

Literature Paper: Jihadist Armed Governance in Mali

By Rida Lyammouri

Summary

In the Sahel, and Central Mali in particular, the proliferation of armed groups over the past decade has resulted in formal and informal non-state governance structures. This paper assesses the various definitions and typologies associated with rebel and jihadist governance in order to better understand the mechanisms of governance provision used by key non-state governance providers in Central Mali.

Introduction

In the Hobbesian and Weberian traditions of governance that have been the norm for centuries, the state has a monopoly over both violence and the pursuit of political power. In exchange, populations are protected through a social contract^{1,2}. Thomas Hobbes wrote that a society without the authority of the state is a society living in anarchy or civil war³. This is the situation in the Sahel today, particularly in parts of Mali, where internal armed conflicts have been going on for a decade, with armed groups competing with each other and with state security and political forces for control of territory. In areas where the state is either inaccessible to the population or absent, instead of anarchy, non-state actors attempt to justify their legitimacy as authorities

through the provision of governance. Although scholars have analyzed, assessed, and set out theories about this phenomenon, particularly in the context of insurgency, the case of Mali is unique because of the multilayered governance structures and the plethora of armed actors seeking power.

This paper assesses the various definitions of, and themes on, armed governance, through a mix of theoretical and empirical examples. It demonstrates similarities and differences in how some of the main armed groups in Mali, and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, exercise geographical, political, and social control. In this way, this paper aims to serve as a starting point to reflect on and understand research needs, in order to assess the conditions for resilience against governance of non-state armed actors, and the conditions for peace through negotiation and cooperation between the state and these actors.

1. Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation." Originally a speech at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblodt, Munich.

2. Hobbes, Thomas. "Leviathan."

3. Ibid.

Background and Context

In 2012, the Malian government was significantly destabilized by a rebellion organized by an alliance of rebel and jihadist groups, coupled with a military coup rooted in discontent with the government's response to the rebellion. Since the events of 2012, non-state armed groups have found ample space to gain influence over large parts of Mali's territory—particularly across Northern and Central Mali. While the personalities have fluctuated, and the armed groups have changed in name and shape over the past decade, the Malian state and its international partners have failed to regain control of much of the country. In 2018, six years after the military coup and the outbreak of the rebellion, estimates suggested that the state had authority over merely 25% of the country⁴. Groups associated with al-Qaeda and more recently the Islamic State—namely Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—have monopolized large swathes of land. Meanwhile, local ethnically-aligned non-state armed groups have established themselves as security actors with political influence over populations.

Within these spaces, non-state armed groups and their associated civilian partners are creating alternative or substitute systems of decentralized governance that function largely independent of any cooperation or negotiation with government authorities at local, regional, or national levels. These groups exercise their presence, often in security and justice roles, to establish control over populations within communities inaccessible to the state. However, academia has often asked why armed groups bother to engage in governance activities⁵. The answer might be that support and legitimation from populations are crucial factors in armed groups maintaining control and achieving greater goals, and the efforts of armed groups to obtain these objectives are more diverse, and have led to the emergence of various formal and informal governance structures.

4. Edoardo Baldaro, "A Dangerous Method: How Mali Lost Control of the North, and Learned to Stop Worrying," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (2018): 579–603.

5. Kasfir, Nelson. "Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes," Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Existing Literature

Governance has traditionally been examined as a state-centric phenomenon. However established norms are inadequate for understanding governance in contexts such as Mali, where the state in many areas is largely absent yet governance occurs in other forms. While a Hobbesian approach might suggest anarchy or 'ungoverned space' within a territory where the state is too weak or absent to exert authority, other approaches suggest that non-state actors are instead providing governance and establishing forms of political and social order⁶. This is particularly prevalent within states where there is internal armed conflict or ongoing civil war. Because governance provided by non-state actors is often associated with insurgents in the context of conflict, 'armed-group governance' is a broader term, but 'rebel governance', 'insurgent governance', and 'guerrilla governance' are commonly used. In all cases, the imposition of a system of shadow governance or insurgent social order occurs when armed actors have both territorial control or significant influence, and implement rules that regulate civilian populations⁷. It should be noted that the spectrum between presence and full control shape the different modalities of insurgent governance in the Sahelian context⁸. JNIM's decentralized structure with fighters largely concentrated in camps (or bases known as 'markaz[es]') in the bush, from where they exert control and regulate social behavior at a distance, gave rise to the notion of 'remote governance'. Meanwhile, ISGS works similarly but has a mode of governance that could be described as 'mobile governance' because of the group's roving bands that crack down heavy-handedly on populations the group perceives as non-compliant.

