international civil society organizations. This blog sheds light on some of the discussions and dilemmas that came up during the session on Human Security and CVE.

## 'CVE' in Mali

A whole range of levels of action exists to counter violent extremism. This 'continuum' of actions ranges from the very targeted, hard security measures that tend to isolate potential terrorists, to the soft, non-coercive frame of CVE, which includes a human security approach at the other end of the continuum. The human security approach focusses on tackling the root causes of violence relating to diverse dimensions of life and society.

In 2012, the world was shocked to see many cities in Northern Mali taken over by several so-called jihadist groups, most importantly Ansar Dine, the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West-Africa (MUJAO) and Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They took over control from the separatist armed groups, most importantly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), that had been in rebellion demanding autonomy for the three Northern regions of Mali since 2011.

The current, proliferated situation of armed groups in Northern Mali is highly complex, but in general we can discern three types of groups through their agenda; there are the 'rebel' groups that fight for autonomy (such as the MNLA); there are armed groups or pro-government militias that fight against the rebel groups (the self-defense or pro-government militias), and there are the groups that fight for the implementation of Sharia (such as Ansar Dine and MUJAO). One must realize that these public agendas do not tell us much about the

diversity of drivers or about hidden agendas, support bases, the collaboration between groups and/or their use of violence. It is difficult for international legal frameworks and interventions to take into account the fluidity of this reality. From the beginning, the international community has distinguished between 'compliant armed groups' such as the MNLA, MAA and the pro-government/self-defense militias on the one hand, and the 'terrorist armed groups', including AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO on the other. While the former took part in the recent peace negotiations with the government, the latter have been approached with counter-terrorism measures, most importantly the military intervention by the French.

### **'CVE language': push and pull factors**

*So, why is terrorism always being linked to Islam? While this is a key question that should be discussed, during our meeting the question was also turned around to: Why is Islam being used or 'abused' for terrorism and why, in turn, does this find resonance among some? To answer this question, one needs to analyze the drivers for violent jihad and its attractive features – in CVE terms, the 'push and pull factors'. Push factors are the underlying structural conditions and psychological factors that play an important background role in considering whether to engage in violent extremism, whereas pull factors relate to the features that are used to attract someone to violent extremism to enable recruitment. It is important to note that such push and pull factors are both individual and contextual.*

A lot is already known about grievances in Mali that could be drivers of violence. However, to better understand the 'push and pull factors' of violence, more research still needs to be done. During the meeting we attempted an initial analysis based on our conversations with civil society in Mali. We think that diverse, interrelated dimensions play a role. These dimensions include socio-economic factors (inequality and a general lack of future opportunities), frustrations over governance, inter- and intra-community conflicts, community insecurities and religion.

The questions regarding the link to Islam and the lack of socio-economic opportunities reflect the way many people in Mali look at this discussion. In conversations with civil society we have often been told that violence becomes a 'coping mechanism' in the difficult circumstances in Northern Mali. The rebel/armed/jihadi groups offer opportunities: a position, a four-wheel drive and an income – these become important pull factors. The religious agenda of these groups is sometimes questioned. Their agenda is, according to some, driven by and linked to drug trafficking, rather than religion in some cases, making them, as we were told, 'criminal groups with a religious coverage'.

### **'Terrorist' groups at the negotiation table?**

In the human security and peacebuilding approach, inclusive dialogue is crucial. Counter-terrorism measures however include the listing of 'terrorist' groups, which makes their inclusion in negotiations difficult. During the discussion on the counter-terrorism agenda in Mali, a mention was made of the peace negotiations that took place in several stages in 2014 and early 2015 in Algiers. The jihadist groups are blacklisted as terrorists. Should these groups have been included at the negotiation table? The people we discussed this with explained that the leader of the blacklisted Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghali, is extremely influential and powerful. He was an important negotiator after previous rebellions and worked as a Malian diplomat in Saudi Arabia. As long as he was not part of the process, he would sabotage it, it was argued. If this is true, one should ask whether at a strategic level excluding 'terrorists' is counter-productive. Along with the strategic and legal question, there is also the question of legitimacy. Would people accept the leader of Ansar Dine at the negotiation table? This remains controversial. At another level, some discussed whether the leaders of the different armed groups represent at all the voices and concerns of the diverse communities. And what about the voices and motivations of the recruits of armed groups, which are also important to be understood.

### **Regulating religious messaging?**

Discussing how to counter violent extremism, religious places such as schools and mosques, were mentioned as places where hate incitement and recruitment had taken place. One man, with a background of schooling at madrassas in Mali, argued that some educational, religious settings focus too much on one interpretation of Islam. He argued that these interpretations sometimes counter the traditional way Islam is practiced in Mali. To deal with this problem, some people argued for the regulation of religious messaging within religious education. However, in reaction to this it was also mentioned that regardless of the form of Islam people preach or practice, the people that use violence should be seen differently from those who don't. If religious messaging specifically were to be regulated, freedom of expression and freedom of religion would be at stake. A recommendation that came out of the debate was to develop a democratic dialogue on religious tolerance.

### **The need for inclusive engagement**

As these discussions show, countering violent extremism in Mali is an area riddled with numerous dilemmas and questions. In fact, the use of the terms 'extremism' and 'terrorism' themselves remain controversial. Many people feel that these terms are used subjectively, linked to a certain ideology only.

Inclusive engagement and investment in all communities, especially by the government, is crucial. This to both understand the perspectives and frustrations among the population and to address them, but also to create a shared and trusted process that will lead to a more peaceful Mali. A sense of being included is crucial to overcome the attraction of violent alternatives. Stigmatization of any community has to be avoided at all cost. Taking seriously the way that people themselves contribute to safety in their own community and enabling this further should be an important part of such process.

While the peace negotiations were probably a necessary step forward, it is important that different stakeholders active in Mali take an approach in which the whole of society is included to prevent the diverse forms of violence of 2012 and after from returning. This is urgent in a setting in which new armed groups have been created and violence is far from over.