



RADICALIZATION IN MALI - A Primer

Robert Martyn, PhD
CIDP Fellow

Mali's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, recently proclaimed that the country is the epicentre of a global Islamist war; his country's defence efforts, he agreed, are for the west, particularly Europe, noting ominously that the "Mediterranean isn't far." He further acknowledged being "far from fulfilling all our state obligations," limiting the context to "obligations to defend [Malian] territory, protect the citizens."¹ Appealing to the international community on this basis is to be expected, given the near Pavlovian response to all things Islamist and Mali's life-blood being foreign sustenance in the form of food, financial aid, and military support. However, this simplistic view of Mali's security situation, pinning everything on radicalized jihadists, is dangerously wrong.

Such a polemicized view will inevitably lead to costly, ill-informed decisions and poorly-devised intervention strategies. This briefing note will therefore provide a framework with which to understand the radicalization process, then look at the specific factors relevant within Mali. This will allow for a more reasoned understanding of the situation currently facing Canadian diplomatic, military, and aid-providing personnel. We will start with a succinct overview of Mali's current situation.

Mali is a multi-ethnic, overwhelmingly Muslim society of 19.2 million people. Inter-religious tolerance had been the norm, due to locally fused forms of Muslim teachings, including animistic Sufi variations, with traditional practices and beliefs. In its past, Mali was a highly developed centre of higher learning and regional trade, yet Mali is currently ranked 175 out of 187 on United Nations Human

Development Index (HDI).² This ranking will likely worsen, given a population median age of only 16 years and a fertility rate of 6 children per woman – the world's third highest—which sets the population on course to double by 2035.³

Current extremism is linked indelibly to the country's ongoing civil war, with the state fighting two generic rebel groups of combatants: Tuareg (and Fulani to a lesser extent), seeking independence or at least greater political autonomy; and an assortment of radicalized Muslim extremists, including many non-Malians from across Africa. There is little evidence of Malians leaving the country to fight alongside Islamic extremists elsewhere, suggesting that their motivation is local dissatisfaction rather than global jihad. Both groups, however, are vying for the same pool of disenfranchised youth in their recruiting efforts.⁴

The Radicalization Process

No single motive explains individual radicalization and violent extremism. Rather there are a number of interlinking factors, such as general issues (structural, systemic, political and socio-economic); individual (personal and idiosyncratic); and perceived experiences and socio-economic factors (such as inequality, exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination).⁵

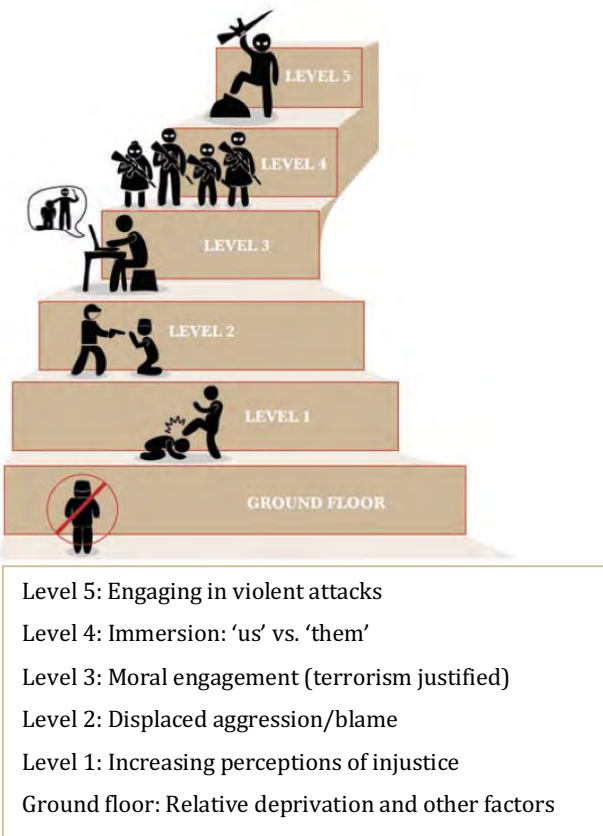
Radicalization can be understood as an expanding struggle between those in authority and those who are marginalized. Violent extremist organizations often fill "governance gaps," including social services, allowing them to win support and manipulate people. Extremists habitually offer simple answers to complex problems that resonate with the

targeted audience, regardless of how workable their solutions may be in the face of reality. However, for an appreciation of the process, the following model illustrates the route to extremism. If increasingly frustrated people have no doorways out of their struggles as they climb the narrowing staircase, they see few options beyond violence.