Scholars have attempted to distinguish between the different types of armed-group governance. Authors including Nelson Kasfir and Ana Arjona refer to 'rebel governance', which, according to Kasfir, "at a minimum, means the organization of civilians within rebel-held territory for a public purpose," such as civilian participation, civilian administration, or organization

6. Furland, Marta. "Understanding Governance by Insurgent Non-State Actors: A Multi-Dimensional Typology," *Civil Wars*, 2020, p.4, DOI: 10.1080/13698249.2020.1785725

7. Arjona, Ana. "Armed Groups' Governance in Civil War: A Synthesis," *Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies*, 2008, pp.2-3

8. Kalyvas, S. (2006). *A THEORY OF IRREGULAR WAR II: CONTROL*. In *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics, pp. 111-145). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511818462.007

of civilians for material gains⁹. Kasfirs collaborative definition suggests rebel or armed governance is “the creation of institutions and practices by rebels that intend to shape the social, political, and economic life of civilians during civil war”¹⁰. Paul Staniland, while also focusing on the insurgent element of armed governance, defines it as a slightly broader phenomenon, with “group[s] of individuals claiming to be a collective organization that use a name to designate [themselves], [are] made up of formal structures of command and control, and [intend] to seize political power by means of violence”¹¹.

While these definitions appear similar, a third term has emerged—‘jihadist governance’. More recent research seeks to distinguish rebel governance from jihadist governance. While both jihadist and rebel insurgents seek territorial control, use violence to gain and enforce control, and seek popular support, scholars have identified four key differences between rebel and jihadist governance. These differences are: Jihadist groups tend to be transnational and linked to global movements, which could affect their engagement with local communities; they believe that both their use of force and their governance are legitimized by the goal of implementing Sharia law; their territorial goals transcend the boundaries of nation states despite their engagement with local dynamics; and their governance projects are more futile than those of rebel projects due to greater international intervention¹². One final distinction is that some literature suggests jihadist governance does not require territorial control because of the ideological nature of the phenomenon¹³. Jihadist groups tend to target individuals, at times using tribal and ethnic cleavages to gain support, relying on the narrative of fighting the government and its western allies.

Applying Literature to the Context of Mali

These definitions are useful in the Mali context given the diversity of armed group affiliations, whether community based, such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) during the 2012 rebellion, or jihadist. Even within the two main jihadist-affiliated groups, JNIM and ISGS, however, systems of governance differ. It is important to note that while JNIM propaganda stresses its main focus is the “Mali case,” JNIM operates today across a much larger area than ISGS, and is also present and expanding its activities in a larger number of countries in West African Sahel. Still, JNIM brigades have demonstrated that their aims are more localized, while ISGS’s goals are more transnational, and ISGS is more severe in its use of violence to gain and maintain control over populations. Both groups, however, invoke similar narratives, even if their ‘ideological products’ differ. They are engaged in close-knit and face-to-face recruitment and seek the sympathy of local populations on the basis of exploiting local conflicts and rivalries over access to land and resources, perceived injustices, and state abandonment or predation¹⁴. Although ISGS and JNIM are both jihadist, the limited research about jihadist governance, and the similarities between jihadist and rebel governance, make using theories of rebel governance a useful tool for understanding how JNIM and ISGS provide governance.

Moving beyond the definitions themselves, Mampilly and Arjona attempted to break down the structures via which control through governance is exerted. Arjona focused on the social contract between a group and civilians, and the scope of a group’s intervention in civilian life. Arjona’s argumentation centered on the time horizons of armed groups, in which armed groups with short time horizons generally generate disorder under conditions that are unlikely to see the establishment of a social contract between the armed group and the local population. However, when armed groups have longer time horizons and exert control (or significant influence) over territory, a social contract emerges and gives place to a new order. This is particularly relevant the Sahel where jihadist groups have waged an insurgency for nearly a decade. These groups also exert control or significant influence over vast swathes of territory.

