



WORKING
PAPER N° 5

LIVING UNDER BLOCKADE: THE CASE OF AREAS UNDER JNIM INFLUENCE IN MALI

DECEMBER 2025

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Some analyses of this report are nourished by previous field works carried out in the Mopti region in January 2024 as part of the project ERC-LANDRESPONSE (n° 101054410) based at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). ”

DISCLAIMER:

This working paper was produced for review by the REcAP Network. It was prepared by an independent research team under the working paper on 'Building Multi-Stakeholders' Collaborative Partnership for the Prevention of Conflict and Violent Extremism in the Sahel'. The authors bear sole responsibility for the contents of this report, and its views do not necessarily represent those of the REcAP Network.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ECRIS	Rapid Collective Survey for the Identification of Conflicts and Strategic Groups
FAMa	Malian armed forces
FCFA	African Financial Community franc
JNIM	<i>Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin</i> (Support Group for Islam and Muslims)
IS	Islamic State
IS-GS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
MINUSMA	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RGPH	General Census of Population and Housing
RN	National road

IN THE HISTORY OF MALI'S CENTRAL REGIONS, BLOCKADES AGAINST VILLAGES AND TOWNS FEATURE PROMINENTLY IN ACCOUNTS OF PAST WARS. WHETHER TRANSMITTED ORALLY OR WRITTEN IN THE WORKS OF HISTORIANS AND CHRONICLERS FROM THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TO THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, POPULAR MEMORY OF THE CONFLICTS IN SÉGOU (SOW, 2021), MACINA (SANANKOUA, 1991; ROBINSON, 1985), AND BANDIAGARA (BARRY, 1991; BRADSHAW, 2021) HIGHLIGHT THE USE OF BLOCKADES AS A STRATEGY FOR BRING ABOUT THE SURRENDER OF REBEL TERRITORIES.

Blockades were used as a way of suffocating the enemy and subduing resisting villages or towns by cutting off access to weapons, food, and means of communication with the outside world. In addition to these cases related in historical accounts, rural populations have also experienced military blockades, and this phenomenon has been observed again in the regions of Ségou, Mopti, Bandiagara, and Douentza during the advance of extremist armed groups¹ from 2017 onwards, notably when Katiba Macina, a militant Islamist group active in Mali, imposed a total blockade on the village of Kouakourou. How should we interpret the use of this strategy from past eras by the armed groups of today? What are its political, economic, and social objectives in the contemporary context?

Kouakourou is a small village located in the Djenné district (cercle), and is surrounded by the waters of the Niger River during the annual flood season (July to December). In September 2017, after the village refused to apply the new rules imposed by jihadist fighters (a ban on celebrations, compulsory wearing of the veil for women, closure of the school, etc.), it was placed under blockade. The fighters controlled access to the river and the surrounding forests. This blockade, which lasted at least two years, prevented residents from accessing their fields, fishing in the river, or trading with the rest of the region. The experience in Kouakourou marked a turning point: it served as a model for other blockades, and this gradually became one of the main strategies used by extremist armed groups to subdue villages that resisted them. In the present study we will analyse different cases of blockades imposed by these groups to highlight their modus operandi, the conditions under which they are implemented, and their internal logic. Although they share certain similarities, these situations reflect a diversity of political, economic, social, and spiritual dynamics.

BLOCKADES WERE USED AS A WAY OF SUFFOCATING THE ENEMY AND SUBDUING RESISTING VILLAGES OR TOWNS BY CUTTING OFF ACCESS TO WEAPONS, FOOD, AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

While the term 'blockade' seems the most appropriate to describe the various situations studied here, in Mali the term 'embargo'² has become popular in everyday language for referring to these blockades imposed by armed groups on villages that refuse to submit to their influence. Both terms relate to a form of isolation—diplomatic or economic—based on coercive measures. For extremist armed groups, the blockade serves as a violent means of controlling a given area. Baczko and Dorronsoro (2017) point out that the control of a population by armed groups is not limited to a simple balance of power or the provision of services aimed at gaining support (rebel governance), but paves the way for the creation of new social and institutional fields, particularly through the law. These dynamics thus contribute to the very production of society. In this sense, the authors invite us to move beyond an analysis focused on the logic of control and services, and to adopt a broader understanding of the ways in which armed groups establish institutions and shape the social order.

¹ In this study, we favour the term 'extremist armed groups' for referring to actors affiliated with Katiba Macina who are active in the areas covered by our investigation. However, local populations frequently use the term 'jihadists' to refer to these fighters. This terminological difference reflects a variation in the linguistic registers and interpretative frameworks used by external observers and local actors respectively. We also sometimes use the term 'jihadist' on the basis of two empirical justifications: firstly, Katiba Macina members identify themselves as such, and characterise their armed engagement as 'jihad'. Secondly, the communities interviewed during fieldwork also use this term to refer to the armed men claiming to belong to this group. The use of this terminology therefore aims to reflect the categories of identification used by the actors concerned, without necessarily endorsing their ideological foundations. ² An embargo is more of a legal norm or practice under international law, whereas a blockade is a military practice that can be implemented by various armed actors, ranging from regular armies to non-regular forces such as extremist armed groups, paramilitaries, militias, etc. In this study, we favour the term 'blockade', which seems to better illustrate the situations observed in our study area. However, it should be noted that the popular use of the term 'embargo' in Mali is also linked to the political events of recent years, marked by ECOWAS embargoes, for example. The term is used both in everyday conversation and by fighters belonging to armed groups to describe blockades.

Although blockades were initially a weapon of coercion in the hands of states or international organisations, they have undergone major changes when being used as a means of coercion by non-state armed organisations, becoming a tactic for subjugating regions resistant to the latter's control. By fragmenting the territories where armed clashes with regular forces or other non-state armed organisations take place, groups resorting to blockades seek to conquer portions of the territory in order to exert their political and economic influence. With the expansion of self-identified 'jihadist' organisations, the use of blockades has become widespread among combat units in the various regions where they are deployed (including Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso). While these non-state armed groups impose blockades on populations to force them into submission, this strategy is also sometimes used by government forces on the territories that they control (Sulaiman, 2025).

In the context of Mali, Bouhleb (2020) and Ahmad and Diallo (2022) point out that this transformation has resulted in restrictions on movement and trade in rural areas where the state is contested, particularly owing to the corrupt and repressive practices of its local representatives. Armed groups establish zones of control where they can control access to markets, main roads, and natural resources, which often becomes conditional on adherence to agreements (benkan)³ or the payment of illicit taxes. These contribute to the financing of the fighters' armed activities, without providing any material (basic social infrastructure) or symbolic (protection and security) benefits for the village communities. This form of control is based on a pragmatic logic: for these groups, the blockade is intended to strengthen the cohesion of various armed coalitions and to provide sustainable financing for their struggle.

Baldaro and Diall (2020) illustrate this phenomenon with reference to the example of the rivalry between Katiba Macina, linked to Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS). Their struggle for control of roads and strategic points has led to the fragmentation of rural areas into a mosaic of zones of influence. In these zones, roads, bridges, local markets, and supply centres become systematic blockage points where civilian mobility can be severely restricted and controlled. This dynamic encourages the establishment of local blockades, which are sometimes intermittent but whose cumulative impact on economic and social life remains considerable.

These levies, imposed on local populations and traders, function as an economic blockade mechanism: those (individuals or villages) who refuse to pay or attempt to circumvent them suffer reprisals, restrictions on movement, or market closures, thus replicating a blockade logic on a local and segmented scale.

Daniel Abgiboa (according to the review of his work by Oztas, 2023) refers to this situation as a veritable 'war on mobility'. Road infrastructure plays a dual role here: it serves development, while also having a strategic function that allows for armed control. Roads thus become front lines, in which conventional battles are replaced with roadblocks, ambushes, racketeering, the burning of trucks carrying hydrocarbons, and temporary closures. Traffic disruption is used as a weapon, both to put pressure on the state and to deprive local communities of access to markets. In this regard, Nsaibia et al. (2023) indicate that Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the main extremist group in the Sahel, use these means as a way of practising extortion, presented as the religious collection of *zakat*⁴, thus misappropriating a positive Islamic religious obligation for the purposes of economic and symbolic control.

These levies, imposed on local populations and traders, function as a mechanism of economic blockade: those (individuals or villages) who refuse to pay them, or attempt to circumvent them, suffer reprisals, restrictions on movement, or market closures, thus applying the logic of a blockade at a local and segmented scale.

In their study, Guichaoua and Bouhleb (2023) consider the use of *zakat* as a key indicator of interactions between 'jihadist' groups and civilian populations. They show that *zakat* fulfils multiple functions—symbolic, political, territorial, military, social, and economic—which structure the

BALDARO AND DIALL (2020) ILLUSTRATE THIS PHENOMENON WITH REFERENCE TO THE EXAMPLE OF THE RIVALRY BETWEEN KATIBA MACINA, LINKED TO AL-QAEDA, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE IN THE GREATER SAHARA (IS-GS). THEIR STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF ROADS AND STRATEGIC POINTS HAS LED TO THE FRAGMENTATION OF RURAL AREAS INTO A MOSAIC OF ZONES OF INFLUENCE

³ In Bamanakan, the language most widely spoken in Mali, the term *benkan* is a combination of *ben* ('meeting', 'waiting') and *kan* ('voice', 'neck'), and refers to the idea of a collective commitment. The root *ben* highlights the dialogical dimension of the agreement, understood as the product of an interaction in which the actors, within a framework of discussion, exercise their agency by freely consenting to a joint decision. In this sense, *benkan* refers to an agreement negotiated and accepted autonomously by all parties, reflecting a shared and voluntary commitment. However, the contemporary use of the term by Katiba Macina fighters is an instance of semantic and political misappropriation: the agreements referred to by this term do not result from balanced negotiation, but from an asymmetry of power where structural constraints drastically limit the capacity for action and choice of the populations concerned. Far from reflecting the ideal of mutual commitment, these imposed arrangements rather reflect a relationship of domination, where apparent consent masks the absence of real alternatives. ⁴ The use of the term *zakat* by Katiba Macina and other groups affiliated with JNIM is a semantic and symbolic misappropriation of a religious concept in Islam. In its original meaning, *zakat* refers to legal almsgiving, that is, a positive religious obligation aimed at promoting solidarity and redistribution within the Muslim community. However, in the context under study, the term is used to legitimise forced levies imposed on local populations under duress. For this reason, in this study we favour the expressions 'forced levies' or 'extortion presented as *zakat*' in order to mark the analytical difference between religious practice and its instrumental use by extremist armed groups in areas under their political and military influence.

order that is imposed in a context of war. However, its application varies depending on the organisation: JNIM (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) integrates it into a relatively codified and redistributive system, often aligned with local norms, which reinforces its legitimacy; conversely, the Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP, which developed from IS-GS, and is affiliated with Islamic State) imposes a coercive and predatory approach, without redistribution, where non-payment results in violent sanctions. This divergence illustrates two contrasting logics: one orientated towards the consolidation of a sustainable order, the other based on terror and opportunistic extraction.

This idea is explored in greater depth by Tobie (2017) and Ladini (2023), who demonstrate that this coercive governance is based on a combination of violence and negotiation: armed actors impose constraints while exploiting communities' dependence on certain roads or resources in order to consolidate their own legitimacy. This fragile compromise keeps populations in a situation of security dependence, thereby strengthening control over the territory without requiring permanent occupation. This mode of governance is observed among jihadist groups in certain regions of Mali (Poudiougou, 2024a). The author highlights that, in rural areas, Katiba Macina fighters exercise a mode of governance at a distance, without having to deploy personnel and resources on a day-to-day basis. This system, which has been described as a form of pastoral moral economy (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2024), functions by either allowing mobility or imposing immobility, depending on the degree of submission of rural populations to jihadist political domination.