Mali-Specific Radicalization Factors

While there are many trajectories towards individual radicalization, this listing is prominent throughout Mali.

Figure 1: Violent Radicalization Staircase Model



SOURCE: Mohamed Elibiary, "Regional Expert Consultation: Framing the Development Solutions to Radicalization in Africa," United Nations, UNDP (July 2015), 4.

Youth Underemployment. Presently, only 10.5 percent of Malian youth are gainfully employed, with almost 250,000 more entering the labour market annually—a number expected to double by 2030.⁶ Finding a job is often linked to nepotism, where family and tribal links are more important than skill and enthusiasm. This labour problem has three

inter-linked drivers: development, education, and broken families.

Economic Development. Development and an associated lack of opportunities is a very specific driver of Malian extremism, wherein endemic marginalization and poverty have produced large numbers of youth without jobs or hope. Mali's GDP growth took a downturn after 2015, which continues to this day, further limiting employment options.⁷

Education. Mali has three education systems: public, private, and Qur'anic. Public schools are theoretically both free of charge and compulsory between the ages of 7 and 16. However, families' inability to pay for requisite uniforms, books, and supplies precludes attendance for roughly 60 percent of potential students. Private schooling is beyond the reach of many, as costs may exceed \$600 annually, which is more than half of Mali's average yearly salary.⁸ Jihadist hostility towards the secular education system, seen as a symbol of colonial domination and referred to derisively as 'Western' education, has led to a spike in attacks on schools and teachers.⁹ The number of schools declined from 530 to 228, while the number of teachers went from almost 2300 to 990.¹⁰ Qur'anic schools are therefore a growing option, especially for the northern pastoral communities. However, the line between legitimate education and jihadist-driven proselytizing for recruiting purposes varies widely between regions, with increased radicalization observed in built-up areas and as one moves northwards.

The number of out-of-school children in Mali has increased from 862,600 in 2012 to 1,155,000.¹¹ Of those attending school, only one-third are expected to graduate, with the majority of students leaving school by the age of 12.¹² As a result, the Malian adult literacy rate is estimated at 46.4 percent for the total population (53.5 percent for males and 39.6 percent for females),¹³ and some asses the rate as even lower. Nevertheless, whichever figure is taken to be the most accurate, Mali ranks amongst the lowest literacy rates in Africa.

Refugees/IDPs. Extremist-caused insecurity has led to the highest levels of population displacement—both Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) and refugees—since the Second World War; of the roughly 600,000 originating across the Sahel, Malians account for nearly half.¹⁴ Having left to escape armed violence, forced recruitment, arbitrary killings, sexual violence, and abductions, those subsequently attempting to return to the north often found the situation



to be unsustainable.¹⁵ They now tend to crowd into squalid camps near urban areas.

These three contributors to youth underemployment, taken together, have broken down social and community cohesion, leaving many children without appropriate social support or positive role models. Children are increasingly deprived of education or options, becoming the family breadwinners or fending for themselves by joining gangs for camaraderie and pay.

Ethnic Strife/Civil War. Northern Mali's current Tuareg rebellion is the fourth wave in a long-standing series of such conflicts.¹⁶ The secession drive is based upon ethnically-driven political and socio-economic exclusion, which has directly contributed to their poverty and alienation. The recent fight was strongly reinforced by the collapse of Gaddafi's regime, which had declared Libya the natural homeland of all Tuaregs and offered them Libyan citizenship.¹⁷ Gaddafi's loss of power in 2011 caused an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 heavily-armed and combat experienced Tuareg fighters to return home.¹⁸ Easily upsetting the balance of power in the north, they were widely admired, and hence emulated by youth seeking role models.

Islamist Extremism. While the Islamists initially supported the Tuareg rebellion, they capitalized on the power vacuum that emerged in the wake of military coups, inefficient governance, and failed security efforts. Mali's jihadist presence resulted from successful Algerian counter-insurgency efforts, which forced them out of their country. This was exacerbated by Algeria's refusal to either assist Mali's COIN efforts or provide jihadists with support or a safe haven, insisting that such neutrality made the situation not their problem.¹⁹ The radical Islamists have since continued to flourish across the Sahel. While many local communities reject harsh sharia interpretations, most have proven unable or unwilling to drive out the extremists.

