Fending for Ourselves: The Civilian Impact of Mali’s Three-Year Conflict
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This report was researched and co-authored by Heather Sonner, Mali Project Lead with CIVIC, and co-authored and edited by Kyle Dietrich, Senior Program Manager for Africa and Peacekeeping at CIVIC.
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Organizational Mission and Vision

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) works to enhance the protection of civilians before, during, and after armed conflict. We are advocates who believe no civilian caught in conflict should be ignored, and advisors who provide practical solutions to prevent and respond to civilian harm.

CIVIC’s vision is for military and non-state armed actors to recognize the imperative to prevent civilian harm, protect civilians caught on the battlefield, and make amends for the harm they do cause. To accomplish this, we assess the causes of civilian harm in particular conflicts, craft creative solutions to address that harm, and engage with civilians, governments, militaries, and international and regional institutions to implement these solutions.

We measure our success in the short term by the adoption of new policies and practices that lead to the improved wellbeing of civilians caught in a conflict. In the long term, our goal is to create a new global mindset around robust civilian protection and harm response.

Acknowledgments

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### Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFISMA</td>
<td>African-led International Support Mission</td>
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<td>AQIM</td>
<td>Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCTARC</td>
<td>Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis, and Response Cell</td>
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<td>CIVIC</td>
<td>Center for Civilians in Conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMA</td>
<td>Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (English: Coordination of Movements of the Azawad, or “Coordination”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMFPR</td>
<td>Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPA</td>
<td>Coalition du Peuple pour l’Azawad</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDR</td>
<td>Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ERW</td>
<td>Explosive Remnants of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAMA</td>
<td>Forces Armées Maliennes (Malian Armed Forces), also referred to as MDSF, or Malian Defense and Security Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIDH</td>
<td>Fédération Internationale des Droits de l’Homme</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPR</td>
<td>Forces Patriotiques de Résistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>GATIA</td>
<td>Groupe Auto-Défense Touareg, Imamghad et Alliés</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCUA</td>
<td>Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad</td>
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<tr>
<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised explosive devices</td>
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<tr>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>International Humanitarian Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAA</td>
<td>Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (English: Arab Movement of Azawad)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNLA</td>
<td>Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (English: National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUJWA/MUJAO</td>
<td>Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>POC</td>
<td>Protection of Civilians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRSG</td>
<td>Special Representative of the Secretary General (civilian head of a UN Peacekeeping mission)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNPOL</td>
<td>United Nations Police</td>
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The Gao Mayor’s office, which was heavily damaged in fighting in the city in February 2013.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“As long as people cannot see the government, they will not be reassured.”

This report presents a locally-informed narrative of the civilian impact of the ongoing conflict in northern Mali and puts forward policy recommendations to help address the desires and expectations that civilians have regarding security and protection issues. A heightened and more nuanced understanding of civilian perspectives will allow all concerned parties to improve protection measures while properly mitigating and responding to incidental harm that results from their operations in the North.

Three years of armed conflict in Mali have left a legacy of civilian harm, widespread fear, and social disintegration. Civilians in the North of the country are left feeling frustrated with the lack of state presence. They are disillusioned by an overall lack of protection and redress by Malian armed forces, the UN peacekeeping mission, and non-state armed groups—all of which claim to be defenders of civilian protection in the North.

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1 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
In 2012 the Malian government lost control of more than half of its territory to a network of loosely affiliated armed groups. While an MNLA-led insurgency sought the creation of an independent secular state called Azawad, AQIM-allied militants quickly overtook the MNLA’s cause in favor of creating a fundamental Islamic state intent of imposing strict Sharia law across the North. After nearly a year of brutal control by the armed groups (a period widely referred to as “the occupation”), French-led international forces intervened and were quick to re-take key northern towns in early 2013. Subsequent stabilization efforts entailed the creation of a robust peacekeeping mission (AFISMA, then MINUSMA) in 2013. However, the gains in security were fragile and unevenly distributed. Since early 2015, the ongoing Algiers peace process to end the conflict has stalled, confrontations between armed groups have persisted, and violent attacks against civilians, UN peacekeepers, and Malian forces have spiked.

The underlying causes of the rebellion were longstanding governance and security issues coupled with mistrust and systemic discrimination across regional, ethnic, and racial lines. Northern communities have long complained of alienation, persecution, and abuse by the government, including by State security forces. The 2012 occupation by armed groups further victimized civilians, who were subject to serious human rights violations, displacement, and intimidation. Yet, despite an end to the occupation, many of the underlying grievances remain unresolved and civilians across the North are still being victimized by the ongoing conflict.

Conflict-related civilian harm—loss of life, injury, displacement, disappearance, and destruction of property as a consequence of military, UN, or armed group action during armed conflict—is not systematically tracked in Mali. Civilian perspectives on the causes and consequences of such harm have been relatively undocumented. To help fill this gap, between September 2014 and March 2015, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) conducted extensive original research, including over 150 interviews with civilians, members of armed groups, government officials, civil society representatives, NGO workers, and MINUSMA officials across Mali. CIVIC’s research found that civilian harm remains a prominent feature of the conflict, and that the underlying drivers of conflict are intensifying. All parties to the conflict need to make significant strategic and operational adjustments to mitigate harm to civilians and increase proactive protection measures.

Since the international intervention allowed the Malian army to begin its return to the North, confrontations with armed groups have increased. Civilians have repeatedly become victims of attacks by Islamist armed groups that target government and UN forces with landmines, rockets, and other explosive remnants of war. Civilians have also been direct targets of forced disappearance by both armed groups and government forces. Some civilians report an increase in ethnically motivated persecution, in particular against Arab and Tuareg Malians. Interviewees commented on a pattern of misconduct by security actors and their proxy militias in which they attack individuals whose backgrounds are different than their own. Sexual violence, armed criminality, and inter-communal tensions have also all increased as a consequence of the continuing conflict.

In light of this, paramount among civilian concerns is the continued absence of sufficient and credible State institutions, security, and protection across the North—an absence that is most pronounced in rural and nomadic grazing areas. While the Malian government has the primary legal responsibility for protecting its citizens, State authority is notably absent in Kidal region and has only a limited presence in many parts of Gao and Timbuktu regions. As a result, armed groups that control territory, such as the MNLA in Kidal region, must provide security and protection for all people in those areas. The current political impasse suggests that there are many unresolved grievances, and that the MNLA and other armed groups may continue to fight for and exercise control in a number northern areas for some time.

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In areas where government and military authorities have begun to redeploy, most civilians expressed little confidence in the State’s capacity to prevent or respond to civilian harm. Victims often fail to seek assistance, believing little will be done or fearing they will be targeted for collaborating with the Malian government or international forces. In fact, civilians expressed concern over increased operations by government-allied militias intended to forcibly re-take the North, which many feel is making circumstances worse for civilians. Absent a signed peace agreement and inclusive consultations with local communities, any aggressive re-taking of northern towns by FAMA, State authorities, or pro-government militias will continue to exacerbate tensions and trigger violent clashes. As such, international support for the re-establishment of government authority in the North must be contingent on the Malian government’s commitment to abide by existing agreements, and the putting in place of measures to mitigate harm to civilians.

The overall weakness of the Malian government in the North leads many civilians to look towards MINUSMA for protection and security. Yet, despite its robust mandate—amended in June 2014 to focus on ensuring security, stabilization, and protection of civilians—the UN mission appears ill-equipped to proactively protect against retaliatory attacks on civilians. Ibrahim, a shop owner from Gao region, summed up a popular sentiment when he noted: “what most frustrates the population is the passivity of MINUSMA peacekeepers.”

Many civilians interviewed feel that recent attacks against MINUSMA have forced the mission into a defensive posture, and have undermined its ability to deal with the broader range of security and protection challenges, including the presence of Islamist extremist groups, transnational criminal networks, and a complex mosaic of warring state and non-state actors.

Indeed, MINUSMA has become the most dangerous UN mission in the world for peacekeepers. UN forces frequently face violent protests, rocket attacks on bases, and targeted attacks with improvised explosive devices. Under-Secretary-General for UN Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous recently said of MINUSMA, “No mission has been as costly in terms of blood.” In the same statement, he also highlighted the fact that more than 40 MINUSMA soldiers have been killed, and 109 injured since the mission’s inception in 2013, with the Chadian contingent sustaining a large proportion of these casualties. As MINUSMA becomes increasingly engaged in the conflict, reports of UN assaults against armed groups and incidental harm to civilians during their operations are further diminishing the UN’s standing as a guarantor of civilian protection.

Malian civilians repeatedly expressed their concern that extremist armed groups will continue to foment instability, and could even regain control of some regions of the North. The recent surge in attacks against MINUSMA, and the February 2015 attack on a nightclub in Bamako in particular, reveal that Islamist extremist organizations are regrouping, are operating beyond the northern region, and are willing to target “soft” civilian targets as well as military actors.

Civilians increasingly understand their rights, and they demand that all actors do more to protect them. Despite the heavy toll of three years of conflict on the civilian population and the continued victimization of many communities by armed groups, the vast majority of people interviewed

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3 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
denounced violence, embraced the ongoing peace process, and welcomed the gradual return of credible government authority to the North (although many of them considered it was still progressing too slowly).

Mali also wants an end to impunity for abuses by all actors, and increased access to justice—meaning a better understanding of the complaint mechanisms available, and protection for those most at risk. Several interviewees demanded security forces compensate them for past abuses. Meanwhile, others requested the establishment of a mechanism to investigate and respond to abuses resulting from FAMA operations, as well as from counter-insurgency and peacekeeping operations by MINUSMA and French forces. Many civilians feel the UN needs to take the lead in such efforts, given FAMA abuses, intimidation by armed groups and militias, and the lack of government presence in many areas.

Finally, both civilians and representatives from armed groups and militias emphasized the need for an inclusive and effective DDR process to prevent combatants from acting as spoilers to durable peace.
RECOMMENDATIONS

All Parties to the Conflict

All parties to the conflict must:

- Ensure adherence to international legal standards, including human rights and humanitarian law.
- Adopt robust policies, practices, and tools to ensure that all troops understand the strategic, moral, and legal importance of minimizing and properly addressing civilian harm resulting from the conflict. This should include training, enforcement, and sustained leadership from all responsible authorities and decision-makers.

