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## Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: responses to terrorist tactics and insurgent strategies

Boeke, S.

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# UNDERSTANDING AL QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB

Responses to terrorist tactics and insurgent  
strategies

Sergei Boeke



Universiteit  
Leiden

**UNDERSTANDING AL QAEDA IN THE  
ISLAMIC MAGHREB**

RESPONSES TO TERRORIST TACTICS  
AND INSURGENT STRATEGIES

**Sergei Boeke**

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**Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb:  
responses to terrorist tactics and insurgent strategies**

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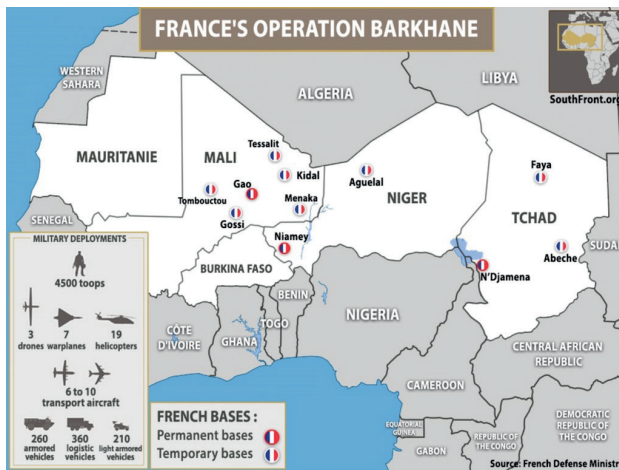
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## Map of Mali



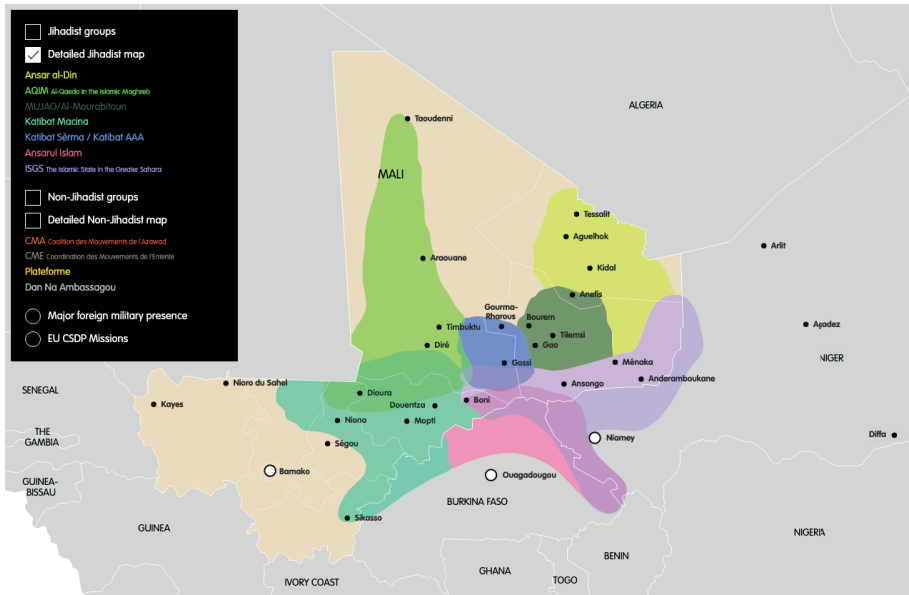
Source: United Nations Maps and Geospatial Services: (<https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/mali.pdf>)

## Operation Barkhane in 2019



French Operation Barkhane In Africa's Sahel Region (Map Update) South Front  
 Source: South Front, at: (<https://s2.cdnstatic.space/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Frances-Operation-Barkhane.jpg>)

## Jihadist Groups in Mali, May 2019



The European Union - Mapping armed groups in Mali and the Sahel (ecfr.eu).

Source: European Council on Foreign Relations, at ([https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/european\\_union](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/european_union))

## Glossary

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
AFD	Agence française de développement
AFISMA	African-Led International Support Mission to Mali
AIVD	Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service)
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula
AQC	Al Qaeda Central
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ASIFU	All Sources Information Fusion Unit
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
AU	African Union
CMA	Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements)
CMFPR	Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance (Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts)
CMFPR II	Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II (Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements II)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CPA	Coalition pour le peuple de l'Azawad (Coalition for the Azawad People)
CT	Counter-terrorism
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DGSE	La Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (French foreign intelligence service)
DRS	Le Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (Algerian intelligence service)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FAMA	Forces armées maliennes (Malian armed forces)
FIS	Front islamique du salut (Islamic Salvation Front)
FPA	Front populaire de l'Azawad (Popular Front of Azawad)
FSI	Failed/Fragile States Index
GAT	Groupes armés terroristes
GATIA	Groupe d'autodéfense des touareg Imghads et alliés (Imghad and Allied Touareg Self Defence Movement)
GIA	Groupe islamique armé (Armed Islamic Group)
GSPC	Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HCUA	Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (Higher Council for the Unity of Azawad)
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita

ICCT	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IS	Islamic State
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force (in Afghanistan)
ISWAP	Islamic State's West Africa Province
JMAC	Joint Mission Analysis Centre
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (Support Group for Islam and Muslims)
JPEL	Joint Prioritized Effects List
JSS	Journal of Strategic Studies
MAA	Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad (Arab Movement of Azawad)
MDP	Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie (Movement for the Defence of the Country)
MEI	Mouvement pour l'État islamique (Movement for the Islamic State)
MIA	Mouvement islamique armé (Armed Islamic Movement)
MINUSMA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali)
MIVD	Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (Netherlands Military Intelligence and Security Service)
MNLA	Mouvement national de liberation de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
MPSA	Mouvement Populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad (Popular Movement for the Salute of Azawad)
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSINT	Open Source Intelligence
RECAMP	Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SCT	Studies in Conflict and Terrorism
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
SITE	The Search for International Terrorist Entities group (an OSINT company)
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TPV	Terrorism and Political Violence
TSCP	Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Background

Fifteen kilometers north of the Niger River lies Timbuktu, one of Mali's most well-known cities. The city became a permanent settlement in the twelfth Century, and is situated in the semi-arid tropical Savanna called the Sahel. A religious and cultural center, it has several great libraries that hold one of Africa's largest collection of books and manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> The books, written in different languages, cover topics ranging from astronomy to history, and even include works by 16<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic scholars advocating the expansion of women's rights.<sup>2</sup> As the centuries passed, the 'City of 333 Saints' was governed in succession by the Great Malian empire, Tuareg tribes, the Songhai empire, Moroccan invaders and then the French Ministry of the Colonies. In 1960 Mali (then called 'Le Soudan français') gained its independence from France, and in 1988 Timbuktu was placed on UNESCO's world heritage list. The ancient libraries and the university attracted thousands of religious scholars, and Western tourists discovered its majestic buildings and cultural heritage. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as the West was preoccupied with the 'War on Terror' and Afghanistan and Iraq, a small affiliate of Al Qaeda conducted attacks and kidnapped tourists far away, in Algeria, Niger and Mauritania. On 25 November 2011, the terrorist group struck Timbuktu. Three Western tourists – a Dutchman, a Swede and a South African – were abducted, and a German who resisted was shot and killed.<sup>3</sup> Several months later the city was overrun by Tuareg rebels and fighters affiliated with Al Qaeda. They occupied the city for more than six months, destroyed several historic Sufi shrines and burned some of the ancient Islamic manuscripts. Locals successfully hid most of the books and French troops liberated the city in early 2013.<sup>4</sup> The hostages were freed several years later. But tourists have not returned to Timbuktu. Nearly ten years later, the whole of northern Mali is still deemed unsafe for visitors.

The Malian crisis started early 2012. The previous year had been a bad one for Al Qaeda. Osama Bin Laden was killed during the May 2011 raid on his hideout in Abbottabad. His organization had struggled to remain relevant during the Arab Spring that swept

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<sup>1</sup> For a collection of essays on the importance of Timbuktu for the intellectual history of West Africa, see: Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (University of Cape Town, 2010), <https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/2421>.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Hammer, 'The Treasures of Timbuktu', *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-treasures-of-timbuktu-138566090/>.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Anderson, 'Former Hostage Held by Al Qaeda Describes 6-Year Ordeal in the Sahara', *The New York Times*, 24 September 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/world/africa/sweden-mali-qaeda-gustafsson.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Worral, "'Badass Librarians' Foil al Qaeda, Save Ancient Manuscripts', *National Geographic*, 12 June 2016, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/06/badass-librarians-joshua-hammer-timbuktu-manuscript-al-qaeda/>.

North Africa and the Middle East. Its woes were such that academics debated whether the terrorist organization would survive.<sup>5</sup> Its affiliate in the Sahel, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), numbered no more than a few hundred fighters at that time.<sup>6</sup> But together with two other Salafi-Jihadist armed groups, Ansar Dine and the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO), AQIM supported an uprising that separatist Tuaregs launched against the Malian government in January 2012.<sup>7</sup> In rapid tempo this alliance of convenience ejected the Malian army from the north. In the southern capital, Bamako, a military coup ended nearly twenty years of uninterrupted democratic governance, plunging the country into political turmoil. By the summer of 2012, AQIM and its two jihadist allies had hijacked the original Tuareg rebellion. They expelled them from the northern cities and came to control an area roughly the size of France. Thus a full two years before the Islamic State/Daesh proclaimed its Caliphate in the Middle East, AQIM ran its own Islamic state, providing public services and dispensing Islamic justice.<sup>8</sup> It set up training camps and IED factories, recruiting profusely from territory it controlled and attracting volunteers from far beyond Mali's borders. By the end of the year, the three Al Qaeda affiliated groups had expanded to thousands of fighters.<sup>9</sup> In January 2013 the groups launched a surprise attack into Southern Mali. The interim government in Bamako appealed to France for help, and French forces were immediately deployed against the terrorist groups.

