



DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

Explaining spatial variation of violence against civilians
in the Liptako-Gourma

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Abstract

Violence against civilian is a complex phenomenon of which the understanding has changed over the past few decades. Nowadays, civilian targeting is not considered as a by-product of warfare, but rather a strategic act that fits the needs and objectives of the perpetrators. In this thesis, I explore the spatial dynamics of the ongoing Sahelian crisis to identify the processes leading to variation in civilian victimization. When comparing two different fronts – the Gourma and the Liptako – of the same conflict using the method of difference, a stark contrast in both rates of civilian targeting and territorial control appears between the two areas. By testing Kalyvas' theory on the case studies, the analysis yields the following observations: conflict agents that successfully consolidated their territorial control and secured collaboration from the civilian population will use significantly less violence against civilians; areas under fragmented control will experience higher levels of indiscriminate violence and a higher number of actors fighting for a territory will increase the rates of violence against civilian; and finally, as the dominant actor loses control over an area, the type of violence will shift from indiscriminate to selective as a function of civilian collaboration.

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Abbreviations

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Group to Support Islam and Muslims)
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VEOs	Violent Extremist Organisations

Chapter 1. Introduction

A. Topic & Context

This thesis aims at exploring dynamics of civilian violence in regions where the zones of influence of different armed groups overlap, and understanding why some areas are more subject to violence than others. Drawing upon ACLED dataset on political violence, this thesis questions whether the nature of territorial control affects the behaviour of conflict actors towards civilians within their sphere of influence using a most different design of comparative case study.

When comparing levels of political violence between November 2018 and March 2019 to the same period in 2017-2018, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) noticed a 7028% increase in fatalities linked to direct attacks targeting civilians in Burkina Faso, with 499 persons killed. In Niger, 63 attacks resulting in 78 reported fatalities translated into a 600% increase in civilian targeting. And across the Sahel¹, the 2,151 reported fatalities account for almost half of the total 4,776 total reported fatalities in the region between November 2018 and March 2019.² These increasingly alarming numbers are solid indicators of widespread insecurity across the Sahel region, of which the civilians are the main victims.

In the aftermath of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the Libyan civil war, the security situation has been extremely volatile in the entire Sahel region. In the remote parts of the north and centre of Mali, state governance is lacking on a large-scale, and when it is present, it is often perceived as predatory or corrupt. Under those circumstances, in areas seemingly left ungoverned, criminal networks and insurgent groups, many of them jihadi extremists, have taken advantage of the situation and grown in both numbers and influence. Over the years, the instability that initially plagued northern Mali, also called *Azawad* by the separatists, started to spill-over in the neighbouring states of Niger and Burkina Faso. Some attributes this contamination to the heavy-handed military response in Mali by national and international security forces that compelled violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to retreat to the other side of the border. These groups include the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Ama'at Nusrat Al-Islam Wa Al-Muslimeen (JNIM) and Ansarul Islam. There, just as they did in Mali, they contributed to

¹ *Sahel in this context is composed of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan*

² ACLED. 2018. *Political Violence Skyrockets in the Sahel According to Latest ACLED Data.*

deteriorating the security situation by attacking hard as well as soft targets, tyrannising local populations and stoking ethnic conflicts.

B. Focus and scope

For the purpose of this study, the cases of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso between 2013 and 2019 will be analysed. More precisely, in the Tahoua and Tillaberi regions of Niger, and the Centre-Nord, Nord and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso, and the Ménaka, Timbuktu and Gao regions of Mali. In the Burkina Faso-Mali-Niger tri-border area, sometimes called the Liptako-Gourma, violence against civilians comes in many forms and shapes. A broad understanding of the concept is used here, following which any violent and one-sided attacks on unarmed, hence, vulnerable civilians will fall in this category. ACLED defines it as “violent events where an organised armed group deliberately inflicts violence upon unarmed non-combatants”.³ As such, accounts of sexual violence, abductions, extortion and theft, forced labour, targeted assassination, looting and destruction of private property, as well as the use of IEDs on civilian population are considered as instances of violence against civilians. Threats or attempts at inflicting any of the harms cited above are also accounted for.

In 2019, the civilian population of Burkina Faso was hit the hardest in the entire region. This surge in violence started off in 2016, when VEOs from Mali infiltrated the northern province of the country, bringing death and violence along with their radical ideology. At the start of 2016, a coordinated attack on several locations in Ouagadougou killed over 30 people, and was later claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al-Murabitoun, two Salafi terrorist groups. These two groups had already joined forces in the past, the most striking example being the Radisson Blu attack in Bamako in November 2015.⁴ Throughout the year, several cross-border attacks against national defence forces were conducted along the Mali-Burkina Border. In comparison, 2015 only saw four significant terrorist attacks resulting in less than ten casualties.⁵ By the end of 2017, this number climbed up to 50, with a newfound use of IEDs against both civilians and security forces, specifically in the Soum province.⁶ The following year, the volume of attacks and terrorism-related activities had nearly tripled, as it spread from the northernmost to the easternmost provinces, as did IEDs, now used in nine other

³ ACLED. *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook*

⁴ Mapping Militant Organisations. (2018). Al Mourabitoun. *Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)*, available at:

⁵ United States Department of State (2016). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015 - Burkina Faso*, available at: [accessed 27 March 2020]

⁶ United States Department of State. (2018). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Burkina Faso*, available at: [accessed 27 March 2020]

provinces.⁷ Following this dramatic development, the state of emergency was declared in a limited number of provinces,⁸ but by December 2019, it was prolonged until January 2021 and extended to a total of 14 provinces.⁹

At the same time, Burkina Faso intensified its bilateral and regional coordination with the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the French *Opération Barkhane*, reaffirmed its commitment to the Nouakchott Process while contributing 1700 troops to the MINUSMA.¹⁰ Finally, a massive influx of internally displaced persons shook Burkina Faso in 2019, rising from 47,000 IDPs in January 2019 to 560,000 in December 2019, peaking in September, when the number of IDPs nearly doubled, going from 280,000 to 486,000.¹¹ Even if the repeated attacks on civilian targets by Islamist groups are the driving force behind this displacement, military operations, and ethnic and intercommunal conflicts have also contributed to this phenomenon. And by March 2020, some 220,000 additional IDPs were accounted for in a new wave of displacement, bringing their numbers to 779,741.¹²

In parallel, Niger has witnessed similar patterns of insecurity leading to high numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, although not as extreme as in Burkina Faso. Currently, the country is facing danger on two fronts: in the north-eastern province of Diffa, Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Provinces are multiplying attacks against security forces and civilians, while multiple armed groups is significantly disturbing the stability of the western regions of Tahoua and Tillabéri. However, only the latter case will be studied in this paper because of its connection with the security situation of Mali and Burkina Faso that will be further elaborated upon later. As of February 29th 2020, the UNHCR reported 95,033 IDPs and 58,831 Malian refugees in this region.¹³ Starting in March 2018, extremists lead an IED campaign there too, underlining the sharing of knowledge between insurgent groups in the region.¹⁴ In 2019, violence seemed to have moved deeper within the country's borders, once again following a similar trajectory to neighbouring Burkina Faso.¹⁵ A possible

⁷ Pavlik, M., et al. (2019). Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger. *ACLED Data*.

⁸ *Burkina Faso declares partial state of emergency*. (2018, December 31). RFI.

⁹ The 14 provinces are Kossi, Sourou, Koulpélogo, Gnagna, Gourma, Komandjari, Kompienga, Tapoa, Kéné Dougou, Loroum, Oudalan, Séno, Soum and Yagha; Service d'Information Du Gouvernement Du Burkina Faso. (2019). *Conseil des ministres du vendredi 27 décembre 2019: Prorogation de l'état d'urgence sur 12 mois*.

¹⁰ United States Department of State. (2019). *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018*.

¹¹ UNHCR. (2020). *Operational Portal – Refugee situation – Burkina Faso* [accessed 27 March 2020]

¹² *idem*

¹³ UNHCR. (2020). *Tillabéri and Tahoua regions – Malian refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) March 2020*

¹⁴ Pavlik, M., et al. (2019). *Op. cit.*

¹⁵ Mahanty, D., & Meeker, W. (2019). A Bulwark against Further Instability in West Africa. CSIS.

explanation could come from the intensified counterterrorism activity of the *Opération Barkhane* and the G5 Sahel in the bordering Tamalit region of Mali, pushing armed groups to move inwards.¹⁶ Unfortunately, as violence and militarisation rise at matching rates, so does the risk of civilian harm.

As can be seen, these three countries were selected for this study because they share numerous characteristics and challenges. In the first place, as stated above, they both suffer from increasing levels of violence in general, but mostly against civilian targets. In the second place, violence in the three countries can be traced back to the same actors: JNIM, ISGS and even Ansarul Islam, initially operating only within Burkina Faso, but quickly becoming transnational too. Finally, violence was initially restrained to border areas, but it gradually made its way further inside the country. Considering these three elements, it seemed legitimate to study the neighbouring regions of Niger and Burkina Faso in addition to Mali itself.

C. Questions and objectives

The main research question here will be:

Why is there spatial variation in violence against civilians?

By looking at the location of events of violence against civilians in the Liptako-Gourma, this research aims at identifying patterns between the inter-rebel relationship and occurrence of violence across time and space. In this regard, geo-referenced data on violence against civilians available from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)¹⁷ will be compared to reported zones of influence of the numerous armed groups operating in the region, available from the ECFR project named *Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel*¹⁸, as presented in Map 1. By working at the first and second administrative division level, displacement of violence along the informal borders of control between armed groups can be observed.

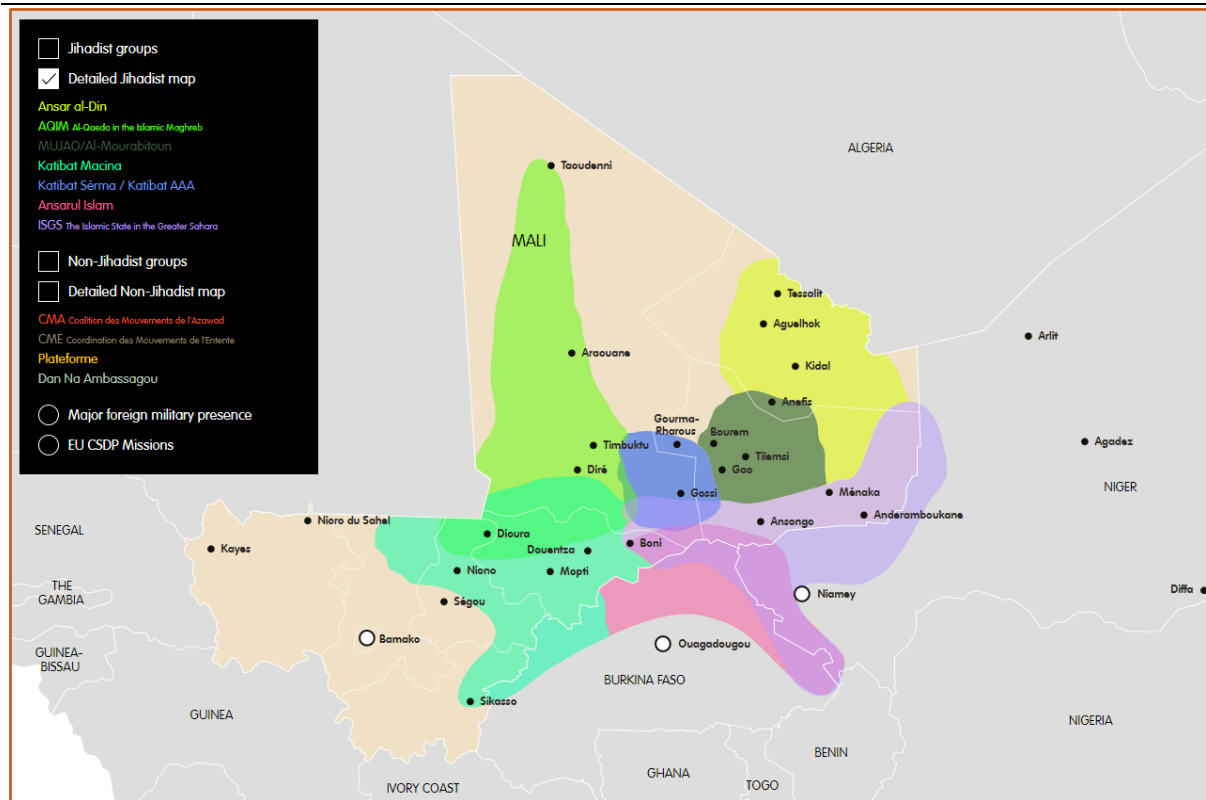
In this context, two sub-questions arise: “Why are some armed groups more lethal than others?” When comparing the number of attacks lead by a certain actor to the number of fatalities it caused, it becomes clear that some groups kill more than others, hence the use of lethal in this question. The second question is “Is violence more common in areas where territorial control

¹⁶ UNHCR & CIAUD. (2020). *Rapport Annuel de monitoring de protection dans la région de Tahoua, Janvier-Décembre 2019*

¹⁷ Raleigh, C., Andrew L., et al. (2010). Introducing ACLED - Armed Conflict Location and Event Data. *Journal of Peace Research*. 47(5), 651- 660.

¹⁸ Lebovich, A. (2019). *Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel*. European Council on Foreign Relations. the author also used ACLED data to estimate and map the territory of the main armed groups.

is overlapping between different groups or in areas controlled by a single armed group?” Theory will help us to formulate possible answers to these questions.



Map 1: Jihadist presence across Mali and the Liptako-Gourma¹⁹

D. Relevance and importance

By analysing dynamics of territorial control using qualitative data in combination with ACLED datasets on violence against civilians in coming, the objective of this thesis is to broaden theoretical considerations by questioning how control over physical territories can affect levels of violence against civilian targets. While Stathis N. Kalyvas’ theory provided the basis for our work, I attempt to go beyond the traditional dyadic understanding of conflict. By introducing a third actor type – militias – to rebels and government forces, explanations of the causes of violence against civilians would be more representative of the reality. Thus, this research hopes to advance the civil conflict and counterinsurgency literatures by looking at the parallel between the spatial distribution of violence and territorial control.

This topic is also timely. For the year 2018, the Internal Displaced Monitoring Center (IDMC) placed the total number of people living in displacement in their home country at 41.3 million.

¹⁹ Lebovich, A. (2019). *Op. cit.*

Among them, it registered 10.8 million new conflict-related displacements, of which 69.1% took place in Sub-Saharan Africa. Given that the latest waves of displacement in Burkina Faso, and to a lesser extent Niger, reached levels similar of those of Somalia, Nigeria and Central African Republic in 2018, it is important to determine how violence is likely to evolve. In the same vein, this thesis is expected to provide methodological tool to anticipate, detect, and potentially prevent, acts of violence targeting civilians. By demonstrating such trends and adopting a human security approach, in contrast with the traditional state security approach, I hope to highlight the need for greater protection for those made more vulnerable by conflict-induced displacement.

This thesis is organised as follows: After contextualising the topic by reviewing literature on civilian victimisation and territorial control, I build an argument suggesting that the nature of territorial control influences the frequency and lethality of violent events targeting civilians. The next section covers the research design and data, discussing our various variable in relation to our analysis method. Chapter 4 describes the historical context of this study, before introducing the case studies in-depth and providing further information about the actors involved in our cases. The two final sections present the results of the case analysis in three separate section following different Kalyvas' arguments, before discussing the conclusions of the thesis and offering general recommendations about the situation in the Sahel.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an explanation for the epidemic of violence that is currently unfolding in almost absolute silence in the Sahel. As it can be traced back to, or at least put in parallel with, the proliferation of armed groups in the region, two strands of literature on armed conflicts are relevant: first, studies about civilian harm; and second, studies about territorial control.