Government of Mali

The Government of Mali should:

Ensure Effective Civilian Protection

- Prioritize the consolidation of state authority and security in the North through peaceful and inclusive means, thereby laying a foundation for strong rule of law, judicial and security sector reform, and a representational and increasingly decentralized government.
- Make every effort to prioritize the protection of civilians—both from their own operations and the attacks of armed groups—in all government and security force policies and operations, both current and future.
- Work with local, traditional, and civil society leadership, including women and youth groups, to ensure an equitable and inclusive engagement with the population as government officials and security forces redeploy to all regions of the North, including isolated rural zones.
- Avert potential clashes and civilian harm by ending all aggressive actions by government forces and pro-government militias to forcibly re-take northern territory.

Deliver an Inclusive Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Process

- Implement a national strategy of coexistence and fulfill the mandate of a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission by drawing on best practices from other relevant contexts and responding to calls from civilians to address underlying grievances that have plagued Mali for decades. If done appropriately, through an inclusive and participatory process, this commission will enable Malians to confront a past marked by the “socioeconomic and cultural marginalization of certain regions and communities in the country.” It will also help its citizens address past injustices by all parties to the conflict, and recognize the rights of the victims to justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.7

Develop Civilian Harm Reporting and Response Procedures for FAMA

- Carry out an expert assessment in order to identify current operational strengths and weaknesses, and recommend the necessary standard operating procedures and training procedures to deal with civilian casualty incidents and allegations. In particular, the expert assessment should (i) identify the best mechanism for ensuring the effective tracking of civilian harm within the context of FAMA’s current information management structures, (ii) draw up a simple and accessible harm mitigation and response plan which can be passed on to commanders in the field for immediate implementation, and (iii) develop practical

step-by-step training that instructs FAMA officers on reporting and responding to alleged civilian harm caused by their operations, which focuses initially on ensuring consistent, timely, and accurate reporting of all alleged civilian harm from field contingents through the chain of command. The establishment of an effective reporting and response mechanism will help FAMA restore community confidence, acknowledge mistakes, and identify best practices for avoiding civilian harm during future operations.

To MINUSMA

The UN has made important strategic and operational changes to prioritize the protection of civilians in peacekeeping operations globally. However, continued leadership by the SRSG and Force Commander is needed in order to effectively champion and implement a proactive protection approach. Furthermore, the UN must develop a standard framework for assessing risk factors and threats to civilians during strategic assessments and use of force contingency planning. There are a number of emerging best practices that could help MINUSMA mitigate harm to civilians.

MINUSMA should:

**Strengthen Civilian Casualty Tracking**

- While a full civilian casualty tracking, analysis, and response cell (CCTARC) is not currently recommended, MINUSMA should prioritize the recruitment of a Risk (or Harm) Mitigation Advisor—a position which has been created and approved, but not filled to date—reporting to the MINUSMA Force Commander. The adviser would help MINUSMA (i) identify with reliable data the issues of civilian harm attributable to the FAMA, armed non-state groups, and MINUSMA, (ii) engage all parties at a tactical level to reduce civilian harm, and (iii) coordinate MINUSMA’s efforts to mitigate and reduce civilian harm resulting from its own operations.

**Deploy Community Liaisons and Strategic Communications**

- Given increased tension between communities and UN Peacekeepers, complete the deployment of Community Liaison Assistants (CLAs) who would work with local communities to improve civilian-military communication, and to increase mission awareness and operationalization of protection needs.
- Use strategic communications to improve community understanding of the roles and limits of MINUSMA military engagement and its efforts to protect civilians. Messaging should also address community concerns and confusion around co-location of MINUSMA forces with FAMA, non-UN international military forces, and any possible future cooperation with compliant armed groups.

**Ensure Civilian Protection and Harm Mitigation Training**

- In addition to ensuring that all peacekeeping forces receive training on international humanitarian law and human rights law before their deployment, all units should also receive advanced scenario-based training on the broader spectrum of proactive protection and civilian harm mitigation. Such scenario-based training should include examples of the practical application of the concepts of distinction and proportionality, as well as relevant operational activities such as crowd control, patrolling, escalation of force, community engagement, and how to appropriately respond to alleged civilian harm.
- Pre- and post-training assessments of current mindset and skill level should be conducted to ensure trainings are appropriate and effective.
- Support the Malian government in the administration and delivery of victim’s assistance mechanisms by conducting investigations and sharing information on civilian harm that results from military operations by FAMA, MINUSMA, and armed groups (building off the Malian compensation law for victims of the 2012 rebellion).
Operation Barkhane

Given the robust role of French Special Forces under Operation Barkhane, French authorities should:

- Develop a dedicated civilian casualty tracking mechanism (similar to the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team developed by ISAF in Afghanistan).8
- Increase operational transparency by routinely releasing credible information on civilian casualties resulting from French military action.
- Set a representative standard by creating robust mechanisms to facilitate investigations and administer post-harm assistance, or amends, for victims and their families that have suffered harm as a result of French operations.

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METHODOLOGY

CIVIC conducted more than 150 structured interviews from September 2014 to March 2015 with civilians affected by the ongoing crisis, as well as diplomats, non-governmental and international organization representatives, government officials, representatives from northern armed groups, and civil society leaders.

CIVIC sought to ensure diversity among interviewees with respect to geographic location, tribal or ethnic affiliation, and gender. Field research was conducted in the regions of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu with interviewees from most major towns (see map), as well as in Bamako and other remote areas, where various armed groups are present and active. Civilians were asked whether they suffered any harm and, if so, by whom. They were also asked about current risks related to the conflict, and views on the security environment and security actors present in their areas. Where access was limited by security—such as in parts of Kidal region—some interviews were conducted by phone or by meeting with individuals outside of their home regions. All of CIVIC’s interviews were conducted independently.

This report is not a survey intended to provide statistically significant results or conclusions, nor is the goal to account for or tally all civilian casualties in Mali. Rather, the goal is to review existing data on civilian harm, combined with the qualitative evidence compiled by CIVIC to draw conclusions about patterns, consequences, and perceptions of civilian harm. We feel that interviewees’ responses regarding perceptions and expectations of broader security and protection issues are important and illustrative snapshots of civilian views across the North. While significant effort was made to ensure a representative balance among interviewees, and all major ethnic groups are represented in the interview sample, CIVIC acknowledges that some communities were more difficult than others to access due to security concerns for both those interviewed and for its researchers. For the security and privacy of civilian interviewees, all names have been altered or omitted unless otherwise indicated. Given the sensitivity of civilian harm and monetary payment issues, many officials wished not to be identified.
Image by Thomas Martinez.
A woman walks past graffiti on the streets of Gao; April 27, 2013.
THE ARMED CONFLICT IN MALI

Background

A pattern of rebellion and short-lived accommodation has persisted for decades in Mali. Northern Tuareg groups have repeatedly rebelled against the state in search of greater autonomy and, in turn, agreements have been reached to increase development spending in the North, and integrate rebel fighters into the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA). Neither has proved durable or sufficient.

Endemic corruption has undermined government promises to increase development in the North. The integration of rebel fighters into the army and national guard in the 1990s proved problematic, and the army has remained weak despite substantial bilateral security cooperation. Lucrative business and trafficking networks linking Bamako and various northern armed and political actors rendered genuine governance and security sector reform unlikely.

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11 France and the United States increased bilateral security cooperation in recent years to aid in the fight against terrorist groups in the Sahel.
The 2012 rebellion and coup d'état against President Amadou Toumani Touré brought these failures into sharp focus for both Malians and the international community. The Malian army collapsed in the North in the face of a new rebellion launched by the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) in January 2012. This rebellion was further complicated by the MNLA’s temporary alliance with extremist armed groups, including Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), each of which is listed by the United Nations 1267/1989 Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee.

The conflict was not limited to a North-South dispute. Tensions among northern groups over conflicting ideologies and endgames resulted in the fracturing of their already loose alliance. Secular Tuareg and Arab armed groups such as the MNLA and MAA saw their separatist cause co-opted by AQIM-allied radical groups more interested in creating an Islamic state in the North. International concern grew significantly when the extremist groups succeeded in overtaking the MNLA and occupying towns across northern Mali in 2012.

International Response

In January 2013, MUJWA pushed into central Mali and seized Konna, a gateway town to Bamako. This sped up plans for an international military intervention. Almost a year after armed groups took over the North, the French-led Operation Serval, along with the African-led International Support Mission (AFISMA), and Malian Armed Forces succeeded in expelling the extremist and secessionist armed groups from major towns and facilitated a nominal return of Malian government forces to the North.

Most civilians welcomed the military intervention and retreat of extremists. The imposition of a strict and repressive form of Sharia law in certain areas had proved unpopular, and resulted in protests against the Islamists in the North. Numerous grave abuses had occurred during the 2012 occupation, including the stoning to death of several people, amputating the hands and feet of suspected thieves and armed opposition members, public floggings, use of child soldiers, and systematic execution of captured Malian armed forces in the North. There was an overall breakdown of basic services in territories held by the MNLA and extremist armed groups.
Insecurity and direct targeting of humanitarian assets severely restricted humanitarian access and created significant displacement, as well as an economic crisis.\(^{23}\)

The international community pursued a two-pronged approach to the crisis, seeking to tackle the extremist groups militarily while engaging the more moderate separatist groups at the political level. The first prong was a continued military effort to fight extremist armed groups, their leaders, and their networks. Targeted military action was carried out primarily in the far north of the country and largely in isolated areas, notably in and around the Ifoghas Mountains.

The second prong was a political attempt to restore legitimate government authority and facilitate a peace and reconciliation process. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was credibly elected in August 2013. Shortly thereafter, the European Union opened training missions to help rebuild the Malian armed forces and police. A preliminary agreement was reached between the government and the MNLA with the Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad (HCUA) in Ouagadougou in June 2013.\(^{24}\)

A UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) was subsequently established in April 2013 to support both military and political approaches, including helping to stabilize key population centers and protect civilians.\(^{25}\) Troops deployed under the African Union-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA)—many of whom had supported French operations—were integrated into MINUSMA.