A large French military intervention, called Operation Serval, put an end to the Salafi-Jihadist's rule in northern Mali. First the main northern cities were retaken, then the jihadist's mountainous redoubt in the Adrar des Ifoghas was cleared in close-quarter combat.<sup>10</sup> By the end of May 2013 most of AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine's fighters had fled or been killed, and the Malian government was again – nominally – in control of all its territory. A United Nations mission, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Byman, 'Al Qaeda's Terrible Spring: Why the Organization Might Not Survive', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 May 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-05-24/al-qaeda-s-terrible-spring>; Bruce Hoffman, 'The Arab Spring and Its Influence on Al-Qa'ida', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 5, no. 5 (May 2012), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-arab-spring-and-its-influence-on-al-qaida/>.

<sup>6</sup> Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali: Les nouvelles menaces contre la France* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 44.

<sup>7</sup> Adib Bencherif and Aurélie Campana, 'Alliances of Convenience: Assessing the Dynamics of the Malian Insurgency', *Mediterranean Politics*, 1 November 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629395.2016.1230942>.

<sup>8</sup> Laurent de Castelli, 'Mali: From Sanctuary to Islamic State', *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (4 May 2014): 62–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.928016>.

<sup>9</sup> Just for estimates on AQIM, see: Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed description of the military campaign, see: Jean-Christophe Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*. (Paris: TALLANDIER, 2014).

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Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was mandated by the Security Council and deployed. It was tasked to ensure stability, assist the government in reasserting its authority over its territory and to broker a peace between the Tuareg separatists and the government. These different objectives have proved difficult to combine; one requires assisting the sovereign government in reestablishing its authority; the other must treat it as one of several parties negotiating a peace accord.<sup>11</sup> Operation Serval was wound down and France set up a new counterterrorist operation, called Barkhane. In Mali Operation Barkhane operated in parallel to the MINUSMA mission, but also covered the other four countries of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Chad, Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso). This new interstate political-security framework, established in February 2014, focused on both economic development and security cooperation.<sup>12</sup> In the summer of 2013, Presidential elections were held in Mali, ensuring the return of democracy. Terrorist violence was notably absent.<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) overwhelmingly won the elections. Ready for a fresh start and with new legitimacy bestowed upon the government, the international community again channeled large amounts of donor money into the country.

By 2020 the optimism had all but evaporated. The UN envoy for West Africa and the Sahel described how a devastating surge in terrorist attacks in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso had caused an estimated 4000 deaths in 2019, compared to 770 in 2016 – a fivefold increase.<sup>14</sup> Civilians had been killed in spectacular terrorist attacks, targeted in low-key murders, or caught in the cross-fire. At the same time, the security forces of the G5 had also killed with impunity, hiding scores of massacres and extrajudicial executions.<sup>15</sup> MINUSMA peacekeepers suffered the highest number of fatalities of any UN mission, five years in a row.<sup>16</sup> The peace process to reconcile the separatist Tuaregs stalled.<sup>17</sup> Worse

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<sup>11</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, 'The Dilemmas of International Intervention in Mali' (Chaire Raoul-Dandurand en études stratégiques et diplomatiques | Université du Québec à Montréal, October 2017), <https://dandurand.uqam.ca/publication/the-dilemmas-of-international-intervention-in-mali/>.

<sup>12</sup> Sergei Boeke and Grégory Chauzal, 'Le G5 Sahel : une avancée de la coopération régionale pour la paix et la sécurité ?', *Annuaire français des relations internationales XVIII* (3 July 2017): 569–79.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Boeke, 'Al Qaeda during the Elections in Mali: The Dog That Did Not Bark', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - the Hague*, 19 August 2013, <https://icct.nl/publication/al-qaeda-during-the-elections-in-mali-the-dog-that-did-not-bark/>.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Burke, 'Sahel Faces Surge in Violence from Terror Attacks', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/22/sahel-faces-surge-in-violence-from-terror-attacks>.

<sup>15</sup> 'Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations' (Human Rights Watch, 8 September 2017), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations>.

<sup>16</sup> For (current) statistics on UN fatalities, see: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities>

<sup>17</sup> 'Report of the Independent Observer on the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process' (The Carter Center, January 2020), [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/mali-independent-observer-report-eng-jan-2020.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/mali-independent-observer-report-eng-jan-2020.pdf).

still, the conflict in the north was eclipsed by another front: the tri-border area became a new epicenter of violence. Various armed groups fed into and fueled interethnic conflict, with the Fulani (or Peul), a nomadic pastoralist people who live across several Sahelian countries, particularly affected. Some joined jihadist groups; many others were falsely accused of doing so and were killed in intercommunal violence.<sup>18</sup> A new Salafi-jihadist group appeared - the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) - and officially became a part of Islamic State/Daesh.<sup>19</sup> After a summer of public unrest and demonstrations, a military coup ousted the Malian government in August 2020. The transitional government lasted until May 2021, and was then dismissed by the same junta that instigated the earlier coup. In June 2021 French President Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane. The French military disposition in the Sahel would be halved, with several bases in Mali to close.<sup>20</sup> Despite some tactical successes, during the seven years of its military operations Mali's security situation progressively worsened.<sup>21</sup>

## Objective and research question

As the key terrorist group in Mali and the broader Sahel, understanding AQIM is of importance. The political violence that erupted in 2012 has caused huge suffering. Thousands of civilians been killed, many more wounded and insecurity has led to huge numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugee flows. In February 2020, the Central Sahel region sheltered over one million IDPs and refugees.<sup>22</sup> The international community, noting that the crisis in Mali poses a threat to international peace and stability, has offered substantial aid.<sup>23</sup> But how assistance should be provided to the region, in an effective and efficient manner, is a question which still eludes governments. International

<sup>18</sup> Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, 'En Afrique, Le Fantôme d'une « communauté Peule » Radicalisée', *The Conversation*, 4 September 2018, <http://theconversation.com/en-afrique-le-fantome-dune-communaute-peule-radicalisee-102276>.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, 'Analysis: Islamic State Claims al-Qaeda Started a War in West Africa', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 8 May 2020, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/analysis-islamic-state-claims-al-qaeda-started-a-war-in-west-africa.php>.