A. Armed conflicts and civilian harm

What is civilian victimisation? I will use the definition of Alexander B. Downes as a base to build up a personal conceptualisation of this phenomenon. In his book *Targeting Civilians in War*, “civilian victimisation is a military strategy chosen by political or military elites that targets and kills noncombatants intentionally or which fails to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants and thus kills large numbers of the latter.”²⁰ Also, other instances of violence such as “abductions, torture, beatings, sexual violence, and the destruction of property”²¹, not to mention instances of forced relocation and depopulation. Finally, remote violence caused by drones, IEDs and mines has become an integral part of the definition, since these methods often cause harm indiscriminately of the nature of the target.

In war, combatants are routinely taking civilians as targets, whether the former belongs to a national army or insurgent forces, in both international and intrastate contexts. As mentioned earlier, armed groups have acted against noncombatants in complete disregard of normative and legal rules aimed at protecting the latter. Across the past three centuries, among all the war-related death, the civilian percentage has been estimated to be around 50%.²² Even if international wars killed more civilians in finite numbers than other types of wars, because of the gruesome total of deaths, the rates were lower than civil, imperial and decolonisation wars. And wars triggered by conquest and independence have caused more casualties in general, killing the lowest percentage of civilians. In comparison, ethnic and religious conflicts have killed the highest rate of civilians, around 76% of all casualties.²³

Before the 90s, most of the literature on armed conflicts was more interested in explaining the causes of conflict rather than its consequences, among which figured genocide, forced

²⁰ Downes, A. B. (2008). *Targeting civilians in war*. Cornell University Press.

²¹ Wood, R. M. (2014). From Loss to Looting? Battlefield Costs and Rebel Incentives for Violence. *International Organisation*, 68(4), 986.

²² Eckhardt, W. (1989). Civilian Deaths in Wartime. *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 20(1), 90.

²³ *Idem*. 91-92.

displacements and mass killings. At the time, the dominant view claimed that civilian casualties, in any number, were merely a by-product of war.²⁴ Wrong time, wrong place and poor accuracy of increasingly destructive weapons, were all excuses that notably gave rise to the term “collateral damage” by the end of the Vietnam War.²⁵ At the time, US military experts considered civilian deaths in conflict as unintentional and as such, unproblematic. As Kalyvas points out,²⁶ when denying the deliberate nature of the killing of unarmed civilians was not a possibility, scholars then argued that it was the result of random or irrational behaviour, and sadistic leaders. Influential theories of the nineties, such as Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*²⁷ and Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*?²⁸, both justified the occurrence of massacres in former Yugoslavia by ethnic or tribal strife, ideology and political division.

At the end the nineties, this type of argument started to become increasingly challenged. After conducting a number of rationalist analysis of conflicts and subsequent massacres in the Balkans²⁹ or in Algeria³⁰, scholars started to dismiss the determinant role of ethnicity in indiscriminate violence.³¹ It’s only from this point on that the argument of targeting civilians as part of greater strategic ambition started to gain momentum, a development often attributed to the major work of Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*³². As it developed, the motivations behind the indiscriminate targeting of civilians have increasingly been brought to the fore. So far authors have usually set their sight on the use of violence by official government forces. Indeed, because of their large capacity in terms of personnel, resources and firepower, they have the means to carry out violence on a greater scale than other actors.³³ In addition, civil and internal wars have also been at the centre of numerous studies, rather than interstate wars. A phenomenon that can be explained by the decline of interstate conflicts since the end

²⁴ Valentino, B. A. (2014). Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17(1), 91-92.

²⁵ Conway-Lanz, S. (2006). *Collateral damage: Americans, noncombatant immunity, and atrocity after world war II*. 220.

²⁶ Kalyvas, S. N. (1999). Wanton and senseless?: The logic of massacres in Algeria. *Rationality and Society*, 11(3), 243–285.

²⁷ Kaplan, R. (2005). *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*. Pan Macmillan. (Originally published in 1993).

²⁸ Huntington, S. P. (1993). The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22–49.

²⁹ Sadowski, Y. (1998). Ethnic Conflict. *Foreign Policy*, 111, 12.

³⁰ Kalyvas, S. N. (1999). *op. cit.*

³¹ Valentino, B., Huth, P., & Balch-Lindsay, D. (2004). “Draining the Sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare. *International Organisation*, 58(02), 402.

³² Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

³³ Raleigh, C. (2012). Violence Against Civilians: A Disaggregated Analysis. *International Interactions*, 38(4), 462–481.

of the Cold War, in combination with the higher rates of civilian death in civil wars, as shown above.³⁴

Further, the dominant frame conceptualised strategic violence against civilians in internal armed conflict as bilateral, with the government on one side, and rebel groups on the other. Typical of guerrilla insurgencies, studies have shown that consolidated democracies and authoritarian regimes alike have resorted to mass killings of civilians when struggling against insurgencies enjoying vast popular support. Even if the latter undemocratic states are more likely to kill civilians *en masse* than democracies, the influence of the regime type is relatively weak.³⁵ In this case, violence against civilians is more widely used by the state, as punishment, denial, or as an assortative strategy. For all of them, the central problem stems from the lack of information about the loyalties and identities of individual civilians.³⁶

In the first scenario, violence is meant to discourage collaboration, punishing those currently aiding the enemy and deterring those considering joining, in a cost-benefit calculation fashion as described by Kalyvas. This will be discussed in further details in the next section.³⁷ However, indiscriminate violence can backfire and push further individuals to defect toward the opposing faction.³⁸ In the second case, incumbents perceive the local population as a resource base for the insurgents, providing the latter with food, recruits, intelligence or “human camouflage”.³⁹ For this reason, mass killings of civilians is expected to deprive the enemy of these vital resources and logistics. Often, one side will attack to other’s ethnic constituencies, since it is a shortcut to resolve the identification problem. The same goes for political orientation and geographical location.⁴⁰

At the same time, such violence can cause displacement, which can be assimilated to a depopulation strategy, where inhabitants of an area are indiscriminately forced to flee.⁴¹ The carpet bombing of Chechnya in 1999 is a tragic example of what was later known as “pacification by depopulation”.⁴² Finally, civilian victimisation can be used as a way to

³⁴ Kalyvas, S. N. (2001). “New” and “old” civil wars: A valid distinction? *World Politics*, 54(1), 99.

³⁵ Valentino, B., Huth, P., & Balch-Lindsay, D. (2004). *Op. cit.* 403.

³⁶ Lichtenheld, A. (2018). Explaining Population Displacement Strategies in Civil Wars: A Cross National Analysis. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

³⁷ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *op. cit.*, 196.

³⁸ *Idem.* 203.

³⁹ Valentino, B., Huth, P., & Balch-Lindsay, D. (2004). “Draining the Sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare. *International Organisation*, 58(02).

⁴⁰ Fjelde, H., & Hultman, L. (2014). Weakening the Enemy: A Disaggregated Study of Violence against Civilians in Africa. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(7), 1230–1257.

⁴¹ Lichtenheld, A. (2018). *op. cit.* 6.

⁴² Hoffman, D. (1999, December 5). Russian Military Finds War a Shot in the Arm. *The Washington Post*.

overcome the identification problem. Previously unknown loyalties and identities can be inferred by generating incentives – indiscriminate violence – for populations to move out of an area and observing the communities in which civilians will settle down.⁴³ In this context, the dominant ethnic affiliation of a location can become a more efficient indicator for collective targeting than identification of individual ethnic identities, given that ethnic groups have a propensity to inhabit contiguous areas. Especially in Africa, where nearly 70% of all minority ethnopolitical groups are clustered in one contiguous geographical territory.⁴⁴

On the other side, when looking at cases of rebel violence against civilians, even if most of the scenarios above are applicable here too, other motivations have been observed. First, it seems that territorial control has an influence on the occurrence and repertoire of violence as a whole. When armed groups enjoy little territorial control, they tend to resort to bombings, abductions and targeted assassination to stay under the radar since they do not have the capacity to face defence forces head-on. Reversely, groups able to carve themselves a piece of territory, providing them with safe havens and a recruitment pool, will partake in more symmetric battles and raids against facilities such as military camps and police stations, thus decreasing the level of violence against local populations.⁴⁵ In support of this argument, Wood argues that the capabilities of insurgent group can be correlated to changes in level of violence against civilians. In this context, groups possessing fewer resources will tend to engage in anticivilian violence to make up for their lack of capabilities as to suppress dissent. Whereas better equipped groups can become alternative to the state, substituting violence for other incentives such as protection, justice or employment to incite support for the insurgents.⁴⁶

On a side note terrorist groups, especially Salafist ones, rarely operate in isolation; the main conflict actors operating in the Sahel are affiliated to larger organisations such as al-Qaeda, for JNIM, and the Islamic State, for the ISGS. Being part of networks or alliances allows these groups to share information and techniques, supplement their manpower and capacities thus reinforcing their influence and power.⁴⁷ In regard to the argument of this thesis, this could have implications for levels of violence against civilians. Horowitz and Potter argue that terrorist

⁴³ Lichtenheld, A. (2018). *op. cit.* 10.

⁴⁴ Scarritt, J., & McMillan, S. (2016). Protest and Rebellion in Africa: Explaining Conflicts between Ethnic Minorities and the State in the 1980s. *Comparative Political Studies*, 28(3), 328.

⁴⁵ de la Calle, L., & Sánchez-Cuenca, I. (2015). How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(10), 810.

⁴⁶ Wood, R. M. (2010). Rebel capability and strategic violence against civilians. *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(5), 612.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, M. C., & Potter, P. B. K. (2013). Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 200.

organisations form alliances for the same reasons businesses collaborates: lower costs, increased effectiveness resulting in improved competition against others “in the marketplace”. For terrorist organisations, this translates into increased levels of lethality for their attacks.⁴⁸

As can be seen, the above-mentioned literature shows how the conceptual framework on anti-civilian violence has evolved over the years. First conceived as a by-product of warfare, it is now recognised as one of its integral components. As such, recent research has been increasingly concerned with uncovering which dynamics and characteristics of civil warfare are precipitating factors of violence against civilians, and which are inhibitors. By looking at conflict actors, their interactions and their environment, analyses seem to confirm that such violence is usually part of larger strategic ambitions. On the ground however, spatial and temporal variations in anti-civilian violence have appeared, which requires new hypothesis to be laid out.

B. Territorial control as indicator of anti-civilian violence

One of the leading scholars on territorial control and violence is Kalyvas. In his main work, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006), he defines “Control” as the fact that an actor has a non-temporary armed presence in a location, allowing it to defend the location from attack and/or prevent the presence or infiltration of enemy combatant.⁴⁹ The author presents several causal pathways that could potentially explain why certain areas are more prone to violence than others. One of the first arguments claims that in the absence of sufficient means to impose and maintain full and permanent control, violence is then seen as a viable strategy to achieve this goal. At the same time, violence-induced control prevents defection and promotes collaboration.

In this sense, territorial control becomes paramount for armed groups. Previous research on rebels in the context of civil wars insurgencies have investigated both rebel alliances⁵⁰, and rebel fragmentation and in-fighting⁵¹. Authors have also studied how changes in conflict agents’

⁴⁸ *Idem*.

⁴⁹ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press. 210-212.

⁵⁰ Akcinaroglu, S. (2012). Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56(5), 879–903; Bapat, N. A., & Bond, K. D. (2012). Alliances between Militant Groups. *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(4), 793–824; Popovic, M. (2018). Inter-Rebel Alliances in the Shadow of Foreign Sponsors. *International Interactions*, 44(4), 749–776; Horowitz, M. C., & Potter, P. B. K. (2014). Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 58(2), 199–225.

⁵¹ Fjelde, H., & Nilsson, D. (2012). Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 56(4), 604–628; Pischedda, C. (2015). *Wars Within Wars: Understanding Inter-rebel Fighting* [PhD Thesis]. Columbia University. Walther, O. *et al* (2020). Political Fragmentation and Alliances among Armed Non-state Actors in North and Western Africa (1997–2014). *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(1), 167–186.

dynamics can affect civilian populations⁵² and why rebel groups can gradually shift from coercive to contractual behaviours.⁵³ However, little empirical research exists on why certain areas located within one actor's territory witness higher levels of rebel violence against civilians compared to others. This gap in knowledge is all the more significant considering that past studies have shown that civilian harm is often the result of internal struggles between conflict actors. In addition, such violence can be interpreted as a measurement of current conflict dynamics, but also of the influence exerted by conflict actors over defined territories. In this context, warring parties use violence against civilians as a strategic and communicative act to signal to their adversaries their ability and willingness to spill blood.⁵⁴ This could potentially explain why certain groups target even their co-ethnics and potential supporters, such as Ansarul Islam attacking Fulani villages in northern Burkina Faso.

A second argument underlines the temporal and changing aspects of civil war. As the conflict drags on, resources and benefits become scarce and so does the loyalty of individuals. In return, the use of violence gradually becomes a less expensive alternative to secure the collaboration of civilians. In short, fear and coercion are more effective in producing loyalty, at least in the short term, than material benefits or ideological preference.⁵⁵ This shows the pragmatism of civilian population faced with violence, and how idealism and pre-war preferences lose out to personal survival. For instance, Ansarul Islam has resorted to extreme levels of violence against civilians to deter collaboration with armed forces and local militias; 55% of violent events involving the Burkinabe organisation have targeted civilians.⁵⁶ Reversely, Sahelian VEOs have been known to use the carrot and the stick to capture the loyalty of civilians. Just as did the Taliban or al-Shabaab between 2007 and 2011 when its territorial control was at its height,⁵⁷ the insurgents provide the population with basic services such as local dispute settlement, access to Quranic education and protection on market days. In the end, territorial control is necessary for threats to be credible as it trumps any other factors. Populations living in areas where one

⁵² Raleigh, C., & Choi, H. J. (2017). Conflict Dynamics and Feedback: Explaining Change in Violence against Civilians within Conflicts. *International Interactions*, 43(5), 848–878.

⁵³ Metelits, C. (2007). *Coercion and Collusion: Change in Rebel Group Treatment of Civilians* [PhD Thesis]. Northwestern University.

⁵⁴ Raleigh, C., & Choi, H. J. (2017). 4.

⁵⁵ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press. 115.

⁵⁶ Le Roux, P. (2019). *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel* (Africa Security Brief No. 36). Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group. (2016). *Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*. Jihad in Modern Conflict Special Report No. 1.

side exerts control are much less likely to collaborate with the rival side as the risk of violent reprisal is tangible.⁵⁸

Then, Kalyvas argues that collaboration is a function of both spatial and temporal variation. On one side, control of an area by an armed group brings support. On the other side, collaboration fluctuates over time, as a population previously controlled by one actor will end its collaboration as the actor loses control over the area. A prime example of this temporal logic is given by the *Opération Barkhane*, the 5000 men-strong French force operating in the Sahel. As they helped crush the Tuareg-turned-jihadist rebellion in 2013, they were welcomed like heroes in cities liberated from the likes of MUJAO or AQIM.⁵⁹ Nowadays however, its presence is increasingly contested by fragments of the population since the influence of extremists has flourished, and violence has been skyrocketing despite French and international counterterrorism efforts.⁶⁰ With this in mind, armed actors are more likely to launch indiscriminate attacks against populations living in areas dominantly controlled by an opponent, as indiscriminate violence in civil conflicts seems to be a function of territorial control by insurgents and incumbents.