**Unresolved Conflict**

With the extremist threat diminished in mid-2013, focus returned to the MNLA-led opposition. Armed groups regrouped and sporadic fighting continued between pro-Bamako and pro-independence groups.

Armed groups formed and re-formed as they sought to gain an advantage in the negotiations. The HCUA is comprised of some former Ansar Dine fighters who were targeted by French forces for their alliance with AQIM. Additionally, some fighters from MUJWA, an extremist group targeted by the French, can now be found among the ranks of the recognized opposition group MAA (Arab Movement of Azawad).

The government returned to its previous practice of backing proxy forces to counter rebellion, often capitalizing on existing tribal tensions to mobilize armed groups. In the most recent conflict, two self-defense militias have been particularly active. The Groupe Auto-Défense Touareg, Imghad, et Alliés (GATIA), which maintains close ties to the Malian army, is often tied to past Imghad militias used by the Touré government to counter previous rebellions led by the Ifoghas Tuareg.\(^{26}\) The Ganda Izo and Ganda Koy, also so-called self-defense militias with links to the Malian army, are largely comprised of Bellah and Songhai Malians.\(^{27}\)

The importance of disarming and demobilizing these groups should not be underestimated in the ongoing peace process, as the likelihood for them to become spoilers is significant. According to a Ganda Izo commander interviewed by CIVIC in Lélé-Hoye-Gourma, Ganda Izo currently has around 900 fighters, is looking for State support, and wants to be integrated into the army. Asked what would happen if the Ganda Izo are no longer supported, the representative told CIVIC, “We

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27 Andrew McGregor, “GATIA: A Profile of Northern Mali's Pro-Government Tuareg and Arab Militia,” *Terrorism Monitor* 13, no. 7, April 3, 2015, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43745&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=00ac4c5f2c348bf01254a5b38037664#VS6xaBDF9VA
will be forced to either join MUJAO or the MNLA and fight against the Malian State, or we will have to become armed bandits and dispossess people of their property, and start looting shops and attacking roads.”

2014 was marked by periodic clashes between these respective armed groups. A key turning point was May 2014, when the Malian army was defeated by the MNLA and HCUA in Kidal. In the months after, the MNLA and its allies took control of strategic towns in the North, only to be halted and pushed back again by pro-Bamako GATIA forces. The rapidity with which the FAMA re-occupied territory following GATIA offensives led to accusations of close cooperation between the army and GATIA.

**Current Context**

Three years into the conflict, armed group activity continues despite new negotiations launched in Algiers in July 2014. Clashes have taken place around Zarho, Didi, and Ber in Timbuktu, and Bamba in Gao. Fighting between the MNLA/HCUA/MAA and GATIA for control over the strategically important town of Tabankort began in late December 2014. This led to a direct fire incident in which a MINUSMA Apache helicopter fired on an MNLA vehicle in self-defense.

There are also concerns that extremists are resurgent, with increased activity by MUJAO, Al-Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, and an alleged new group of combatants referred to as “the Macina Liberation Force,” a reference to the Macina region of central Mali. Attacks by armed groups, particularly against MINUSMA peacekeepers, have become more sophisticated and spiked significantly since late 2014. The security vacuum has expanded in contested areas since Prime Minister Moussa Mara visited Kidal region in May 2014, and has resulted in an increase in politically-motivated violence, as well as armed banditry, kidnapping, IED attacks, and animal rustling. Key areas have become particularly volatile, such as along the border with Mauritania, between Gao and Kidal, in Menaka and Ansongo in Gao region, and around Aguelhock and Tesselit in Kidal region.

The principal pro-government security actors remain present in these areas, but face challenges to improving the situation. According to some civilians, pro-government militias have begun to forcibly re-take northern towns, exacerbating local tension and confidence in the government. The FAMA are only partially redeployed in the North, with significant presence in the cities of Gao and Timbuktu, and with limited patrolling in rural areas. MINUSMA gradually increased its deployment of peacekeeping forces, including special contingents with enhanced assets contributed by the Netherlands and Sweden, but capacity and force protection concerns have limited its mobility in these volatile areas. Nevertheless, MINUSMA has played a deterrence role by deploying temporary detachments, notably in in Ber, Léré, and Lerneb.
France began a gradual reduction of its military presence in 2014 with the transformation of Operation Serval into Operation Barkhane, a regional counter-terrorism operation to target armed extremist groups across the Sahel. France is increasingly turning to neighboring countries in the Sahel region to share the burden of continued operations, focusing on joint operations with the militaries of the G-5 countries (Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina-Faso).\(^\text{35}\)

As of May 1, 2015, a UN-brokered peace deal had been signed by the government in Bamako, but was still rejected by northern rebels.

\(^{35}\) For more information, see the French Ministry of Defense at www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/sahel/dossier-de-presentation-de-l-operation-barkhane/operation-barkhane.
Children spend time in the unfinished Marche du Lt. Damien Boiteux. Damage left over from fighting in the city can be seen in the background; April 29, 2013.
CIVILIAN HARM IN MALI

While a complete accounting of civilian harm since 2012 does not exist, local perspectives help to strengthen our understanding of key protection challenges facing Mali today. A range of recent reports by Human Rights Watch, MINUSMA, Amnesty International, and the UN Independent Expert on human rights in Mali, Suliman Baldo, all help to document abuses and the impact of the deteriorating security environment on civilians. As Mr. Baldo commented after visiting Mali in March 2015, “All parties involved in the conflict have committed serious violations, including violations of the right to life, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, arrests, and arbitrary detentions and violations of the right to property. In recent months, entire communities have been forced to move in order to protect themselves from imminent collective punishment.”

While MINUSMA’s Human Rights Office has done significant reporting on human rights abuses, no government or international entity has been able to fully document the impact of the conflict on civilians. A full accounting of civilian harm is not within the scope of this report, but a reasonable analysis can be made of the type and scale of civilian harm faced by the northern population from existing sources and interviews undertaken by CIVIC.

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The nature of civilian harm is often dictated by conflict dynamics. This report looks at past abuses and ongoing protection challenges. Our primary focus is on abuses occurring from 2013 to the present day, including the French-led intervention, deployment of AFISMA and MINUSMA, redeployment of FAMA, and confrontations with armed groups in the North. While not the central focus of this report, our research also considers abuses during the 2012 occupation of Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao by armed groups. Interviewees from these regions reflexively referenced this period first when recounting incidents of civilian harm. Ongoing IED, suicide, and rocket attacks reinforce fears among civilians that extremist armed groups might regain influence and return to power.

The Occupation Period

Beginning in January 2012, several armed groups launched a rebellion against the Malian government with the aim of independence for northern Mali. Following the March 2012 coup d’état, which ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré, the FAMA retreated from the North, and the MNLA quickly took control of Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao regions. Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine originally backed the MNLA, but soon realized their visions for the new state were incompatible. Using intimidation and harsh rule, extremists groups MUJWA, Ansar Dine, and AQIM overtook the MNLA’s secular separatist cause in favor of creating a fundamental Islamic state intent of imposing strict Sharia law across the North. Government services, media, and humanitarian assistance were cut off, leaving civilians trapped.

Illegal Detention and Abuse Under Occupation

One afternoon in July 2012, a 33-year-old woman was inside the entrance to her house talking with her husband, grandfather, and younger sister. She was startled when Ahmed Moussa, a well-known Imam from Timbuktu, approached her house. He had seen her from the street, asked her husband why she was not wearing a veil and demanded that she comply under threat of arrest. When her husband resisted, Moussa threatened him and fired two shots in the air. Eight young men affiliated with Moussa’s religious police arrived and helped detain her husband and grandfather. The two men were sentenced to six months in jail. She felt helpless and afraid.

With no police or government officials to turn to, the woman sought the help of a local radio personality who appealed for the men’s release. Her husband suffers lasting psychological effects from the detention and physical abuse. He fears the eventual return of the extremist groups and is too afraid to file a complaint. The woman herself has little hope for justice, but believes victims of the occupation should be counted and financially compensated for their suffering and losses.

While information is incomplete, reports by the UN and human rights organizations indicate that the military and armed groups executed an estimated 33 persons in northern Mali during 2012. More than two-thirds of reported executions and disappearances are attributed to Malian armed forces, and were often carried out against those suspected of being affiliated with or supporting armed groups. A number of cases targeting Tuareg men occurred in and around Sevaré, where the army had retreated. A particularly high profile incident involved the killing of 16 Islamic preachers by Malian army soldiers in Diabli, near the Mauritanian border.
Although civilians report widespread abuses, limited access and reporting give us an incomplete picture of civilian harm by armed groups in the North during 2012. According to one report, armed groups have been accused of killing at least nine civilians in northern Mali during the occupation. One man was allegedly shot while fleeing Timbuktu. In a separate instance, four civilians were shot during an MNLA raid on humanitarian storage facilities in Gao. Civilian government officials were also targeted. Armed group members reportedly killed a municipal councilor in Gao in June 2012. In July, Ansar Dine members stoned a couple to death for being unmarried—a violation of the group’s strict implementation of Sharia law. There were also ten reported cases of amputation carried out by extremist armed groups in Gao, Timbuktu, and Ansongo during the occupation.

**The Intervention**

After the French intervention to reclaim the North, the Malian army re-established a presence in parts of the region. However, soon the number of reported abuses increased. During the first phase of operations from January through March 2013, the Malian army is alleged to have executed or disappeared more than 34 civilians. Victims were overwhelmingly Tuareg and Peuhl—ethnic groups associated with the MNLA and MUJWA. Arabs, forming part of MUJWA’s leadership, were also targeted in two separate incidents in Timbuktu.

Civilians interviewed by CIVIC described a widespread fear of the FAMA that prevented many from fleeing the fighting, or otherwise forced them to take indirect, less safe routes south. Multiple interviewees referred to the reported execution of 13 men and the disappearance of five more in Sevaré by the Malian army in early January 2013. The mostly Peuhl men were removed from buses and taken away when they were unable to produce identity papers. Human Rights Watch documented that their bodies were dumped into wells.