<sup>20</sup> Fatoumata Diallo, 'Macron mise sur Bazoum et fait du Niger le cœur du dispositif français au Sahel', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1201242/politique/macron-mise-sur-bazoum-et-fait-du-niger-le-coeur-du-dispositif-francais-au-sahel/>.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Toulemonde, '[Infographie] Niger, Mali, Burkina : la stratégie de Barkhane a-t-elle atteint ses limites?', *Jeune Afrique* (blog), 25 March 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1143167/politique/infographie-niger-mali-burkina-la-strategie-de-barkhane-a-t-elle-atteint-ses-limites/>.

<sup>22</sup> 'UNHCR Stepping up Response to Escalating Violence and Displacement in the Sahel Region', UNHCR, 4 February 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/2/5e39d14a4/unhcr-stepping-response-escalating-violence-displacement-sahel-region.html>.

<sup>23</sup> see: 'Resolution 2100 (2013)' (United Nations Security Council, 25 April 2013), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2100>.

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aid has not been provided in a coherent or coordinated fashion, with at least 17 different Sahel strategies guiding assistance to the region.<sup>24</sup> This incoherence is not only due to the diverging interests of donors, but also due to a lack of a shared understanding of the causes of the crisis and the best way to address these.<sup>25</sup> France has equally struggled in its military approach to combat terrorism. After first expanding Operation Barkhane with a mini-surge of 600 extra troops in 2020, Macron then terminated the mission a year later. Several scholars had long expressed concerns that an overly militarized approach did not adequately address the region's problems, and only risked further escalation.<sup>26</sup> Parallels to Iraq and Afghanistan were quickly drawn.

The starting point of this research is to investigate the role of AQIM in the 2012 Malian crisis. The 2012 crisis consisted, as several academics argue, of multiple overlapping crises.<sup>27</sup> These crises involved terrorism, ethnic divisions, problems of governance, and much more. Quality research has already focused on the origins of this crisis, and this is used as a stepping-stone to chart the development and spread of AQIM and other affiliated groups in Mali. This dissertation applies theories, concepts and insights from the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency literature to structure understanding of AQIM. This is not just relevant for Mali and its neighbours, but also has broader applications. Does the experience of 'liberating' an 'Islamic State' in Mali, as French troops did in 2013, hold any lessons for Syria and Iraq? How has Al Qaeda as a global movement and ideology adapted to the threats it has faced, both from Western counterterrorism efforts and competition from ISIS/Daesh? During the heyday of the Islamic State's Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, Al Qaeda was out of the news and appeared condemned to an inexorable decline. Developments since suggest a different outcome, with Al Qaeda managing to rebrand itself and to continue low-key growth.<sup>28</sup> How its Sahelian affiliate has fared within this broader development will be the subject of this research.

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<sup>24</sup> Aurélien Tobie, 'A Fresh Perspective on Security Concerns among Malian Civil Society', No 2017/2 (SIPRI, July 2017), [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sipriinsight\\_1707\\_2\\_mali\\_1.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sipriinsight_1707_2_mali_1.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Lori-Anne Thérault-Bénoni et al., 'Sahel Strategies: Why Coordination Is Imperative' (Institute for Security Studies, March 2015), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/PolBrief76Eng.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Marc-Antoine Perouse de Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue: La France au Sahel* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2020); Bruno Charbonneau, 'Faire La Paix Au Mali: Les Limites de l'acharnement Contre-Terroriste', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 53, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 447–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666017>.

<sup>27</sup> Alexis Arief and Kelly Johnson, 'Crisis in Mali' (Congressional Research Service, 16 August 2012), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/506c05282.pdf>; Grégory Chauzal and Thibault Van Damme, 'The Roots of Mali's Conflict; Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis', CRU Report (Clingendael, March 2015), [https://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the\\_roots\\_of\\_malis\\_conflict/](https://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/).

<sup>28</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, 'How Al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge', Hudson Institute, 1 March 2017, <http://www.hudson.org/research/12788-how-al-qaeda-survived-the-islamic-state-challenge>.

This dissertation combines five peer-reviewed articles, four published in leading international academic journals in the field of conflict and terrorism studies, and one by the International Centre of Counter-Terrorism in the Hague (ICCT). Three of these articles were written with co-authors; two as the sole author. The articles – reproduced integrally as chapters here – investigate different aspects of AQIM and its impact on Mali and the broader Sahel. While each focuses on a specific component of the phenomenon, they address the following central research question: *How has Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb evolved since the 2012 Malian crisis, and how have Mali and the international community reacted to the group's development (2012- 2021)?* This overarching question can be divided along several sub-questions.