Other arguments suggest that changes in the technology of war, shifting from conventional front-and column-based warfare to “irregular”, “asymmetric” or “guerrilla” warfare, are responsible for higher levels of violence. The argument takes three directions. First, Irregular warfare is conceived as a Revolutionary war in which groups fighting in a civil war are polarised and hold deeply rooted antagonisms against each other. This can be the case in ideologically, religiously or ethnically divided societies or in decolonisation wars as well. This deep-seated enmity would then transform into violence. The second hypothesis depicts irregular war as a Medieval war, where the absence of formal structures among non-professional armies leads to predatory behaviour against civilians. Finally, as clear front lines disappear, troops not familiar with irregular warfare might be destabilised by the inability to discern who and where their enemy is. In this context, the rational calculus of armed forces unable to identify the opponents will justify turning against the civilian population that may host informers or combatants as it solves the strategic issue of identification of the enemy at a low cost.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). 115.

⁵⁹ A 2013 Al Jazeera poll found that 96% of Malians in Bamako supported French intervention: Interactive: Mali Speaks. (2013, January 21). *Al Jazeera*.

⁶⁰ Bax, P., Fouquet, H., & Hoije, K. (2019, November 27). French Flag Burns in Mali As Islamists Overrun Frazzled Army. *Bloomberg.com*.

⁶¹ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press. 67-70.

All things considered, violence will be either selective or indiscriminate depending on the level of control that one actor has over a territory. Kalyvas built the following scale to discuss territorial control: full incumbent control, partial incumbent control, parity, partial insurgent control and full insurgent control. In this context, because civilians are reward-seeking and usually risk-averse agents, they will collaborate extensively with the group in control and provide information about enemy supporters. These defectors are identified by either, direct detection, or denunciation. And denunciation increases when control is high, because the dominant actor is able to protect its collaborators from the consequences of counterdenunciation. Under full control, the actor is able to engage in statelike activities, such as policing and taxing, but also deny access to its rival. As a result, there will be little defection toward the weaker actor because collaboration is widespread, which means that indiscriminate violence is unnecessary because the cost of selective targeting is low. But when control over an area is contested, defection will pick and so will selective violence, as the dominant player attempts to prevent further civilian collaboration with the enemy. But the rival faction, lacking information about the loyalties of the civilian population will have to resort to indiscriminate violence to obtain the same result. It must be said that indiscriminate violence can produce counterproductive effects in the long-term as civilians will face the same risk of being killed whether they actually collaborate with the enemy or not. In short, levels of violence will rise the more contested an area is, and the conflict agent enjoying the least territorial control is more likely to engage in indiscriminate violence in this area.⁶²

According to the paragraph above, high levels of violence indicate competition over territorial control between armed actors. Territory-grabbing by one actor could incite the losing side to ramp up attacks on civilians as a tactic to acquire resources or loyalty through force, or to weaken the enemy's support base.⁶³ Reversely, low levels of violence are correlated with a more hegemonic hold over the territory by one actor. Thus, I view civilian targeting at the hand of armed actors as a tool of intra- and inter- group communication and competition, which is amplified by territorial control fragmentation. In areas where control is unchallenged, the odds of defection and the need to signal influence to other groups is limited, conflict actors need little violence. Whereas in areas where many armed actors are active, violence against civilians is required to prevent them from informing and defecting to their adversaries, but also to display their capabilities. In a nutshell, I argue that a territory over which a larger number of actors

⁶² Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). 225-229.

⁶³ Raleigh, C., & Choi, H. J. (2017). *Op. cit.* 864

competes control by a corresponds to a heightened civilian victimisation. Thus, complete control by one actor would lower significantly violence against civilians, while shared control would increase this trend. As such, my prediction yields the following sets of hypotheses:

- H1a: *Fragmentation of territorial control between actors will lead to higher levels of violence against civilians in that area.*
- H1b: *Complete territorial control by one actor will lead to lower levels of violence against civilians in that area.*
- H2a: *Areas under fragmented control will witness more indiscriminate violence against civilians relatively to selective violence in that area.*
- H2b: *Areas under unitary control will witness more selective violence against civilians relatively to indiscriminate violence in that area.*

However, Kalyvas' theory examines only dyadic civil conflicts, with the government on one side, and insurgents on the other. In practice, civil wars are rarely a host to such straightforward dynamics as they are much more complex phenomenon, in which a multitude of actors interacts, emerges and disappears. Raleigh and Choi have attempted to fill this gap by studying how dynamics between the government, rebels and militias influence their patterns of violence against civilians. They find that acts of violence or territorial conquest by one type of agent, tend to generate reprisals against the population by other types of agent in the form of positive feedback loops.⁶⁴ Similarly, Dowd found that the conflict environment influences the level of violence against civilians. This means that the configuration of armed actors and their comparative strength indicates if Islamist groups will use more or less anti-civilian violence. Furthermore, opposition between territory-seeking groups, such as JNIM or the ISGS, and non-territory seeking ones tends to breed even more anti-civilian violence. Thus, this type of violence is strategic in nature, and often follows logic of signalling, retribution or competition.⁶⁵ As such, I include militias, whether they are ethnic, communal or political, in our analysis to avoid losing important dimensions of the conflict.

⁶⁴ Raleigh, C., & Choi, H. J. (2017). Conflict Dynamics and Feedback: Explaining Change in Violence against Civilians within Conflicts. *International Interactions*, 43(5), 862.

⁶⁵ Dowd, C. (2016). Fragmentation, Conflict, and Competition: Islamist Anti-civilian Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 31(3), 436.

Chapter 3. Research Design

Why civilians in certain regions are more likely to be killed by insurgents than those living in others? That is, why are insurgents more inclined to victimise civilian population in one area, while being less aggressive in others? What is puzzling is that despite similar conditions some areas witness much more violence against the local civilian population, moving from relatively low to extreme levels of violence.

In the Liptako-Gourma region, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara enjoys an almost hegemonic control over the borders between Burkina Faso and Niger and between Niger and Mali, almost up to Algeria. In the latter area, even if civilian victimisation is very present, it is dwarfed when compared to the levels of violence that characterises the northern border between Burkina Faso and Mali. There, elements of the al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM, al Murabitoun and Katibat Macina, are sowing terror by targeting both civilians and other armed actors, while local militias are exacting their own kind of justice against the civilian population over ethnic strife and land conflicts. Not to mention the frequent military operations led in the tri-border region by national armies, the *Opération Barkhane* or the G5 Sahel Joint Force, that only add more fuel to an already explosive situation. Thus, what can explain this difference? Why is the Niger-Burkina Faso border less hostile than the Burkina Faso-Mali's? And how does territorial control influence the rate and lethality of attacks against civilians?

A. Method

This thesis uses a Millian method of comparative case study known as method of difference or “most similar systems design” (MSSD), that fits the cross-sectional aspect of the thesis where I explore the difference in the rate of occurrence of an event. Following the initial description by Przeworski and Teune in 1970, this method allows researchers to explore variations of observed behaviours.⁶⁶ The factors considered as non-relevant then only explain the variations within their cases alone. In brief, this method, by looking at cases as possibly similar to each other within the case selection, apart the phenomenon of interest, assumes that the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable can be tested by keeping all other variables constant.⁶⁷ In this thesis, these variables are the occurrence of violence against civilians and the nature of territorial control across two areas that share important similarities. The main

⁶⁶ Teune, H., & Przeworski, A. (1970). *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*. Wiley-Interscience. New York.

⁶⁷ Anckar, C. (2008). On the Applicability of the Most Similar Systems Design and the Most Different Systems Design in Comparative Research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(5), 390.

premise of this approach is that the degree of fragmentation of territorial control will explain the variation of one-sided violence targeting civilian populations granted all other relevant factors are similar; the more fragmented control is, the more violence is likely to be observed. The extraneous variables are the *population density* in the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger; the *presence of displaced persons* whether they are refugees, IDPs or returnees; the *presence of an international border* allowing for cross-border attacks; and the *ethnic diversity* of the population living in the area of interest. The *terrain* could also influence the dynamics of violence as it can offer shelter to armed groups.

B. Case selection

As mentioned above, the cases compared in this thesis are the Gourma, sitting across Mali and Burkina Faso, and the Liptako, a large area divided between Niger, Mali and Burkina. Although the cases will be described in depth in Chapter 4, laying down the similarities and differences of the features that justify the use of the method of difference. The first area covers almost half of the border between Mali and Burkina Faso. It includes the Burkinabe provinces of Kossi, Sourou (Boucle du Mouhoun), Yatenga, Loroum (Nord), Soum (Sahel), and the Malian *cercles* of Bankass, Bandiagara Koro and Douentza (Mopti). The combined population is 3,558,073 inhabitants living across 123,455km² for an average population density of 28,82/km². The bulk of the area is semi-desertic plains, with steppe vegetation or a type of shortgrass savanna typical of the Sahel, forest areas and Sudanese savannas start to appear around Sourou, Kossi and southernmost part of Bankass. Central Mali is made of plains and plateau alternatively, and the northernmost part of the Gourma-Rharous start to become desertic.⁶⁸ There is a total of 281604 displaced persons across Zone A, with more than half located in Soum, including the bulk of Malian refugees living in the Mentao camp. In Mali, Bandiagara *cercles*, further from the border area, hosts thousands of IDPs, Bankass and Koro to a certain extent too.

The second area, the Liptako, represents 19 administrative divisions: the Burkinabe provinces of Oudalan, Seno, Yagha (Sahel), Komanjdjari, Gourma, Tapoa (Est); the Malian *cercles* of Gao, Ansongo, (Gao) Ménaka, Andéramboukane (Ménaka); and finally the Nigerian departments: Bankilaré, Torodi, Ayorou, Ouallam, Banibangou, Téra, Gothèye, Say, Abala, Tillabéri (Tillabéri). The northern parts of the area, between Oudalan and Abala are desertic to semi-desertic steppes and agricultural land, but the southern part of the Burkina has forests and savannas due the Mekrou and Oti rivers that form part of the border with Benin. The transition

⁶⁸ Cotillon, S. E. (2017). *Op. cit.* 1.

area that characterises southern Tillabéri and the upper Est region is mostly steppe, rocky land and bare soil.⁶⁹ An estimated 4,562,828 people were living in that area of 198,975 km², which represents a slightly lower population density of 22,93 inhabitants per km², although still similar enough to be compared. To the best of our knowledge, the number of refugees and IDPs is estimated to be 252,977, who are either living among host populations or official camps. Northern Tillabéri host three refugee camps, most of them being Malian Tuareg having fled intercommunal violence in nearby Ménaka.⁷⁰ IDP locations can be found all along the border with Mali, and more recently on the border with Burkina, in Téra and Torodi.⁷¹ In Burkina Faso, the bulk of Malian refugees and IDPs can be found in Seno and Oudalan ore also hosting 50,000 of the 560,000 internally displaced persons throughout Burkina Faso in December 2019. In Mali, Ménaka and Gao host the most IDPs⁷², but also some Nigerien refugees.⁷³

In general, the types of warring actors involved in the conflict are similar and can be sorted in three types: militias, violent extremist organisations, and security and defence forces. Second, these two cases are in fact two fronts of the same conflict. The historical premises of much of the violence can be traced back to the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, an insurgency that spread instability and religious extremism throughout the entire Sahel region. As such, the underlying causes of the violence are similar in the three countries over which span our cases; in areas where the state is absent, violent extremist organisations have tried to fill that void to bolster their influence and legitimacy. Having recruited heavily among the Fulani community by exploiting the long-standing discrimination suffered by this community, they may have acted as a catalyst and actually stoked pre-existing inter-communal tensions. As these groups acted out their expansion strategy over the entire tri-border area, militias of all types have organised themselves to protect their community. At the same time, national security and defence forces have retaliated indiscriminately against those communities they felt had ties with the insurgent by using scorched-earth tactics and mass extra-judicial killings.⁷⁴ This explosive cocktail has pitted one community against another, fuelling a bloody feedback-mechanism of violence where civilians are the main victims.

⁶⁹ Cotillon, S. E. (2017). *Op. cit.*

⁷⁰ UNHCR. (2020). *Situation des réfugiés maliens 31 Décembre 2019* [Map].

⁷¹ UNHCR. (2020). *Synthèse Globale des données des réfugiés maliens au Burkina Faso (au 31 Décembre 2019)*.

⁷² Commission Mouvements de Population. (2019). *Rapport sur les mouvements de populations du 31 Déc. 2019*.

⁷³ Médecins Sans Frontières. (2020, March 11). *Fuyant les violences au Niger, les réfugiés au Mali restent démunis*. MSF Luxembourg.

⁷⁴ Kishi, R., Pavlik, M., & Jones, S. (2020). Year In Review 2019. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. 28.

Although these cases are part of the same conflict, the Gourma theatre has witnessed significantly more violent events compared to the Liptako theatre area, and has also a larger number of armed groups operating in its region than the latter. In this regard, given the control variables are held constant, the covariation seems to indicate a phenomenon that could be corroborated, or falsified, using the MSSD, which warrants a comparison.

Year	Zone A: Gourma			Zone B: Liptako		
	All events	VAC	%	All events	VAC	%
2013	12	6	50%	62	16	26%
2014	2	0	0%	24	5	21%
2015	19	6	32%	34	9	26%
2016	43	17	40%	27	9	33%
2017	162	75	46%	122	45	37%
2018	329	213	65%	263	149	57%
2019	647	419	65%	371	259	70%
2020	269	140	59%	232	160	69%
Grand Total (exc. 2020)	1214	736	61%	907	589	65%

Table 1: Count of all violent events and violent events targeting civilians per year

C. Data

In order to test existing theories of violence against civilians, I use disaggregated data on violence against civilians in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from January 1, 2013 to December 31, 2019⁷⁵, exported from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset.⁷⁶ It collects information on the characteristics of political violence events, reporting for each event: when did an event occur, where did it occur, who was involved, and what occurred following a nine-event taxonomy. ACLED focuses on events of political violence and protest, which means that criminal violence is excluded, following specific guidelines from their codebook to distinguish one from the other. To quote C. Raleigh, “Disaggregated analysis goes beyond tests of preestablished theoretical frameworks, and offers its own insights into conflict dynamics. It allows researchers to interpret how the dynamics of a conflict form, change, and interact across spatial and temporal scales.”⁷⁷ Although data from 2013 to 2016 is included in our dataset, the

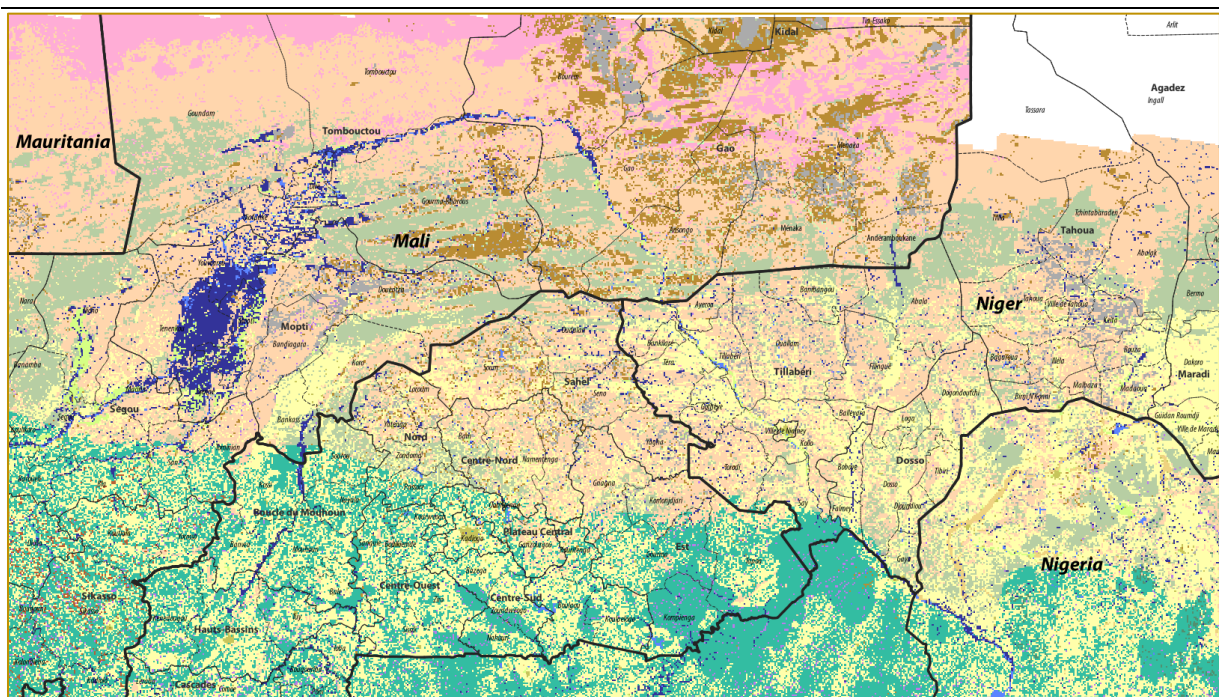
⁷⁵ Lates included event dates from 9 January 2020, when suspected JNIM and/or ISGS militants abducted five civilians, and seized a truck and merchandise in the village of Incare (Thiou, Yatenga). 11 January 2020 update.