THE FIGHTERS DEPLOY ARMED ELEMENTS AT CERTAIN KEY POINTS ALONG THE ROADS IN ORDER TO AMBUSH USERS AND THUS CREATE CONDITIONS THAT IMMOBILISE THE POPULATION. THE POPULATION IS THEN ORDERED TO COMPLY WITH THE MEASURES IMPOSED IN EXCHANGE FOR A PARTIAL REOPENING OF THE BLOCKED ROADS

In the current trends of armed violence in Mali, blockades no longer affect only villages or medium-sized towns, but now extend to major roads. This includes national roads connecting major cities, as well as secondary roads (connecting villages) used by rural populations. These roads are the links between rural communities and the rest of the country. Owing to their importance to economic and social life, road infrastructures are strategic targets. Without setting up visible checkpoints along the roads, as is done in other contexts or by self-defence groups (Schouten, 2022), extremist fighters block certain roads by other means (setting fire to vehicles, hijacking buses and their passengers, destroying bridges, etc.) in order to increase pressure on populations that do not support their cause. The fighters deploy armed elements at certain key points along the roads in order to ambush users and thus create conditions that immobilise the population. The population is then ordered to comply with the measures imposed in exchange for a partial reopening of the blocked roads. They thus establish mechanisms for controlling and filtering road users (buses and travellers), making the resumption of mobility conditional on the payment of the sums demanded, either remotely or on the spot, depending on the case.

Road blockades have serious repercussions on local economic relations. Roads connect the various weekly markets, facilitating trade between rural populations, the sale of agricultural products, and the supply of essential goods (OECD/SWAC, 2025). The use of attacks, the laying of mines, and the destruction of bridges to prevent the movement of transport vehicles, particularly those of market traders, significantly disrupt local economic activities, causing prices to rise (Baudais et al., 2023; Tangara, 2024). Katiba Macina therefore controls resources, monitors trade flows, and imposes a hierarchy of power based on its ability to block or allow movement. This form of control transforms roads, markets, and crossroads into instruments of political domination, shaping the local economic and social order under armed coercion.

The studies cited above show the increasingly systematic use of blockades as a tactic of war by extremist armed groups in Mali and the Sahel in general. For these groups, blockades have become a common means of exerting pressure, aimed at forcing uncooperative local populations to engage in dialogue or submit to their authority. Furthermore, in the contexts studied, blockades have also forced regular armed forces to review their security measures and strategies for combating these groups, given the devastating effects of blockades on local communities, which lead to deteriorating living conditions, malnutrition, and profound harm to individuals' physical and moral welfare.

METHODOLOGY

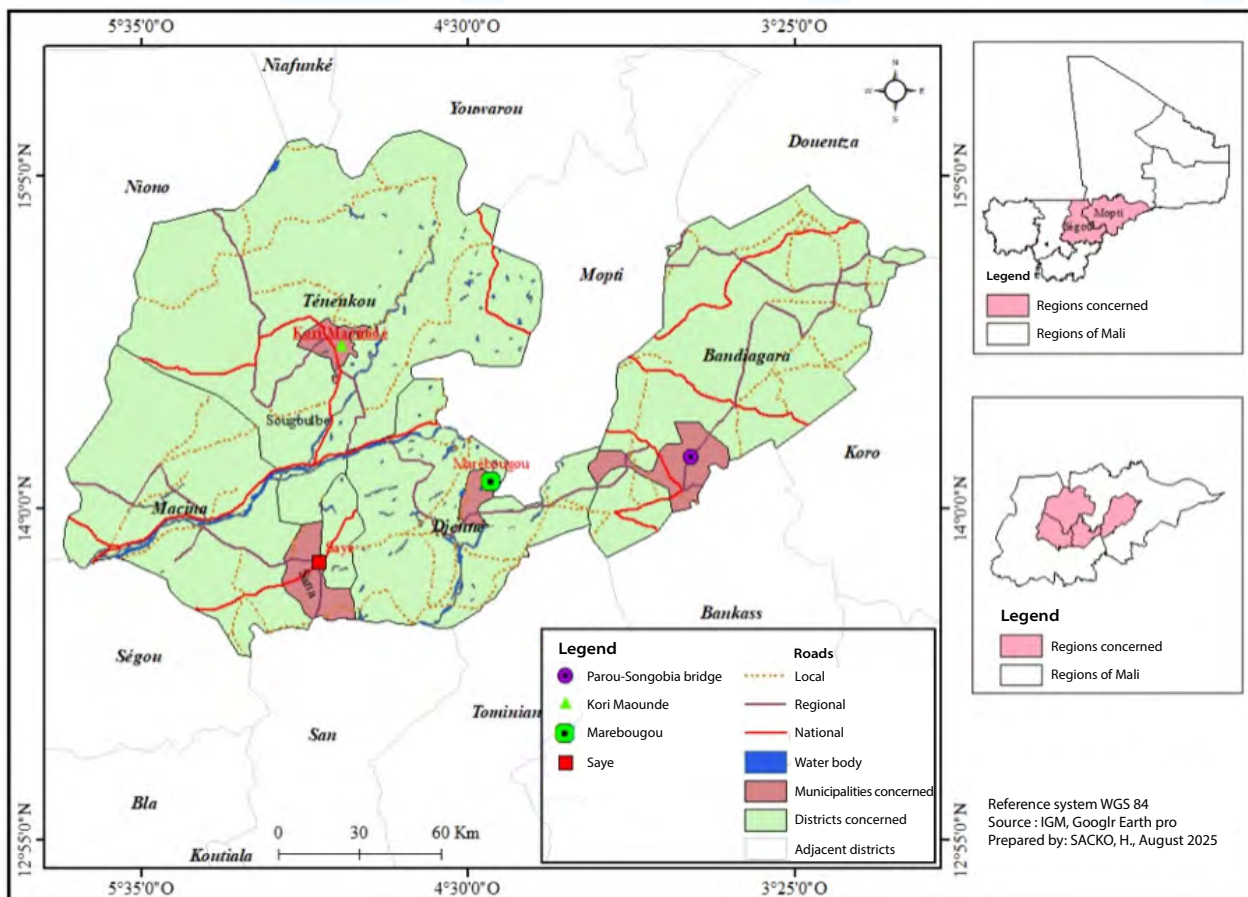
The methodology adopted is based on a qualitative approach combining interviews and contextual analysis. A total of 48 people were consulted, including 10 women. The aim of this approach is to understand the local dynamics of adaptation to blockade situations in areas under the influence of Katiba Macina, which is affiliated with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

STUDY AREA

The study adopts a comparative approach between two areas of Mali in which Katiba Macina has strengthened its influence in recent years: the Bandiagara-Mopti and Ségou regions. This comparison is intended to help understand variations in the application of blockade tactics and the factors explaining these differences. The analysis seeks to determine the extent to which these strategies differ according to location, socio-political context, the presence of competing actors (self-defence groups, state forces), the dynamics of dialogue or negotiation between Katiba Macina and local populations, the duration of the blockade, and the type of locality (town, village).

THE STUDY ADOPTS A COMPARATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN TWO AREAS OF MALI IN WHICH KATIBA MACINA HAS STRENGTHENED ITS INFLUENCE IN RECENT YEARS: THE BANDIAGARA-MOPTI AND SÉGOU REGIONS

FIGURE 1: LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA



The study also sought to determine how the populations' adaptation strategies to the blockades vary depending on the territory, and why. The responses of the inhabitants interviewed were found to depend on several factors, notably the presence of an organised force capable of armed opposition (military detachment, self-defence group) and the involvement of external actors (humanitarian or mediation NGOs)⁵.

⁵ In this case, the external actors are organisations specialising in conflict mediation, such as HD (Humanitarian Dialogue) and Promédiation.

RELEVANCE OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS

Bandiagara and Mopti: Testing grounds for Katiba Macina's strategies

In the Bandiagara and Mopti regions, the study focused mainly on the localities of Marébougou (Djenné district), Kori-Maoundé (Bandiagara district), and the Parou-Songobia bridge, located on Route nationale no. 15 (RN15), connecting Bankass to Bandiagara. These three localities were chosen to illustrate the different strategies adopted by Katiba Macina fighters⁶ towards the local populations.

The coercive measures implemented by the fighters (armed groups) in these localities serve several strategic objectives connected to establishing the group's political and military influence in the territories. When faced with resistance, Katiba Macina imposes blockades of varying degrees that drastically limit the supply of food, medicine, and fuel. This resistance comes mainly from civilian populations, community leaders, and, in some cases, self-defence groups, who refuse to submit and collaborate with jihadist fighters, or who provide discreet support to the regular armed forces.

This system of control and pressure weakens the resistance capacity of local communities, forcing them to accept the group's authority. This forced deprivation creates increased dependence among the population, encouraging them to negotiate or submit in order to ensure their survival. At the same time, these restrictions are intended to discourage any collaboration with the regular armed forces (and therefore with the state) or with self-defence groups. The latter are perceived as threats to the order that Katiba Macina fighters seek to impose.

THE VILLAGE OF SAYE⁷

Although administratively part of the Ségou region, in practice—in terms of mobility and interconnections—the village of Saye is more orientated towards localities in the San region (a new administrative division). It will be useful to analyse the dynamics surrounding the village of Saye, which has been under blockade by Katiba Macina since April 2024, with dramatic consequences for the local population.

Saye is located in a strategic area connecting Djenné and San, two corridors where Katiba Macina is seeking to strengthen its influence. The area around the town of Djenné is now increasingly under the influence of Katiba Macina, with little armed resistance from local self-defence groups⁸, which is facilitating its gradual establishment. San, on the other hand, is a crucial location: it provides access to the Bani River, a key point for controlling the flow of goods, livestock, and travel from Benenikenyi (near San) to Djenné and onwards to Mopti, where the Bani meets the main course of the Niger River. By consolidating its presence around Saye, Katiba Macina seeks to control these key transport routes, strengthen its grip on trade routes, and extend its territorial control in the region (Tangara, 2024).

The blockade imposed on the village of Saye is part of a gradual strategy of subjugation: Katiba Macina first secured the cooperation of several surrounding villages through non-aggression pacts, in exchange for the cessation of all forms of collaboration with the regular armed forces and their withdrawal from any self-defence initiatives. These pacts aimed to secure recognition of the armed group's authority by local communities, as well as the adoption of dress codes (veils for women) and economic practices (payment of forced levies) imposed by the fighters. However, the village chief of Saye, considering that his village had already suffered major economic losses (theft of livestock, murders, and reprisals), refused to submit, believing that he had nothing left to preserve. In response, Katiba Macina decreed a total blockade on Saye, isolating the population and drastically limiting their movements.

The case of Saye is thus emblematic of a form of resistance observed in certain localities on the Bandiagara plateau, where village chiefs have opposed the influence of armed groups. In opposing external powers, they were able to draw on both material resources (self-defence groups, influential local social networks, army presence) and symbolic resources (collective historical memory of resistance, marabout prestige). In this context, it is useful to compare Saye's expe-

IT WILL BE USEFUL TO ANALYSE THE DYNAMICS SURROUNDING THE VILLAGE OF SAYE, WHICH HAS BEEN UNDER BLOCKADE BY KATIBA MACINA SINCE APRIL 2024, WITH DRAMATIC CONSEQUENCES FOR THE LOCAL POPULATION

⁶ In this report, the jihadist fighters to whom we refer are mainly affiliated with Katiba Macina. This group is the main such actor operating in the central regions of Mali. Although this group is part of the JNIM jihadist conglomerate, which includes other armed groups, in the areas covered by this report references to jihadist fighters mainly pertain to Katiba Macina. ⁷ Compared to Marébougou and Kori-Maoundé, Saye is a locality with a stronger historical and political identity and a larger population. Saye is smaller than its neighbouring, medium-sized towns, such as Djenné and San, but comparable to Macina and Tenenkou. This status also helps to explain why the inhabitants of villages and hamlets destroyed by the jihadists are moving in significant numbers to Saye. ⁸ The majority of the self-defence groups that were formed between 2017 and 2021 have been defeated in various episodes of armed confrontation with the jihadists.

rience with certain other communities that made arrangements with Katiba Macina, and yet faced restrictions of various sorts. Such a comparison provides keys to a deeper understanding of the criteria that determine the imposition of blockades.