Abuses continued as the Malian army re-entered towns. In February 2013, Malian soldiers in uniform detained four Arab men on the street in Timbuktu and accused them of being ‘jihadists.’ When one of their neighbors, a Songhai man, defended them, he was also taken into custody and all the men then disappeared. The incident received public attention, and is one of the few cases in which a complaint was lodged with Malian authorities. The victims’ families formed an association to advocate for an investigation and judicial procedures against the soldiers implicated in the men’s disappearance. The case, however, has stalled and the wife of one of the victims expressed to CIVIC her extreme frustration at having received no support for her family despite the attention the case has received. She said she would not discuss the incident again until she receives some type of financial assistance for her family.

Several non-state armed groups have also been implicated in serious human rights abuses as they withdrew under international military pressure, or tried to consolidate control in areas where they remained. In Bougoumi village, Mopti, MNLA fighters reportedly killed some 20 people in March 2013. In Menaka, MNLA members are accused of shooting two civilians at a humanitarian distribution point. In Kidal, the MNLA illegally detained, and in some cases abused, 100 dark-skinned men on

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44 “Illegal detention and abuse under occupation” recorded during CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, November 2014.
46 The UN reported that six Arab dignitaries were disappeared after being last seen in FAMA custody. UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent Expert,” A/HRC/25/72. The second incident is discussed below.
48 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, December 2014. Name and details omitted for security reasons.
Crisis in Kidal – May 2014
The May 2014 events in Kidal were a pivotal moment in the conflict, and highlight key challenges to civilian protection and harm mitigation in Mali. Eight civilians were killed, including six local administrators.

Despite warnings from the UN, Prime Minister Moussa Mara visited Kidal on May 17, intending to demonstrate the full return of state authority. The MNLA and HCUA viewed his visit, and particularly the forces sent to provide security, as a direct provocation. The armed groups attacked the governorate as local officials awaited the arrival of the Prime Minister. As a result, eight civilians were killed, many by gunshot. The Prime Minister escaped with the help of MINUSMA.

In response, the government reinforced its presence with newly trained contingents and launched an assault on Kidal on May 21. The FAMA used heavy artillery and reportedly fired indiscriminately into the city, seriously injuring at least one civilian who was evacuated to Bamako for hospitalization. However, their offensive was defeated by the MNLA/HCUA, resulting in dozens of FAMA soldiers captured, and at least 33 killed. As the offensive collapsed, many remaining Malian soldiers fled, with some seeking shelter at a MINUSMA base. The MNLA/HCUA took control of the FAMA camp and assets.

The armed groups’ willingness to target civilians, in addition to the army’s use of heavy weapons in a populated area, highlights the risk to civilians. The operational weakness and lack of capacity demonstrated by the Malian army, even after EU training, undermines its credibility as a potential security guarantor. MINUSMA has also been unable to fill the gap. Despite the UN’s effort to improve security by facilitating the deployment of Malian gendarmes and UN formed police units, the situation rapidly deteriorated. The difficulty of navigating the Mission’s mandate to support the re-establishment of State authority, while government forces simultaneously clash with armed groups in violation of the ceasefire is a familiar, but problematic paradox.

Civilians in conflict.org

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Summary executions and forced civilian disappearances declined significantly after mid-2013. The conflict shifted, with armed groups increasingly launching attacks on government and international forces. From July 2013 to May 2014 there were 12 reported summary executions by the military and armed groups. Malian army soldiers are implicated in five killings, including the execution of three Tuareg men, who had been placed under arrest in Djebock, Gao. AQIM was also implicated in killing or disappearing five Tuareg civilians in three separate incidents in Kidal, reflecting tensions between the MNLA and AQIM elements.

After the May crisis in Kidal (see inset), conflict dynamics shifted yet again, and the number of summary executions and disappearances continued to decline. According to Fatou, a 38 year-old Bellah from Goundam, during this period “village fairs were the preferred places for jihadists to execute individuals they believe are traitors who favor the French forces.” Despite an overall decline, one civilian in Timbuktu city noted: “armed groups continue to kidnap and execute people they accuse of being complicit with international forces.”

49 The violations in Menaka are documented in OHCHR (26 June 2013); the Kidal incident was reported by Human Rights Watch, “Mali: New Abuses by Tuareg Rebels, Soldiers,” June 7, 2013, www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/07/mali-new-abuses-tuareg-rebels-soldiers.
51 Author’s note: In addition, three foreigners were reported killed in the course of kidnapping by armed groups during this period.
54 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
55 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
Ongoing Protection Concerns

Many civilians interviewed across northern Mali expressed concern over the increased number of revenge attacks, as well as the systemic persecution of civilians alleged to be collaborating with any party involved in the conflict. Civilians requested increased presence and protection efforts by UN, French, and FAMA forces in contested areas to help prevent retaliatory attacks from armed groups.

CIVIC interviewed a representative of the MNLA in Timbuktu region, who acknowledged that armed groups have used intimidation against civilians, and noted that civilians are in a very difficult situation. This person, who asked to remain anonymous, said that anyone who engages with a warring party (including MINUSMA or the FAMA), whether by force or choice, is often left without protection and quickly becomes a target of opposing armed groups.

“It should be noted that civilians who collaborate with international forces in the fight against terrorists, such as AQIM, MUJAO, and other groups, do not enjoy any protection from French forces or MINUSMA. The Malian army and non-state armed groups (MNLA, MAA, HCUA) maintain a fear of armed confrontation, making both groups ineffective at securing the population. Similarly, MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane also fall short in protecting civilians who risk their safety to denounce terrorist groups that take advantage of the conflict.”

Civilians continue to be targeted by armed groups as collaborators with the government or international forces. In a particularly shocking incident outside of Timbuktu, a former MNLA spokesperson, Hamma Ag Sidi Ahmed, was kidnapped with four relatives and later beheaded, reportedly on suspicion of collaborating with French forces. The public display of his body was widely believed to be a warning to others, and was the second execution for alleged collaboration with French forces. Another warning happened in January 2015 when the mayor of Timbuktu’s vehicle was attacked by armed group members while traveling in the Gao region, which resulted in one civilian death and two injuries. Given rampant attacks and abuses by criminal and armed groups, current MINUSMA Formed Police Unit (FPU) levels (838 according to UN reports) are inadequate to protect civilians against security threats, banditry, and retaliatory attacks in a territory the size of Texas.

Reports of summary executions or disappearances carried out by FAMA members have steadily declined. FAMA forces were more confined to their bases after the May 2014 events, and patrols were increasingly conducted jointly with MINUSMA and/or French forces, which may account for the improved record. However, maltreatment of suspected armed group members by the FAMA remains a concern. The UN reported that FAMA tortured and maltreated a number of its 20 detainees in Mopti, who were being held on suspicion of armed group activity in November 2014.

56 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
Image by Thomas Martinez.
Women in Gao, Mali, examine poster explaining what they should do when they discover unexploded ordinance left behind by the war; April 28, 2013.
CATEGORIES OF CIVILIAN HARM: 2012–PRESENT

Executions, Enforced Disappearance, and Maltreatment

Rebel armed groups, extremist groups, government-allied militias, and Malian government forces have all been accused of carrying out extrajudicial killings, executions, and forced disappearances during all stages of the conflict since 2012. A Timbuktu shop owner describes views reflected by other interviewees: “The diverse sources of insecurity complicate the situation. The people of Timbuktu suffer from threats posed by the Malian forces, terrorist groups, and rebel groups, but also militias and armed gangs that block the roads. As for the FAMA, they have been accused of enforced disappearance. For example, during the retaking of the northern regions, FAMA arrested youth from the Wahhabi community of Ansongo—they have been missing ever since.”62 63

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62 Civic interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
63 Civic interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
Improvised Explosive Devices, Landmines, and Explosive Remnants of War

Improvised explosive devices (IED), landmines, and explosive remnants of war (ERW) have resulted in significant civilian harm since the conflict began in 2012. The United Nations Mine Action Service reported 128 cases of civilian victims, including 22 fatalities, from ERWs, IEDs, and landmines in Mali between February 2012 and November 2014.\(^\text{64}\) The majority of reported victims are children, who will face lifelong hardship as a result of their injuries. In the first three months of 2015, the UN recorded ten attacks with such devices against its personnel alone, resulting in one killed and 28 injured.\(^\text{65}\)

When asked his opinion about the use of IEDs in destabilizing Mali, a young Arab merchant in Menaka replied: “Civilians in Kidal city and surrounding areas are often victims of IEDs and rocket fire from armed groups. On several occasions, trucks carrying civilians have struck mines en route to Ansongo and Menaka.”\(^\text{66}\)

Similarly, a local business owner in Kidal region identified the area around Aguelhok and Tessalit as the least secure for civilians due to a lack of security forces. The business owner also attributed the insecurity to “the activities of groups related to AQIM,” namely, the use of IEDs and the “abduction of anyone suspected of working with Barkhane or MNLA.” He further explained that the insecurity is “due to problems between tribes in the area (Imghad, Idanana, Arabs)” as well as “the presence of pockets of Ansar Dine, MUJAO, [and] AQMI.” He noted that “civilians in the city, like those in surrounding areas, are often victims of IEDs and rocket fire from these groups.”\(^\text{67}\)

Survey, clearance, and education activities appear to be reducing the number of civilian victims of mines and IEDs, as there were almost fifty-percent fewer civilian casualties in 2014 than in 2012 or 2013.\(^\text{68}\) This also suggests a shift in tactic and capacity by the armed groups mostly responsible for the use of landmines and IEDs. Landmines were used substantially in 2012 as defensive measures by armed groups, notably by MUJWA around the city of Gao.\(^\text{69}\) However, armed groups, particularly extremists, are less able to control territory, and there is now greater use of IEDs targeting government and international forces. Increasingly sophisticated devices were used in more recent attacks in late 2014, leading to greater precision and impact.

While civilians do not appear to be the primary targets of IEDs, IEDs are inherently indiscriminant and often kill or maim civilians. Two humanitarian workers along with two civilians were killed by IEDs in separate attacks in May 2014, and civilian contractors working for MINUSMA have also been attacked.\(^\text{70}\) Even if not directly targeted, the toll on civilians remains substantial, with more than 23


\(^{66}\) CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.

\(^{67}\) CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.