⁷⁶ Raleigh, C., Linke, A., Hegre, H., & Karlsen, J. (2010). Introducing ACLED: An Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset: Special Data Feature. *Journal of Peace Research*.

⁷⁷ Raleigh, C. (2012). Violence Against Civilians: A Disaggregated Analysis. *International Interactions*, 38(4), 464.

analysis will focus on the 2017-2019 period since it is the most violent period. Also, from 2017, the actor landscape stabilizes with the creation of the ISGS and JNIM.

On *terrain*, data on land use and land cover in Western Africa allowed to compare the type of terrain. Relying on thousands of aerials and satellite photographs and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping tools, researchers divided the map in a grid made up of 2km wide squares, colored according to the dominant vegetation type in the square. Data is available for the years 1975, 2000 and 2013, the latter being the one selected for this thesis.⁷⁸ The type of vegetation can be used to determine whether armed groups can benefit from woody cover to hide bases and avoid detection from aircrafts.



*Map 2: Land Use and Land Cover*⁷⁹

For the *refugee presence* variable, the location and number of refugees, IDPs and returnees can be found by looking at maps produced by the Government of Mali, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Monthly and quarterly reports from the Malian government account for the number of displaced persons inside and outside the country since November 2016, although they incorporate data from 2013. The data is disaggregated at the first, second

⁷⁸ Cotillon, S. E. (2017). West Africa land use and land cover time series. *US Geological Survey, No. 2017-3004*

⁷⁹ Cotillon, S. E. (2017). West Africa land use and land cover time series. *US Geological Survey, No. 2017-3004*. Information about the color coding and descriptions of each vegetation type can be found o : <https://eros.usgs.gov/westafrica/land-use-land-cover-map>

and third administrative level (*Région, Cercle, Commune*) which provides a rich and precise source of data. In Burkina Faso and Niger, maps and datasets created by the UNHCR and OCHA are the most reliable too. Most of the time, data is only available for the first administrative level, although the exact position can be found through coordinates of refugee camps and IDP locations.

D. Variables

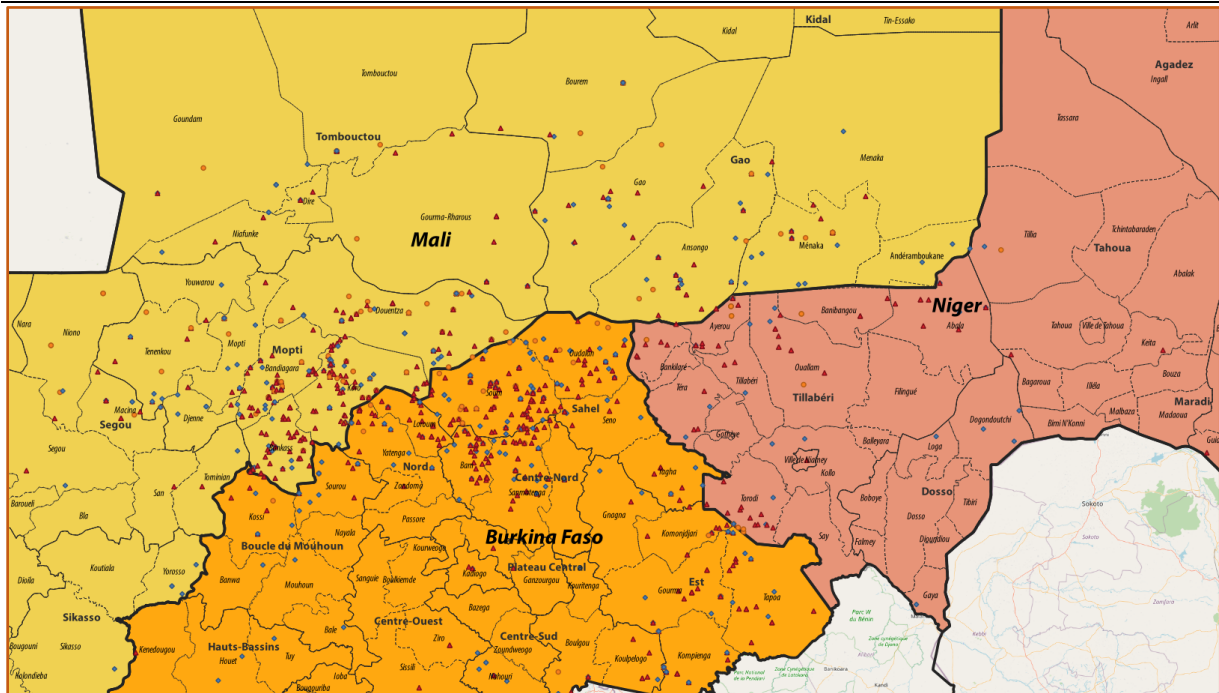
1. Dependent variable

Here the dependent variable will be the occurrence of one-sided events of violence against civilians. Using data from ACLED, I have access to a precise number of reported events of violence against civilians, that can be disaggregated in types of events. In the ACLED datasets covering 2013 to 2019, there were 6445 events recorded for Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Note that this is an ongoing conflict and ACLED is updated monthly, data was available up until May 2020, but it was decided not to include 2020 in the analysis as a full year is the temporal unit of this thesis. Among them, 2004 were included in the “Violence against civilians” *event_type* category. However, other events not included in this category could also have targeted civilians. In order to obtain precisely all instances of one-sided violence, the *interaction* column is particularly useful. The values in *Interaction* relay two types of information: first, each of the two numbers refers to a Group type, based on the goals and organisation forms. Each Group type was first recorded in the *Inter1* and *Inter2* columns, and only refers to the type of group listed in *Actor1* and *Actor2*, not taking into consideration additional associated actors. Second, the two numbers combined refer to the interaction between these two groups. Thus, considering that the code 7 in the *Inter1*, *Inter2* and *Interaction* columns refers to civilian as a party involved in an event, the values of the *Interactions* columns were filtered to include only those with 7 in them.⁸⁰ This method supplements the “Violence against civilians” *event_type* category (and associated sub-events) with other *sub-event types* that targeted civilians too: “Grenade”, “Remote explosive/landmine/IED”, “Looting/property destruction” and “Abduction/forced disappearance”, “Shelling/artillery/missile attack”, “Suicide bomb” and “Air/drone strike”.⁸¹ The remaining rows are events in which civilians were the primary targets of violence. After applying this filter, 2527 events remained from the

⁸⁰ Those included 17 (Military Versus Civilians); 27 (Rebels Versus Civilians), 37 (Political Militia Versus Civilians), 47 (Communal Militia Versus Civilians), and 78 (Other Actor Versus Civilians).

⁸¹ ACLED. (2017). *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook, 2019*.

initial 6445. As a remark, the fatalities column could also be used as a proxy for VAC or to account for variation of the lethality of the attacks.



Map 3: Violent events in 2019 in the Liptako-Gourma
 (● = Remote violence, ▲ = Violence against civilians, ◆ = Battles)

2. Independent variable

In accordance with the requirements of the MSSD method, only the variable of interest can vary, which is the level of fragmentation of territorial control over a defined area. To start with, a map of the armed actors in the Sahel drawn by Andrew Lebovich in May 2019⁸² was used to determine the location of territorial control. However, assessing the degree of fragmentation of the control is possible through qualitative data and geocoded data from the ACLED dataset and geographic information systems. Using Kalyvas denominations, control can vary in degrees on a scale ranging from uncontested control to fragmented control. Furthermore, territorial control will be analysed at the second subnational level, which is recorded in the *admin2* column of the ACLED dataset. Considering our cases span over transnational borders, working at the country level would be difficult. Plus studying phenomenon that are concentrated in particular areas makes working at the sub-national level more pertinent, as it brings a higher level of precision and offers more widely generalisable observations.

⁸² Lebovich, A. (2019). Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel. *European Council on Foreign Relations*.

To assess fragmentation, a simple formula creates a score by taking into account conflict events attributed to the armed actors and the total count of these actors in a defined area. Although it accounts for actor fragmentation, rather than territory directly, it serves as a proxy for the latter. This calculation gives out a score that reflects “the dominance of a single actor in conflict, while a higher score reflects more equal distribution of violence across groups.”⁸³ This fragmentation index is a practical tool to compare cases that see variation in their absolute level of violence. Fortunately, the author of the formula applied it to ACLED datasets, and describes the procedure to create the index, which was then replicated to produce the results figuring in **Table 2**.

Year	Zone A			Zone B		
	Count	Fragm.	Events	Count	Fragm.	Events
2013	3	2,33	14	7	4,45	51
2014	3	2,27	5	9	6,37	22
2015	6	5,4	9	10	7,41	20
2016	9	4,89	30	8	6,43	15
2017	10	5,87	84	16	8,28	54
2018	16	6,57	265	18	2,98	199
2019	16	2,71	693	13	1,27	315

Table 2: Actor Count, Fragmentation Index and Total Event Count for each zone⁸⁴

3. Control variables

First, the presence of *international borders* has long been a predictor of the scope and duration of conflict. As interactions between two areas are facilitated by contiguity, the length of the border directly influences the level of interactions, whether positive or negative.⁸⁵ Control of national borders is important to insurgents as it allows them to establish bases out of the government reach, but also to trade for natural resources and weapons.⁸⁶ Although in the Sahel, the establishment of the G5-S Joint Force capable of operating within 50km of the border shared by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso might prevent this trend.

⁸³ Dowd, C. (2015). Actor proliferation and the fragmentation of violent groups in conflict. *Research & Politics*, 2(4), 3.

⁸⁴

⁸⁵ Furlong K., & Gleditsch, P. (2003). The Boundary Dataset. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 20(1), 94.

⁸⁶ Buhaug, H. (2005). *The Geography of Armed Civil Conflict* [Doctoral Thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology]. 67.

Secondly, *population density* and *population size* can be an indicator of violence, as countries with large but dispersed population seem to suffer from higher risks of internal conflicts.⁸⁷ Both variables will be constructed from official population projection for the year 2018. *Population density* will be calculated for both areas of interest, based on the population size and total area of the second subnational division. In our case, the population is low to very low, usually under 50 inhabitants per km².

Thirdly, *ethnic diversity* the population in those areas is usually ethnically diverse, even if some ethnic groups are more predominant in certain areas than others: Dogon in Mopti, Fulani in Soum, Gourmantché in Gourma, Tuareg in Gao and Ménaka, Songhai in Gourma-Rharous. This thesis relies on qualitative data to affirm that different ethnic communities can be found within the same department in the Liptako-Gourma.

Fourthly, the *terrain* is a structural factor that can affect rebel group's military prospects. When the terrain is rough, it improves militant chances of winning by increasing the marginal costs of counterinsurgency because of the difficulty to access and manoeuvre. Additional spending in those areas has little effect on the insurgency, which eventually leads the State to cut back its losses and stop its efforts there until marginal benefits increase again.⁸⁸ For instance, in November 2019, the Malian army abandoned at least three of its camps near the Nigerian border, considered too vulnerable, and falling back on Ansongo.⁸⁹ It then launched a large military operation in the Mopti region, where it had a stronger grip. The withdrawal was largely motivated by a series of attacks by jihadist groups targeting isolated military positions, killing over a hundred soldiers in a couple of weeks.⁹⁰ The army made a shy return to the Nigerian border in May 2020.⁹¹ As such, forested or mountainous areas on the periphery of the country have higher probability of guerrilla, and thus greater violence, whereas open plains, cities and agricultural areas make counterinsurgency campaigns more effective. In addition, dense forest cover, just as mountains, offer hide-outs and cover from aerial detection while hindering mechanised troops movements. **Map 2** above shows the vegetation type and woody cover for the Liptako-Gourma region.

⁸⁷ Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56(4), 581.

⁸⁸ Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (1999). *Weak states, rough terrain, and large-scale ethnic violence since 1945*. 3. Paper presented to the 95th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, GA, 2–5 September.

⁸⁹ Mali: L'armée annonce le repli de certaines de ses positions isolées après des attaques jihadistes. (2019, November 10). *Jeune Afrique*.

⁹⁰ Mali: Le bilan de la double attaque de Boulkessi et Mondoro s'alourdit. (2019, October 4). *Jeune Afrique*.

⁹¹ Keita, Mohamed. (2020, May 18). Labbezanga: L'armée malienne signe son retour. *Malijet*.

Refugee presence as a variable accounting for the presence of refugees and IDPs in the direct vicinity of the location of the attacks. Fisk has shown that the presence and population size of refugees can be a predictor of civilian victimisation. Comparatively, locations hosting self-settled refugees may be targeted at even higher rates than camp-settled refugees.⁹²

As presented in **Table 3** below, since all other variables are equal, then the structure of territorial control should be the most significant factor to explain spatial variation in violence.

As of 2019	Zone A	Zone B
International border	Yes	Yes
Population size	3558073	4562828
Population density	28,82/km ²	22,93/km ²
Refugee presence	281604	252977
Terrain	Savannas and steppes	Savannas and steppes and farmland
Ethnic diversity	Dogon, Fulani, Songhai, Fulse Mossi	Fulani, Tuareg, Mossi, Daoussahak, Gourmantché

Table 3: Comparison of variables relevant to the method of difference

⁹² Fisk, K. (2018). One-sided Violence in Refugee-hosting Areas. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62(3), 530–531.