These elements demonstrate the value of analysing the situations of blockade in the areas of Saye, Marébougou, Kori-Maoundé, and the Parou-Songobia bridge, spread across the regions of Bandiagara, Mopti, and Ségou. Owing to time constraints, data collection was based on sampling.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND POPULATION STUDIED

Sampling was based primarily on a purposive approach to participant selection, taking into account the social function and role of the respondents in their communities. In addition, the 'snowball' method was used to identify other relevant profiles based on the recommendations of the initial participants, particularly for addressing sensitive aspects of the study.

The individuals interviewed generally occupy interface or intermediary roles within their communities. They include imams, presidents of youth associations, presidents of women's associations, agents of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), transport operators, and community radio presenters. Depending on their social position, activity, or profession, these individuals serve as intermediaries between their community and armed groups. This intermediary role justified the choice of these different profiles for the interviews. In order to reflect the diversity of experiences under blockade, we also interviewed residents without any particular social position, but whose daily lives had been severely affected. The interviews provided a better understanding of life under constraint, survival strategies, and perceptions of the changes imposed by armed groups. Certain socio-professional categories are particularly well suited to this purpose, such as traders and transporters, who occupy a central place in our survey owing to their essential role in maintaining the flow of goods between besieged villages and urban centres. Some of these individuals manage to negotiate passage corridors with armed groups in order to continue supplying villages with basic commodities (food, medicine, fuel, spare parts) or to transport livestock and goods to regional markets. These actors continue to be essential links in the economic connection between cities and the countryside.

We also interviewed customary and religious leaders, some of whom have played an active role in community mediation, whether in facilitating coexistence or mobilising resistance. In several localities, women and young people have proved to be major actors in negotiating truce or coexistence agreements with armed groups, particularly to guarantee access to resources and the continuity of certain economic activities (fishing, transhumance, agriculture).

Finally, we also interviewed local elected officials and technical agents (health, livestock, agriculture). Some continue to work in areas under armed influence. Their testimonies provide valuable insights into how public services have adapted and how these professionals carry out their work despite the risks.

The diversity of the profiles interviewed has enabled us to produce a detailed and contextualised reading of people's way of life under blockade, by cross-referencing the voices of actors with different but complementary roles.

SAMPLING WAS BASED PRIMARILY ON A PURPOSIVE APPROACH TO PARTICIPANT SELECTION, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE SOCIAL FUNCTION AND ROLE OF THE RESPONDENTS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Data collection was based on two main tools: semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The documentary analysis was based on academic literature and reports from NGOs and international institutions. We also used data from the Malian press to contextualise and better characterise the various case studies.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents of Saye, Djenné, Marébougou, and Kori-Maoundé, as well as other actors such as transport operators and NGO workers. This data collection phase, conducted from 5 May to 30 June 2025, was based on the data collection methodology of the Enquête collective rapide d'identification des conflits et des groupes stratégiques (Rapid Collective Survey for the Identification of Conflicts and Strategic Groups, ECRIS) (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 1994). This approach was chosen because it allows for the analysis of social and political dynamics in the context of conflict or social transformation. Unlike traditional ethnographic approaches or accelerated survey methods, the ECRIS method is halfway between in-depth field analysis and a comparative approach, allowing for rapid and structured data collection. Furthermore, it facilitates the identification and study of local conflicts as keys to understanding power relations and social transformations. It considers villages and communities not as homogeneous and consensual entities, but as arenas where various strategic groups with sometimes divergent interests confront each other (Bisoka et al., 2024).

In a context of applied research, our study confirms the relevance of ECRIS for understanding local dynamics, tensions between actors, and the adaptation strategies of populations faced with restrictions imposed by armed groups. This method made it possible to identify the forms of control exercised by Katiba Macina and the reactions of local communities by providing qualitative indicators that are comparable from one site to another.

THE CONCEPT OF A 'SENSITIVE FIELD SITE' HAS MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS, WITH NO STRICTLY ESTABLISHED BOUNDARIES. IT GENERALLY REFERS TO AN AREA THAT IS DIFFICULT TO ACCESS FOR RESEARCH OWING TO INSECURITY, CONFLICT, OR THE VULNERABILITY OF THE POPULATIONS CONCERNED (HAGBERG & KÖRLING, 2015)

SENSITIVITY OF THE FIELD SITE AND THE DATA COLLECTION STRATEGY ADOPTED

The concept of a 'sensitive field site' has multiple definitions, with no strictly established boundaries. It generally refers to an area that is difficult to access for research owing to insecurity, conflict, or the vulnerability of the populations concerned (Hagberg & Körling, 2015). In the context of our research, all of the case studies are located in areas marked by the presence of armed groups and prolonged conflicts, making access to the sites extremely complex (Hamani, 2025). These conditions called for an adapted methodological strategy, allowing for the collection of information while limiting the risks for researchers and respondents.

Working in sensitive field sites involves constant adjustments that go far beyond traditional methodological considerations. Our research is embedded in a reality marked by the emotions and tensions experienced by researchers: fear, stress, uncertainty, empathy, and even shock (Boumaza & Campana, 2007). In such contexts, Hagberg and Körling (2015) recommend an approach that combines the use of digital tools with support from trusted informants. We have adopted this approach by mobilising pre-existing networks of contacts, composed of local investigators, community leaders, and associative partners.

To ensure safety and accessibility, interviews were conducted in safer and more easily accessible locations. For the villages of Saye and Marébougou, the town of Djenné was chosen as the meeting place, particularly on Mondays, the day of the weekly market. For Kori-Maoundé, the interviews took place in Sévaré. This approach made it possible to invite participants to a safer environment. However, for Saye, most of the interviews were conducted by telephone, as security constraints prevented those concerned from travelling to Djenné.

In addition to the three villages (Marébougou, Saye, and Kori-Maoundé), the survey conducted around the Parou-Songobia bridge aimed to document the effects of armed blockades on mobility, trade flows, and local forms of governance under constraints. Interviews were conducted with several categories of actors: transporters, NGO agents operating in the region, and representatives of Dogon youth associations, notably the Collectif des associations de jeunes du pays Dogon (Collective of Youth Associations of Dogon Country). The surveys conducted in localities under the influence of jihadist groups, particularly those under blockade, required constant readjustment of the research protocol and even redeployment of the survey. This redeployment took place in other areas with similar characteristics, providing insight into the dynamics of daily life for rural popu-

WHILE SOME OF THE INDIVIDUALS WE APPROACHED FOR INTERVIEW AGREED TO SPEAK TO US, OTHERS (PARTICULARLY THOSE BELONGING TO CERTAIN TRANSPORT COMPANIES) REFUSED TO MEET WITH US

lations living under jihadist blockade for several years. By choosing to include a crossing point in the survey, the Parou-Songobia bridge, we aimed to highlight a new coercive measure adopted by Katiba Macina in the Bandiagara region from 2019 onwards.

While some of the individuals we approached for interview agreed to speak to us, others (particularly those belonging to certain transport companies) refused to meet with us. This reluctance can be explained by several factors. Firstly, most of the road transport companies operating on this route originate from areas directly affected by the conflict, notably Bandiagara, Bankass, and Koro. Secondly, the silence of some actors is linked to the fear of reprisals. As several transport operators told us, 'the jihadists know everyone': social, family, and geographical affiliations are known, and any public statement is perceived as a high-risk act.

These factors reveal the intensity of the pressure experienced by users of this road, and the way in which the presence of armed groups infiltrates spaces for speech, work, and movement. The silence and self-censorship observed are symptoms of the reconfiguration of public space, which has come to be governed by violence and the threat of its use.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

For data analysis, we adopted a case study approach. We started from the premise that a case study consists in selecting empirical elements with certain characteristics that are highlighted in order to analyse a given social fact (Lund, 2014). From this perspective, the data collected in Marébougou, Saye, Kori-Maoundé, and around the Parou-Songobia bridge constitute concrete situations that can be used to describe and analyse, in a comparative manner, the effects of the blockades and the ways in which daily life is organised in villages under the influence of Katiba Macina. These analyses made it possible to identify various social dynamics—resistance, coexistence, or submission—in response to the pressures exerted by armed groups.

After identifying the specific characteristics of each case, we identified cross-cutting aspects in the modes of political and social control imposed by Katiba Macina fighters in central Mali. These recurring elements include restrictions on mobility, control of access to agricultural land and pastures, and strategies for weakening populations (through hunger or isolation) in order to force them into submission.

Before turning to the analysis, a contextualised characterisation of the case studies is presented in the next section.

MARÉBOUGOU

Marébougou is a village in the municipality of Femaye, located in the Djenné district, Mopti region. Its population is mainly composed of members of the Bozo and Bamana peoples. Although it is not a chief town, before the blockade the village had a very active local market, integrated into regional trade circuits linking Djenné, Sofara, Kouakourou, and Taga. This connection made Marébougou an essential link in local trade before it was subjected to a total blockade from October 2021 onwards, and then to a partial blockade, still in place today, following the acceptance of a submission pact with Katiba Macina and an operation by the Malian armed forces in early 2022.

Economically, subsistence farming was one of the main activities, mainly geared towards self-consumption, although part of the harvest was sold. Livestock farming was the dominant source of income, while trade, often carried out by women, was mainly orientated towards the markets of Djenné, Sofara, Kouakourou, and Taga. In addition to these activities, there was some small-scale craft production, carried out by a few households that produced agricultural tools (hoes), mats, and small utilitarian objects. Supply chains, which had previously been maintained by vehicles and tricycles, ensured that mobility was relatively smooth before the blockade was imposed.

The village is located in a deltaic wetland area marked by strong hydroclimatic seasonality. During the rainy season, the plains are flooded, favouring rice cultivation, livestock grazing, and fishing. In the dry season, the landscape becomes a plain dotted with pockets of vegetation and residual water sources. This dual nature made Marébougou a strategically productive area, combining grazing, fishing, and agriculture. These characteristics partly explain why the village became a target in the context of the blockades.

Marébougou was placed under blockade after the population refused to comply with the demands of armed jihadist groups. Between July and August 2021, these groups demanded the introduction of Sharia law, including forced levies (zakat) on crops and livestock, a ban on music, restrictions on ceremonies, and the imposition of the veil for women. After the village rejected these demands and refused to sign a pact with Katiba Macina, it was placed under a total blockade for six months, prohibiting any entry or exit beyond a 500-metre perimeter.

The blockade had profound and multiple impacts on village life. Firstly, it caused total isolation, disrupting trade routes and preventing access to neighbouring markets, particularly that of Sofara. This encirclement was accompanied by targeted violence: the murder of herders around the village and farmers in their fields, the mass theft of livestock, and attacks on women, who were of-



ten beaten when they ventured into the bush to collect firewood. These attacks also led to the closure of the school and the gradual disintegration of social and community life. Finally, the blockade led to food insecurity, a deterioration in health and hygiene conditions, and a general feeling of insecurity, permanently weakening the resilience of local populations.

SAYE

The village of Saye is located in the municipality of the same name, in the Ségou region, on Route nationale no. 27 (RN27). Formerly the administrative centre of the district, it is now an important local hub within a municipality covering 673km², and with a population estimated at 57,955 in 2009 (RGPH, 2009)⁹, which is spread across 27 villages. Several of these villages have been emptied of their populations following armed attacks. As of 2023, at least 14 of the surrounding villages were abandoned, as their inhabitants had taken refuge in Saye. The municipality is part of the irrigated area managed by the Office du Niger, making it a strategic agricultural area.

The population of Saye is mainly composed of Bamana, alongside Fulani and Bozo communities, particularly in riparian areas and among groups practising livestock farming and fishing. The local economy is based mainly on agro-pastoral activities, supplemented by trade and crafts. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, with a predominance of cereal production (rice, millet, sorghum), but also cash crops such as cotton and sugar cane. Livestock farming also plays an important role, with

⁹ We have used data from the 2009 Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat au Mali (General Census of Population and Housing in Mali, RGPH) owing to the inaccessibility of the 2022 RGPH database. Furthermore, although the latter's report is publicly available, it does not provide disaggregated data at the municipality and village levels.

cattle, sheep, and goat rearing, as well as modern cattle fattening practices.

Before the blockade, trade played a key role in Saye's economy thanks to weekly markets connecting the town to regional markets. These weekly markets enabled the sale of various products (cereals, fish, fruit and vegetables, local crafts), while a dynamic craft industry provided pottery, mats, and traditional fans. The working population also included transporters, masons, butchers, and weavers.