\(^{70}\) Two staff of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) were killed in Timbuktu on May 29, 2014. See Norwegian Refugee Council, “Two NRC staff killed in Mali,” June 6, 2014, www.nrc.no/?did=9178270. Two civilians were killed by an IED near Aguelhok in May 2014. See United Nations, “Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2014/403. Three civilians were injured when their vehicle contracted by MINUSMA hit an IED in Gao region in November 2014. See
civilians in conflict in 2014.\textsuperscript{71} The recent discovery of an undetonated IED device in the center of Gao city suggests civilians are at much greater risk of harm when attacks can be carried out in populated areas.\textsuperscript{72}

While reduced humanitarian access due to insecure road transport is an indirect cost to civilians, its impacts are substantial. Distribution has been partially restricted to locations accessible by air, and the number and scale of operational humanitarian organizations has been affected by the risk of armed group activity, including use of mines and IEDs in particular. A medical worker in Gao city emphasized: “The main threat in Gao are terrorist attacks in the city, often through the use of mines on trails in the bush and attacks on roads, which very often result in injuries and death of civilians.”\textsuperscript{73}

### Asymmetric Attacks

Suicide bombings, small arms, and light weapons attacks have been largely targeted at international military forces and the FAMA. According to multiple sources, MINUSMA has been the target of over 80 attacks since its inception, with 11 suicide attacks reported in 2013—most of which were concentrated in Kidal and Gao, just after the military intervention.\textsuperscript{74} Civilian casualties were limited to two attacks. In September 2013, two civilians were killed in an attack on a Malian army garrison in Timbuktu.\textsuperscript{75} Five more civilians, including a small child and two peacekeepers, were killed one month later in Tessalit in a vehicle-born suicide attack on a MINUSMA checkpoint.\textsuperscript{76} Since the beginning of 2015, there have been at least 12 recorded civilian casualties as a result of suicide and armed attacks on military forces including MINUSMA.\textsuperscript{77}

Oumar, a Songhai merchant from Gao region, described the negative impact these attacks have on security forces: “In Gao, it is the FAMA and MINUSMA troops that are supposed to be responsible for the security of civilians. But the population has little confidence in FAMA since their departure in 2012.” He further noted, “many civilians believe that FAMA is ready to flee at any moment and leave them to their fate.”\textsuperscript{78}

By 2014, the context had shifted and suicide attacks declined, while mortar and rocket attacks increased. There were 35 such attacks in 2014, with several attacks on MINUSMA targets in Tessalit and Aguelhok.\textsuperscript{79} Rockets hit civilian areas in Gao on two occasions in April and May 2014, but caused no casualties.\textsuperscript{80} In 2014 there were two deadly attacks on MINUSMA in Kidal and Ber, for which AQIM claimed responsibility, killing six and wounding 13 peacekeepers.\textsuperscript{81}

Several civilians explained how negative local perceptions of the UN have supported an increase in attacks on peacekeepers in Kidal. Many civilians feel that MINUSMA does not adequately consider the grievances of northerners, and is biased in favor of national unity and the return of the state of Kidal to Bamako. Second, many civilians feel that MINUSMA is a passive force which does not adequately ensure their protection. One Kidal interviewee said: “MINUSMA in the Kidal region is limited to three cities, which include, Kidal, Tessalit and Aguelhok. They do not go out enough to

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\textsuperscript{72} MINUSMA press statement, January 12, 2015, http://t.co/vZ64qP7v8.

\textsuperscript{73} CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.

\textsuperscript{74} Calculated based on review of UNSG reports covering the period January to December 2014.


\textsuperscript{78} CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.

\textsuperscript{79} Calculated based on review of UNSG reports covering the period January to December 2014.


For more on the Kidal attack, see Michelle Nichols, “UN peacekeepers need to expand further in Mali’s north,” Reuters, June 13, 2014, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/13/uk-mali-un-idUKKBN0EO20W20140613.
meet, observe, and protect the civilian population in nomadic grazing areas, and are more confined when they need to be mobile in order to execute their mission to protect civilians."\(^82\) He added: “MINUSMA does not understand the context well and has a lot of work to do to build trust among communities. Without better understanding the context, the actors, and engaging civil society, a sustainable peace will [not be] possible in this region. MINUSMA should reflect and find an appropriate mechanism for engaging civil society.”\(^83\)

As tensions and confrontations with extremist groups have increased in early 2015, several suicide attacks and assaults have taken place against the Malian army and UN peacekeepers in the North. The January 2015 suicide attack near Tabankort killed 12 people, and was allegedly carried out by pro-government GATIA fighters and possibly AQIM militants against rebel Tuareg and anti-government Arab positions.\(^84\) The January 2015 unclaimed suicide attack, and subsequent assault against a MINUSMA camp in Kidal, killed one Chadian peacekeeper.\(^85\) Farther south in Mopti and Segou, a series of small arms attacks on FAMA and government targets were carried out the same month, resulting in one civilian death.\(^86\) In March 2015 Al-Murabitoun, an Islamist group led by Algerian militant Mokhtar Belmokhtar, claimed responsibility for an attack on a popular Bamako nightclub that killed five civilians, including one French citizen.\(^87\) Also in March 2015, unknown individuals launched rocket attacks on a MINUSMA base in Kidal, killing three and wounding 12 others.\(^88\)

In the first three months of 2015, MINUSMA recorded 18 attacks in January (nine against MINUSMA, seven against civilians, one against FAMA and government personnel, one against MNLA); 14 in February (three against MINUSMA, one against Operation Barkhane, five against the FAMA, five against civilians); and 13 in March as of March 16 (four against MINUSMA, two against Operation Barkhane, two against the FAMA, five against civilians). The increase in hostilities by separatist and violent extremist armed groups has undermined UN and FAMA efforts to increase security and protection, and continues to derail broader peace efforts.\(^89\)

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence increased significantly during the initial occupation period in northern Mali, including forced marriage by members of the MNLA in Gao and Timbuktu.\(^90\) Songhai and Bellah women were particularly vulnerable. In November 2014, the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH) and its partners brought 80 cases of sexual violence from this period to the Malian courts for consideration.\(^91\) Investigations are ongoing.

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\(^82\) CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
\(^83\) CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
Interviewed civilians reported that both sexual violence and armed criminality decreased after the withdrawal of the MNLA. In Gao, some interviewees recounted efforts taken by MUJWA leadership to regulate its members’ behavior, while others reported making complaints to MUJWA leadership against its members with little or no result.92

Even after the return of limited State presence in Gao and Timbuktu, rates of sexual violence remained elevated.93 Although less prevalent than during the MNLA offensive, sexual violence remains a significant risk. According to the UN, from January to October 2013, 276 rapes, including 68 cases of children, were reported in the North.94 There are also reports of sexual violence committed by members of the FAMA after their return to the North.95 Civilians near military camps are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse. In Gao, for example, during a three-month period in 2014, there were 50 rapes reported to the gendarmerie and armed forces, 30 of which were allegedly perpetrated by FAMA members.96 According to Ahmedou, a young (Bellah) laborer from Timbuktu, “The Malian military, under the protection of their superiors, has committed rape and assault. It is rare that civilians dare denounce these acts.”97 Without accountability and investigations of alleged abuses, a culture of impunity and injustice will continue to prevail, and will undermine government efforts to stabilize the North.

UN peacekeepers have also been accused of sexual violence, including four Chadian peacekeepers in September 2013.98 At the UN’s urging, the Chadian government investigated the incident. According to a MINUSMA spokesperson commenting on the case in March 2014, “The available evidence is inconclusive.”99 The full results of the investigation were not publicly disclosed. Given the UN’s Zero Tolerance on sexual exploitation and abuse policy, and its Human Rights Due Diligence policy, CIVIC recommends that the UN—not the troop-contributing countries, closely examine these findings and consider establishing a mechanism for overseeing future investigations of abuse, including sexual violence perpetrated by UN peacekeepers.

Underreporting of sexual violence is likely attributed to social stigma, along with the absence of credible justice processes, and the presence of the implicated security force members near areas where sexual violence has taken place.

Armed Criminality and Kidnapping

Banditry is common on key transportation routes where organized criminal networks and independent mafia take advantage of the security vacuum and the absence of forces responsible for protecting civilians.100 In contested areas, where neither the FAMA nor separatist armed groups have consolidated control, rates of armed criminality are particularly high.

Banditry has been increasing in the North as more territory is contested between Coordination (CMA, mainly MNLA, HCUA, and MAA) and Platform (mainly FPR [Forces Patriotiques de Résistance] and CPA) aligned groups, creating a growing security vacuum. Banditry and carjacking carried out by unidentified groups of armed men, often on motorbikes, are the most prevalent. Incidents cause harm beyond the immediate victim by negatively impacting trade and economic activity, and reducing humanitarian access. Links between these small groups of armed attackers and organized armed groups remain unclear, but the proliferation of weapons as a result of the

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92 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
93 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
95 Malian military authorities were accused of impeding the criminal investigation of two rape cases brought against FAMA members in Gao. See United Nations, “Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2014/943.
96 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
97 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
100 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
Conflict is considered a contributing factor. The limited deployment and capacity of Malian police, gendarmerie, and the military creates an enabling environment for armed criminality and transnational smuggling in the region.

When asked about the impact of armed criminality and insecurity in Gao region, a male merchant living in Menaka said it had impacted him by causing: “Separation from my family and children, the complete cessation of all state-based social services, the proliferation of illegal arms, drug[s], tobacco and fuel trafficking, the complete absence of administrative or community authority, the deterioration of road and hydraulic infrastructure.” The merchant also spoke of how he “feared death” and how he was the victim of a robbery on the road between Ansongo and Menaka. When asked about ongoing operations, the man described them as being “mixed in their results” due to “pockets of resistance,” such as MUJWA in Menaka, and the ongoing “attacks, bombings, and kidnappings that are not pursued.”\(^{101}\)

According to MINUSMA staff interviewed in Timbuktu and Kidal, increased tension and competition between armed groups in the North has resulted in an increase in kidnapping. Often family members of armed groups or political movement leaders are targeted as a means of intimidation and retaliation. Reporting of such incidents is virtually non-existent and largely takes place in areas outside of government control. Although kidnapping has been a long-standing feature of conflict in the region, the current level of instability and tension is thought to have increased the number of incidents over the past months, with AQIM and Al-Murabitoun/MUJWA remaining the main perpetrators.