Chapter 4. Empirical

A. Historical background

As mentioned in the introduction, the violence in the Sahel can be traced back to the fourth Tuareg rebellion in Mali. As a result of deep-seated distrust between the communities of the north and the south of Mali, the MNLA, a separatist movement, attacked the city of Ménaka on 17 January 2012. It must be noted that this conflict was influenced by the Libyan civil war that saw a large number of weapons and fighters flowing into Mali.⁹³ By April, the insurgency had defeated the Malian Armed Forces in major cities which brought most of the north under its control.⁹⁴ On April 6th, the MNLA proclaimed the independence of the Azawad, comprising the regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal as well as parts of Mopti. In the south, soldiers displeased by the poor handling of the crisis by the government led a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré on March 21st. At the same time the north declared its independence, a transitional government led by Dioncounda Traoré was sworn in with the objective of waging war against the Tuareg rebels and reassert Malian dominance over the north.⁹⁵

In the hope of improving its fighting chances, the MNLA allied itself with several radical Salafi organisations. But as their influence grew, the nature of the insurrection started to change: instead of fighting for the independence of the Azawad, they sought to impose the Sharia over the whole territory. This disagreement led to tensions between the Islamists and the MNLA which eventually turned into an intestine turf war of which the formers came out victorious.⁹⁶ By mid-November, the Islamist had successfully taken over the rebellion and evicted the nationalists from their strongholds of Douentza and Ménaka. As a result, the MNLA decided to enter peace talks with the government and scaled down its claims of independence, instead demanding self-rule within the country. By the same token, it offered to side with government forces in its fight against the Islamic fighters, now in control of the North.

As the jihadis progressed south towards the capital, the transition government was compelled to ask for help from the international community. A coalition army led by France's *Opération Serval*, later joined by ECOWAS' AFISMA, was able to push back against the militants and swiftly ended the conflict in early 2013. However, the jihadists were not completely eliminated and switched to guerrilla warfare throughout most of 2013 and part of 2014, dispersing their

⁹³ Morgan, A. (2012, February 6). The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali. *Think Africa Press*.

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group. (2016). *Mali Central: La fabrique d'une insurrection ?* (Africa Report No. 238). 7.

⁹⁵ Le président malien démissionne ouvrant la voie au départ de la junte. (2012, April 8). *L'Express*.

⁹⁶ La ville de Gao est tombée aux mains des islamistes. (2012, November 14). *France 24*.

forces in the surrounding areas of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, some even retreating into the Adrar of the Ifoghas, a mountainous area on the Algerian border. Still, the levels of violence decreased significantly in most part of the country and which allowed displaced populations to return. In July 2014, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was deployed to take over the peacekeeping duties of the *Opération Serval* and the AFISMA. As the *Operation Serval* reached its objectives and the intensity of the conflict had diminished, France gradually disengaged its troops. *Opération Barkhane* was launched on 1 August 2014, this time with the objective to combat terrorism at the regional level and prevent VEOs from re-establishing themselves in the Sahel.⁹⁷ In the meantime, the central government struggled to formally end the political conflict, although it finally succeeded when the two main coalitions of the north, the Platform and the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), finally signed the peace agreement in mid-2015.⁹⁸ To this day, many of the solutions discussed in the text are yet to be implemented even if significant progress has been made.⁹⁹ Groups that were sidelined from the peace deal formed their own coalition, the CME, to advocate for their own inclusion in implementation of the peace agreement.¹⁰⁰

In reality, this peace settlement only succeeded in maintaining a fragile peace between the North and the South. Before the conflict, ethnicity was already a polarising factor. After years of political instrumentalisation by the government following a “divide and conquer” strategy had led to the creation of ethnic-based self-defence groups. While ethnicity plays a significant role in group affiliation since armed groups consolidate their power through alliances with traditional leaders of specific ethnic groups, it would be oversimplistic to claim it determines all of it.¹⁰¹ The instability in the Azawad led to further discrimination that put a strain between ethnic communities that, for instance, often blamed Fulani, Tuareg and Arab for joining the jihadi movements or the rebellion. To make things worse, intense internal conflicts also plagued Tuareg and Arab communities, due to the numerous factions and tribes making up these ethnic groups. Not to mention the opposition between nomads and sedentary worsened by the crisis. Prior to 2012, Fulani pastoralists were already suffering from cattle raiding by Daoussahak nomad tribes; the insurrection gave the opportunity to the former to join the MUJAO hoping to

⁹⁷ Goffi, E. (2017). *Opération Barkhane: Entre victoires tactiques et échec stratégique* (Rapport de Recherche No. 3). Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix.

⁹⁸ Rémy, J.-P. (2015, March 1). Accords de paix d’Alger: Une dernière chance pour le Mali. *Le Monde*.

⁹⁹ Situation in central Mali ‘deteriorating’ as violence, impunity rise, UN rights expert warns. (2020, February 21). *UN News*.

¹⁰⁰ Mali: Création de la CME pour l’inclusivité dans l’Accord pour la paix. (2017, November 12). *Studio Tamani*.

¹⁰¹ Molenaar, F., Tossell, J., Schmauder, A., et al (2019). *The Status Quo defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya* (CRU Report). Clingendael Institute. 96.

obtain protection from the latter, that had integrated the MNLA.¹⁰² As shown above, the many sources of instability in Central Mali lead to the militarisation of communities as an attempt to protect themselves.

As a result, the pace of violence in the central region of Mopti started to pick up speed. At the time, this area was already tense because of agropastoral conflicts made worse by deteriorating climate conditions and poor regulation on land usage. But the 2012 insurgency caused a spike in violence against civilians because the large Fulani and Tuareg populations living in the Mopti were suddenly associated with the rebellion on the sole basis of their ethnicity and suffered from abuses by security forces and other ethnic militias. In addition, the brief Islamist control over part of the region in the second half of 2012, forced many state representatives to flee because they were systematically targeted. Their swift return after the jihadists were chased away was considered as opportunistic by the local population. Further, this feeling of abandonment exacerbated the pre-existing distrust of the population against state authorities.¹⁰³ In a nutshell, state absence, combined with an influx of automated weapons, played a part in an arms race that appeared between communities as a way to protect or exact justice for themselves. The same logic also pushed some young Fulani's in the arms of armed groups, namely Ansar Dine, MUJAO and Ganda Izo, expecting to obtain protection or weapons for their community in order to be able to weigh in on local conflicts. Needless to say, some joined these groups out of conviction and desire for revenge.¹⁰⁴ To make things worse, the region was largely ignored in the peace agreement, as the priority was to solve the problems in the north.

Another key point, the populations of the centre and northern regions of Mali have witnessed a renewed deterioration of their security situation since the last quarter of 2015. The near continuous state of emergency enforced since November 2015 in these parts of the country can serve as testimony of this trend.¹⁰⁵ The weak presence of both administrative and military authorities, has further increased the vulnerability of the local populations. In their absence, a revival of the radical Islamist threat in this region already plagued by banditry and inter-communal conflict, has contributed to the formation of self-defence militias. But this multiplication of armed groups, often along ethnic and communal lines, only generated an upsurge in intercommunal violence and civilian harm. This culminated in the Ogossagou

¹⁰² International Crisis Group. (2014). *Mali: Reform or Relapse*. Africa Report No. 210), 13.

¹⁰³ United Nations Security Council. (2014, 9 June). *Rapport du secrétaire général des Nations unies sur la situation au Mali*, S/2014/403, 4.

¹⁰⁴ International Crisis Group. (2016). *Mali Central: la fabrique d'une insurrection ?*. Africa Report No. 238, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Council. (2020). *Report of the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Mali* (A/HRC/43/76). United Nation General Assembly.

massacre on March 23, 2019, where suspected Dogon militiamen burned down an entire Fulani village, leaving 160 dead, including over 50 children in central Mali.¹⁰⁶

In like manner, Niger and Burkina Faso seem to present many of the same characteristics in the parts of their territory bordering Mali. This includes intercommunal conflicts, ethnic discrimination, weak state presence or predatory behaviour on the part of the administration and weapon availability.¹⁰⁷ In turn, this provided a breeding ground for militias and jihadist groups to arise. From 2016 on, homegrown and transnational jihadist organisations increasingly started to make their presence felt in the two countries, and in Mali too, causing the number of IDPs in Mali to rise again to 51,961 at 30 June 2017.¹⁰⁸ In Burkina Faso, the situation degraded significantly along 2019, resulting in more than 1000% increase in internal displacement compared to the year before, with 513,000 new IDPs because of violence in 2019.¹⁰⁹ In comparison, there were “only” 284 000 new displacements in Mali, and 57 000 in Niger.¹¹⁰ All in all, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are now faced with levels of rebel violence rarely seen before in the history of the three countries, and the trend seems to go upward as of May 2020. For civilian populations this means severe insecurity, as they are caught between intercommunal conflicts, jihadist violence and extra judiciary killings at the hands of security and defence forces.

B. Case studies

For each area, selected second level administrative division – *cercle* in Mali, department in Niger and province in Burkina Faso – located within a 50km radius of an international border and have suffered from at least 10 acts of violence between 2017 and 2019 have been selected. The two resulting areas coincidentally overlap with the unformal region of the Liptako-Gourma that sits across the three countries. It can be divided into two separate entities: the Gourma, which in Songhai means “the right bank of the Niger river” is made up of the southwestern provinces of Burkina Faso and the central region of Mali up to Bourem, where the Niger river takes a right turn towards the Gulf of Guinea. Next, the Liptako comprises the southwestern part of Niger, the entire eastern border of Burkina Faso and the bordering region of southeastern

¹⁰⁶ Central Mali: Top UN genocide prevention official sounds alarm over recent ethnically-targeted killings. ([2019, March 28](#)). *UN News*.

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group. ([2017](#)). *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North* (Africa Report No. 254).

¹⁰⁸ United Nations Security Council. (2018). *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Mali* (S/2018/136).

¹⁰⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. ([2020](#)). *Burkina Faso: Displacement associated with Conflict and Violence*.

¹¹⁰ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2020). *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020*.

central Mali. Historically, the name comes from a Fulani Emirate created in early 19th century. The two zones are presented in the Map below.

Because these countries were arbitrarily delimited by colonisers that had very little knowledge – and most likely interest – of the ethnic geography of Western Africa, the same ethnic groups often live on both sides of an international border. Fulani, or *Peulh*, are scattered throughout Western Africa due to their mostly pastoralist way of life. In Burkina Faso, they make up 90% of the population of Soum. Although Mossi is the main ethnic group, Gourmantché are found in the Est region, and Fulse in the Nord, Centre-Nord and Sahel regions of Burkina Faso. The nomadic Tuareg are also dispersed, although they are more likely to be found up north. Dogon is the main ethnic group of the central Mali plateau, with Bandiagara laying at the centre of the *Pays Dogon*, although its presence extends across the Border with Burkina Faso. Songhai and Zarma are found mostly in the bend of the Niger river. Below, we will showcase what makes the Gourma different from the Liptako in the context of our selected variables, and describe the conflict agents active in each area.



Map 4: The two case studies: the Gourma in red, and the Liptako in green

1. Zone A: the Gourma theatre

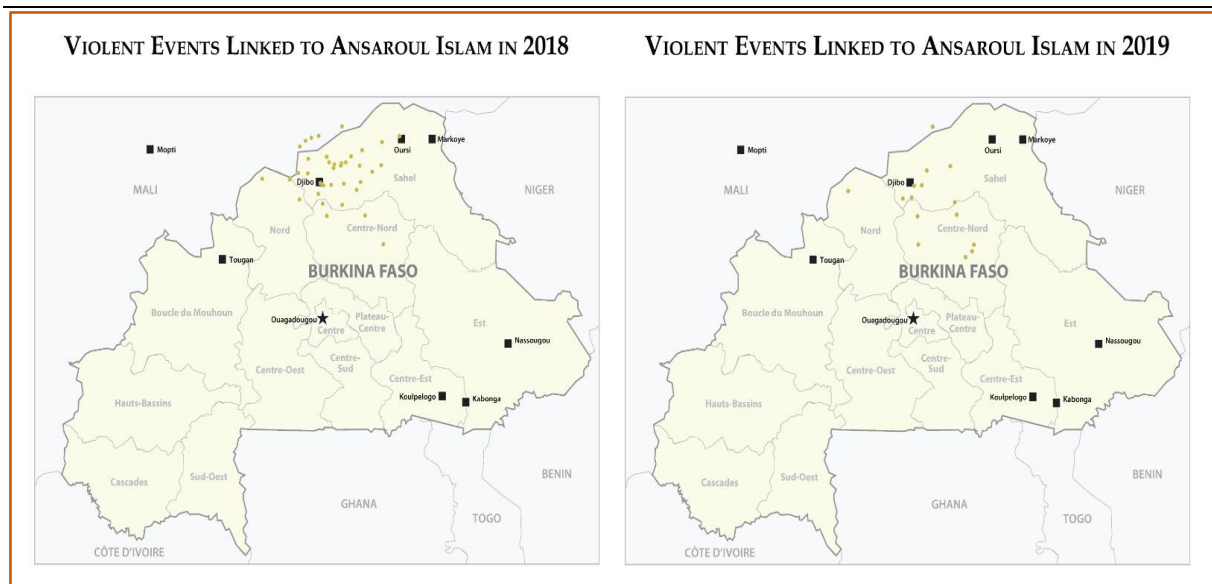
Prior to 2017, only a handful of violent events affected this zone. Since then, violence of all types has spiked, going from 40 events in 2016, to as many as 587 in 2019. As can be observed from Table 1, Zone A has been noticeably more violent than Zone B for the entire observed time period. This applies to the number of fatalities and violent events targeting civilians too. In both cases however, a sharp rise in violence started in 2017. As stated above, the formation of transnational jihadist groups has largely contributed to this trend, considering that in 2019 alone, they were responsible for over 60% of all violent events in Zone B. Before 2018, the share of violence against civilians represented less than half of the total violence, and within two years it represented around two thirds in both areas.

For the year 2019, groups such Ansarul Islam, the ISGS, JNIM and its different factions have been involved in violent events in Zone A; JNIM being by far the most active in the area with 228 events, although almost half of them were attributed to Katibat Macina, one of its battalions. This terrorist organisation has pledged its allegiance to the emir of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. It was created from the merger of the Sahelian branch of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Murabitoun, Ansar Dine and the Katibat Macina and Serma. It grew exponentially during 2018 and 2019 but the most interesting development is the displacement of the brunt of the group's operations to the south-east. While in 2018 most events involving JNIM were centred around the central Mopti region, in 2019, the mean coordinate of all events shifted to the Soum province of Burkina Faso.