Since 2023, the blockade of the village has profoundly disrupted the economic and social structure, leading to numerous forced conversions. The immobility imposed by the blockade, making agricultural plots and pastoral lands inaccessible, has confined men's activities to the village perimeter and put an end to activities taking place outside the domestic space. In this context, women are perceived by armed groups as less threatening, which in some cases allows them to cross the demarcated perimeters without immediately incurring lethal reprisals. However, these incursions are not without risk: they may be exposed to physical violence, verbal abuse, threats, or confiscation of the wood they are carrying. The interviews conducted for this research did not reveal any cases of sexual violence in Saye, although such acts have been documented in other localities in central Mali, particularly in the Koro and Bankass districts.

Conversely, men who violate these territorial boundaries are generally perceived as a direct threat and are subject to more severe penalties, including being killed. This asymmetry in the management of offences explains why some men have switched to domestic activities, such as making mats, fans, and other everyday objects. The materials needed for this craft production are often collected by women, whose transgressive movements, although risky, are tolerated to a certain extent by the armed groups.

Other materials essential for producing these everyday objects are purchased at the weekly market in Matomo, located 3km away, which is only accessible on Wednesdays under military escort from a nearby Malian army detachment. Women's work has been reduced to collecting and selling dead wood, exposing them to violence inflicted by extremist armed groups from Katiba Macina¹⁰.

The agricultural sector has been operating at a slow pace for three years because access to fields is limited, while livestock farming has been severely disrupted by large-scale cattle theft. Trade has virtually come to a standstill owing to the closure of markets, the blocking of certain roads (such as the Bélénitien-San road), and ongoing insecurity. Cultural services and local radio stations have also been shut down, further isolating and weakening the municipality.

Analysis of Saye's commercial interconnections highlights the central role of weekly markets in the structure of the local economy. Before the blockade, residents benefited from a dense network of markets (Djenné, San, Djafarabé, Matomo, Saro, Macina, Sofara), accessible several days a week, ensuring fluid trade, diversifica-

tion of outlets, and the integration of Saye into a wider economic network. The wide variety of available means of transport (tricycles, cars, minibuses) reinforced this commercial and social mobility. The blockade abruptly severed these connections: now only the weekly market in Matomo remains accessible, and only under military escort. The closure or armed control of other routes has led to a contraction of the economic space, increased dependence on a single market, and a weakening of subsistence mechanisms.

KORI-MAOUNDÉ

Kori-Maoundé is a village located in the municipality of Pignari Bana, along the Bandiagara-Sévaré road in the Mopti region. The population, composed mainly of Dogon and Fulani, enjoyed harmonious and complementary relations before violence broke out around 2015 (International Crisis Group, 2015). At that time, coexistence between the two main ethnic groups was based on economic interdependence and the regular exchange of agricultural and livestock products (Thibaud, 2005). This context has been severely affected by the conflict. Violence in other parts of the Bandiagara region have created a climate of suspicion and mistrust between the Dogon and Fulani, with the latter often accused of colluding with jihadist groups (International Crisis Group, 2018; Poudiougou, 2024a).

Economically, agriculture was the main activity, based on food crops such as millet, sorghum, groundnuts, Bambara groundnuts, cowpeas, sesame, sorrel, and rain-fed rice. Market gardening, with shallots, tomatoes, chillies, aubergines, and lettuces, was widely practised by women for commercial purposes. These activities were complemented by livestock farming, mainly sedentary, including cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry. Crafts (tanning, fabric dyeing), masonry, and carpentry, often organised in local mutual aid associations, were also present. Trade revolved around the weekly markets in Bandiagara, Goundaga, and Allaye Kokolo, which attracted local residents. Transport relied on means such as minibuses, horse-drawn carts, motorcycles, and bicycles, enabling the movement of goods and people.

Kori-Maoundé's economic links with Bandiagara, Sévaré, and Goundaga were crucial for the supply of basic commodities and the marketing of local produce. The disruption of these trade routes due to the security crisis severely disrupted the village's economy and undermined livelihoods.

Security deteriorated further from 2018 onwards (International Crisis Group, 2018). Since then, the village has been subjected to attacks, bans on access to fields, and blockades. In 2023, a vehicle carrying market traders was set on fire at the Kori-Maoundé bus station, causing several deaths and halting passenger transport. In November 2024, the situation worsened with a total ban on access to fields, according to an official responsible for schooling in Kori-Maoundé¹¹. These incidents have reinforced isolation—as intended by jihadist groups—and led to significant socio-economic disruption.

¹⁰ Since women are seen as less threatening by armed fighters, going beyond the designated perimeter does not automatically result in their being killed. They may be subjected to violence (being whipped, verbally abused, or threatened), whereas men found in those same places are routinely shot dead. ¹¹ Interview with a school official in Kori-Maoundé, Sévaré, June 2025.

Faced with these threats, local Donsow¹² hunters formed a self-defence group that became part of the Dan Na Ambassagou militia, under the initiative of the latter's leader, Yousouf Toloba. This group has been protecting the village since 2018, strictly controlling who is allowed to enter. The presence of Dan Na Ambassagou, perceived as a threat by jihadist groups, partly explains why the village was targeted.

The blockades and attacks against Kori-Maoundé are motivated by several factors: the village's refusal to sign the agreements¹³ imposed by Katiba Macina, punishment for the presence of self-defence militias, and the desire to impose jihadist authority and control local economic flows. This violence takes the form of bans on farming, cattle theft, targeted killings, the burning of vehicles, and the isolation of the village. Localities under the strong influence of Dan Na Ambassagou, such as Kori-Maoundé, have very little room to discuss issues specific to their villages, as they are forced to follow the positions of Dan Na Ambassagou, under the authority of its leader Toloba. This is why, in the Bandiagara region, the villages on the plateau, where Dan Na Ambassagou has a strong influence, have taken few initiatives for direct dialogue with Katiba Macina fighters. In contrast, the villages in the plains, particularly in the Koro and Bankass districts, which are more vulnerable to incursions and more exposed to jihadist violence, are the ones that have most resorted to forming local agreements.

The impacts on the population are significant: the school was closed after the first attacks, the agricultural and market gardening economy has collapsed, local trade has disappeared, and food insecurity has worsened. Faced with this situation, residents are calling for emergency food aid, the revival of agricultural activities, the securing of roads, and the reopening of schools and markets.

In short, Kori-Maoundé illustrates the critical situation facing villages in Dogon country: an area that was historically dynamic and interconnected is now caught in the grip of armed violence, blockades, and isolation, with a fragmented local economy and profoundly disrupted social life.

THE BLOCKADES AND ATTACKS AGAINST KORI-MAOUNDÉ ARE MOTIVATED BY SEVERAL FACTORS: THE VILLAGE'S REFUSAL TO SIGN THE AGREEMENTS IMPOSED BY KATIBA MACINA, PUNISHMENT FOR THE PRESENCE OF SELF-DEFENCE MILITIAS, AND THE DESIRE TO IMPOSE JIHADIST AUTHORITY AND CONTROL LOCAL ECONOMIC FLOWS

¹² The terms Donso and Donzo (plural Donsow) are interchangeable and refer to members of traditional hunting societies in West Africa. These societies occupy a legitimate place, both historically and culturally, in most West African societies. These groups of armed men come together in an association called Donso-ton (hunters' association) and share a specific way of life, the donso-ya (the way of the hunters) (Cissé, 1994; Sidibé, 2020). Their internal organisation is hierarchical, with three main levels determined by the individual's degree of knowledge, which is linked to seniority in the brotherhood: the donso-kalanden (novice or apprentice hunter), the donso-ba (great hunter or master hunter, holder of the knowledge necessary to teach the donso-ya), and the donso-kuntigi (chief hunter, usually an experienced member who leads the brotherhood in a locality). Throughout history, this brotherhood has played several roles: providing meat for villages through hunting, but also protecting communities from internal and external threats. This dual function has given the Donsow historical legitimacy in the management of coercive violence and armed defence against aggression, whether visible or invisible. During armed conflicts in West Africa, they have often mobilised in different forms: the Kamajors during the conflicts around the Mano River (in Liberia and Sierra Leone), the Donzo during the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, and more recently in Burkina Faso and Mali, where rural insecurity and the absence of security forces have encouraged the emergence of various self-defence militias claiming to be Donsow. For further information, see Poudiougou (2024a), pp. 407 ff. ¹³ Between 2019 and 2021, in the Koro district, a series of agreements were signed, laying the foundations for what are now commonly referred to as 'local agreements' or benkan. These pacts, signed by traditional customary leaders (Dogon, Fulani, Bamanan, Dafing, etc.) under the supervision of jihadist fighters, have often been facilitated by mediating NGOs. Armed groups impose these pacts, which contain written and oral clauses that evolve according to the security context and the political-military and economic objectives of Katiba Macina. In central Mali, several local agreements have been concluded with armed groups such as Katiba Macina without any real dialogue or direct negotiation. Mediation NGOs, which are supposed to facilitate the peace process, have often served as intermediaries to convey the conditions imposed by the fighters, particularly to lift blockades or allow access to certain weekly markets. This approach has undermined the fundamental principles of mediation, in particular the impartiality and inclusiveness of stakeholders. Furthermore, although mediators interact mainly with JNIM members, the latter never sign the agreements, which means that only the community leaders commit their populations to the terms of the agreements. This asymmetry raises major ethical questions about the responsibility of mediation actors, who expose local communities to unilateral commitments without any guarantee of reciprocity or formal recognition from armed groups.

IN THE MALIAN PRESS, THE RN15 IS FREQUENTLY REFERRED TO AS THE 'ROAD OF DEATH', THE 'ROAD OF CARNAGE', OR EVEN THE 'OPEN-AIR TOMB' (GUINDO, 2020A)

THE PAROU-SONGOBIA BRIDGE

The Parou-Songobia bridge is a strategic piece of infrastructure located on RN15, connecting several towns in central Mali, including Sévaré, Bandiagara, Bankass, and Koro, and providing a link to Burkina Faso. Located about 25km south-west of Bandiagara, this bridge carries a significant proportion of regional road traffic and is an essential crossing point for the populations of the Koro and Bankass districts to other regions of the country.

In the Malian press, the RN15 is frequently referred to as the 'road of death', the 'road of carnage', or even the 'open-air tomb' (Guindo, 2020a). These expressions reflect the scale of the tragedies experienced by travellers and traders who use it. Since 2017, this strategic road has become a symbol of insecurity owing to the high number of civilians killed or abducted by armed groups. According to the Baguine Sô movement¹⁴, between 2017 and the end of 2020 no fewer than 116 people were killed in attacks carried out around the Parou-Songobia bridge. This route is therefore considered one of the deadliest stretches of road in central Mali (Guindo, 2020b).

For example, on 3 November 2020, a minibus carrying civilians was attacked, killing eight people. Two days later, another minibus was targeted, killing eight people and injuring eight others, including women and children (Diallo, 2020). On 19 April 2022, an attack on itinerant traders resulted in one death. In November and December 2023, the villages of Barassoro (Bankass district) and Allaye Kokolo (Bandiagara district) were also attacked, causing three and six deaths respectively. Between 2017 and 2024, the cumulative death toll amounted to at least 120 civilian victims (women, children, and unarmed persons) killed in attacks targeting transport vehicles, markets, and villages.

Despite its strategic importance, the Parou-Songobia bridge axis remains insecure and continues to suffer repeated attacks by armed groups, as well as the hijacking of buses and passengers. Several villages in the Bankass district, some of which are close to the bridge, are under blockade or subject to movement restrictions imposed by armed groups. One of their strategies is to demand the signing of local agreements in exchange for 'mobility' concessions. This strategy is evident in the everyday, differential treatment of the populations of the municipalities of Baye, Ouenkoro, Madougou, Pel-Maoundé, and Dangaténé, all of which have signed agreements and benefit from some degree of mobility. Conversely, villages that refuse to submit to the authority of Katiba Macina fighters are subjected to killings, the burning of buses, kidnappings, and disappearances of people, vehicles, and goods (Guindo, 2022a).