\(^{101}\) CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
French and Malian forces patrol the streets of Gao on April 29, 2013.
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY ACTORS

The number of different security actors and the overlap and the ambiguity in terms of their roles and responsibilities to the civilian population complicates efforts to mitigate civilian harm in northern Mali. Latent social tension between and among warring parties—linked to racism, regionalism, ethno-nationalism, and mutual distrust—further undermines national integration and the ongoing peace process. Security actors often embody these dynamics and act out their frustration on combatants and non-combatants from different backgrounds and regions. Bamako-based national armed forces, pro-government militias, and northern Tuareg and Arab-led armed groups are all guilty of causing harm against civilians. Civilians report that all groups have used excessive force against their adversaries, and have failed to abide by the international humanitarian law principles of distinction and proportionality. As a result, civilians continue to suffer, and national reconciliation becomes less likely.
The current political stalemate and weak provision of security in northern Mali create an enabling environment for armed confrontation between the various warring parties. Despite their differences, most civilians interviewed prioritize the return of effective and responsible State rule to the North. They also demand that MINUSMA play a more proactive role in safeguarding civilians’ rights and livelihoods during the transition and redeployment of State authorities.

**Malian Armed Forces (FAMA)**

“There must be an effective return of judicial services (prosecutors, judges, lawyers...) before we can say that the Malian armed forces act responsibly and equitably toward all civilian populations in the region.”

Malian security forces, despite their nominal return to some parts of northern Mali, have not gained the confidence of local populations. According to CIVIC interviews, incidents of civilian harm attributed to the FAMA are primarily targeted abuses against Tuareg and Arab communities, with Songhai and Bellah also affected. According to an elder Songhai man interviewed in Timbuktu, “Some civilians, mostly from Arab, Tuareg and Songhai communities, say they have been victims because the [Malian] army has been known to avoid due process and move quickly to excessive means such as using torture, trauma, and sometimes killing those in question.”

Although the FAMA are implicated in a number of serious abuses, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that abuses against civilians are systematic and widespread. Nevertheless, some allegations of abuse as well as profiling and harassment of certain ethnicities at FAMA checkpoints are alienating Tuareg, Arab, and Peuhl populations. The absence of accountability for many alleged abuses suggests that notional progress on broader security sector reform and rule of law issues does little to allay mistrust among certain populations. Youssouf in Timbuktu city noted, “The distrust between the civilian population and the security forces is at the heart of what undermines collaboration in the fight against terrorist groups in the region.”

As highlighted below, few civilians in northern Mali perceive the FAMA as a credible or effective security actor in the North. In dozens of interviews in towns across Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, civilians were skeptical of the army’s ability to repel armed groups and prevent terrorist attacks without the backing and presence of international forces. Civilians in the regions were particularly critical of aggressive actions by pro-government militias to re-take northern towns, and the army’s inability to combat the growing threat of banditry and transnational crime. Nevertheless many interviewees wished to see a continued or expanded FAMA presence, and, in some cases, asked that the FAMA receive more training and equipment. Bintou, from Gao region, said many in her community, “hope that the government assumes its role of protecting civilians by deploying the administration and justice services throughout the territory to ensure justice for all victims of the conflict. This requires endowing FAMA with adequate resources to fully accomplish their mission. Malians are attached to their national army and hope that they are at the forefront, even before the Chadians.”

Even some civilians who had suffered injury or loss as a result of FAMA action expressed relief at the presence of Malian forces as a buffer, however weak, against the return of rebel or extremist armed groups.

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102 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
103 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
104 There are relatively few FAMA checkpoints in the North, principally set up at the entry points to a few larger towns in Gao and Timbuktu regions. Interviewed civilians described mostly petty corruption when someone is unable to produce identity papers, a typical problem for many Malians. FAMA officers admitted to targeting those who might be ‘foreign’ to the area or who do not speak the local language, as well as on the basis of perceived tribal affiliation.
105 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
106 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
“In 2013, it was the Malian army, with occasional assistance from proxy militias, that committed the most harm against the civilian population within the communities of Timbuktu. The Malian army is accused of multiple summary executions, arbitrary arrests, public torture, looting of property, and taking ransom for detainees. For a long time, the Malian army assumed the role of security, administration, and at times, justice. Judicial procedures are currently nonexistent for cases of arrest, leaving the army to decide what happens to detainees without any form of judicial protections for the alleged perpetrators or the victims. To offset military rule, people want State authorities to resume control in the North.”

According to Issa, in Kidal, “The FAMA have not operated since May 2014, but their past operations are criticized by civilians who repeatedly suffered from FAMA’s abuses. There has been a slight improvement and fewer abuses than during previous rebellions since the arrival of international forces.”

Despite an agreed upon framework for integration of some combatants, and the decentralization of military leadership, some northern armed groups are worried about the safety of their communities, claiming that they will likely continue to be persecuted by the FAMA. As one representative of the MNLA in Timbuktu noted: “Feelings of revenge sometimes drive the Malian army against Tuareg and Arab civilians, who are often treated as members of the MNLA as well as terrorist groups. In particular, civilians in ‘white’ (Tuareg and Arab) communities face abuse, arbitrary disappearances and killings, as well as looting by the Malian army. There is a great deal of violence against particular ethnic groups (Arab and Tuareg) by the Malian army, which in turn fuels mistrust among civilians from those communities in Timbuktu.” Similar worries plague the Malian armed forces, which have been targeted by northern armed groups and treated as unwanted invaders and colonizers. Civilians across Gao and Timbuktu regions often get caught in the crossfire and are unfairly persecuted by both sides.

Our interviews found that the gendarmerie has a better reputation among civilians, although this too is eroding. In the days following the army’s return to Gao and Timbuktu in 2013, the arrival of the prevoté—the unit of the gendarmerie that carries out military police functions—helped to reduce abuses and excess by soldiers. According to CIVIC interviews, some civilians were able to make formal complaints about abuse to the prevoté and some soldiers were questioned and detained. Today, the presence of the prevoté at military checkpoints is believed to reduce harassment and abuse. Through first-hand interviews with detainees and their families, CIVIC learned that some detainees held by the army on suspicion of terrorism have reported that physical abuse typically stopped once they were transferred to the gendarmerie, and the vast majority of persons detained by the army are subsequently released by the gendarmerie based on a lack of evidence. However, the force is not immune to accusations of corruption and its limited capacity to address rising banditry is a continuous source of frustration. According to a teacher interviewed in Ansongo, “Today, justice is limited to the gendarmerie in Gao region. As a result, there are often abuses and inquiries that are never made. Despite receiving many complaints from outside the city, the gendarmerie refuse to travel and victims are left to take care of themselves.”
One interviewee, a medical worker in Gao city, said that security was improving but that “in the early days of the liberation, the population of Gao marched against the behavior of the police and gendarmerie who had begun to harass civilians under the pretext of defective identity cards or other incorrect official documents.”

**French Forces**

French military forces remain the most trusted security actors in the North, according to civilians interviewed for this report. Civilians appreciate the critical role French forces played in ending the occupation by extremist groups, in part because there was relatively limited fighting in populated areas. Today French forces have become more dispersed throughout the Sahel region, but remain present in northern Mali. Despite an overall favorable opinion, some civilians requested more transparency, including increased accountability for mistakes made and harm caused. A merchant interviewed by CIVIC in Timbuktu town noted:

“The French operations in Timbuktu successfully expelled terrorist groups outside the cities and pushed them [farther] north. While civilians still live in fear, we do not hear much about civilian victims affected by French operations because terrorists in the city were largely caught by surprise. However, in the early days of the intervention, French warplanes bombed Islamist positions in the city without fully recognizing civilian casualties.”

French authorities have not released a count of civilian casualties as a result of French military action. Nor has there been much independent reporting of civilian harm during Serval. In one early incident in January 2013, there were reports of between four and 11 civilian casualties in Konna, possibly as a result of French fire on the town. Despite family and eyewitness testimony to various media outlets, formal findings of an investigation were never made public.

Most operations took place in isolated areas away from population centers, resulting in reduced civilian harm. The use of up to 4,000 ground forces to carry out French operations also likely resulted in fewer civilian casualties than in other counterinsurgency contexts, where airpower is more readily relied upon. Familiarity with the terrain and cooperation with local forces, such as Tuareg fighters, may also account for both the low casualty record and perceived effectiveness. French forces allegedly cooperated with and supported local Tuareg fighters under the independent command of General Haji ag Gamou, and later used MNLA fighters as guides in remote operations. When French forces were prepared to take Kidal in early-2013, they did so in coordination with Chadian forces, taking the lead in entering the politically sensitive city, and without the Malian army.