- a. Which factors have contributed to the establishment of Al Qaeda in Mali/the Sahel?
- b. How has AQIM been organized, how does it relate to Al Qaeda central and other Salafi-Jihadist groups?
- c. What motivates and drives AQIM and its fighters?
- d. What effect have their operations and activities had on Mali and beyond?
- e. How have the governments of Mali and France, and the international community responded?
- f. What impact have these policies had on the Al Qaeda affiliated groups?

The central focus on AQIM has both a vertical and a horizontal component. From a vertical perspective, the study of political violence can be structured along various levels, ranging from the macro-level (systemic), to the meso-level (organizational) to the micro-level (the role of individuals and individual actions). This dissertation focuses predominantly on the macro and meso levels, although the role of individuals – especially in leadership positions – is incorporated. These field commanders – considered political entrepreneurs by Alexander Thurston – are primary actors on the meso-level.<sup>29</sup> The horizontal component of this research involves a multidisciplinary approach, which is described later in this chapter.

In its focus on AQIM, this dissertation strives to avoid common pitfalls that beset many studies on terrorist organizations. According to Marc Sageman, a CIA intelligence officer turned academic, the vast majority of studies on terrorism are still (in 2020) so biased as to be worthless.<sup>30</sup> Many researchers, often financed by or sympathetic to governments, predominantly reason from a (Western) counterterrorist perspective, unable or unwilling

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 11–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771160>.

<sup>30</sup> Mitja Sardoc, 'Making Sense of Political Violence: An Interview with Marc Sageman', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 3 (2 April 2020): 670–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1726581>.

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to discern the rationale and emotions that can spur individuals to fight for a cause. In addition, the focus on an object of research (a terrorist group in this case) can cloud the fact that terrorism, like war, is an interaction between two or more parties, with actions leading to reactions - like in a wrestling match.<sup>31</sup> As such, a simple focus on so called 'root causes' of political violence underrepresents the importance of (government) reactions contributing to an escalatory cycle. Once the threshold of deadly violence has been crossed, this induces its own irreversible and unpredictable dynamics. This dissertation, therefore, focuses also on the broader political context, to fathom the interrelationship between terrorist and counterterrorist actions in Mali and the wider Sahel, irrespective of the protagonist and his moral standing. Terrorism remains a product of – and a primary shaper of – politics, and as Darryl Li has remarked,

*“[w]ithout rendering legible the political nature of jihadi projects, its focus on doctrine becomes deterministic; its analysis of propaganda tends toward voyeurism; its study of tactics redounds to incoherent moralism; and its focus on individual motivations is atomistic.”*<sup>32</sup>

During the writing of this research, AQIM underwent continuous change – making it a challenge to keep up with the latest developments. From an organizational perspective, it has not ceased to mutate and fragment, while remaining loyal to Al Qaeda Central (AQC) in Pakistan. In 2012 there were only three main Al Qaeda affiliated groups in Mali - AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine – although AQIM did consist of several relatively autonomous and competing katiba's (fighting units) in Algeria and the Sahel.<sup>33</sup> At the end 2012 – just before the French intervention – an important commander, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, left AQIM with his fighting troop, calling his new unit the Al Mulathamun katiba (“those who sign in blood”). He did, however, stay loyal to AQC.<sup>34</sup> A year later this group would merge with MUJAO to form another group called Al Murabitun. In 2014, Katiba Macina was established in central Mali, led by the Salafist preacher Amadou Kouffa. One of his students would in turn create Ansaroul Islam, which operates in northern Burkina Faso. In March 2017, Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine, announced the establishment of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (or JNIM; the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims), joining Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina,

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<sup>31</sup> Sardoc.

<sup>32</sup> Darryl Li, 'A Jihadism Anti-Primer', *Middle East Report* 276, Fall 2015, <https://merip.org/2015/12/a-jihadism-anti-primer/>.

<sup>33</sup> Vidar B. Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (24 September 2020): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1822593>.

<sup>34</sup> Sergei Boeke, 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar: A Loose Cannon?', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, 3 December 2013, <https://icct.nl/publication/mokhtar-belmokhtar-a-loose-cannon/>.

AQIM's Sahara Branch, and al-Murabitun under one umbrella.<sup>35</sup> The leadership shura of this group swore allegiance to AQIM's overall leader (or emir) Abdelmalek Droukdel, al-Zawahiri of Al Qaeda Central and Hibatullah Akhundzada of the Afghan Taliban. This merger was probably instigated in response to the growth of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, which had emerged from a splinter from Al Murabitun in 2015.<sup>36</sup> The difficulty of understanding this kaleidoscope of jihadist groups is compounded by French targeting operations, with even Droukdel killed in June 2020.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the different articles of this dissertation describe the organization at the time of writing, with the final article providing a summary of the development within the timeframe of the whole research.