These imposed agreements allow the residents of signatory villages to move around with a limited degree of mobility: at roadblocks, they are generally spared, while those from non-signatory villages may be detained, or even subjected to kidnappings, followed by ransom demands. This is particularly the case in the villages of Bankass and Dimbal, whose refusal to sign agreements has made their inhabitants particularly vulnerable to frequent kidnappings along the bridge axis. Buses travelling on this road are regularly exposed to attacks.

The first attack occurred in December 2019, and made the bridge unusable. Extensive damage (large holes in the deck) required repairs in 2020, financed by MINUSMA and Canada to the sum of 54 million CFA francs¹⁵. Despite these repairs, the attacks continued: in December 2023, the bridge was again targeted by Katiba Macina fighters, blocking traffic on the Bandiagara-Bankass-Koro axis for a significant period of time (Guindo, 2022b).

Faced with long-term insecurity, local populations have called for the establishment of a permanent military base (Traoré, 2024). Tempora-

¹⁴ A local association founded in 2019 during a period of great tension in the Bandiagara region, and a peak in violence in the area. ¹⁵ <https://croissanceafrique.com/mali-la-minusma-finance-la-rehabilitation-du-pont-de-songobia/>

ry initiatives have been put in place, such as protection by the army during repair work or the provision of temporary security by Dan Na Ambassagou, but no regular forces are stationed there on a permanent basis. Local residents and associations—the Conseil local de la jeunesse du cercle de Bankass (Local Youth Council of Bankass District) (Traoré, 2024), the Collectif des associations de jeunes du pays Dogon (Collective of Youth Associations of Dogon Country), Ginna Dogon, the Mouvement patriotique pour l'unité et la sauvegarde du cercle de Bankass (Patriotic Movement for the Unity and Safeguarding of Bankass District), and the Mouvement Baguine Sô (Guindo, 2020b)—continue to call for more consistent protection of the bridge and its surroundings.

The incessant attacks, sabotage, and kidnappings have turned the Parou-Songobia bridge into a veritable blockade point. This strategy on the part of armed groups serves several purposes: forcing recalcitrant municipalities (such as Bankass and Dimbal) to sign submission agreements; controlling trade flows and mobility; imposing forced levies; exerting financial pressure through ransoms; and punishing communities that refuse to comply. The agreements reached with Baye and Ouenkoro in 2019 reduced the threats to the mobility of the populations of these two municipalities on the RN15, in exchange for submission to the demands of Katiba Macina. Fighters from Katiba Macina have held up these populations as examples to illustrate, on the one hand, the relief of mobility constraints for villages that have signed agreements, and on the other hand, the strengthening of constraints on coaches, travellers, and goods coming from villages that resist them and travelling between Bandiagara and Bankass.

Since 2021, there has been an increase in mass kidnappings along this route, usually followed by ransom demands (Kanouté, 2025). These operations target both itinerant traders and influential local figures. In March 2024, a coordinated attack led to the abduction of more than a hundred civilians, for whom the kidnappers demanded 120 million CFA francs (Mali Actu, 2023).

These events show the persistence of organised violence that has turned the Parou-Songobia axis into a veritable corridor of terror in the heart of Dogon country. This high-risk zone is now the focus of attacks, kidnappings, and sabotage, disrupting local economic and social life. Given the crucial role of infrastructure in economic development and poverty reduction (Tangara et al., 2025), its destruction—whether through sabotage or the blocking of mobility around the Parou-Songobia bridge—can have dramatic consequences for economic activities and the living conditions of the population.

By attacking the bridge, jihadists seek to block mobility, force communities into submission, and extort resources from them, in a context where there is only a limited presence of security forces. During attacks on coaches carrying passengers, the fighters release women and children before disappearing into the bush with the men and vehicles. Ransoms are demanded from bus owners and families for the release of the men and vehicles. Although this attitude might suggest leniency towards women and children on the roads, in villages under their influence the same fighters violently repress women who venture into the fields or engage in any other income-generating activity. This is why women appear to be the main victims of the blockades imposed in areas under the influence of Katiba Macina and, more broadly, JNIM.

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THE DAILY LIFE OF WOMEN UNDER BLOCKADES IMPOSED BY KATIBA MACINA

In the villages of Kori-Maoundé, Marébougou, and Saye, women played a central role in economic and social life before the crisis. They were organised in associations and carried out various income-generating activities such as trade, market gardening, cash crop farming (groundnuts, cowpeas), and rearing small grazing animals. Their mobility enabled them to attend weekly markets, which were hubs for trade and subsistence. As the head of an association in Kori-Maoundé pointed out: *'Before the crisis, the women in Kori-Maoundé were very organised. To begin with, we had associations that would lend us money here in the village. [...] Once we'd obtained these funds, each of us undertook income-generating activities such as trade, agriculture, etc.'*

The arrival of armed groups and the establishment of blockades profoundly disrupted this balance. In Kori-Maoundé, women saw their economic opportunities reduced considerably, particularly in the agricultural and commercial sectors, owing to persistent jihadist threats. A local female leader explained that: *'The crisis has had many impacts on women. First of all, all the associations that used to support us financially have disappeared because of the insecurity. [...] We can't go anywhere, so we're all stuck here in the village and can't get out.'*

In this context of insecurity, where men are often the targets of violence, women have taken on a leading role in domestic organisation and the local economy. They cultivate the fields with their children while the men try to maintain a degree of security. Some have become heads of households after losing their husbands. One woman recounted: *'In 2020, my husband and children left early in the morning to work in the fields. [...] My husband was attacked by an armed group and killed on the spot. [...] As for my nephew, the armed group took him away and to this day we don't know if he's alive or dead.'*

Despite everything, one positive aspect stands out: *'The only positive impact of the crisis that I can mention is the strengthening of social cohesion and solidarity between us women and even men.'*

In Marébougou, the situation is similar. A shopkeeper explained: *'Here, the blockade began three years ago. [...] Over time, when the people of Marébougou refused to sign the agreement with them, they imposed the blockade on us.'* The ban on travelling and attending weekly markets, particularly the one in Sofara, led to prolonged economic inactivity, the loss of livestock—the main means of accumulating savings—and a shortage of basic necessities. She added: *'We spent more than six months inactive, with the population's living conditions deteriorating, schools closed, famine, and breastfeeding women falling ill because at one point we had nothing left to eat.'*

Physical violence has added to these difficulties: *'Sometimes armed groups would beat our women who went into the bush to collect wood.'* Even after the village signed a pact with the Katiba Macina fighters, restrictions have remained in place: agricultural areas are limited, access to Sofara remains prohibited, and women must help men gather what is necessary for forced levies on already meagre harvests.

In Saye, a women's association leader testified to the effects of four years without farming, total immobility, and an increased mental burden on women, who are the main breadwinners in their households. She explained: *'Our association is a union of women organised around a goal. [...] The aim is for women to help each other because, in our society, women play an important role in the well-being of households.'* But the blockade has turned everything upside down: *'The blockade has had many impacts on women. [...] As women, we're the most affected because, as I told you, here, most of the burdens fall on us women.'* She added that even searching for wood is dangerous: *'This search for wood by women is not without negative consequences. Indeed, armed groups attack and beat our women every time they go outside the village to fetch wood.'*

Beyond these specific cases, women in villages under blockade are particularly vulnerable to physical, economic, and social violence. Armed groups impose religious and behavioural restrictions: wearing the veil, banning ceremonies, constant surveillance. Yet, in this context of crisis, women show remarkable resilience. Solidarity among themselves and with men has grown stronger, becoming an essential lever for survival and dignity.

3

THE BLOCKADE PROCESS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A STUDY OF THE CASES OF MARÉBOUGOU, SAYE, KORI-MAOUNDÉ, AND THE PA-ROU-SONGOBIA BRIDGE SHOWS THAT, WHILE BLOCKADES BY JIHADIST GROUPS FOLLOW RECURRING PATTERNS, THEY ALWAYS OCCUR IN SPECIFIC LOCAL CONTEXTS WHERE POWER RELATIONS, THE CONFIGURATION OF ACTORS, AND THE TRAJECTORY OF CONFRONTATION INFLUENCE THE TRIGGERING, INTENSITY, AND DURATION OF THE BLOCKADE.

DIFFERENTIATED ACTORS AND POWER RELATIONS

In all the cases studied, Katiba Macina seeks to force local communities to accept a pact of submission (*benkan*) involving economic, social, and religious obligations. However, the nature of the resistance encountered and the form of the confrontations differ. In Marébougou, Katiba Macina faces resistance from the Donsow of the Djenné district, who, since 2018, have been organised into self-defence groups to protect villages. These self-defence groups, which recruit mainly from among the village youth, remain autonomous and act according to their own territorial logic, despite their affinities with Dan Na Ambassagou. Customary authorities, caught between two rival armed forces, have to deal with conflicting pressures. In 2020, with military support from the Donsow, Marébougou refused to bow to the demands of Katiba Macina fighters (closure of the school, the veiling of women, abandonment of the use of certain weekly markets, including Djenné and Sofara, etc.), and resisted with arms. The mobilisation of young people in the Djenné district, who organised demonstrations in support of Marébougou, reflected a desire to defend the locality beyond strictly military means. The defeat of the Donsow in the battle of Marébougou ultimately forced the village to submit to Katiba Macina and accept its demands.

In Saye, resistance is organised locally by the Donsow and armed young people, under the authority of traditional chiefs. Here, the rejection of the *benkan* is based on religious principle: the inhabitants consider themselves to be good Muslims and believe that they should not have to submit to an external religious authority. This outright refusal places the customary authorities on the front line against Katiba Macina fighters.

In Kori-Maoundé, the confrontation has been marked since 2018 by the establishment of a camp of Dan Na Ambassagou fighters, who oppose any negotiation with the jihadists. The local authorities—village chief, imam, mayor—are aligned with this position, making any direct discussion with Katiba Macina impossible. Here, the blockade takes on a more punitive dimension, targeting a village perceived as an enemy stronghold (refusing any dialogue and welcoming displaced persons from neighbouring villages).



THE BENKAN: A SYSTEM OF CONTROL THROUGH VIOLENCE

The *benkan* (the form of pact imposed by Katiba Macina) has several recurring features: the obligation to pay *zakat* on crops and livestock, a ban on music during social events (celebrations, weddings), the closure of schools, and the obligation for women to wear the veil. However, its application and acceptance vary greatly from one locality to another.

In Marébougou, acceptance of the *benkan* came after a major military defeat of the Donsow, which resulted in the village having a reduced capacity for resistance. The inhabitants then submitted, incorporating radical changes into their social and religious practices. In Saye, on the contrary, categorical refusal led to a total blockade, accompanied by the imposition of prohibitions despite the absence of a formal pact: the fighters imposed religious rules and forced levies. In Kori-Maoundé, no *benkan* was established. The absence of negotiation can be explained by the stalemate between the two armed camps. In cases where the Dan Na Ambassagou movement remains strong, Katiba Macina cannot impose a pact without first achieving military victory.

The use of the term *benkan* to refer to agreements imposed by jihadist groups is confusing. In its traditional sense, *benkan* implies an exchange between two opposing parties, leading to a compromise accepted by both sides. However, the agreements proposed by extremist armed groups are by no means based on mutual consent. Rather, they are a series of unilateral instructions and prohibitions, issued without any prior negotiation.

In most cases, a simple information session is organised, usually at the mosque immediately after prayers, while the village is surrounded by armed men. The message is delivered in an intimidating context, with the armed men facing a defenceless civilian population.

In other situations, particularly when the village is perceived as recalcitrant or suspected of cooperating with the army or self-defence groups, an ultimatum is delivered: 'sign' the agreement before a given date. Failure to meet the deadline is then considered tantamount to an open declaration of resistance to the jihadist group's authority, usually resulting in reprisals.