On the contrary, Ansarul Islam was involved in as many events as JNIM in 2018, but by 2019, events attributed to the group had dramatically decreased. Very active in Soum, Ansarul Islam is a Burkinabe militant Islamist organisation founded in 2016 by Malam Dicko. Between 2016 and 2018, more than half of violent events related to radical Salafism were attributed to the group. Yet, from 2019, it started avoiding direct confrontation, only engaging in a handful of abductions and IEDs ambushes presumably. It also appears the group was no more able or willing to conduct cross-border attacks, as only one event in Mali was attributed to Ansarul Islam militants, the remaining ones being located further away from the border. This may be the result of increasing efforts from the local and international security forces to combat insurgency in the border area,¹¹¹ forcing the already weakened Ansarul Islam to retreat deeper

¹¹¹ Burkina Faso : Au moins sept assaillants tués par la force Barkhane après l'attaque d'Inata. ([2018, October 5](#)). *Jeune Afrique*.

within Soum and even in the Bam and Sanmatenga provinces.¹¹² Also, JNIM is now claiming responsibility for the group's attacks, further diminishing its visibility and influence.¹¹³



Map 5: Differences between attacks linked to Ansarul Islam between 2018 and 2019

It is worthwhile to note that Islamist violence in Burkina Faso has fuelled intercommunal tensions, which caused further insecurity and displacement. In 2018 and 2019, Malian Dogon and Dozo militias, and the Security and Defence Forces of Burkina Faso have been the deadliest groups operating in the area, being responsible for around a quarter of all fatalities reported by ACLED for both years, 465 and 459 respectively. This is surprising because these groups have been involved in fewer events than JNIM for example – about a third – and in a fewer number of sub-national divisions. In central Mali, a series of large-scale massacres targeted Dogon and Fulani communities, the latter being the hardest hit by far, considering the 284 Fulani killed between January and October 2019.¹¹⁴ While the majority of these militias are poorly organised and present at the village-level, Dan Na Ambassador shows a nearly military hierarchy and claims to train over 5000 men in 36 training camps throughout Mopti.¹¹⁵ As an umbrella organisation for local Dogon self-defence groups and traditional hunting societies called *Dozo*, its first objective is to defend the *Pays Dogon*, a roughly defined area extending from

¹¹² **Note:** Compiled by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, this graphic shows violent events involving Ansaroul Islam in 2018 and the first six months of 2019. Data on attacks or fatalities does not attempt to distinguish perpetrators of the events. **Data Sources:** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Menastream, SITE Intelligence Group, and Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC).

¹¹³ International Crisis Group. (2020). *Burkina Faso: Sortir de la spirale des violences* (No. 287), 12.

¹¹⁴ Dufka, C. (2020). *Combien de sang doit encore couler? » Atrocités commises contre des civils dans le centre du Mali, 2019. Human Rights Watch.*

¹¹⁵ Diallo, A. (2019, May 14). Mali: Accusé du pire, le chef de milice Youssouf Toloba ne désarme pas. *Jeune Afrique.*

Bandiagara to the Burkinabe border.¹¹⁶ It is infamously known for its involvement in the Koulogon and Ogossagou massacres against Fulani communities. In retaliation, self-defence Fulani groups formed under the Dogon threat and led several punitive expeditions into Dogon villages as reprisals. Considering that none of them seem to have the intention of controlling neither the rival territory nor its population and the military symmetry between both actors, violence seems to obey to what appears to be a logic of reciprocal extermination as intercommunal tensions escalate.¹¹⁷

In Burkina, the Koglweogo acts as judge, jury and executioner, which has led to many instances of abuses, especially towards the Fulani community. It emerged to fill in the power vacuum resulting from the collapse of the national security apparatus following the end of the Compaoré regime in 2014.¹¹⁸ It is a network of self-defence groups embedded at the local level rather than one central organisation. Predominantly Mossi, this militia is informally integrated in the State's security architecture. This has favoured the prosperity of the *Guardians of the bush*, who enjoy large support among the population, even if their actions have no legal basis.¹¹⁹ Even security forces have repeatedly targeted members of the Fulani community, with reports of widespread human rights violations, abuses and even extra-judicial executions.¹²⁰ At the same time, Fulani ethnics seem to be caught between a rock and a hard place, since armed Islamists are targeting them for recruitment and threaten to kill those who refuse.¹²¹ Even in displacement camps, Fulanis are afraid to register for aid, because they are afraid of being accused of collaborating with the enemy.¹²² These populations are then forced to flee because security is nowhere to be found when even the army spreads fear amongst Fulani.

In June 2019, the MINUSMA created a new operational sector dedicated to the Mopti region, with its own leadership in an effort to improve regional security and coordination with the Malian armed forces. By dividing the territory to cover, both sides were then able to project power more efficiently, in hopes of protecting civilians and restore some semblance of

¹¹⁶ Dubois, O. (2018, December 12). Mali - Youssouf Toloba: « Notre mouvement cible les malfaiteurs, pas une ethnie ». *Le Point*.

¹¹⁷ Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *op. cit.* 68.

¹¹⁸ International Crisis Group. (2018). *Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence*

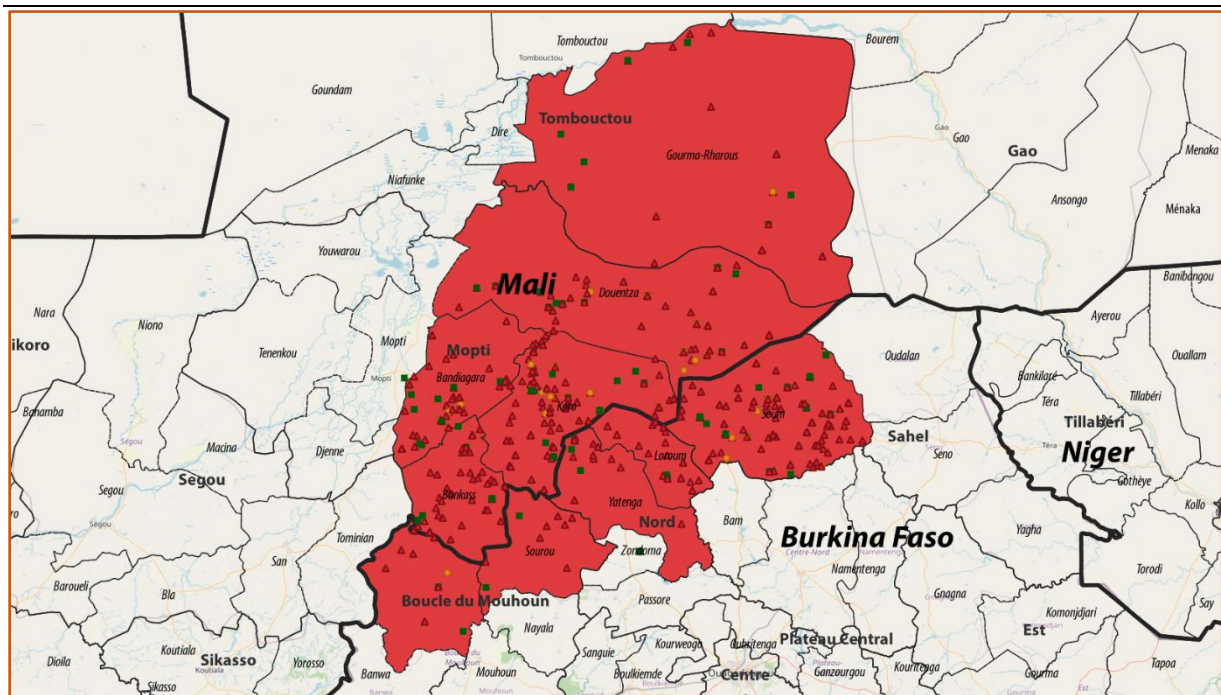
¹¹⁹ Moncomble, V., Van Vyve, V., & Papegnies, O. (2018). Koglweogo: Miroir d'une faillite d'Etat. *La Libre Belgique*.

¹²⁰ Dufka, C. (2018). "By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists" Abuses by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso. Human Rights Watch; Diallo, A., & Coulibaly, N. (2019, March 14). Burkina: Le MBDHP évoque des « exécutions sommaires » au cours d'opérations antiterroristes. *Jeune Afrique*.

¹²¹ Dufka, C. (2019, June 12). Burkina Faso's Atrocities in the Name of Security Will Help Terrorists' Ranks. *Human Rights Watch*.

¹²² Kleinfeld, P. (2019, January 15). In Eastern Burkina Faso, local grievances help militancy take root. *The New Humanitarian*.

stability.¹²³ Similarly, the G5 Sahel Joint Force established its headquarters in Sevaré, Mopti for shaping strategy and future cross-border operations in the region. However, in June 2018, a suicide car bomb claimed by JNIM destroyed the camp, forcing all operations to be halted as the G5 S-JF headquarters were relocated to Bamako.¹²⁴ More recently, *Opération Barkhane* has even reinforced its presence in Central Mali by establishing an advanced temporary base in Gossi, Gourma-Rharous. It also answered calls for help from the Burkina Faso government on multiple occasions.



Map 6: Violence against civilians in the Gourma between 2017 and 2019

(● = Remote violence, ▲ = Violence against civilians, ■ = Strategic developments)

2. Zone B: the Liptako theatre

As was the case for the previous zone, it was relatively spared from violence up until 2016, but the security situation started to degrade significantly from that point on. After its first and only attack at the end of 2016,¹²⁵ the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara became a dominant player in the region. It first made a name for itself in the tri-border area by conducting high-

¹²³ La Force de la MINUSMA créé le Secteur Centre pour rendre plus efficace sa présence dans la région de Mopti. (2019, June 25). MINUSMA.

¹²⁴ G5 Sahel Joint Force commander moves HQ to Mali capital Bamako after attack. (2018, September 28). *The Defense Post*.

¹²⁵ Zerrouky, M. (2016, September 5). Un groupe lié à l'Etat islamique revendique une première attaque dans le Sahel. *Le Monde*.

profile attacks on several military positions, notably at the Tongo Tongo ambush that killed American soldiers.¹²⁶ They extended their zone of influence towards Ménaka, then opened new battlefronts further within Burkina Faso's border, reaching the Centre-Nord and the Est region, as far as the W-Arly-Pendjari ecological complex sitting across Beninese border.¹²⁷ This territorial expansion could have been motivated by the pressure applied by French troops on the Malian side of the border since 2018, considering that *Opération Barkhane* has a permanent support base in Gao. The ISGS is known for collaborating with other jihadist groups, such as Ansarul Islam and JNIM, with sometimes several groups claiming the same attack, of which the attacks on the military camps of Koutougou, Boulkessi and Mondoro are good examples. It must be said however that these organisations are most likely working in parallel, but as their respective zone of action overlap and many attacks are unclaimed, responsibility for violent events is difficult to determine.

At other times, gunmen enter herdsman camps, shooting at them and stealing their cattle. And because of these *razzias*, local herders now tend to be armed too. And with more weapons in circulation, the risk of intercommunal tensions turning bloody is at an all-time high, especially between Tuaregs and Fulanis. For those who do not take up arms, they must pay the *zakat*, an Islamic tax based on the total value of one's belongings, often in the form of cattle. As such, this sort of forced cooperation contributes to the vulnerability of the civilians and to the persisting insecurity in the Tillabéri, given the funding it provides to armed groups. Another important factor contributing to the insecurity is the spreading use of IEDs and landmines by the ISGS in the border regions. In the Tillabéri region, this phenomenon started approximately in January 2019, but it had been observed in the Sahel region since mid-2017, and in the Est since mid-2018, marking a territorial expansion of the activities of the group.¹²⁸

Against them, the terrorists are facing the armed forces of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and France, that often lead joint missions under the G5 Sahel Joint Force. In addition, MINUSMA has established bases in Gao, Ansongo and Ménaka. The US military also operates a drone base located in Agadez, Niger from which it conducts intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions. On several occasions, the French troops of *Opération Barkhane* has lead operation in cooperation with local ethnic-based militias such as GATIA and MSA. The Imghad and Allied Tuareg Self-Defence Grouping (GATIA) is a loyalist ethnic self-defence group of Imghad

¹²⁶ Comment des djihadistes ont piégé une patrouille américaine au Niger. (2017, November 4). *Le Monde*.

¹²⁷ Nir, S. M., & O'Reilly, F. (2019, August 20). Benin Awakens to the Threat of Terrorism After Safari Ends in a Nightmare. *The New York Times*.

¹²⁸ Pavlik, M., et al. (2019). *Op.cit.*

origin, a tribe considered in the Tuareg social hierarchy as vassals. It has strong connections with the Malian army, considering that its military commandant, El Hadj ag Gamou, is also a general in the FAMa. And the Movement for the Salvation of the Azawad (MSA-D), a Daoussahak-based militia present in the Ménaka area, made up of former members of other militias.¹²⁹ Both groups are part of the Platform, the pro-government coalition that signed the 2015 inter-Malian peace agreement along with the CMA. These two militias stand accused of engaging in serious abuses against local populations of the Niger-Mali borderlands during joint operations with Barkhane authorised by Niamey. Although Niger and Barkhane mostly ended their collaboration, it escalated in intercommunal tensions and bolstered the legitimacy of the ISGS in the region.¹³⁰ Finally, the Koglweogo is also involved in the Burkinabe provinces of the Liptako theatre. They are central players in the country's conflict, as they are caught in a tit-for-tat logic of retribution against the jihadist groups due to their involvement in the country's counter-terrorism efforts.¹³¹

All in all, the overwhelming activity of non-state armed groups in the Liptako has been matched by an intensification of military operations. As a consequence, the state of emergency has been in effect in the five departments of Niger bordering on Mali since March 2017¹³², and since the end of 2018 for five other departments bordering Burkina Faso.¹³³ The flare-up of violence in Burkina Faso resulting in incursions in Burkinabe territory is one of the reasons for the extension of the state of emergency to these departments.¹³⁴ The Declaration of state of emergency comes with a series of measures severely affecting the population's right to free movement, and livelihood in general: widespread curfews, ban of two-wheelers and sometimes even pick-up trucks, and the closure of markets. For these reasons, access to basic services has been greatly reduced for local populations, education and health in particular. The situation also obstructs humanitarian aid and trade flows between the two countries, which in turn exacerbates the vulnerability of both displaced and host communities. Besides, military activities, such as increased presence and operations, in particular airstrikes, generate fear and psychosis in local communities too. In addition, populations benefitting from protection of security and defence

¹²⁹ Lebovich, A. (2019). *Op. cit.*

¹³⁰ International Crisis Group. (2020). *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery* (Africa Report No. 289).

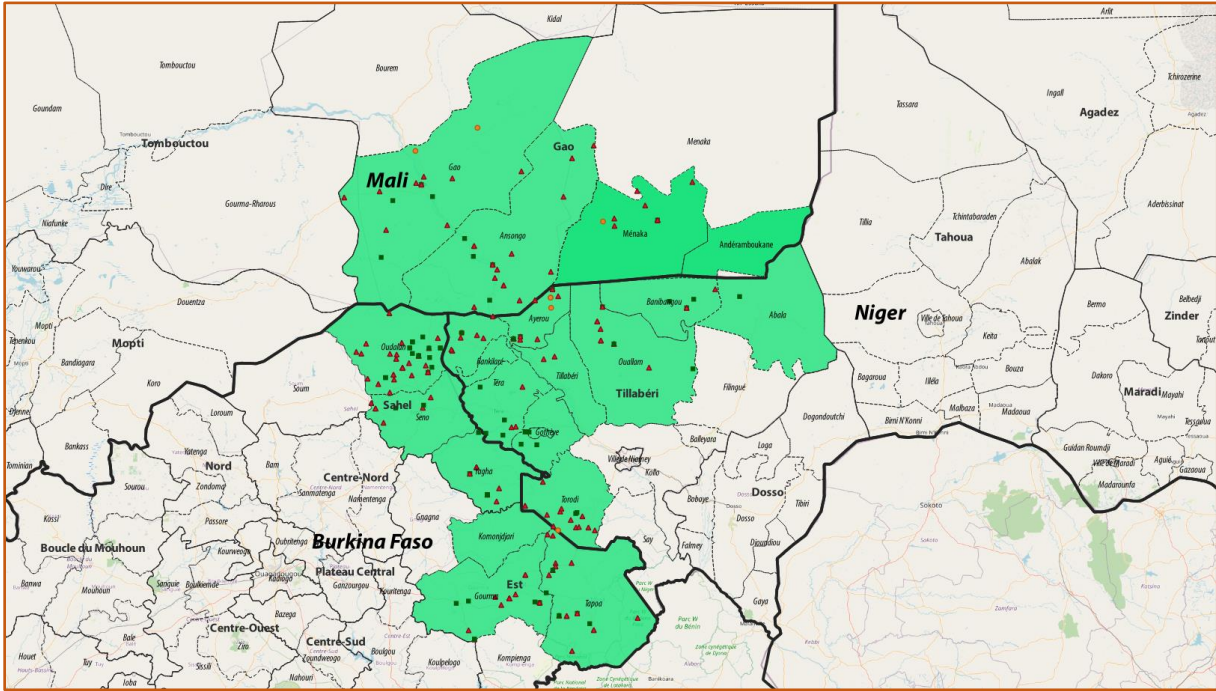
¹³¹ Kishi, R., Pavlik, M., & Jones, S. (2020). *Year In Review 2019*. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. 48.