## Theories, definitions and conceptual frameworks

### Theoretical underpinnings

Theory provides the direction and structure for scientific research. At the same time, the use of theory entails inherent and significant limitations that need to be taken into consideration. This has been aptly described by Samuel Huntington in his book 'The Soldier and the State', and is worth quoting at length:

*"Understanding requires theory; theory requires abstraction; and abstraction requires the simplification and ordering of reality. No theory can explain all facts, and at times the reader ..... may feel that its concepts and distinctions are drawn too sharply and precisely and are too far removed from reality. Obviously, the real world is one of blends, irrationalities and incongruities: actual personalities, institutions and beliefs do not fit into neat logical categories. Yet neat logical categories are necessary if man is to think profitably about the real world in which he lives and to derive from it lessons for broader application and use. He is forced to generalize about phenomena which never quite operate according to the laws of human reason. One measure of a theory is the degree to which it encompasses and explains all the relevant facts. Another measure, and the more important one, is the degree to which it encompasses and explains it better than any other theory."*<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Abdulbasit Zenn and Jacob Zenn, 'Justifying War: The Salafi-Jihadi Appropriation of Sufi Jihad in the Sahel-Sahara', *Hudson Institute*, 1 March 2017, <http://www.hudson.org/research/13480-justifying-war-the-salafi-jihadi-appropriation-of-sufi-jihad-in-the-sahel-sahara>.

<sup>36</sup> Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 7 (July 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Roger, 'Aqmi confirme la mort de son fondateur Abdelmalek Droukdel', *Jeune Afrique*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1003611/politique/aqmi-confirme-la-mort-de-son-fondateur-abdelmalek-droukdel/>.

<sup>38</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1957), vii.

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This dissertation's approach of combining separate peer-reviewed articles to address the research question allows the use of different theoretical frameworks, each tailored to fit the specific sub-question. This contrasts with the classical approach in dissertation monographs where a primary theory is selected and applied to the empirical findings. Here, each article/chapter makes a case for using a particular theory or conceptual framework to address an element of the broader research question. This entails describing the field of available frameworks and the rationale for the chosen theory, and a description of its limitations. At the same time, the use of a particular theory advances thinking on its academic relevance, applicability and limitations. In the next section, two essential definitions/concepts for this dissertation are described, as they not only delineate academic debate but also shape policy discourse.

## Defining Terrorism

Terrorism is an old phenomenon that has nonetheless managed to elude a generally agreed definition. There is neither an internationally agreed United Nations definition nor a consensual academic one, with Schmid and Jongman arguing in 1988 that researchers have “spilled almost as much ink as the actors of terrorism have spilled blood” in their attempts to define the concept.<sup>39</sup> Terrorism remains an intensely political strategy or tactic and is dependent on the subjective opinion of the observer, illustrated by the anecdote that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter.<sup>40</sup> Terrorism is equally a value-laden term implying moral judgement on the subject individual or group. As such, the label has proved to be a powerful tool for state regimes, as described by Philip Herbst:

*“Terrorist became a mantra of our time, carrying a similar negative charge as communist once did. Like that word, it tends to divide the world simplistically into those who are assigned the stigma and those who believe themselves above it. Conveying criminality, illegitimacy, and even madness, the application of the term terrorist shuts the door to discussion about the stigmatized group or with them, while reinforcing the righteousness of the labellers, justifying their agendas and mobilising their responses.”*<sup>41</sup>

Despite the absence of a consensual academic definition on terrorism, most researchers agree that any definition should contain a common set of components. A minimalist approach,

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<sup>39</sup> Alex P. Schmid and Albert Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company., 1988), xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Boaz Ganor, 'Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist Another Man's Freedom Fighter?', *Police Practice and Research* 3, no. 4 (1 January 2002): 287–304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/156142602200032060>.

<sup>41</sup> Philip Herbst, *Talking Terrorism: A Dictionary of the Loaded Language of Political Violence* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 164.

used by a team of researchers led by Leonard Weinberg, analysed 73 definitions appearing in major academic journals in the field, and came up with the lowest common denominator: “*Terrorism is a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role*”.<sup>42</sup> There is a common understanding that political goals, the use or threat of violence and publicity are central to terrorism. Perhaps the quest for a definition, as Gilbert Ramsay argues, is irrelevant and obscures scholarly consensus on what terrorism is, since the term is effectively used in heterogeneous contexts.<sup>43</sup> Intimidation of the public, through the use of fear or terror, is the immediate aim while the ultimate objective is to pursue political change. The word terrorism stems from the Latin word *terere*, ‘to frighten’, but some scholars have questioned whether fear and intimidation is in fact the primary goal.<sup>44</sup> As such, objectives can be to mobilise constituencies, exact retribution, avenge fallen comrades or to kill perceived enemies. Kydd et al argue that terrorist violence is a way of signalling to audiences to show how far they are willing to go to achieve their goals.<sup>45</sup> While terrorism is generally associated with non-state actors, some states have also – either directly or by proxy - used terrorist tactics.<sup>46</sup>

The problems in defining terrorism are unfortunately matched by an equal difficulty in understanding why people turn to it and what motivates them. This question, albeit only one in the broader scope of terrorism studies, is encapsulated in the term – and study of – radicalization. Some authors, like Sageman, even contest the usability of term, arguing that from a dialectical paradigm, (terrorist) fighters can simply be soldiers who volunteer to defend their community (the out-group) against another one, which is often the state (the in-group). Their commitment to a certain community, which leads to mobilization in a group, can have affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions.<sup>47</sup> Peter Neumann argues that there is a difference between cognitive radicalization and behavioural radicalization, with no predestined or linear pathway from extremist ideology to extreme actions.<sup>48</sup> Many people that have radical ideas never act on them, while others

<sup>42</sup> Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, ‘The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (1 January 2004): 777–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768>.