Finally, it is worth noting a significant change in the way forced levies are collected, which extremist armed groups present as *zakat* in areas where agreements or pacts are in force. Owing to logistical constraints, these levies are no longer collected in kind. Since January 2022, the increasingly offensive stance of the Malian army has been putting growing pressure on jihadist groups. The use of armed drones to track columns of extremist armed groups allows the regular armed forces to identify and recover livestock and bags of grain collected as *zakat* in villages controlled by *Katiba Macina*. The fighters are therefore adapting and demanding that villages pay these extortions in cash via mobile transfer services, notably *Orange Money*. In various localities under the influence of *Katiba Macina*, herders who still own a few head of cattle are often forced to buy back their own animals at a price of 100,000 CFA francs per head (approximately €152) if they wish to keep their livestock. Otherwise, they must sell the animals at livestock sales during weekly markets and then transfer the corresponding amount via *Orange Money*. Similarly, farmers are forced to sell the portion they owe to the jihadists as *zakat* at weekly markets.

THE TEMPORALITY AND INTENSITY OF BLOCKADES

The differences in temporal dynamics illustrate three distinct forms of blockade in the different localities studied. In *Marébougou*, the blockade lasted six months from September 2021, immediately after a local military defeat. The imposition of isolation was rapid and total, leading to a forced surrender. In *Saye*, the blockade was imposed gradually, beginning in 2023 and intensifying in 2024. To increase pressure on the village, *Katiba Macina* fighters forced residents of villages near *Saye* to flee there, thereby increasing the humanitarian emergency. This concentration of displaced persons increased pressure on resources and reinforced the economic stranglehold. In *Kori-Maoundé*, isolation gradually set in from 2019 onwards, combining sporadic attacks, restrictions on movement, and targeted killings. In 2024, the blockade became almost complete, and was reinforced by *Katiba Macina* instructing transporters not to stop in the village or take its inhabitants on board their vehicles.

THE USE OF THE TERM *BENKAN* TO REFER TO AGREEMENTS IMPOSED BY JIHADIST GROUPS IS CONFUSING. IN ITS TRADITIONAL SENSE, *BENKAN* IMPLIES AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN TWO OPPOSING PARTIES, LEADING TO A COMPROMISE ACCEPTED BY BOTH SIDES

COMMON PRINCIPLES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BLOCKADES

Three principles appear to be constants in the strategies used by extremist groups:

- a principle of economic suffocation, brought about by controlling the flow of goods and restricting mobility, in order to make life impossible without surrender;
- a principle of transforming social norms, which manifests itself in the imposition of a strict interpretation of Islamic prescriptions, erasing local cultural practices;
- a principle of exemplary punishment, whereby recalcitrant villages are punished in order to deter other localities from following suit or developing similar behaviours.

However, the methods used to implement these strategies vary according to: i) the type and strength of opposition actors (*Donsow*, *Dan Na Ambassagou*); ii) the centrality of the village in transport and supply networks; and iii) the political and social cost to local authorities of submitting to or negotiating with *Katiba Macina*.

INTERMEDIARY FIGURES IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PACTS

Analysis of the cases of Marébougou, Saye, and Kori-Maoundé shows that the intermediary role played by certain social categories has a major influence on the possibility, nature, and outcome of discussions with jihadist groups.

In Marébougou, the involvement of the mayors of Dialassagou and Femaye (residing in Taga) enabled the opening of a formal channel of dialogue between Katiba Macina fighters and the local community. These mayors, as political and administrative authorities, acted as intermediaries between the demands of the jihadists and the positions of the village, facilitating the flow of information and limiting, at least temporarily, the direct escalation of violence¹⁶. This configuration illustrates a situation where dialogue, although under considerable pressure, is made possible by the existence of local institutional intermediaries who have legitimacy among the population, tacit approval from the authorities, and access to armed actors¹⁷.

In Saye, no dialogue process with Katiba Macina fighters has been initiated to date. Furthermore, the inhabitants' categorical refusal to engage in a *benkan* does not seem to favour such a dynamic at the moment. The lack of visible initiatives on the part of local authorities, such as the imam or village chief, may partly explain the breakdown in communication and the imposition of a strict blockade, reinforcing the village's resistance and isolation. This case highlights that the rejection of any channel of dialogue, while expressing a position of principle, also reduces the room for manoeuvre to mitigate the effects of the blockade. The position adopted by Saye¹⁸ could be seen as part of the village's historical tradition of resisting domination by external authorities, such as its refusal to submit to the authority of the Bamanan kingdom of Ségou.

In Kori-Maoundé, dialogue is not formal, but there are indirect initiatives in this direction. The absence of direct dialogue with the jihadists is due to a structural factor: the strong presence of the Dan Na Ambassagou self-defence movement, which excludes any negotiation with Katiba Macina on principle. The mediation attempts recorded between April and July 2025 were reportedly initiated by the ministère de la Réconciliation nationale (Ministry of National Reconciliation) and the Bandiagara governorate. However, these initiatives, conducted at the regional level, did not specifically target the situation in Kori-Maoundé. The presence of institutional intermediaries from outside the locality (state, regional authorities) contrasts here with the absence of legitimate local figures capable of negotiating issues specific to the village.

Overall, this comparative analysis highlights that the existence, nature, and legitimacy of intermediary figures—whether local or regional—strongly influence the dynamics of blockades. Where a local channel exists, as in Marébougou, it can allow for a rebalancing of power relations, even asymmetrical ones, whereas in cases where such channels are rejected (Saye) or blocked by structural opposition (Kori-Maoundé), confrontation remains the dominant mode of conflict regulation. Ultimately, while the imposition of a blockade draws on a shared repertoire of action across the cases studied, their intensity, duration, and effects depend largely on the local balance of power and the communities' ability to negotiate, resist, or yield.

ULTIMATELY, WHILE THE IMPOSITION OF A BLOCKADE DRAWS ON A SHARED REPERTOIRE OF ACTION ACROSS THE CASES STUDIED, THEIR INTENSITY, DURATION, AND EFFECTS DEPEND LARGELY ON THE LOCAL BALANCE OF POWER AND THE COMMUNITIES' ABILITY TO NEGOTIATE, RESIST, OR YIELD

¹⁶ In the case of Marébougou, the municipal authorities mainly played an intermediary role. The Donsow recognise the authority of customary chiefs more, as the mayor of the municipality of Femaye does not live in the locality. The latter, who lives in the village of Taga, is perceived by the inhabitants as a distant authority. ¹⁷ Without making a formal commitment, the state, through the ministère de la Réconciliation nationale (Ministry of National Reconciliation), does not oppose pacts between rural populations and jihadist groups. In Mali, the authorities have adopted an attitude that suggests that discussions can be held at the local level. However, they do not play an active role in the signing process (no authority signs with the other actors in the case of local agreements, nor do they appear publicly in the case of verbal agreements between the populations and armed groups linked to Katiba Macina). Nevertheless, at the local level, representatives of the executive (prefects, sub-prefects) are aware of the discussions that lead to the pacts. In some cases, they are the ones who encourage the populations to enter into discussions while waiting for the arrival of the state (the army). During a hearing before the Conseil national de la transition (National Transitional Council) in April 2021, Minister Wagué highlighted the dangers of certain pacts in the following terms: 'If the population signs agreements with the jihadists, it is against the state, because clauses in these agreements prohibit the population from collaborating with the military. So, if our people decide not to collaborate with the army, there is a problem. That is why the state does not necessarily endorse these agreements.' Despite this concern, he considered that the pacts concluded through the involvement of certain civil society organisations, such as the Haut conseil islamique du Mali (High Islamic Council of Mali), which is supported by the Ministry of Reconciliation, respect state standards while preserving the interests of the population: 'All these commitments have been made within the framework of respect for the state. None of the arrangements made go against the state.' Regarding these statements, see Bah (2021). ¹⁸ In Saye, the capital of the municipality, the mayor's residence in the village makes the holder of this post an actor of prime importance, but also a vulnerable figure, caught between the Katiba Macina fighters and self-defence groups. Any attempt to initiate a dialogue process almost automatically exposes the mayor to reprisals from the latter. A similar situation can be observed in Dogofry, where the mayor was recently killed by traditional Donsow hunters, accused of having undertaken an initiative to mediate between Katiba Macina fighters and the villages in his municipality. For more on the Dogofry case, see Baché (2025).

SCHOOLING IN A TIME OF BLOCKADE

In the villages of Kori-Maoundé, Marébougou, and Saye, school was much more than a place of learning: it was a space for cohesion, for looking to the future, and for connecting with the state. Before the crisis, schools, although modest, operated regularly. In Kori-Maoundé, the school, established in 2005, had six classes and received support from international NGOs. A school official recalled: *'We carried out our educational duties in a joyful and peaceful atmosphere, while also running activities such as a school garden, health programmes, and sports.'*

With the arrival of armed groups, everything changed. Teachers were forced to flee, schools closed, and children scattered. According to a representative of a women's association in the village: *'The school in Kori-Maoundé was also closed. Our children who were studying at this school were eventually scattered. Some dropped out, others ended up in Sévaré or Bandiagara.'*

In Marébougou, the situation is similar. The Koranic school closed its doors, the pupils scattered, and the teachers stopped working. A young man from the village explained: *'Since the arrival of armed groups in 2017, the school and health centre in Marébougou have been closed'*. The absence of educational institutions is experienced as a loss of points of reference and a break in social continuity.

In the face of this disintegration, forms of resilience are emerging. In Kori-Maoundé, a school official has re-established the school in Sévaré in the form of simple shelters, with the support of NGOs: *'I have set up three shelters for teaching the pupils. The teachers are still being paid by the NGO in question.'* This initiative illustrates the adaptability of local actors, despite the risks and constraints.

In these contexts, the school becomes a symbol: of the presence or absence of the state, and of the possibility or impossibility of planning for the future. The closure of a school is not only a consequence of the crisis; it also reveals the nature of that crisis. It shows how the social fabric is unravelling, how children are losing their bearings, and how communities in exile must reinvent forms of education.

' THE SCHOOL IN KORI-MAOUN-DÉ WAS ALSO CLOSED. OUR CHILDREN WHO WERE STUDYING AT THIS SCHOOL WERE EVENTUALLY SCATTERED. SOME DROPPED OUT, OTHERS ENDED UP IN SÉVARÉ OR BANDIAGARA '

.....

' SINCE THE ARRIVAL OF ARMED GROUPS IN 2017, THE SCHOOL AND HEALTH CENTRE IN MARÉBOUGOU HAVE BEEN CLOSED '

.....

REACTIONS FROM THE POPULATION

Armed resistance

Faced with blockades, local populations do not remain passive, but their reactions are generally limited to local contexts and, above all, vary according to the degree of violence exercised by jihadist groups.

In Marébougou, the initial response was one of armed resistance. Many young villagers organised themselves into a self-defence group affiliated with the self-defence movement operating in the Djenné district. This mobilisation was facilitated by the presence of local armed self-defence groups in the area since 2017. However, this resistance was broken during the Battle of Marébougou in October 2021¹⁹, which resulted in a heavy defeat and large numbers of casualties. The jihadists' victory led to the imposition of a total blockade. Marébougou's strategy thus developed gradually: from initial armed resistance, to a period of holding out against the blockade, then to acceptance of a pact with Katiba Macina, which was perceived by some residents as a strategic choice that would allow them to regain relative mobility and revive paralysed economic activities.

This weakening of armed resistance led to forced coexistence with members of Katiba Macina. However, it should be noted that, in the face of jihadist groups, Marébougou successively adopted several strategies, passing from armed resistance, to endurance of the blockade, to acceptance of the pact and submission to jihadist influence.

The case of Saye has similarities with that of Marébougou, particularly in terms of its use of armed resistance. In the eighteenth century, Saye, then a small chiefdom, vigorously opposed the rule of the King of Ségou, who besieged it before taking control in 1782 (Thornton, 1990). In the current context, this memory of resistance fosters a certain sense of pride among the villagers. In addition, the presence of an armed detachment provides a certain minimal level of protection and a deterrent against attacks by jihadists. This military detachment also allows the inhabitants of Saye to travel to the Matomo weekly market, the only one still accessible to them.

In Kori-Maoundé, as in other localities on the plateau in the Bandiagara district, the main response is that of the counterinsurgency led by self-defence groups affiliated with Dan Na Ambassagou. Their resistance is aided by the rugged topography, which makes access difficult for jihadist fighters, and by the movement's political and military influence in the region. However, the blockade has forced some of the inhabitants to flee to Sévaré, Bandiagara, or Bamako. The reduction in arable land as a result of insecurity also highlights the concentration of land control in the hands of a few founding lineages (Poudiougou, 2024b). In crisis situations, these lineages may temporarily cede certain plots to other families in the village, while retaining land rights.

