War on Terror and Social Networks in Mali

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In 2002, the US opened a new front of the War on Terror in Saharan Africa, with the Malian government designated as a key strategic partner. Since then it has provided troops, materiel and funding to combat what the Bush administration regards as an abiding threat: a large, sparsely populated expanse sheltering terrorist groups linked to al-Qaida.

Aside from the weakness of evidence for such groups operating in the Sahara, the way the US has chosen to both carry out and rhetoricize its War on Ter-

How the US has chosen to carry out and rhetoricize its War on Terror with the Malian government has had important consequences for the political and economic stability of northern Mali. Pre-existing political and economic disparities have grown since 2002, spurring deeper social and cultural shifts and bringing a group of young, reformist Muslim intellectuals to leadership roles in new kinds of community-based organizations. The author explores these processes and their implications for social networks and corporate identity in Malian society north of the Niger Bend.

ror in Mali has heightened regional tensions and widened pre-existing political and economic disparities. Social networks, particularly those networks based on different types of Muslim corporate identity, are one important area of social and cultural change. Older Sufi-based networks are giving way to new kinds of Muslim social organizations often funded by outside patrons and to new ways for northern Malians to get access to a variety of resources they have been denied.

Structural adjustment and open revolt

The story begins with the structural adjustment programmes and increasing presence of multinational companies in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period the IMF, World Bank, and other foreign donors struck a series of agreements with various Malian governments that attempted to address spiralling past debt service (most notably in 1982, 1988, 1996, and 1998) and underwrote large-scale works projects meant to increase

An American officer training Malian soldiers, 2004

foreign direct investment, with the larger goal of development along neo-liberal free-market principles. The impacts of these programmes varied across the country with the degree of existing social inequities, the level of government corruption and the local structures of political and economic control. But by 1989, Mali spent 100.8% of its GNP on debt service. Forced privatization measures hurt many markets—notably cotton, but also fragile farming in the north. At the same time, the Traore government cut social and health programme budgets. While Malians across the country felt the impact of these measures, they disproportionately affected the crumbling northern economy. Subsequent anti-government protests led to military coup in 1991, and coincided with the outbreak of a protracted armed rebellion in the north.

During the 1990s, important trends began to emerge in Mali's Saharan periphery that highlighted the direct and indirect effects of these external inputs, as well as aid's politicization. Reliable total aid figures are surprisingly sparse, since they include not only the official IMF and Bank loans and grants but also the parallel, often undocumented, monies invested by large multinational companies, in the wake of privatization, to gain favourable access to new opportunities as well as private NGOs and foreign state country aid. What is clear, however, is that the benefits flowing from these investments remained in the hands of mostly southern elites who actively supported or were part of the Bambara-dominated Konaré government.

1990s: Failing economy and new alternatives

Over the nineties, those leaders and communities in northern Mali who refused to cooperate with national government programmes and policies lost out to those who did. These communities received proportionally fewer opportunities than others precisely when in many cases they needed this help the most, with the slow but inexorable movement of the desert southwards and several successive years of devastating drought. For a social fabric already stretched thin by two decades of environmental degradation, neo-liberal economic reforms that undermined rural economies, and several disease outbreaks, the timing could not have been worse.

Local leaders responded in various ways. One option was open revolt, the choice made by the Ifogas Tuareg and allies in the early nineties. Another, more common option was simply acquiescing to government requests, the path that many older Songhai, Bellah, and Fulani community leaders chose. But a

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new, third option emerged for community leaders in the nineties with the arrival of Islamic NGOs and missionary organizations, as a way of both differentiating themselves from those leaders who "sold out" and getting access to needed resources, connections, and clout. Saudi, Libyan, and Pakistani organizations brought with them economic opportunities as well as community prestige for those who choose to join them. These groups also frequently offered scholarships to young students to study at religious centres in the Middle East. At the same time, less missionary-focused Islamic relief organizations stepped into the gap left by both the international aid community and local governments, providing crucial services where others were not.

Interviews conducted with members of different generations across ethnic groups in northern Mali suggest that the older leaders felt increasingly threatened and pressed as the nineties drew to a close. Many of the younger scholars, some returning from the Middle East, had developed their own connections to Islamic aid monies and brought in projects to areas that Western aid and the Malian government shunned. The late nineties brought a kind of desert bloom in local Muslim grassroots self-help organizations, seeded and actively supported by various kinds of Middle East-based interest groups. Most of these organizations were more or less focused on community development, but some, like the Saudi and Pakistani da'wa organizations, were interested in much more—in spreading what they saw as a purer kind of Islam.

The Bambara-dominated Malian government tried to counter this by inviting Libyan organizations to build new mosques and infrastructure improvements while also establishing an official Islamic High Council in 2002 that purports to regulate the quality of preaching and oversees the religious affairs of the country. In many cases the government succeeded in co-opting the older generation of Islamic leaders from across Malian society, particularly Tijani and Qadiri Sufi leaders, pressured by new types of community competition.