9. Kasfir, Nelson. “Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes,” Cambridge University Press, 2015, p.24

10. Arjona, A., Kasfir, N., & Mampilly, Z. “Rebel Governance in Civil War,” Cambridge University Press, 2015.

11. Furland, Marta. “Understanding Governance by Insurgent Non-State Actors: A Multi-Dimensional Typology,” *Civil Wars*, 2020, p.4, DOI: 10.1080/13698249.2020.1785725

12. Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hibergh Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen. “Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2021.

13. Ibid.

14. Bouju, Jacky. “The Fulani rebellion and the ‘war for land,” *Revue Internationale Des Etudes Du Developpement*, No 243(3), 2020.

Meanwhile Mampilly asserted that the extent of governmental service provision correlates with the pressures to the territorial control that a non-state armed group control^{15,16}. Service provision is frequently considered a key component of establishing governance, with examples including Tigray in Ethiopia and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Sudan. However, in other places, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and the RENAMO in Mozambique, armed governance actors relied on negotiation and cooperation with local actors, such as traditional leaders¹⁷. Interestingly, Mampilly argued that pre-conflict state presence affects civilian expectations of service provision from armed non-state governance actors, making service provision a less-effective tool for armed governance in areas with previously weak state presence¹⁸. Such an assertion could explain why in Central Mali, both JNIM and ISGS rely on existing structures of service provision instead of providing improved services. What characterizes both JNIM and ISGS are low bureaucratic capacities and distribution of public goods, making their modes of governance largely immaterial. They let humanitarian organizations negotiate access to operate in areas under their control or influence, to provide for the populations' basic needs. However, jihadist groups do provide some basic social services, but these activities are neither widespread nor consistent. In some rare instances, JNIM has communicated in its propaganda that the group provided social services in the form of simple aid, such as on November 26, 2019, in the village of Allawallam northwest of the town of Djibo, in Burkina Faso, just before engaging Burkinabe forces in combat¹⁹. In several instances, JNIM and its affiliates have hijacked trucks chartered by humanitarian organizations and NGOs, and diverted the supplies transported to distribute them to selected communities.

Both groups, JNIM and ISGS are more focused on security provision to selected communities and justice through intervention in intercommunal conflicts, including farmer-herder conflicts and transhumance management. Particularly in farmer-herder conflicts, both JNIM and ISGS work to provide natural resource management solutions²⁰. Through the provision of justice, which tends to be informalized, these jihadist groups are able to demonstrate law and order to populations that have witnessed the degradation of formalized structures of justice via traditional and religious authorities. One example was the August 2020 mediation between Dogon and Fulani led by JNIM, which was perceived as brokering peace in order to gain local support²¹. Simultaneously, in some ways not informalized, especially in JNIM's case, with greater bureaucratic capacity than ISGS, JNIM performs justice activities across a broader spectrum and with larger geographical reach. JNIM publicly communicating on counter-banditry campaigns and engaging communities in 'awareness' against acts of banditry and criminal activities, in several regions, including Tombouctou²², Koulikoro²³, and Kidal²⁴. Meanwhile, ISGS has through its own unofficial messaging and official Islamic State messaging, showcased its heavy-handed justice provision by cutting off the hands and feet of thieves in Mali²⁵, and

15. Arjona, Ana. "Armed Groups' Governance in Civil War: A Synthesis," Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, 2008

16. Mampilly, Zachariah. "Stationary Bandits: Understanding Rebel Governance," 2007.

17. Arjona, Ana. "Armed Groups' Governance in Civil War: A Synthesis," Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, 2008

18. Mampilly, Zachariah. "Stationary Bandits: Understanding Rebel Governance," 2007.

19. "#BurkinaFaso: #JNIM claimed to have preached and provided social services in the village of Allawallam, northwest of Djibo, before attacking security forces entering it," Menastream (Twitter), December 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1201820405977276416?s=20>

20. Ursu, Elena. "Under the Gun Resource Conflicts and Embattled Traditional Authorities in Central Mali." Clingendael Institute, July 2018.