HOWEVER, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT, IN THE FACE OF JIHADIST GROUPS, MARÉBOUGOU SUCCESSIVELY ADOPTED SEVERAL STRATEGIES, PASSING FROM ARMED RESISTANCE, TO ENDURANCE OF THE BLOCKAGE, TO ACCEPTANCE OF THE PACT AND SUBMISSION TO JIHADIST INFLUENCE

Solidarity among populations in the face of blockades

In contexts of blockade, populations develop collective strategies to cope with shortages and isolation, transforming mutual aid into a tool for survival and silent resistance. In Marébougou, many interviewees describe this period as a time when the community strengthened its bonds in the face of adversity. Deprived of access to markets and unable to obtain supplies, the inhabitants set up mechanisms for the systematic sharing of food, water, and available healthcare. This sharing, sometimes informal but nonetheless constant, became a form of organised solidarity, enabling them to cope with food insecurity, disease, and other critical situations.

In Saye, the testimonies collected emphasise the human and collective dimension that emerged despite the dramatic conditions. The blockade fostered the emergence of greater mutual aid: families and individuals supported each other to meet the most urgent needs, such as food, access to a few rare medical products, and assistance to vulnerable people. This internal solidarity functions both as a survival network and as a means of maintaining social cohesion in a context where adversity could divide the community.

¹⁹ See Box 3, which describes this decisive battle between Katiba Macina fighters and self-defence groups in the Djenné district.

THE BATTLE OF MARÉBOUGOU

The Battle of Marébougou was a major episode in the conflict in the Djenné district, illustrating the confrontation between the Donsow self-defence groups and the jihadist forces. Occupying a strategic location across the Niger River, Marébougou was historically an operational base for the Donsow. Faced with the expansion of armed groups, the Donsow undertook a regional mobilisation, seeking the support of hunters from various regions of Mali, including Ségou, San, and Dogon country, among others. This mobilisation brought together more than 1,000 Donsow fighters in Souma, allowing them to launch a comprehensive assault on the jihadists present in the locality.

Despite ritual and strategic preparations based on divination practices, internal divisions, particularly between chiefs Sinaly and Amadi Diola, weakened the group's cohesion. The assault was launched on the morning of Wednesday 20 October 2021, but the Donsow quickly encountered unexpected resistance. The jihadists, who were better armed and positioned, had anticipated the attack and hidden in the trees and along the paths. The clash was brutal: the Donsow, ill-prepared for such intensity, suffered heavy human losses. Many fighters died of exhaustion or lack of water, and confusion on the ground prevented any effective coordination.

The toll was tragic: more than a hundred bodies were recovered, not counting those who went missing, while losses on the jihadist side were minimal. This defeat marked a decisive turning point. The death of leader Sinaly dealt a severe blow to troop morale and led to the profound disorganisation of the Donsow movement. The survivors were forced to negotiate their surrender, agreeing to hand over their weapons and acknowledge their defeat in exchange for food and financial aid. The blockade imposed by jihadist groups on Marébougou had devastating humanitarian, economic, and social effects. The blockade led to a total interruption of agricultural activities, particularly the cultivation of rice and millet, which was the village's main source of subsistence. With no supplies coming in, basic foodstuffs such as salt and everyday cooking essentials ran out, causing widespread famine. Children and the elderly were particularly affected, with some dying of starvation and others wasting away owing to lack of care.

Access to medicines and health services was also cut off, further exacerbating the vulnerability of the inhabitants. The village was completely isolated, with all entrances and exits blocked, preventing any relief or evacuation efforts. This situation plunged the population into a state of terror and despair, described as 'hell' by witnesses. Psychologically, the blockade created a climate of constant fear, reinforced by the threat of the village's total destruction. The Donsow, unable to leave their camp, lost their ability to defend themselves, while armed groups moved freely throughout the region. This asymmetry accentuated the local population's sense of abandonment and moral defeat.

Finally, the blockade had political repercussions: it weakened self-defence structures, caused internal divisions, and forced the population to accept surrender agreements. Marébougou thus became a symbol of the loss of local sovereignty in the face of pressure from extremist armed groups, illustrating the limits of community resistance in a context of asymmetric warfare.

THE TOLL WAS TRAGIC: MORE THAN A HUNDRED BODIES WERE RECOVERED, NOT COUNTING THOSE WHO WENT MISSING, WHILE LOSSES ON THE JIHADIST SIDE WERE MINIMAL

LOCAL ECONOMIES UNDER BLOCKADE

The various cases of blockade studied demonstrate how profoundly they affect the economic life of local populations. Agriculture, the main economic activity in these areas, is almost brought to a standstill, and in some cases has become impossible to practise, owing to regular attacks on farmers and the burning of fields ready for harvest. In Marébougou, for example, only fields located less than a kilometre away remain relatively accessible. In these rural areas, the cessation of agriculture is tantamount to destroying the engine of the local economy. The immediate consequences are the collapse, or even destruction, of agricultural production, leading to the sudden cessation of all related activities (Tangara, 2024) and the disintegration of the local economy. As a result, the population becomes dependent on external supplies for food and basic necessities, which are made impossible by the blockade, leading to higher prices and a deterioration in living conditions.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY UNDER ARMED BLOCKADES

In the villages of Kori-Maoundé, Marébougou, and Saye, the local economy was based on three main pillars: agriculture, livestock farming, and trade through weekly markets. These activities formed the basis of subsistence and social life, but the arrival of armed groups and the establishment of blockades gradually destroyed this economic system, weakening the population by disrupting the complementary economic relationships between production systems and the interdependence of rural economies in this region.

AGRICULTURE HAS BEEN PARALYSED

In Kori-Maoundé, one male resident reported: *'In terms of agriculture, we haven't had access to our fields for three years now. At less than a kilometre outside the village, if you go out, you're exposed to violence and killings by armed groups.'* A female resident in Marébougou observed: *'A rural population that hasn't been allowed to farm for several years—that says it all. Socio-economic activities have been destroyed.'* In Saye, the situation is dire: *'For four years now, the inhabitants of Saye and the surrounding area have been unable to farm due to the presence of armed groups, which has led to food insecurity and famine in the locality.'*

LIVESTOCK FARMING AND TRADE HAVE BEEN HIT HARD

Livestock farming, an essential source of income and savings, has also been severely affected. In Kori-Maoundé, one of our respondents reported: *'Herders have also been negatively affected because there have been many cases of animal theft here.'* In Marébougou, a witness recounted: *'They (Katiba Macina fighters) went to find the farmers in the fields to kill them, they took the village hostage [...] many of our animals were stolen by armed groups.'* In Saye, cattle raiding fuels cycles of violence: *'Many of our animals have also been stolen, and this is always the initial cause for clashes between our Donzo and the armed groups.'*

WEEKLY MARKETS, THE HEART OF LOCAL TRADE, HAVE COME TO STANDSTILL

Weekly markets, described as the 'circulatory system' of the local economy, have not escaped the grip of armed groups. A resident of Kori-Maoundé testified: *'The presence of armed groups in the area still prevents women from carrying out their market gardening and trading activities. We can't go anywhere.'* A female resident in Marébougou explained: *'We could no longer travel, so the trade circuit was broken. [...] We spent more than six months inactive.'* The population in Saye faced similar constraints, as a resident explained: *'None of the weekly markets we used to go to are accessible to us now. The only market we go to now is the one in Matomo [...], and we're escorted there by the military.'*

THESE BLOCKADES ARE TRANSFORMING PREVIOUSLY ACTIVE POPULATIONS INTO INACTIVE ONES, DEPENDENT ON HUMANITARIAN AID

These blockades are transforming previously active populations into inactive ones, dependent on humanitarian aid. In Marébougou, residents have been unable to access their fields for several years. Similarly, in Saye and Kori-Maoundé, the presence of armed groups has prevented any agricultural activity for nearly four years. Deprived of their livelihoods, people have no choice but to rely on humanitarian aid to ensure their food security and access to basic services, particularly healthcare. In other words, 'killing agriculture' also means condemning complementary activities such as livestock farming, small-scale trade, and market gardening, which were essential sources of income for households' survival.

While agriculture is the central pillar of these local economies, livestock farming and trade also play a complementary role. However, in Kori-Maoundé, Marébougou, and Saye, these activities are also suffering from the effects of the blockades. Massive livestock thefts are a common feature, causing the economic collapse of many livestock farmers and traders (Berger, 2023).

Finally, local trade, and in particular weekly markets, play a decisive role in the functioning of the rural economy. As Tangara (2024) points out, these weekly markets ensure the circulation of goods and services between production and consumption, and play a vital role, comparable to that of a circulatory system. However, armed conflicts severely disrupt this circuit through attacks, kidnappings, and restrictions on mobility, leading to the isolation of populations and the blocking of trade. The cases of Kori-Maoundé, Marébougou, and Saye perfectly illustrate this dynamic: markets there rarely operate, and when they do, population mobility continues to be limited to the bare minimum, particularly affecting women involved in market gardening and small-scale trade. This disorganisation inevitably leads to the gradual destruction of the local trade circuit.

These testimonies show that blockades lead not only take away people's livelihoods, but also lead to the disintegration of the rural economy: agricultural production is halted, livestock is looted, and trade is paralysed. This economy, deprived of its foundations, is thus reduced to a dynamic of external dependence and day-to-day survival. In other words, these blockade situations affect economic capital, social capital, and identity capital (Baczko & Dorronsoro, 2017).

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY OF CASE STUDIES

Actors involved and local conflict configurations

The four sites studied illustrate distinct configurations of confrontation between armed jihadist groups, self-defence actors, and local authorities. In Marébougou, Saye, and Kori-Maoundé, the dynamics are centred on villages, while the Parou-Songobia bridge is a strategic hub for regional mobility.

- **Marébougou** is characterised by a plurality of actors: Katiba Macina fighters, Donsow self-defence groups, customary authorities, and mobilised youth. This plurality creates tensions between dynamics of submission, resistance, and negotiation²⁰.
- **Saye** presents a more homogeneous configuration of resistance, centred around local Donsow and customary authorities, who refuse any form of pact with the jihadists.
- **Kori-Maoundé** is marked by a polarisation between Katiba Macina and the Dan Na Ambassagou movement, whose political and military influence structures local resistance.
- **The Parou-Songobia bridge**, although not in a village, is a disputed area of territorial control, where armed groups impose mobility agreements on local populations, transforming the infrastructure into a lever of regional domination.

²⁰ The mayors of Femaye, Taga, and Dialassagou played a facilitating role in establishing contacts and discussions between villagers and Katiba Macina fighters. However, this mediation did not succeed in easing internal tensions within the communities concerned. Some residents remain opposed to any form of negotiation, despite the human losses and economic consequences of the total blockade imposed for six months from September 2020. Others, however, support the idea of dialogue and a mediated solution with the armed groups. The apparent acceptance of the conditions imposed by the pact with the jihadists does not reflect ideological convergence, but rather the village's military and political powerlessness in the face of pressure. These dynamic highlights the coercive nature of the agreement, which is based more on the need for survival than on free consent. It is likely that the changing balance of power—notably the weakening of Katiba Macina, the strengthening of the Malian military presence, and the rise of local self-defence groups such as the Donsow—will lead to the questioning or even the end of the pact currently in force in Marébougou.

Modalities of submission and pact-making

The concept of the *benkan* (submission pact) is a key indicator of the power relations between jihadist groups and local communities.

- **In Marébougou**, the *benkan* involves the payment of zakat, the closure of schools, a ban on ceremonies and cultural practices, and the imposition of the veil on women.
- **In Saye**, refusal to sign the *benkan* has resulted in a total blockade, with severe restrictions on resources and mobility.
- **In Kori-Maoundé**, no *benkan* has been signed owing to the persistent influence of Dan Na Ambassagou. In light of the presence of this self-defence group, negotiations, if they were to be undertaken, could not be conducted in isolation, as in the case of Saye²¹; they would have to belong to a larger configuration, with the involvement of Dan Na Ambassagou fighters.
- **Around the Parou-Songobia bridge**, mobility agreements function as territorial *benkan*: signatory villages enjoy relative security, while non-signatories are exposed to targeted violence²².