¹³² Niger: État d'urgence à la frontière malienne. (2017, March 3). *Le Figaro*.

¹³³ Au Conseil des Ministres: Prorogation de l'état d'urgence dans plusieurs départements des régions de Diffa, de Tahoua et de Tillabéri. (2019, June 17). *Le Sahel*.

¹³⁴ Attaques terroristes: Le Niger décrète l'état d'urgence près de la frontière avec le Burkina Faso. (2018, December 1). *Jeune Afrique*.

forces are exposed to retaliation from non-state armed groups under suspicion of collaboration. Similarly, other communities are at risk of being accused of complicity with these groups and treated as enemy, either because they were coerced into paying taxes or because they are stigmatised due to their ethnic affiliation.



Map 7: Violence against civilians between 2017 and 2018

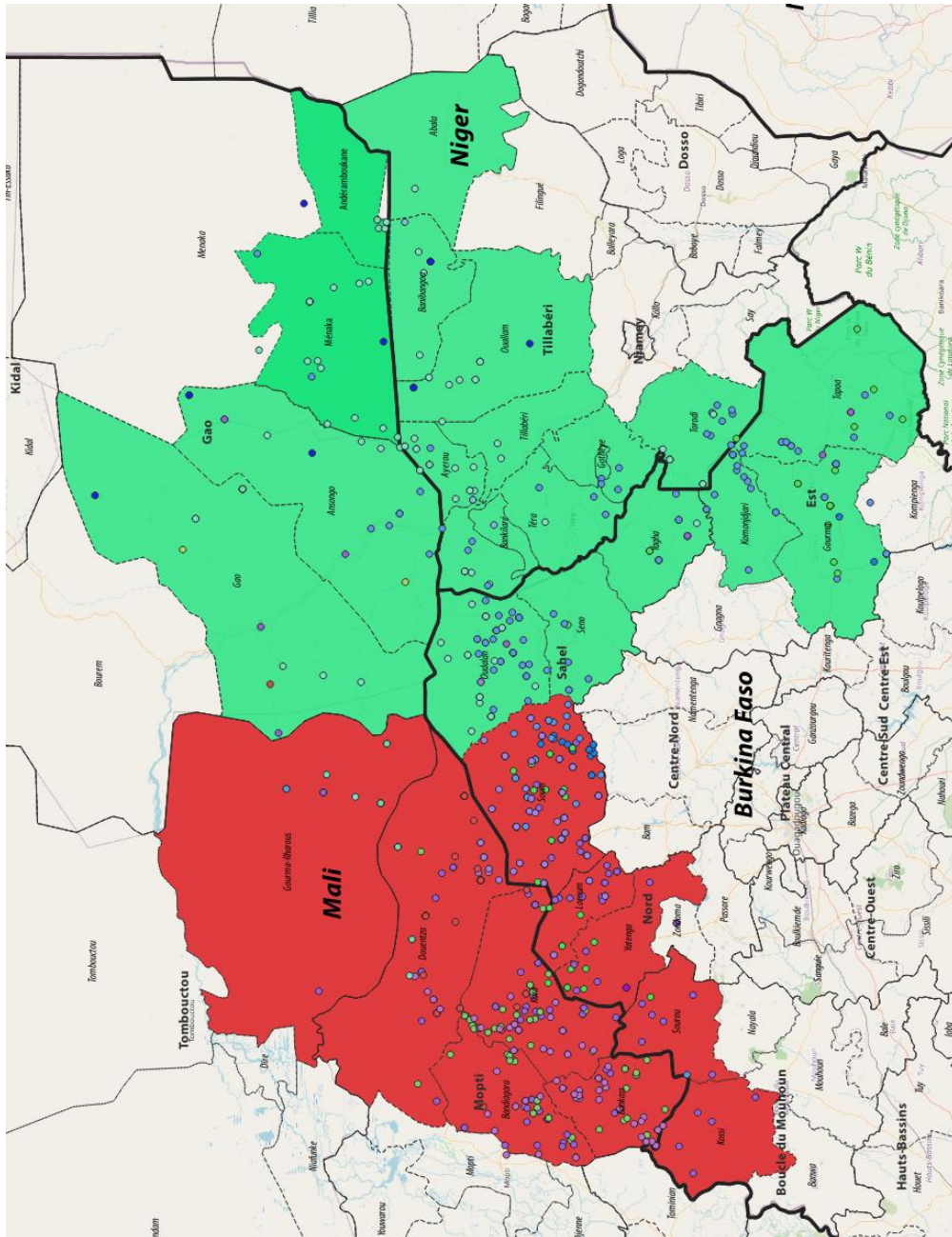
(● = Remote violence, ▲ = Violence against civilians, ■ = Strategic developments)

Chapter 5. Discussion

In this chapter, I will analyse the cases to demonstrate either support, or lack thereof, to our hypotheses. From theory, areas where multiples groups are battling for control are expected to experience a higher level of violence against civilians, thus Zone A will be more violent than Zone B. Then, in accordance with Hypothesis 1, we will show that the higher the level of control of an actor over an area, the less likely this actor is to victimise civilians in that area. As such, because control over the various subdivisions of the Liptako theatre (Zone B) is less fragmented than in the Gourma theatre (Zone A), the Liptako sees less violent events and less fatalities. Finally, evidence from our cases will establish that civilians living in the Liptako theatre are more likely to be subjected to selective violence than to indiscriminate violence as a direct consequence of the homogenous nature of territorial control in that area. Reversely, the Gourma populations face more indiscriminate violence because of highly fragmented control.

As a first indicator of territorial fragmentation, the actor fragmentation index (FI)¹³⁵ built for each theatre reveals that, for the year 2019, violence is exercised by a lower number of actors in Zone B, with 1.27, than in Zone A, with 2.71. At 1.27, this score means that a few actors have the monopoly of violence in the Liptako, in this case the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. At 2.71, the Gourma region see violent events distributed more evenly between conflict actors, although this score remains low in comparison to the year 2018 in the Liptako, with a FI of 6.57. The stark contrast between 2018 and 2019 is attributed to the rise to power of JNIM and the ISGS in the region. Even if not every group sees the other as an enemy or tries to expand its territory, the dynamic is worth considering. As violence is more equally shared between different actors in one area, the likelihood that these actors will fight for territorial control increases. For this reason, the difference of actor fragmentation brings support, although limited, to H1a.

¹³⁵ Dowd, C. (2015). Actor proliferation and the fragmentation of violent groups in conflict. *Research & Politics*, 2(4), 3.



Legend

- Ansarul Islam
- Dozo Communal Militia (Burkina Faso), Dozo Communal Militia (Mali), Dozo Militia, Dan Na Ambassagou, Dogon Ethnic Militia (Mali)
- Fulani Ethnic Militia (Burkina Faso), Fulani Ethnic Militia (Mali), Fulani Ethnic Militia (Niger)
- G5S: G5 Sahel Force (2017-)
- GATTIA: Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defense Group
- Islamic State (Greater Sahara)
- Islamic State (Greater Sahara) and/or Ansarul Islam
- JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims
- JNIM: Group for Support of Islam and Muslims and/or Islamic State (Greater Sahara)
- Katiba Macina
- Koglweogo Militia
- Military Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-), Government of Burkina Faso (2015-), Police Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-), Police Forces of Burkina Faso (2015-) Gendarmerie
- Military Forces of France (2017-)
- Military Forces of Mali (2013-), Police Forces of Mali (2013-) Gendarmerie, Police Forces of Mali (2013-)
- MSA: Movement for Azawad Salvation
- Police Forces of Niger (2011-) National Guard, Police Forces of Niger (2011-), Military Forces of Niger (2011-), Military Forces of Niger (2011-) Gendarmerie

Map 8: Violence against civilians per actor between 2017 en 2019

A. Consolidation of control

According to Kalyvas, areas under full insurgent control experience less violence than contested areas. Thus, Zone B should consist of areas where control has been consolidated, granted that full control allows for widespread monitoring through established collaborators networks. To establish full control, insurgents first need to push out the government's forces out of the area by military means, before targeting the remaining state representatives. This usually happens in regions of weak government control. A civil servant from the Tera department mentioned these attacks on public officials: "*Imagine here, in a neighbouring commune of Burkina, they burned down the town hall and chased the mayor away, we are just at the border. Now it's our turn. They came up to 25 km on the laterite road, they preached and established their laws, we passed it on [to the State] but nobody came.*"¹³⁶ Under those circumstances, there should be more direct attacks against security and defence forces' positions and increased targeting of state agents. Over 2019, the Islamic State has intensified its campaign against military camps on the Mali-Niger border. Most notably, the November 1 attack on Indelimane camp forced Malian forces to retreat further away from the border. The same official explains "*Today when you leave here, you'll travel a thousand miles and there's not a single soldier. In the past, on market day there were always soldiers at the market. People are afraid. Nowadays there are no soldiers, they're all gone.*"¹³⁷ Interestingly enough, the militants started to eliminate the traditional chieftaincy of Inates in April 2019, after the state captured a Tuareg jihadist with the help of information provided by the Tuareg chief of Inates. After they killed him, they killed four other members of the chieftaincy that were on their way to attend his funeral. And in July, the Islamic State assassinated his successor, and went on to attack a military outpost in Inates.¹³⁸ This campaign culminated on December 10 when hundreds of ISGS gunmen stormed the Nigerien army camp of Inates in the deadliest attack to date in Niger. Targeted assassination of traditional and local leaders has been an increasing concern for communities; between April and June 2019 no less than 7 Tuareg leaders have been killed by the Islamic State in Greater Sahara.¹³⁹ Finally, when looking directly at the civilian fatality count of the ISGS in Ayorou, it appears that five out of the ten victims were traditional leaders. This trend has been ongoing since at least October 2018 in this, as is attested by this extract from a humanitarian report: "*Targeted assassinations and kidnappings of village and tribal chiefs suspected of informing the FDS have been reported in*

¹³⁶ Clingendael Interviews, Civil servant, November 2019. Diagourou, Say Department, Tillabéri Region, Niger. Author's translation from French.

¹³⁷ *Idem.*

¹³⁸ Armstrong, H. (2019, December 13). Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inates. *International Crisis Group.*

¹³⁹ Niger army base attack leaves 71 soldiers dead. ([2019, December 12](#)). *BBC News.*

the commune of Anzourou and Inates”¹⁴⁰. Surely, these examples lend weight to the proposition above, considering that the ISGS has been actively targeting state agents while it led offensives against military positions. At least in the Ayorou department, but also in the Malian borderlands, the Islamic state has incrementally bolstered its territorial control by eliminating any remnants of the state apparatus while limiting victimisation of civilians.

In contrast, Zone A has witnessed much more instances of civilian victimisation, which entails that only limited parts of the region are under the full control of one or another conflict actor. Although several outposts were attacked mid-2019 in Soum, the militants were not able to keep these positions under their control for long. The Burkinabe government requested Operation Barkhane’s help on several occasions to secure Djibo and its surroundings.¹⁴¹ Across the Soum province, even though Islamists have also attempted to consolidate their influence, it has been challenged by the Koglweogo on one side, and FDS on the other. In reprisal, both actors have routinely targeted and massacred members of the Fulani community across Soum. In the Arbinda department the Koglweogo are responsible for murdering no less than 101 civilians in 2019, and 35 more in the neighbouring departments of Tongomayel and Kelbo. JNIM and/or the ISGS have killed over a hundred civilians in Arbinda too, while the military has ‘only’ killed ten. Indiscriminate violence against civilians is a strong indicator of contested territorial control. With this in mind, this significant difference in rates of killings seems to demonstrate that the FDS had only partial control over the Arbinda department.

On the Malian side of the border, Dogon and Dozo militias, including Dan Na Ambassagou have operated and killed mainly in the Bankass *cercle*. Comparatively, Bandiagara – the historical home of the Dogon – saw much less violent events involving these groups. In this sense, where Dogon and Dozo enjoy the most territorial control, in Bandiagara, there is little need for violence. In Bankass and Koro, where their territorial control is contested, attacks are more recurrent and more lethal. Reversely, Fulani militias have targeted Dogon civilians at a higher rate in Bandiagara than in Bankass. The cases of Koro and Douentza stand out; the number of violent events targeting civilians are the highest in Mali for Zone A, with 92 and 81 respectively, nearly the double of Bankass (57) and Bandiagara (58). The main difference is the number of actors battling for territory in that part of Mopti: while only three actors perpetrated violent acts against civilians in Bankass and Bandiagara, there were 5 in Koro and up to 9 in

¹⁴⁰ Cluster Protection. (2018). *Rapport Monitoring Protection Tillaberi, Octobre 2018*. Translated by the author from French.

¹⁴¹ Point de situation des opérations du 12 au 19 septembre. (2019, September 23). *Ministère de la Défense*.

Douentza according to ACLED data. This observation also applies the Soum province on the other side of the border too.

In the light of these developments, the difference in patterns of violence between the Liptako and the Gourma theatres seems to confirm that the extent of control of an actor over an area and its ability to rid this area of rival agents and to impose its will unchallenged exert a substantial influence on the rate of civilian targeting. In Zone A, higher rates of civilian victimisation are a function of a multi-actor environment and highly fragmented territorial control, as illustrated in the Soum province of Burkina Faso and Mopti region of Mali.¹⁴² In these areas where control is disputed, targeting civilians indiscriminately, often on an ethnic basis, serves the purpose of signalling strength and territorial control to the groups allegedly related to these constituencies. As a matter of fact, it demonstrates the inability of conflict actors to impose themselves as the main game in town. Again, the use of indiscriminate violence shows that they were not able to induce collaboration and defection toward a specific side from local populations, thus lending support to hypothesis H2a. In Zone B, the Islamic State has proven itself to be a dominant player, whose control over the Mali-Niger border has steadily increased since 2018. After pushing out the Malian and Nigerien forces out of its zone of influence, the ISGS used violence mainly to take out state representatives and to blind its enemy, a dynamic supporting the claims of hypothesis H2b this time. Generally speaking, these processes are in accord with Kalyvas' arguments.