Food Insecurity. A severe, ongoing food crisis is negatively affecting Mali, with the northern Sahel particularly hard hit by the consequences of climate change. Mali's average annual rainfall has decreased 30 percent since 1998, with progressively common droughts lasting longer. Desertification, where land is becoming increasingly arid, sees the Sahara spreading southward at approximately 48km annually.²⁰ It is estimated that "more than 16 million people in the Sahel region face food security issues; this includes more than 1 million children under the age of five risking death from severe malnutrition".²¹ Combined, drought and

desertification have increased the population's vulnerability and raised levels of food insecurity. This provides another recruiting opportunity for radical extremists. Given the inadequate government security efforts, few humanitarian organizations were able to remain in the area and provide services. Anti-government factions stepped in to either deliver direct food support or establish local security, wherein aid agencies could provide some measure of relief. Insurgent groups have therefore benefited from their ability to react, in contrast to the government, making them a more attractive option to the Malian citizenry.

Crime. War-fighting produced a proportional growth in criminal behaviours, given the decline of legitimate business. Ideological differences aside, Jihadists and secular rebels share pragmatic interests, usually focused on illegal fund-raising. Smuggling of an array of items including cigarettes, weapons, passports, or people (for sex, labour, or merely economic emigration) is endemic. Kidnapping for ransom is also a business that attracts youth, as seen in the 2008 kidnapping of Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler.²² Smuggling drugs is particularly problematic, with estimates that one-quarter of the approximately 140 tons of Europe's annual cocaine consumption during the past decade transiting western Africa.²³ These all raise the likelihood of youth being radicalized for economic reasons; "Misery has made the Sahel's thousands of unemployed an easy target for recruiters from extremist groups."²⁴

Mali Government (Governance). Underpinning the aforementioned economic development crisis is the state's failure to provide effective, legitimate government. Mali is plagued by blatant corruption, with bribery and embezzlement being huge obstacles for the foreign investment that could slow radicalization. Mali's corruption rates 116 out of 176 countries surveyed; a 2016 Malian Auditor General's report declared that "16 government agencies embezzled \$124 million of public funds."²⁵

Mali Government (Security). While much delayed, Mali has developed a strategy to counter violent extremism, which includes a National Reconciliation Policy.²⁶ Included within this policy, however, are offers of employment to former rebels, which alienated underemployed youth, who now consider radicalization as a pathway to work. Further hampering security efforts is the political leadership actively keeping the military weak, based on its history of coups d'état. Meddling with all aspects of the military is common, to the detriment of the military's competence, organization, and morale. High levels of corruption left

many units short on basic equipment and supplies.²⁷ As such, Mali is now obligated to rely on French and UN military forces—seen by many Malians as “foreign fighters,” which may contribute to extremist recruiting.

Mali Government (Army). Such policy deficits are aggravated by the Malian army, which has been described variously as “in a state of advanced disrepair,” “badly trained, badly paid, and under-equipped,” politicized, divided, and led by supposedly corrupt commanders.²⁸

Worse, rebel acts were cited as justification for revenge, with the military committing atrocities such as massacres and poisoning wells.²⁹ Not only is the army mistrusted by much of the population, the leadership’s failure to take the moral high ground on corruption and civil rights abuses denigrates their legitimacy, thus granting ethicality to the insurgents.

Endnotes

¹ Katarina Hojje, “Global Security at Stake in Mali’s Islamist War, President Says,” *Bloomberg*, 20 September 2018. Online: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-20/global-security-at-stake-in-mali-s-islamist-war-president-says>

² United Nations Development Programme, “Human Development Index – Mali.” *Human Development Reports*. Online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MLI>. The HDI is a composite measure that compares life expectancy, literacy, education, standards of living, and quality of life.

³ Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook, 2018*. Online: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>; BBC News, *Mali Country Profile*, July 2018. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13881370>; Worldometers. Online: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/mali-population>. While the infant mortality rate remains at approximately 1 death per 10 live births, an overall declining mortality rate will be problematic.

⁴ Dona Stewart, “What is Next for Mali? The Roots of Conflict and Challenges to Stability,” *US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute* (2013), 27.

Conclusion

As can be seen, Malian radicalization is not a simplistic, single-cause issue. Significantly, economically-driven criminality was recently reaffirmed by a UN HQ member in Mali, who further noted the difficulties of moving the focus from a one-dimensional anti-Jihad effort.³⁰ Some specific contexts, such as positively emphasizing identity or social cohesion could prove effective in building resilience to violent extremism. The Malian state, however, has failed to utilize them, leaving it to violent elements to capitalize on the narratives, contributing to instability, thus feeding the radicalization.³¹ As noted with the example of rebels providing food and aid workers, as well as state failure to take the moral high road, this further surrenders legitimacy to the radicals.

All evidence points to a requirement to overhaul state structures and the legal system, as proven necessary by ongoing efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in order to rebuild government acceptability.³² Otherwise, the government’s inadequacies in securing the country and the people’s support play into the jihadists and rebels being depicted as “the winning team” for youth determining which path to choose.