The temporality and intensity of blockades

Blockades vary according to their context:

- **Marébougou** was subjected to a total blockade for six months from September 2020, following the defeat of the Donsow, before experiencing a partial blockade in 2021, following the acceptance of the pact proposed by Katiba Macina fighters.
- **Saye** has been under blockade since 2023, with an intensification in 2024 linked to the influx of displaced persons and pressure on resources.
- **Kori-Maoundé** has been increasingly isolated since 2019, which has been exacerbated by attacks and the prohibition on transport operators accessing the population.
- **The Parou-Songobia bridge** has been subject to recurrent attacks since 2017, transforming the route into a deadly, mobile blockade zone.

Community reactions and forms of resistance

The responses of the populations vary between armed resistance, forced submission, and resilience strategies:

- **In Marébougou**, the initial armed resistance was broken, leading to partial submission.
- **In Saye**, the historical memory of resistance fuels persistent armed opposition, supported by a military detachment.
- **In Kori-Maoundé**, resistance is structured around a counterinsurgency approach led by Dan Na Ambassagou.
- **Around the Parou-Songobia bridge**, communities are developing strategies of circumvention, negotiation, or advocacy for lasting security.

Mobility and control of resources

The blockade directly affects mobility and access to natural resources:

- **In Marébougou**, movement was restricted to within one kilometre (or 500 metres, according to our interviewees) of the village, preventing any agricultural or pastoral activity.
- **In Saye**, trips beyond one kilometre are punished, and access to markets is restricted to a single weekly market under military escort.
- **In Kori-Maoundé**, distant fields have been abandoned, secondary roads have become dangerous, and weekly markets have been deserted.
- **Around the Parou-Songobia bridge**, attacks target vehicles and passengers, trade flows are controlled, and non-signatory villages are isolated.

²¹ In this context, the underlying idea is that the village cannot initiate a process without the prior agreement of the central structure of Dan Na Ambassagou. This organisation is based on a structured hierarchy, centred around a central core and groups of fighters deployed in different localities according to a defined hierarchical positioning. Such a centralised form of organisation does not exist among other self-defence groups in central Mali, particularly in the Djenné and Ségou regions, where each group operates almost autonomously, with no obligation to report to a higher authority. ²² Targeting is mainly based on the villages or municipalities of origin, as indicated on identity documents. Fighters generally ask travellers three key questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? For what purpose? The answers to these questions often make it possible to identify the place of origin of those questioned, and concealing this information can have negative consequences for the traveller. Thus, identity checks are the main means by which individuals are targeted on the roads.

An attempt at categorising the blockade situations analysed

TABLE1: TYPOLOGY OF THE BLOCKADE SITUATIONS ANALYSED

Type of space	Example	Control methods	Community reaction
Village under pact	Marébougou	Calm situation, under surveillance: limitation of mobility, total submission to the rules imposed by Katiba Macina	Partial submission, solidarity
Village in resistance	Saye	Blockade and collective punishment: ban on all economic activity (farming, livestock farming, fishing, trade) and total immobilisation for the entire village	Armed resistance, historical memory
Village in counterinsurgency	Kori-Maoundé	Armed competition (Katiba Macina vs Dan Na Ambassagou): restrictions on movement and economic activity, depending on the balance of power	Armed resistance, isolation
Strategic axis	Parou-Songobia bridge	Extraterritorial control: screening of passengers by Katiba Macina fighters, hijacking of coaches and passengers from villages that have not signed local agreements	Fragmented resistance, mobility agreements

4

CONCLUSION

THE SITUATIONS IN MARÉBOUGOU, SAYE, AND KORI-MAOUNDÉ ILLUSTRATE THREE DISTINCT TRAJECTORIES OF CONFRONTATION, RESISTANCE, AND NEGOTIATION IN THE FACE OF KATIBA MACINA'S EXPANSION IN CENTRAL MALI. THESE TRAJECTORIES ARE SHAPED BY LOCAL, HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHICAL, AND POLITICAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HOW COMMUNITIES RESPOND TO JIHADIST PRESSURE.

In Marébougou, the dynamic is marked by an alternation between armed resistance and submission. After an attempt at defence organised by the Donsow, military defeat led to a severe blockade, then to the acceptance of a pact with the jihadists. This pact, or *benkan*, profoundly transformed the social and religious life of the village, imposing strict norms regarding *zakat*, education, celebrations, and gendered behaviours. The village's submission was facilitated by the weakening of the self-defence forces and the absence of any alternative security option.

Saye, on the other hand, illustrates the trajectory of fierce and continuous resistance. Categorically rejecting any form of pact, the inhabitants organised a local defence force under the authority of traditional figures and hunters. This resistance is based on a historical memory of siege and struggle against external domination, which strengthens community cohesion. The blockade imposed by Katiba Macina has caused severe isolation, but has also strengthened internal solidarity, despite difficulties in accessing vital resources.

Kori-Maoundé presents yet another different configuration. Located in an area of influence of the Dan Na Ambassagou movement, the village lies at the heart of a counter-insurgency strategy. Here, the presence of a structured self-defence group prevents any dialogue with the jihadists. However, this stance exposes the population to indirect reprisals, including targeted attacks, restrictions on mobility, and a drastic reduction in agricultural space. The gradual isolation of the village, combined with pressure on secondary roads, weakens the resilience of the inhabitants.

These three cases show that communities' responses to the jihadist threat are never uniform. They depend on local organisational capacity, the history of power relations, geography, and political alliances. Where self-defence groups are weak or absent, submission becomes a survival strategy. Where the memory of resistance is strong, confrontation persists despite the human and material costs. Finally, where structured local armed forces exist, dialogue is blocked, but the population remains caught between two forms of violence.

The humanitarian impact of these blockades is devastating: growing food insecurity, collapse of local economic circuits, and forced displacement to safer areas (Tangara, 2024). In addition, these restrictions significantly complicate the operations of humanitarian organisations, limiting their ability to deliver aid and exposing them to the risk of reprisals or manipulation by the armed group. In addition to this strategy of economic and social control, Katiba Macina also carries out targeted attacks against villages or individuals that they deem to be hostile to them. These offensives repress any attempt at resistance, particularly targeting communities close to self-defence groups, and create a climate of widespread fear. By making the threat omnipresent, Katiba Macina deters any opposition without needing to maintain a permanent military presence (Poudiougou, 2024a). This combination of blockade and targeted violence allows it to exercise a form of domination over the population that is both subtle and brutal, making any form of external intervention, including humanitarian aid, extremely complex and sensitive.

Conversely, in the Koro district, there is relative freedom of movement, allowing trade to continue and people to move around more freely. This difference can be explained by the absence of organised resistance in this area, as well as tacit agreements between Katiba Macina and certain local communities, which guarantee a reduction in violence in exchange for strict compliance with the rules imposed by the group. Rather than imposing control by force, Katiba Macina fighters seek to establish influence here by establishing governance under their armed control. This strategy has been illustrated, at least since 2021, by the terms of use of the Bankass-Bandiagara section of RN15, which connects Bandiagara to Sévaré. While villages that have made various arrangements with Katiba Macina enjoy relative freedom of movement on this road, those that resist are subjected to all kinds of harassment: attacks on vehicles carrying people to weekly markets, kidnappings followed by ransom demands for coaches and travellers, confiscation of property, and enforced disappearances. Thus between 2021 and 2025, on the bridge between Parou and Songobia, more than ten coaches carrying several hundred travellers to or from Bandiagara were involved in such kidnappings.

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This duality in Katiba Macina's strategies, alternating between repression and negotiation depending on the local context, is gradually pushing several villages to submit to the conditions set by its fighters in order to escape the various forms of violence perpetrated in the localities under their influence. In addition to mobility constraints, these restrictions apply to the provision of certain basic services (health care, municipal services, schools, etc.) in the villages under their influence. The prohibition or regulation of movement appears not only as a means of governing through violence, aimed at isolating and coercing populations, but also as a key indicator of local power relations (Vignal, 2018).

It should be emphasised, in conclusion, that the control mechanisms and repressive measures analysed in this report relate exclusively to the situations studied. Although the fighters responsible for the blockades all claim to belong to Katiba Macina, affiliated with JNIM, the methods used to implement these blockades remain heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is evident not only in the way villages are surrounded, and roads and certain specific activities (transport, agriculture) are shut down, but also in the concrete ways in which the blockades operate. The measures observed include restrictions on mobility, enforced submission, the use of benkan, and the imposition of new social and religious norms on village communities (the wearing of the veil for women, closure of schools, forced levies, disarmament of self-defence groups, prohibition of all contact with the defence and security forces, etc.). Thus, within a given region, such as Mopti or Bandiagara, the measures put in place, the severity of the sanctions, and the degree of violence used against the population can vary significantly. Furthermore, the blockades examined in this report differ from those imposed on strategically important urban areas, such as Timbuktu (September 2023) or Kayes (September 2025), as well as those targeting national hydrocarbon supply routes (September 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of our study, we have constructed a series of recommendations aimed at mitigating the effects of blockades, strengthening security, and improving the living conditions of the affected populations.

1. TO GOVERNMENT ACTORS

- **Strengthen the military presence:** re-establish regular patrols to secure the RN15 road from Sévaré to Koro²³. At the same time, dislodge armed groups (jihadists) that are maintaining blockades on villages and deploying permanent military bases. Such actions, aimed at restoring and protecting mobility, will reassure the population, drive away armed groups, protect road infrastructure, and promote the recovery of the local economy.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** repair damaged roads and bridges to restore connectivity and facilitate economic exchanges.
- **Support local negotiations:** facilitate dialogue between stakeholders (local communities, armed forces, and armed groups) to identify demands while clarifying the state's red lines (education, health, justice, security). These dialogues must be conducted by recognised mediators, with security guarantees in place to lift the ongoing blockades.
- **Support public services:** once the blockades have been lifted, reopen schools and health centres in these areas with appropriate security measures in place.

2. TO HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS

- **Adapt strategies for accessing populations under blockade,** not only through community relays and local NGOs, but also by setting up supply chains.
- **Establish communication and alert systems** (SMS, radio, satellite) to provide information on blockade conditions.
- **Establish secure humanitarian corridors** to deliver aid in collaboration with local populations.
- **Document the different blockade situations** to enable solutions to be adapted to local realities and work with the relevant actors.

3. TO TECHNICAL AND FINANCIAL PARTNERS

- **Consolidate humanitarian aid funding** by supporting national and local efforts to deliver food, medicine, and other essential services to blockaded areas in collaboration with security forces and municipal and village authorities.
- **Restore damaged infrastructure** (roads, bridges), with an emphasis on resilience to security risks.
- **Finance economic resilience programmes:** in blockaded localities, the government and development cooperation programmes should support village populations in resuming income-generating activities, such as market gardening, trade, and local crafts. In areas newly released from blockades, support economic recovery by providing households with food supplies for a period of six to twelve months, coupled with access to seeds, agricultural inputs, and microcredit.
- **International advocacy:** raise awareness among international partners and diplomatic representatives of the impact of blockades on communities in order to mobilise the funds needed for humanitarian aid and economic recovery.

4. TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- **Community solidarity:** encourage the mutual aid dynamics that have emerged during blockades within villages in order to embed practices of sharing and mutual assistance between households and villages.
- **Dialogue with the authorities:** create secure channels of communication between the population and prefects, sub-prefects, local military chiefs, and religious leaders in order to find solutions adapted to local crises without exposing the former to reprisals from armed groups.
- **Training local actors:** highlight the skills and expertise (resource and crisis management, political and religious knowledge) of customary leaders and local associations by giving these actors a leading role at the local level in dialogue with armed groups and in the reconciliation process.

²³ Such patrols were in place in 2019/2020 and helped reduce attacks on coaches and the destruction of bridges along RN15.

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Graphic design: Studio Ctrl A

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Funded by the European Union

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