<sup>43</sup> Gilbert Ramsay, ‘Why Terrorism Can, but Should Not Be Defined’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12 February 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17539153.2014.988452>.

<sup>44</sup> Ersun N. Kurtulus, ‘Terrorism and Fear: Do Terrorists Really Want to Scare?’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 22 May 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17539153.2017.1329080>.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, ‘The Strategies of Terrorism’, *International Security* 31, no. 1 (31 July 2006): 49–79.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Jackson, Eamon Murphy, and Scott Poynting, *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Sardoc, ‘Making Sense of Political Violence’.

<sup>48</sup> Peter R. Neumann, ‘The Trouble with Radicalization’, *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049>.

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who have been (auto-) labeled terrorists are not motivated by extremist or radical views.<sup>49</sup> In short, whether motivated by ideology or by identity, it is impossible to identify a set of characteristics that define ‘a terrorist’ and allow others to profile him/her. The process by which people turn to political violence remains context-dependent, and for each person that is ‘mobilized’ into an armed movement, many others reject this path.

Different frameworks have been used to structure the variables involved in the process of being inspired or recruited by violent extremist groups. These can be situational factors (country/ community) at the macro-level, social/cultural factors (identity groups) at the meso-level and individual factors at the micro-level.<sup>50</sup> The simplistic distinction of greed-grievance has been used to structure insights on motivations for armed conflict, although this narrow binary fails to capture the many reasons for political (and economical) violence.<sup>51</sup> Other studies distinguish between push and pull factors.<sup>52</sup> In studying why people turn to political violence, there is a strong conceptual focus, with empirical data – for example, interviews with former members of terrorist groups – proving challenging to collect. There is certainly an increase in the number of empirical studies on preventing and countering violent extremism, but the Sahel is still underrepresented in these.<sup>53</sup> A good example of an empirical study is an extensive UNDP report that researches drivers and incentives for recruitment. The authors interviewed 573 (former) members of African terrorist groups, and 145 individuals who had not been members (as a reference group). The research findings offer many valuable insights on the backgrounds of the recruits and why they joined terrorist groups, but unfortunately the sample did not interview any individuals from AQIM.<sup>54</sup>

Islamic terrorism also requires further definition. Al Qaeda’s religious ideology is rooted in Salafi-Jihadism. As one of the theological strands in the Sunni denomination of Islam, Salafists have a particular reverence for the pious predecessors (the *Salafiyya* in Arabic)

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<sup>49</sup> Max Abrahms, ‘What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy’, *International Security* 32, no. 4 (1 April 2008): 78–105, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2008.32.4.78>.

<sup>50</sup> Harriet Allan et al., ‘Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review’ (London: Royal United Services Institute, 16 October 2015), <https://www.dmeforpeace.org/peacexchange/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Drivers-of-VE-Hypotheses-and-Literature-Review.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Vinci, ‘Greed-Grievance Reconsidered: The Role of Power and Survival in the Motivation of Armed Groups’, *Civil Wars* 8, no. 1 (1 March 2006): 25–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240600886032>.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice’ (Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Rex W. Douglass and Candance Rondeaux, ‘Mining the Gaps: A Text Mining-Based Meta-Analysis of the Current State of Research on Violent Extremism’ (RESOLVE, 2017), 8, [https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2017-08/RSVEMiningGapsCVEAnalysis\\_DouglassRondeaux\\_20170208.pdf](https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2017-08/RSVEMiningGapsCVEAnalysis_DouglassRondeaux_20170208.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> ‘Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment’ (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

during ‘the Golden age’ of Islam - the age of the Prophet Mohammad and his four immediate successors. As described by a jihadist in an interview with Djallil Lounnas,

*“Salafism is a major concept that entails the return to the Tradition, by which we mean the Qur’an, the Sunna, the Sharia and the ‘Khilafat’ (the succession), all four being a matter of consensus among the Muslims. The Westerners have their constitutions and their ideologies, whether it is Communism or Liberalism. For us, it is Islam and Islam only.”*<sup>55</sup>

While both Salafism and the Saudi-Arabian centred Wahhabism are conservative and fundamentalist, they are not necessarily violent. When, however, the creed is combined with the term jihad, which is ‘to strive’ or ‘exert oneself’ in Arabic, the ideology can propagate violence. The word jihad as mentioned in the Quran has been interpreted in two ways; the first concerns one’s (peaceful) inner struggle against evil, and the second alludes to the more aggressive external fight against the enemies of Islam.<sup>56</sup> For the Salafi-jihadists the goal is to violently overthrow the apostate regimes in Muslim countries (the near enemy), and attack far enemy (the West).<sup>57</sup> Those that adhere to the other ‘Religions of the Book’, namely Christians and Jews, but also Shia Muslim and of course nonbelievers are considered adversaries. Islamic scholars generally agree that civilians should not be targeted in war, but Al Qaeda has argued that those living in Western democracies can be attacked. In addition, Islam prohibits suicide, but for suicide bombings Al Qaeda has attempted to construct theological arguments to justify what mainstream religion rejects.<sup>58</sup> In the end, the use of religion for political ends (an activity of all times) generally consists of emphasising particular elements of the organised faith in question, while suppressing others. As such, there are many examples of jihadists possessing an extremely lacking understanding of their professed faith, with key commanders and their combatants eschewing the most basic of Islamic principles.<sup>59</sup> This, nonetheless, neither detracts from the group’s instrumentalism of ideology, nor the combatants’ normative commitment to their set of beliefs.