⁵ Robert Martyn, “Rebellious Belief: What Motivates Insurgents,” in Alan English, Rob Engen, H. Christian Breede (eds.), *Combat Motivation - Past, Present, and Future: The Canadian Context*, (Kingston: Queen’s McGill University Press, forthcoming).

⁶ Marije Balt, “Youth unemployment in Mali: a magnet for criminals and terrorists,” *The Broker (EU)* (23 April 2015).

⁷ African Development Bank Group, “Mali Economic Outlook.” Online: www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/mali/mali-economic-outlook

⁸ Numbeo/Cost of Living, “Mali.” Online: https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Mali

⁹ Nadia Adam, Ekaterina Golovko, and Boubacar Sangaré, “Terrorism puts education on hold in Mali.” *Reliefweb*, 17 October 2017. Online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/terrorism-puts-education-hold-mali>.

¹⁰ UNESCO Office in Dakar, “The impact of Mali’s crisis on education,” April 2014. Online: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/dakar/about-this-office/single-view/news/the_impact_of_malis_crisis_on_education/

¹¹ Adam, et al, “Terrorism puts education on hold in Mali.”

- ¹² Education Policy and Data Center, “Mali Profile.” Online: <https://www.epdc.org/Mali>
- ¹³ US Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, “Mali Country Profile.” (2005). Adult literacy rate is defined as those over age of 15 who can read and write.
- ¹⁴ UNHCR, “Malian IDP and Refugees,” *UN Data Portal* (2018), Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/malisituation>
- ¹⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Global Overview 2015: People internally displaced by conflict and violence.” *Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council* (2015), 34.
- ¹⁶ Stewart, “What is Next for Mali?,” 32-33.
- ¹⁷ R. Poulton and I. ag Youssouf, “A Peace of Timbuktu: Democratic Governance, Development and African Peacemaking,” *Geneva, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research* (1998).
- ¹⁸ Scott Stewart, “Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya,” *Stratfor*, 2 February 2012. Online: www.stratfor.com/weekly/mali-besieged-fighters-fleeing-libya. See also “Strife in the Sahel: A Perfect Desert Storm,” *The Economist*, 17 March 17 2012; BBC, “Ex-Gaddafi Tuareg Fighters Boost Mali Rebels,” *BBC News Africa*, 17 October 2011. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15334088>
- ¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Related Groups,” (March 2017); also, Stewart, “What is Next for Mali?,” 39-40, and “Mali: Extremism & Counter-Extremism,” Counter-Extremism Project. Online: www.counterextremism.com/countries/mali
- ²⁰ Wieteke Aster Holthuijzen and Jacqueline Rugaimukamu Maximilian, “Dry, Hot, and Brutal: Desertification in the Sahel of Mali,” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 13, No. 7 (2011), 245-268.
- ²¹ Stewart, “What is Next for Mali?,” 59
- ²² The kidnapping ultimately led to Canadian SOF training Malian Armed Forces. See Mark Moyar, “Countering Violent Extremism in Mali,” *MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University* (2015), 10.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁴ Norman Cigar and Stephanie E. Kramer (eds.), “Al-Qaida After Ten Years of War: A Global Perspective of Success, Failure and Prospects,” *Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office*, 30 March 2012; and Modibo Goita, “West Africa’s Growing Terrorist Threat from Confronting AQIM’s Sahelian Strategy,” *Africa Security Brief, Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University* (2011).
- ²⁵ US Department of Commerce, “Mali – Corruption.” Online: www.export.gov/article?id=Mali-Corruption.
- ²⁶ US Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2014.” Online: www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239404.htm
- ²⁷ Moyar, “Countering Violent Extremism in Mali,” 14. See also United Nations Security Council Report S/2012/894, “Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali,” 29 November 2012, 4.
- ²⁸ Moyar, “Countering Violent Extremism in Mali,” 30, 43-44.
- ²⁹ Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, “Mali’s Long Road Ahead,” *The RUSI Journal*, 159, No. 5 (2014), 32-40.
- ³⁰ Author’s discussions with a senior MINUSMA officer who must remain anonymous.
- ³¹ Boeke and Tisseron, “Mali’s Long Road Ahead,” 32-40.
- ³² Timothy Culpepper and William Lynn, “A Hybrid Intelligence Process for Hybrid War,” in Paul Brister, William H. Natter III, Robert R. Tomes (eds.). *Hybrid Warfare and Hybrid Threats: Perspectives for an Era of Persistent Conflict* (NY: CENSA, 2011), 179-180.