B. Denunciation and its impact on the type of violence

Further, when insurgent groups achieve sufficient control over an area, they are able to set up basic administrations that offer basic public services, collect taxes and provide justice and protection. These situations provide incentives to civilians to collaborate with the insurgents, especially in areas where the state is absent, and the threat of violence should suffice to convince the most reticent ones. Taking these dynamics into account, collaboration should be widespread, and violence limited in Zone B. In Diagourou, Téra department, an official said on this issue: *"In my hometown, they [the jihadists] preached. But after spending five days there, I realized that people didn't even want to see me anymore. The people and even my own parents did not want to see me because they just see that they are stronger. Today when I go there, I am not safe and people feel bad. It's as if I came to report them. I'm like a stranger in my own*

¹⁴² Boyle, M. J. (2009). Bargaining, Fear, and Denial: Explaining Violence Against Civilians in Iraq 2004–2007. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21(2), 270.

home. These people look at me through the villagers' eyes."¹⁴³ The combination of collaboration and service provision, and the lack of access to rival actors makes violence redundant as civilians have little incentives to defect toward the opposing side. Further, collaboration entails that some civilians will become denounciators, and help the occupants to monitor their territory. Denunciation ensures that violence will target only enemy sympathisers. When a village chief tries to signal Islamists preaching in its town to the prefect, the same Diagourou civil servant explains that *"The soldiers will ask the village chief where the Islamists went, what they said... The soldiers will leave and at night two motorcycles will come to kill you, saying it was you who denounced them. It also means that there is close complicity among the population."*¹⁴⁴ Yet, the civilians living along the Burkina Faso border have faced little violence compared to their peers in Soum, a trend that attributed to the fact that insurgents refrain from using mass violence within the areas they successfully brought under their control.

As the different departments making up Zone A are often under fragmented control, accusations of collaboration will come from multiple sides. The group with the most control on the area will be responsible for the bulk of the violence, although it will be selective. And because conflict actors seek to preserve territory from the enemy's encroachment, selective violence serves the purpose of strengthening their control by preventing further defection and forcefully obtaining the collaboration of remaining civilians at the same time. Further, I suspect selective civilian victimisation to be driven by concerns of collaboration with the enemy and threats to territorial control rather than identity. In a Human Rights Watch report investigating atrocities committed by jihadists in Burkina Faso, a survivor of the attack on Pobe-Mendao, Soum recounts the attack and words from one of the attackers: *"You dogs, we told you not to work with the enemies of Allah, the FDS [Defense and Security Forces] and you refused. Will they protect you now? We have no mercy for collaborators. Then they picked 11 men – they knew whom they wanted – ordered them to lie down. They told the rest of us to get out. ... As I fled, the shooting started."* The attack took place after the FDS conducted a military operation in proximity of the village.¹⁴⁵ In the village of Silgadji, Soum, jihadist militants executed six Mossi, the dominant ethnic group in Burkina Faso, at the end of a protestant church service.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Clingendael Interviews, Civil servant, November 2019. Diagourou, Say Department, Tillabéri Region, Niger. Author's translation from French.

¹⁴⁴ Clingendael Interviews, Civil servant, November 2019. Diagourou, Say Department, Tillabéri Region, Niger. Author's translation from French.

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2020). *Armed Islamist Atrocities Surge Targeted Attacks, Executions Kill Over 250 Civilians In 2019*. 11.

¹⁴⁶ Attaque meurtrière dans une église du nord du Burkina Faso. (2019, April 29). *France 24*.

Although the attack would be assumed to be indiscriminate in nature and motivated by the religious and ethnic identity of the victims, a witness of the event mentioned that one of the assailants said “*One jihadist took out a list of people they said were working with the Kogloweago [a local defense group], calling out the names, which included the elderly Pastor Pierre Ouédraogo and his son. They ordered them to lie face down, then a jihadist shot them ... two times each in the head. People were horrified... The victims were all [ethnic] Mossi.*”¹⁴⁷ These two cases demonstrate when insurgents are able to set up a network of collaborators, they will only use violence against the civilians that have been singled out as defectors or potential defectors.

As can be seen, although populations of Gourma and the Liptako theatres have both collaborated with conflict actors to a certain extent, the result has not always ended in violence. The main difference resides in the nature of territorial control; whereas in Zone A, control is often fragmented and incomplete, with one side being more dominant than the other; in Zone B, one actor, the ISGS, seems to have prevailed in terms of territorial control, at least across 2018 and 2019. Fragmentation entails that several actors have access to the civilian populations of Zone A, which will then choose to collaborate with one or more actors. The strength of one actor in one area influences this choice, as civilians feel more confident in denouncing if this actor is able to protect them from counter-denunciation and retaliation. As rates of collaboration and denunciation towards one actor increases, so decreases its cost of selective violence. In the absence of a rival, the threat of violence only is sufficient to ensure collaboration and avoid violence completely. This dynamic applies to Zone B. Reversely, in Zone A, the dominant conflict actor resorts to selective violence to induce collaboration and consolidate their control. All in all, the observation that the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has been able to bring under its control several areas on the border of Niger with Mali and Burkina Faso confirms both sets of hypotheses, congruent with the arguments of *The Logic of Civil War*.

C. Indiscriminate violence under partial control

Whenever indiscriminate violence strikes the populations of a territory where control is fragmented, it is likely exercised by the actor enjoying the least control over that area. In this regard, I expect indiscriminate violence to emerge when information necessary for selective targeting is scarce. For lack of resources, the incumbents will solve the identification problem by selecting targets through association, often based on ethnicity, religion or location. By the

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch. (2020). *op. cit.* 11.

same token, they attempt to induce collaboration, or at least prevent defection. That is to say, Zone A should see more purges and genocidal attacks than Zone B, since conflict actors in the latter area appear to have enjoyed a stable control over it. Looking solely at the data would confirm this trend: between 2017 and 2019 in Zone B, ACLED recorded 10 events with more than 15 civilian fatalities, while Zone A had 31.¹⁴⁸ In Zone A, reports of summary executions by armed forces have been abundant. The Koglweogo and ethnic militias, whether Fulani, Mossi or Dogon, have all committed atrocities on a large-scale. And Islamists have not hesitated to decimate villages either, although they rarely claim such attacks.

After the Burkinabe army left the school of Béléhédé, Soum, it used as a base camp during Operation Doofu, Islamist militants came and shot villagers at random, killing 18 as one of the survivors recalls the attack: “*The jihadists blamed us for supporting the FDS, massacring us just a few weeks later ... The army also engaged in excesses in our zone ... The jihadists blamed us for their bad behaviour.*”¹⁴⁹ This incident shows that shifts in territorial control is imposed upon civilians at their own expenses, since their loyalty is irremediably questioned even if collaboration is not proven. In Gasseliki, soldiers detained and killed 12 men in November 2018, “*I know all of them. Some were from Gasseliki, others who had come to market. I counted them from my shop, 12 of them, as the soldiers ordered them onto the truck. The next day I spoke with the men who had found and buried them in a nearby village called Aladjou.*”¹⁵⁰ said a resident of Gasseliki. Only two months later, jihadists attacked targeted the village’s inhabitants indiscriminately twice in less than a week. A villager who survived recounts: “*The first time, the Jihadists came two-by-two on 19 motorcycles firing madly at people in the market. We fled anywhere, everywhere for cover. They stayed for 45 minutes, killing, stealing, and burning shops. I think they were warning us not to organise a self-defence militia.*”¹⁵¹ Another villager reported that one of the attackers said “*we’ve come to clean up*”. This tragic succession of events suggests the idea that control over Gasseliki shifted between November and January as indiscriminate violence was used by rival actors. The motive behind these abuses can be assumed to be an effort to dissuade collaboration with the enemy. Other than Soum, security and defence forces have been the predominant perpetrators of indiscriminate violence, the

¹⁴⁸ Although cases of selective violence might be included in events counting 15 or more fatalities, we believe that this number is high enough to include mostly cases of indiscriminate violence.

¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch. (2020). *op. cit.* 12.

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with witness, Soum Province, March 11, 2019. In: Dufka, C. (2019). ‘*We found their bodies later that day*’: Atrocities by armed Islamists and security forces in Burkina Faso’s Sahel region. Human Rights Watch. 13.

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with witness, Ouagadougou, January 28, 2019. In: Dufka, C. (2019). *Op. cit.*

majority of time against Fulani ethnics, in the Loroum and Yatenga departments, where JNIM's Katibat Macina has increased its presence over the course of 2019.

Ultimately, Zone B has also been the scene of large-scale violence targeting ethnic communities. However, these events are likely to unfold in parts of the Liptako where other conflict agents are active and where territorial control has not yet been consolidated. And as a matter of fact, many of these civilian killings have occurred either in the Ménaka, where other non-state armed groups operate, or in the Est region of Burkina Faso, where the presence of insurgents is relatively new. In the latter case, the ISGS killed scores of people across the Gourma province,¹⁵² allegedly as retribution for the Koglweogo killing at least 20 members of nearby Fulani communities in late November 2019.¹⁵³ In addition, the last quarter saw an increase in attacks against Koglweogo and army positions throughout the Est. Under this theory, this violence appears to be an effort from the Islamists to weaken the control of the incumbent factions over the Est region and its civilian populations, and reclaim it for themselves. In particular considering that the militants had been chased out of the area by Operation Otapuanu in March 2019. The same goes for Ménaka, where encroachment by other non-state armed groups such as GATIA and the MSA, has led to retribution by the ISGS against Daoussahak and Imghad Tuaregs, the respective constituencies of these groups.

Hereby, we see the other side of the coin. Dominant players avoid indiscriminate violence as it would be counterproductive, potentially pushing their civilian support bases to transfer their support to the opposing side. But the opposing side is not able to engage in selective violence, since it cannot count on the collaboration of the civilian population. In Zone A, instances of indiscriminate violence have become routine and are exercised by all conflict actors. Sometimes they are committed in the same place by different conflict actors at different times, underlining the temporal nature of territorial control and violence against civilians. Reversely, the number of indiscriminate attacks against civilians has remained low between 2017 and 2019 as a function of the high level of control by the ISGS in the Liptako theatre. Note that each Zone is not completely homogenous in terms of control, so exceptions have arisen, notably in the northernmost and southernmost regions of Zone B.

¹⁵² GRASH. (2020, January 11). Rapport de monitoring du mois de Novembre 2019 « Agir en urgence ou périr ». *Groupe de recherche-action sur la sécurité humaine (GRASH)*

¹⁵³ Morin. (2019, November 26). Est du Burkina: Situation préoccupante. *Wakat Séra*.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

Violence against civilian populations during warfare is a phenomenon as old as war itself. Once perceived as an inevitable by-product of conflicts, recent studies have highlighted the underlying strategic motivations behind civilian victimisation. This thesis attempted to pursue this strand of research by applying Kalyvas' theoretical framework on territorial control and its influence on violence against civilians to the ongoing conflicts plaguing the Sahel. There, killing civilians has become integral part of the conflict actors' strategy. Having said that, the modalities of this violence vary depending on the extent of control that armed groups exerted over a defined area. As they battle for territorial control, civilians caught in the crosshairs will be targeted on the basis of their perceived loyalty.

A disgracefully high prevalence of violence against civilians in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has inspired this thesis, the principal focus of which was to explain the cause of such targeting at a certain time and in certain places. To this effect, the research used the theory on civil war violence developed by Stathis Kalyvas that argues that territorial control will be the main indicator of variation in rates of civilian victimisation. Moreover, the secondary objective of this research was to examine how including supplemental conflict agents in the otherwise dyadic opposition between insurgents and incumbents would affect conflict dynamics. In this regard, this paper has demonstrated that actor fragmentation has a positive influence on rates of anti-civilian violence.

For the purpose of this research, a most similar system design method was performed. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, this method underlined differences in variables of interest. Then, a within-case comparison between two fronts of the Sahelian conflict has provided support to much of the predictions based on Kalyvas' work. Firstly, ACLED dataset was used to produce maps which would put in evidence areas in which violent events were located between 2013 and 2019. Mapping violence in the Sahel showed that, first, the brunt of violence against civilians took place in the Gourma theatre, on the border between Mali and Burkina Faso; and second, that conflict agents were more numerous and had more interactions with each other. To put it another way, the results appeared to confirm that actor fragmentation and the extent of territorial control do indeed increase rates of anti-civilian violence.

Continuing, qualitative data from news outlets, field interviews and humanitarian reports was used to illustrate and give a physical expression to territorial control dynamics. In the first place, results of the comparative analysis provided support to the argument that fragmented control

would yield more violence against civilians than complete control by one actor. Whereas areas of Zone A were partially controlled by a multiplicity of agents for the most part, one actor had been able to consolidate its hold on a large part of Zone B. As a result, civilians in Zone A suffered much higher rates of violence, of both indiscriminate and selective nature, while civilians in Zone B were faced with limited selective violence. Secondly, looking at how the territorial control shapes behaviour among the civilian population, the comparison underlines how the level of control predicts the rate at which civilians will collaborate with the occupying force or its rival. As ISGS's control was high in Zone B, civilians were very likely to denounce enemy's collaborators which decreased the cost of selective targeting, resulting in lower rate of anti-civilian violence. Zone A being disputed by a number of actors, collaboration was less abundant and defection towards one side or another common, which then required actors to use violence to incite collaboration or prevent defection. Finally, the last argument suggested that shifts in territorial control results in shifts of the perpetrator of indiscriminate violence. The losing side now having to resort to it because of its lost civilian support base, thus raising the cost of selective violence. All things considered, the dynamics of violence against civilians in the Sahelian fit confirm the two sets of hypotheses. Further, it also highlighted that the number of actors active in a conflict area influenced the rates of violence for that area.

As shown above, the situation in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso lend support to Kalyvas' expectations. If the abundance of armed groups and their competition for territory increases violence against civilians, how can we prevent further civilian harm? Following our observations, for the Sahelian governments, increasing the military presence alone would only alter the balance of force, leading to renewed violence. To break the cycle, the safety and well-being of the civilians should be the main focus of any strategy aiming at sidelining the Islamist threat and appeasing intercommunal tensions. Dialogue with communities should constitute the first step of this strategy. The best way to address deep-rooted issues such as land conflict and ethnic discrimination is to include locals and traditional leaders in decision-making. For this purpose, the State should build a relationship based on trust with minorities often excluded from the political representation by addressing their grievances. Considering that many fighters join out of opportunism, States should provide incentives for them to lay down their weapons such as creating jobs, recruiting them in security and defence forces and ensuring the security of their communities. This would erode the power of insurgents and restrict their ability to exact reprisals. At the same time, security personnel must be trained to respect basic human rights, and those violating them should face prosecution to prove that injustice does not go unpunished.

This also applies to militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou or the Koglweogo, governments must investigate their abuses and hold them accountable. Better representation of border communities such as Fulani and Tuareg within the army could prevent atrocities against those groups on the field. Finally, international forces present in the area should make to not stir further intercommunal by collaborating with biased ethnic-based militias and remain neutral to avoid escalation. In general, foreign powers should follow the lead of the host countries, rather than trying to impose its own strategies and interests.

As shown above, the causes of violence in the Sahel cannot be solely attributed to shifts in territorial control. Grievances run deep and the ongoing conflict has only exacerbated them. Still, shining a light on some of the reasons why armed groups kill civilians in certain areas in not in others could help new atrocities in the future. Even if territorial control and violence can prompt collaboration and denunciation, I argue it is not sufficient to win the hearts and minds of a community. In my opinion, future researches should focus on the dynamics that allow militias and insurgent groups to embed themselves in communities and acquire some degree of legitimacy against the State. Ultimately, violence obeys logics of oppression aimed at excluding minorities and dissenting voices from the political landscape. Throughout the world, individuals and communities become targets solely because of their identity. And in the end, education is the best tool at our disposal to fight discrimination and oppression.

Word count : 19401

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