The current context, however, presents challenges for continuing this approach. French forces significantly reduced their presence in Mali when they transitioned to a regional operation called Barkhane. Launched in August 2014, Barkhane—an operation led by the French military in partnership with Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso—builds off of Operation Serval by taking a regional approach to counter-terrorism and supporting armed forces of partner nations.
Extremist threats are now resurgent in former Al-Murabitoun and MUJWA-controlled areas in Gao and Mopti, and asymmetric attacks have been carried out by small groups of attackers who can easily blend back into the local population, making targeted operations difficult. The relationship between French and northern armed groups has become increasingly problematic. According to some interviewees in Kidal, the Malian government is wary of French acquiescence to rebel demands in the Algiers talks, which would be supported in exchange for security cooperation against extremist elements.\(^{120}\)

French forces have also established procedures for the capture and transfer of suspected extremist group members taken in the course of military operations. French military are required to immediately transfer captured suspects to the Malian authorities. Interviewed humanitarian officials felt confident that the International Committee for Red Cross (ICRC) is being systematically notified and given access to detainees, particularly after reports of Malian army abuses against detainees before transfer to the gendarmerie.\(^{121}\)

**MINUSMA Peacekeepers**

"The care and protection of victims of violence should be provided by the international forces (MINUSMA) until there is a complete return of the government and rule of law in the North."\(^{122}\)

The UN mission in Mali has a protection of civilians mandate—articulated by the recently approved mission-wide POC strategy—which outlines a framework for the implementation of MINUSMA’s objectives, including strengthening its staff and program capabilities in support of peacekeepers and civilians in the North. However, MINUSMA’s operational capacity remains limited because the POC strategy has not been operationalized. Key positions have not been filled, including a Risk Mitigation Advisor, and civilian harm mitigation measures remain a challenge for peacekeepers. To complicate matters, some civilians have concerns about the conduct and impartiality of some UN peacekeepers. As one Kidal resident said:

"Many people feel that MINUSMA peacekeepers are still the best placed to uphold respect for all civilians without distinction, but their problem often lies in the neglect and solidarity between African contingents of MINUSMA and the Malian army. African MINUSMA soldiers are accused of being subjective in their decision of whom to protect. Some people even speak of a kind of contempt or indifference that these soldiers have toward members of Arab and Tuareg communities, which they have accused of being close to armed groups."\(^{123}\)

In January 2015, MINUSMA peacekeepers killed three civilians when warning shots were fired by UN peacekeepers during protests against MINUSMA in Gao. This incident brought to a boil existing frustrations with the mission. Although limited in scope and number, civilian harm incidents attributed to UN peacekeepers in Mali are high profile and carry significant credibility costs. The mission is likely to remain a target of asymmetric attacks in Mali, and must balance the current force protection challenge with the mandate to protect civilians. Particular attention must be paid to civilian protection and harm mitigation in cases where MINUSMA may undertake robust actions, such as the Apache helicopter attack on a Coordination group vehicle after peacekeepers came under fire.\(^{124}\)

In this particular incident, the UN mission was working to end a standoff between the separatist MNLA fighters and pro-government militia fighters in the town of Tabankort, Kidal region. In accordance with their mandate and rules of engagement, Dutch UN attack helicopters were

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\(^{120}\) CIVIC interviews, Kidal region, March 2015.

\(^{121}\) CIVIC interview with a Humanitarian official, Gao region, October 2014.

\(^{122}\) CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, February 2015.

\(^{123}\) CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.

responding to weapons fire directed at peacekeepers. While the UN said warning shots were fired to deter a rebel vehicle, an MNLA spokesperson said five of its fighters were killed in the incident. As a result, MNLA spokesman Moussa Ag Acharatoumane said cooperation with UN peacekeepers would be suspended. After several days, a suicide attack in Tabankort, reportedly carried out by pro-government fighters, killed at least nine MNLA fighters. As a result, tensions swelled in Gao city, causing violent protests against the UN. To manage the crowd and quell the violence, UN peacekeepers used tear gas and fired warning shots on protestors, killing three civilians and injuring several others. The UN immediately launched an investigation, the results of which have yet to be released publicly. In February 2015, seven UN peacekeepers were injured in Tabankort, illustrating that the UN is actively targeted in this conflict.

Co-location of MINUSMA forces with government army and French military forces raises particular issues with respect to risk of civilian harm, and civilian perceptions of said harm. Joint MINUSMA-FAMA patrols and possible cooperation between some armed movements and MINUSMA presents the potential for further complicating relations between MINUSMA and the civilian population. Tensions between certain MINUSMA contingents and local populations have been reported, and there is believed to be frustration with the Mission’s lack of capacity to improve security in areas where its forces are present, along with limits on humanitarian access. As one Kidal resident commented, inter-group relations are further complicated by the fear of CMA (Coordination of Movements of the Azawad) groups that “some militias (e.g. GATIA and MAA) will begin to collaborate with MINUSMA and FAMA as the FAMA advance towards Kidal.”

When CIVIC asked which actors had the primary responsibility for civilian protection, a 42 year-old merchant from Menaka stated, “MINUSMA is supposed to have the responsibility [of protecting civilians], however, its behavior when faced with threats to civilians has not inspired confidence among civilians. MINUSMA does not guarantee any civilian protection. The location of the MINUSMA camp in Menaka leaves people to believe it is not there to provide security for the population, since it is located practically outside of the city. However, MINUSMA does protect humanitarian actors in the Menaka region.”

A community leader from Kidal also discussed the lack of capacity to improve security: “Residual banditry, characterized by armed robberies, is a real safety concern for peaceful populations. This often happens on the main transportation routes where both drivers and local residents become the victims when their goods are stolen. One of the security measures taken by armed groups in consultation with Barkhane and MINUSMA forces is the registration of all motorcycles in the region. This is to facilitate the identification of perpetrators or victims using the registration number of the motorcycle. These measures have not provided reliable results due to the lack of framework and implementation procedures, serious commitment, and efficient work methods.”

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125 Lewis and Farge, “Dutch UN attack.”
128 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
129 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
130 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
The recent attacks on peacekeepers in Kidal and Gao show that the UN mission has become an explicit target for armed groups operating in the North. This shift, combined with the weakened position of the government following its forced withdrawal from Kidal in mid-2014 and the reduction in French military forces, has created a degraded security environment in recent months. In this context, MINUSMA’s mandate is currently under review.

From interviews with UN, NGO, and government stakeholders, CIVIC learned that there is much discussion about how to operationalize the new strategic guidance in order to effectively implement a robust protection of civilians mandate. New and innovative policies, tools, and mechanisms will likely be needed to address the unique challenges MINUSMA faces. As MINUSMA peacekeepers know too well, MINUSMA is currently the most dangerous UN mission in the world for peacekeepers, and has become involved in a complex conflict where the UN is itself a direct target. While MINUSMA operates under a Chapter VII UN Security Council mandate, further reflection and review is needed to determine if additional capabilities are required to effectively protect civilians and maintain security.

The current context is ripe for contributing analysis of the changing security environment as it relates to civilian harm and protection issues in northern Mali. A protection risk assessment has reportedly been carried out by MINUSMA, however data on civilian harm incidents by all sides remain dispersed across agencies and organizations, according to mandate. This report, which maps harm risks from existing data and interviews with civilians, could contribute to improving understanding of the current civilian security environment.

The security situation, the roles and responsibilities of various armed actors, as well as MINUSMA, will evolve according to developments in the talks in Algiers, combined with events on the ground. The training of Malian armed forces and police is underway, and the redeployment of security forces and police to the North will be under discussion according to the terms of any agreement that may be reached with the armed movements. International actors, including MINUSMA and bilateral government partners, should not give unequivocal support for the redeployment of Malian government and military authorities (or proxy militias) to the North. Support should be based on terms outlined in peace agreements and informed by best practices for mitigating harm to local populations.

**Armed Non-State Actors**

Northern Mali has a broad range of armed non-state actors (ANSAs). Among the most violent and least concerned with protecting civilians are violent Islamist extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO/MUJWA), al-Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the alleged new Macina Liberation Force. Membership in these groups often changes, with some fighters changing loyalties.

Also active in northern Mali are a range of mostly secular secessionist groups. Most prominent among them is the CMA block, which consists of the MNLA, MAA, and HCUA, a group of Arab and Tuareg-led armed groups currently engaged in the Algiers peace process. While all these groups have engaged in abusive tactics against civilians and oppositional forces, they are not, unlike the violent extremist groups listed above, currently sanctioned by the United Nations or the US government as foreign terrorist organizations.

These groups are addressed here since they do (or have previously) controlled northern territory and, to varying degrees, represent desires and expectations of communities. However, during the 2012 occupation, these groups largely failed at providing basic services to citizens, such as education, health care, security, and justice. They were also responsible for creating a climate of fear, instability, and social disintegration.
When asked his opinion of armed groups in his region, a Songhai man in Ansongo remarked: “All actors say that they are there for the safety of civilians. But in practice, non-state armed groups have little respect for civilians in rural areas because they [the armed groups] are the ones responsible for all acts of banditry perpetrated against civilians. Armed non-state actors cause many victims through robberies, laying of mines, and attacks. Most of these acts end with civilians being harmed or killed.”

Among other non-state armed groups in northern Mali are pro and anti-government self-defense militias. The GATIA (Groupe Auto-Défense Touareg, Imghad et Alliés), have close ties to—and likely financial backing from—the Malian army. The Ganda Izo and Ganda Koy, largely comprised of Bellah and Songhai Malians, are so-called self-defense militias, and also have ties to the Malian army.

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131 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
132 Thiénot et Roger, “Nord du Mali.”
133 McGregor, “GATIA.”
Image by Thomas Martinez.
City elders at a meeting between CIVIC and Gao’s Civil Society; April 27, 2013.
NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF CIVILIANS

“Until state authority is fully restored and there is a shared commitment by all communities, mistrust between security authorities and Arab and Tuareg ethnic groups will persist. Mistrust is a key component of the conflict, of the increasingly frequent attacks, and of the existence of Islamist cells in nomadic areas. We [Songhai] are also victims of security forces because of the existence of young Songhai men within armed groups. Until peace is found and the fight against terrorism is carried out with the participation of military personnel from all communities in the region, there will always be abuse.”

Civilians have suffered much from the three-year conflict in northern Mali.

In many ways, civilians are caught between a rock and a hard place. While a few of those interviewed expressed support for northern armed groups, none were openly sympathetic to the cause of violent Islamist groups. Some interviewees feel that non-extremist armed groups represent real grievances, but many also perceive these groups as threats to peace. Some civilians feel armed groups are motivated by political and economic advancement, and are largely ineffective at providing security and protection to civilians. Almost all of the civilians CIVIC interviewed were in favor of a unified Mali, a full return of responsible government authority, including professional security forces in the North, and justice for past wrongdoings by all actors. Additionally, civilians want guarantees that their rights will be respected, their voices heard, and that they will not be abandoned if another rebellion erupts.

134 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
Given the continued victimization of some northern populations, many civilians wonder whether all parties to the conflict really want peace. Civilians expressed support for the initial success at pushing out armed groups and stabilizing the North, but are concerned that MINUSMA peacekeepers and the French-led Operation Barkhane are unprepared to face the array of political and security threats to their respective missions. Above all, civilians want an inclusive, protection-based approach to stabilizing the North and call on all parties to uphold a higher standard of accountability in their conduct of operations.

This report documents that civilians have been subjected to many forms of harm and neglect from all parties involved in this conflict since 2012. We asked civilians across the North what they wanted from the various actors in the conflict. What follows is an attempt to fuse some of their needs, wants, and expectations into a framework for improving protection policies and actions by all parties.