21. Ross, Aaron. "Where state is weak, Mali militants broker talks between rival clans." Reuters, 28 August 2020.

22. Audio released by JNIM on August 2020, during which head of the group in Timbuktu region, Abu Talha al-Libye thanked "Arqane" tribe and invites them to prevent their children from stealing others belongings, Source: Housseine Ag Issa (Twitter), August 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/HousseineAg/status/1293669800913313798?s=20>

23. "#Mali: #JNIM arrested three bandits on June 24 between Mourdiah and Nara, #Koulikoro, the bandits are suspected for around twenty robberies against civilian transport vehicles, they identify by name and area of origin, two are from Tombouctou and one from #Mauritania", Menastream (Twitter), June 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1409125530885046273?s=20>

24. "#Mali le #JNIM annonce «une campagne sécuritaire dans la région de #Kidal contre voleurs & bandits des grands chemins, l'élimination d'Aqmus Ag Kalkali & l'arrestation d'un de ses acolytes... la campagne est tjrs en cours... appelle habitants à aider & criminels à se repentir»", Wassim Nasr (Twitter), July 26, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1419726275950911496?s=20>

25. "#Mali: In latest Al-Naba, #ISGS (#ISWAP-GS) section features photographs from the May 2 weekly market in Tin-Hama (Ansongo), # Gao Region, where three robbers had their hands and feet cut off after they were caught in a robbery on April 28 in Assore, on Ansongo-Menaka road. ", Menastream (Twitter), May 20, 21, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1395493942221840388?s=20>

in neighboring Burkina Faso²⁶. Hence, both JNIM and ISGS seeks to ‘formalize’ their justice provision, at least in the eyes of the populations, when considering that jihadist groups communicate these activities in their official public messaging to local communities and the general public (i.e. international community). They also have designate people to these roles (qadis) and follow certain procedures, interrogations, investigations, and courts.

This raises the question of why armed groups are accepted as governance providers by civilian populations. Research indicates that the use of violence is vital to gain control initially over a population. However, control does not guarantee sympathy, support, or shared interests. It additionally does not secure cooperation or compliance, with justice and rule of law argued as one approach to civilian cooperation and compliance²⁷. Loyle argued that justice provision offers both solutions to civilians’ grievances, boosting confidence, and punishments that demonstrate a group’s authority²⁸. In Mali, armed groups are able to provide this level of justice, and quantitative and qualitative research has demonstrated that this provision of justice is seen by some segments of populations as more compelling than the alternative—a more formalized and traditional system that is perceived as corrupt and tainted with clientelism. Quite simply, when armed groups can provide a service that a state government cannot—justice, security, and natural resource management in the case of Mali—then civilians are more likely to accept these groups as their governance providers.

In Central Mali, this process is complicated by the systems of multilayered armed governance and militia activity that prevail, in addition to the traditional structures such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders, who also attempt to maintain some degree of authority. Competition between armed groups results in sustained violence. Meanwhile, local influential parties including traditional leaders and religious leaders, are pitted against armed and jihadist groups. Negotiating their co-existence with armed groups has had mixed results.

26. “#BurkinaFaso: In a 1:07-minute-long unofficial video, #ISGS (#ISWAP-GS) shows 4 youths amputated for theft on 17 May in the village of Deou, #Oudalan, the speaker is "Abu Ibrahim", a local Burkinabe commander which some sources claim to be the successor of Abdelhakim al-Sahrawi,” Menastream (Twitter), June 4, 2021, <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1400589292766908434?s=20>

27. Loyle, Cyanne. “Rebel Justice During Armed Conflict.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* - 2021, Vol. 65(1).

28. Ibid.

While JNIM has demonstrated a greater willingness to negotiate with and engage with traditional authorities, and even the central government, in order to extend its legitimacy, ISGS does not appear to consider negotiation a tool within its governance design²⁹. This is in line with Kasfir’s assertion that “civilian participation is likely to complicate rebels’ decision making”³⁰.