In 1991, Mali officially hosted only a handful of large foreign Islamic NGOs with mostly modest local operations. In the late 1990s, new Malian reformist groups made their voices increasingly heard, including organizing large demonstrations in Bamako to force the government to shut down businesses during Ramadan and to protest Christian Evangelical missions.[1] By the year 2000, Mali had more than 110 officially-sanctioned Islamic NGOs and hundreds of smaller unregistered local organizations supported by foreign donors—overwhelmingly based in the far north of the country.

A new Saharan front on the war on terror

In early 2002, the Pentagon devised a new military programme meant to outsource intelligence gathering to African allies and to prevent terrorist organizations from using the Sahara as staging area, which it dubbed the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI). High-ranking officials and spokesmen developed a shared rhetoric about the operation, repeating key imagery in public statements that evokes an inherently lawless, violent, alien nature of the Sahara and those who live there. These statements were not only broadcast in American papers to the intended domestic constituents, but also quickly appeared on *Al-Jazeera*, the Internet, Malian papers, and radio broadcasts throughout the Sahel.

Many northerners formed their own opinions about PSI long before US personnel appeared in Mali. Most Tuareg and Hassani leaders bristled at the prospect of the Malian army being reinserted into their territories and interfering with the trans-Saharan trade they profit from and control. In 2003, rumours began to spread about what the Americans were already doing covertly, or would do with the help of Bambara military forces.

Other leaders used War on Terror to assert their claims to authority and ramped up their own rhetoric in response. By 2003, young Fulani, Bellah, and Songhai scholars from Timbuktu, Gao, and Mopti had transferred blame for local conditions in radio programmes and sermons from "Globalization" and the Bambara to the U.S. and its Malian sycophants, who now included older-generation local leaders of the Tijani and Qadiri Sufi *turuq*. Rumours about the War on Terror and the rhetoric it has inspired on all sides has given younger Muslim community leaders—particularly ones who have established outside funding sources—new, more receptive audiences in the north.

New local Islamic reformist organizations meanwhile have increasingly become sites where individuals can negotiate not only identity but also social status, with attendant effects on normative social form, the shape and dynamics of social networks, access to productive re-

sources and market opportunities and cultural practices. Small new madrasas in northern Mali provide food, clothing, and education. At the same time they serve frequently mixed communities of Hassaniyya, Tamasheq, Fulbe, and Songhai speakers, who learn classical Arabic and a range of religious topics together. Small sponsored farming cooperatives, such as those based near Kidal and Timbuktu, meanwhile provide modest economic opportunities and protection for their members.

And yet there is no evidence that discrete terrorist cells are operating in any coordinated way in the Malian Sahara and there are few, if any, ties between Malian reformist groups and any known terrorist group. Moreover, while a reformist movement is making progress broadly in Mali, there are competing groups and interests within it as well as mixed feelings of Malians towards foreigners telling them what is proper worship, let alone how to live their everyday lives.

Alternative authority, competing claims, rising stakes

The US War on Terror, the conduct of the American military and its proxies in the Sahel, and the rhetoric the war has inspired has made the possibility of violence more likely, rather than unlikely. Stories about inappropriate conduct of US personnel, whether fictions created to help northern leaders acquire authority and followers or not, have begun to spread across the desert zone. Further, the US has helped reinsert the Malian army in sensitive areas that were part of the 1996 cease-fire and are claimed by former rebellion participants.

The ensuing growth in military and other spending to extend Malian government military and intelligence capabilities and protect foreign commercial ventures has been a rhetorical gift to that younger generation of reformist scholars and leaders. More moderate Muslim leaders of all ages have lost influence as they have become more strongly identified with a national government at the beck and call of what some now imaginatively call a new Christian Crusade.

The US has also pressured the Malian government to shut down smuggling networks to starve potential terrorist networks. Control of informal capital flows and markets remains a key site of struggle and rumour, which, next to aid dollars, bolster northern Mali from the Niger Bend north. The question over who gets access to capital of differing types—including social prestige, *baraka*, authenticity, rightful claims to privilege as well as property, goods and currency—and the extent to which local leaders establish their own social positions as providers of this expansive sense of capital reflect the social power they wield.

What the US and its allies have failed to recognize is the multivariate nature of these struggles, which comprise in any case more than smuggled cigarettes or other goods thought to fund al-Qaida. Informal marketing activities are social mechanisms by which communities not only cope with serious environmental degradation and deep social change, but also the shifting formal sector markets over which they have little control and to which they have little access. Further, "formal" markets in Mali are themselves often corrupt and manipulated by those who control them. Destroying the informal sector in the north only, without providing viable alternatives, is having the opposite effect of what most American strategists would intend: growing political and economic instability.

As the Pan-Sahel Initiative now grows into the larger Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorist Initiative, the composition of social networks and political alliances in northern Mali are continuing to shift in response. Whether the US and Malian governments recognize the damage PSI has done so far and the degree to which they can include northerners more effectively in their own governance and economic development remains an open question.

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Note

1. Michael Rubin, "Deserted," *New Republic*, 11 Feb. 2002.

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