**Return of Government to the North**

Civilians want the Malian security forces and UN peacekeepers to step up their protection efforts in the North, including restoring responsible government authority, services, security, patrolling, investigations of abuses, and access to justice for victims.

Civilians denounce attempts by pro-government militias to forcibly re-take northern towns. They want to see a return of the government to the North that respects peace agreements and the will of local populations. Without this, underlying grievances and mistrust will likely fuel further violent clashes. Too many northerners have long suffered from discrimination, and a lack of access to education, health care and basic services, freedom of movement, and protection against armed groups and criminals. Amadou in Gao city noted: “The government must return quickly to the northern regions so that normal life can return.”

**Increase Measures to End Impunity**

Northern Malians also want justice for wrongdoings of the past.

“Generally, people want to be sure that violations, in all their forms and no matter who the perpetrators are, do not go unpunished, and that Malian judicial and security institutions will one day be capable of finding those responsible and adjudicating fairly. The people also want cases of grave crimes that surpass the capacity of the Malian justice system to be taken up by international institutions.”

Civilians want MINUSMA to also support their physical protection against Malian armed forces.

“To improve the safety of civilians in this region, MINUSMA must keep a vigilant eye on the actions of the FAMA during their missions outside urban areas. We want the international forces to pay attention to the treatment of detainees and the existence of judicial procedures that protect the accused. We want the Malian army to refrain from generalized stereotypes towards members of certain communities in the region.”

As the UN becomes increasingly involved in the conflict itself, civilians call for a mechanism to track the impact of MINUSMA operations on civilian populations. “There is no form of investigation or monitoring of incidents where civilians are victims by either MINUSMA or Serval, especially for incidents that occur in remote grazing areas such as abductions, displacement, and threats where victims are civilians in nomadic areas.”

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135 CIVIC interviews, Gao and Ansongo regions, November 2014.
136 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
137 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
138 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
Civilians need to know who to trust and how to file complaints without being intimidated and persecuted by armed groups and State security forces. “So far we can say that civilian populations await the implementation of a serious procedure for taking up their complaints. At the hospital in Timbuktu, there are victims who suffered violence by the Malian army in the Niafunke circle, but no judicial structure is interested in pursuing their case to hold guilty soldiers accountable for their abuses.”

Increase Patrols and Communication in Rural Areas

When asked his ideas for improving protection, a community leader from Kidal city suggested increasing patrols, extending telecommunications networks to non-urban areas, and creating a mechanism for reporting security and protection incidents by telephone.

“In the cities of Kidal, Tessalit, and Aguelhock, the telephone network covers a mere 10km radius, however the most endangered populations are nomads who are far from the city and difficult to reach. MINUSMA patrols do not go that far and communicate very little with locals in isolated areas and encampments. People also do not have a culture of reporting and do not know who to report to even if they want to. Especially in the current context where civilians are victims of intimidation and threats from Ansar Dine, AQIM, militias, or movements in cases where they inform and cooperate with international forces, the lack of protection is not surprising given that people are suspicious and afraid of reporting. One of the solutions proposed by our community is to extend the telephone network, encourage a culture of communication, and make emergency numbers available.”

To increase protection in vulnerable rural areas, a young businessman in Tessalit suggested: “Consider a redeployment or extension of international force presence to certain areas where there are no forces, such as in the areas of Boureissa and Tinza, up to the vast Tamasna area. These are areas known to be frequented by Islamists and drug traffickers, and probably the staging point for organizations that conduct IED attacks and remote gunfire.”

Strengthen Proactive Protection

Proactive protection refers to the ability and commitment of peacekeeping and military forces to protect civilians under imminent threat, to prevent violence through negotiation, mediation, or the use of force, and to respond quickly to incidents of violence that may occur. As civilians underscored in their comments above, proactive protection requires increased capacities, mobility, agility, equipment, and technology, as well as the political will and a shared commitment by forces to protect civilians under threat regardless of the perpetrator’s affiliation.

Civilians want FAMA and MINUSMA forces to uphold international humanitarian law (IHL) and protection principles, and to proactively prevent violence against populations under imminent threat by armed actors, including through increased patrolling and the use of force.

Many civilians we spoke with welcome MINUSMA’s presence, but feel that peacekeepers do not do enough to protect communities. “MINUSMA peacekeepers are usually on the defensive when they should go out and look for potential criminals where they hide to prevent them from harming others. This passive behavior makes civilians wonder if MINUSMA should be involved in their protection.”

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139 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
140 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
141 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
Many civilians had a weak understanding of MINUSMA’s mandate and rules of engagement, which causes frustration and lack of confidence. One prominent Kidal resident urged the UN to:

“Restore trust of the civilian population, secure grazing areas [pastures], communicate more with the population, and reassure locals through the presence of a protection and intervention force. MINUSMA must apply its mandate in a comprehensive manner and not just focus on its day-to-day mediation efforts, while forgetting about its mission to protect the civilian population and their well-being.”142

While partly beyond the scope of MINUSMA’s mandate, the following is helpful to understand what many civilians expect from the mission, namely a more robust role for UN Police.

“MINUSMA must be equipped with air capabilities to survey areas and identify jihadists likely to make attacks. We think MINUSMA should be an intervention force, not just a peacekeeping force. Like Barkhane who fights against terrorists, MINUSMA must identify and stop armed bandits to help communities. We know the bandits and we know their markings. If this is not done, the government will not be able to function normally in this uncertain situation. So, Barkhane must continue to fight against the terrorists and MINUSMA against the residual banditry in support of the Malian forces.”143

Civilians in the north repeatedly expressed concern for the protection of nomadic populations and vulnerable grazing areas. “The current operations of MINUSMA, Barkhane, and the CMA are very limited and concern only ad hoc operations aimed at their own security. A doctrine or directive for the protection of civilians that is adapted to the lifestyle of nomads, especially in the Kidal region, must be envisaged.”144

Increase Engagement with Local Actors

Civilians across the North call for specific measures to be put in place to build confidence among communities that feel abandoned by their government and military, and have been victimized as the military and pro-government militias re-deployed and launched heavy-handed operations in the North since 2013. Above all, civilians want existing local leadership structures to be included in efforts to increase security and protection.

One Kidal resident told CIVIC:

“In terms of confidence-building measures, we want more MINUSMA and government authorities to engage with civil society through listening, sharing, and establishing dialogue forums on the dangers and protective measures available. MINUSMA has confused its mission in the Kidal region as a simple mediation mandate and has had so little contact with civil society that it often confuses these actors as armed groups or movement sympathizers. There are influential civil society actors in Kidal who are well positioned to work for peace and security and only need support to amplify their voice. These are the actors that must recognize that MINUSMA cares about Kidal and work with them as partners. MINUSMA must get more involved in civilian protection efforts in general, particularly when mediation does not succeed, due to inter-tribal and inter-movement conflict. All of these elements cause persistent insecurity.”

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142 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
143 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
144 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
Abou, in Timbuktu region, also called for increased collaboration with local leaders, saying:

"With the persistence of the crisis, protection and support initiatives must directly involve local community leaders in order to improve the living conditions of the civilian population. To ensure effective support and easy access to target populations, an action plan must be established with significant involvement of local leaders of the communities concerned (sedentary and nomadic populations)." 145

Both MINUSMA and FAMA need to improve measures for protecting civilians that provide information in contested northern communities such as Kidal. Mohamed in Kidal region recommends:

"FAMA must identify human resources in the cities and representatives of the dominant tribes for each interest sector to liaise with the quasi-permanent camps. FAMA and MINUSMA must patrol, but avoid putting civilians in danger through direct and overt contact without security monitoring measures that can guarantee their safety. Neither MINUSMA nor FAMA can immediately protect civilians from threats in their current composition and deployment." 146

Strengthen Security Checkpoints

According to multiple interviews, there are relatively few FAMA checkpoints in the North, namely around entry points to larger towns in Gao and Timbuktu regions. Interviewed civilians described cases of petty corruption when someone is unable to produce identity papers—a problem for many Malians. FAMA officers admitted to targeting those who might be "foreign" to the area, those who do not speak the local language, or on the basis of perceived tribal affiliation. In addition to professionalizing the review of travel documents, one civilian in Ansongo, recommended increasing security checkpoints because of the resurgence of extremist groups like MUJWA in Gao region. “Compared to the Nigerien military along the border, the Malian military does not always do a good job because they have fewer checkpoints on travel routes. The screening of travelers is also not done rigorously. There are no body searches in Mali, unlike the Nigerien border, where all passengers are thoroughly searched by security agents.” 147

Communicate DDR Process for Armed Non-State Actors

According to a senior representative of the Ganda Izo movement interviewed by CIVIC in Gao region, fighters would like: “Immediate support for pro-government militias, insertion of certain members of armed groups into the national army (DDR), socio-economic reintegration for members of armed groups, [and] equality between red skin groups (Tamasheqs, Arabs) and black skin groups (Songhai, Pehulis, Bellaht)" 148 As highlighted above, one Ganda Izo representative said that without government support, their fighters "will be forced to either join MUJAO or the MNLA and fight against the Malian state."149 Demobilization of fighters, including pro-government militias, should be a top priority for stabilizing the North.

145 CIVIC interview, Timbuktu region, March 2015.
146 CIVIC interview, Kidal region, March 2015.
147 CIVIC interview, Gao region, March 2015.
148 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
149 CIVIC interview, Gao region, November 2014.
About the Report

This report presents a locally-informed narrative of the civilian impact of the ongoing conflict in northern Mali and puts forward policy recommendations to help address the desires and expectations that civilians have regarding security and protection issues. A heightened and more nuanced understanding of civilian perspectives will allow all concerned parties to improve protection measures while properly mitigating and responding to incidental harm that results from their operations in the North.

About Center for Civilians in Conflict

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) works to make warring parties more responsible to civilians before, during, and after armed conflict. We are advocates who believe no civilians should be ignored and advisors who provide practical solutions to prevent and respond to civilian harm.

The organization was founded as Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a courageous humanitarian killed by a suicide bomber in 2005 while advocating for Iraqi families.