At the same time, threatening and intimidating traditional authorities could represent a risk to groups participating in armed governance in areas where local elites such as tribal leaders have strong clientele networks and thereby greater influence over local populations³¹. In Côte d’Ivoire during the period of Forces Nouvelles control in the early 2000s, areas where local elites had stronger networks experienced greater governance provision from Forces Nouvelles because local elites were able to negotiate better services in exchange for civilian cooperation³². In Central Mali, however, the multilayered approach to governance has created space for already weak traditional authorities to appear even weaker to civilians because of their inability to negotiate on their behalf—often because they must flee for their own safety.

Finally, one of the distinctions academia has tried to make between jihadist and rebel governance is duration of the governance project³³. Kasfir highlighted that even when groups exert control over, or even gain support from, civilian populations within a territory, the group’s interests and the population’s interests might not match, causing pressures such as those from local civilians who retain a number of strategies for challenging rebel rule if their needs are not met^{34,35}. In Mali’s Mopti Region, for example, when Katiba Macina took control, the groups challenged norms and traditions to such an extreme that

29. Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hibernag Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen. “Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2021.

30. Kasfir, Nelson. “Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes,” Cambridge University Press, 2015.

31. Baalen, Sebastian van. “Local elites, civil resistance, and the responsiveness of rebel governance in Côte d’Ivoire.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 2021.

32. Ibid.

33. Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hibernag Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen. “Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2021.

34. Kasfir, Nelson. “Rebel Governance – Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes,” Cambridge University Press, 2015.

35. Mampilly, Zachariah. “Stationary Bandits: Understanding Rebel Governance,” 2007.

one interviewee said in 2018, “they have banned the fundamental freedoms granted to all human beings”³⁶. For JNIM and, more specifically ISGS, questions remain about the longevity of their projects if the implementation of governance clashes with local norms, creating civilian resistance in addition to the national and international military responses to the groups’ attempts to govern sovereign territory.

Conclusion

In Mali, armed group members can be neighbors, friends, and family. These same members could be seeking to achieve local objectives or global, transnational objectives. This makes the aims of armed governance providers less clear, but it also provides ample opportunity for conflict and post-conflict assistance practitioners to establish peacebuilding and resilience mechanisms that support more positive outcomes for civilians severely destabilized and insecure, both physically and economically, because of ongoing violence.

This literature review finds at least two areas in which additional research related to Mali’s case could support better understanding and better outcomes for civilians.

First, the application of typologies from the literature already identifies both similarities and differences in the mechanisms used by the jihadist armed groups, JNIM and ISGS, in their provision of governance and exertion of authority. Additional research using quantitative and qualitative methods could provide more granular understanding of armed group motivations, which in turn would be useful in assessing the conditions for community resilience against jihadist governance. It could also reaffirm some of the current strategies used to support improving the legitimacy of traditional authorities, as alternative providers of governance to armed groups.

Second, and perhaps more pragmatically, in areas under JNIM control or JNIM influence, there might be conditions for negotiation and cooperation that allow for peace. Rebel/jihadist-state engagement during and post-armed conflicts is not uncommon. Rachel Sweet argued that this relationship at the local level often occurs in the context of understanding of lines of control, and the types of

relationships can impact post-conflict state formation and who is able to profit from natural resources³⁷. Whether these relationships in Mali fit into the frameworks that Sweet identified—collusion, cooptation, entrenchment, and displacement—could again help understand armed groups’ governance strategies and how to use that understanding in improving outcomes in a future post-conflict setting³⁸.

Alternative authority and armed groups’ governance is not a new phenomenon, but it is proliferating, especially in Mali and the Sahel. Research and analysis must avoid taking traditional norms about governance as the starting point in understanding the complexities of navigating politics in situations in which new governance actors operate. Sahelian jihadist groups have demonstrated that they work to long time horizons by continuing to wage an insurgency over nearly a decade, with states in the region having serious difficulties in containing and defeating the groups. Sahelian jihadist groups in their latest iterations (again) exert control or significant influence over large territories. Depending on local circumstances, social contracts are being forged, as these groups seek to control and maintain support from the local populations, while facing constraints on how much violence or imposed rules local populations will accept before they rebel or countermobilize by forming resistance militias or self-defense groups.

36. Ursu, Elena. “Resource conflict and radical armed governance in central Mali,” Clingendael Institute. July 2018.

37. Sweet, Rachel. “State-Rebel Relations During Civil War: Institutional Change Behind Frontlines.” Dissertation, 2017.

38. Ibid.

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