<sup>55</sup> Djallil Lounnas, ‘The Shifts in the Jihadi-Salafi Paradigms: From the Peshawar and Jalalabad Paradigms to Those of Idleb and Raqqa’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (29 January 2019), 4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1544557>.

<sup>56</sup> Assaf Moghadam, ‘Mayhem, Myths, and Martyrdom: The Shi’a Conception of Jihad’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (1 January 2007): 125–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550601079656>.

<sup>57</sup> Joas Wagemakers, ‘Salafism’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 5 August 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.255>; Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, ‘A Genealogy of Radical Islam’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (16 February 2005): 75–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100590905057>.

<sup>59</sup> See numerous examples described by former FBI interrogator in: Ali H. Soufan and Daniel Freedman, *The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against Al-Qaeda*, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011

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There is an even more radical fringe of Islamism, centred around the concept of Takfir. Those that fight under the banner of the Islamic State adhere to this, and since the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel has been attracting fighters from AQIM, the concept deserves brief explanation here. According to this creed (and its followers; the takfiri) even Muslims who are deemed impious can be considered apostates (kufar), and forfeit their right to life and property.<sup>60</sup> This was preached by the Group Islamique Armé (GIA), the institutional ancestors of AQIM, during the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s. Their wanton cruelty and brutality, including frequent beheadings, were mirrored first by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (between 2004-06), and a decade later by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>61</sup> In each of these cases excesses of (filmed) torture and executions contributed to the alienation of the local population and the subsequent loss of support for the terrorist groups. Al Qaeda's leadership has consistently warned against this risk, with notably al-Zawahiri (when still Bin Laden's deputy) reminding al-Zarqawi that the Muslim populace would never find the scenes of slaughter (of hostages) palatable.<sup>62</sup> The fine line between terrorizing a target audience and repulsing one's own constituency is well encapsulated by different Al Qaeda documents, such as Abu Bakr Naji's 'Management of Savagery' and the later 'General Guidelines for the Work of Jihad'.<sup>63</sup> Discerning influence of Islamic ideology at a meso- and micro-level remains a complex undertaking, necessitating not only theological knowledge but also an understanding of the role of religion in society (as a collective phenomenon). For the Sahel, several studies have argued that religion plays only a minor role as a driver for recruitment, with most fighters joining armed groups not out of religious fervour, but rather to protect their communities.<sup>64</sup>

## Conceptualizing Insurgency

The distinction between terrorism and insurgency is an important one, especially for the Sahel. According to David Kilcullen, a former Australian soldier renowned for his works on

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<sup>60</sup> Eli Alshech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism: A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis', *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 4 (22 September 2014): 419–52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00214p04>.

<sup>61</sup> For details on the GIA, see for example: Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War: 1990-1998* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> 'Letter from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Released by the ODNI on 11 October 2005)', 9 July 2005, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Holbrook and Cerwyn Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–57.

<sup>64</sup> Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni and William Assanvo, 'Jeunes « djihadistes » Au Mali : Guidés Par La Foi Ou Par Les Circonstances ?' (ISS Institut d'études de sécurité, August 2016), <https://issafrica.org/fr/recherches/note-danalyse/jeunes-djihadistes-au-mali-guides-par-la-foi-ou-par-les-circonstances>.

counterinsurgency, terrorism and insurgency were often considered synonymous until the 1970s, with the former primarily considered as a component of local insurgencies.<sup>65</sup> The sixties had seen a large body of scholarship focus on insurgencies, with key thinkers such as David Galula, Robert Thompson and Mao Zedong analysing the so called ‘wars of national liberation’, in turn building on works by earlier scholars such as T.E. Lawrence. The appearance in the seventies of international groups such as the German Baader-Meinhof group, divorced from popular insurrectional movements, led to the large impetus for research into terrorism. The focus on insurgencies declined until the Afghanistan (2001-2021) and Iraq interventions (2003-2011) brought a renewal of interest, with Kilcullen arguing in 2006 that more research on insurgencies had been published in the previous four years than the preceding four decades.<sup>66</sup> In essence, both terrorism and insurgencies concern political violence, involve asymmetrical warfare and often use similar tactics to achieve their goals. Their strategies, however, differ fundamentally. The U.S. Counterinsurgency Manual defines an insurgency as:

*“an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict. Stated another way, an insurgency is an organised protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”<sup>67</sup>*

In the classic understanding of insurgency, therefore, the goal of the insurgent is to obtain control of a territory and its population. Terrorism, in contrast, does not aim to govern, but to provoke and intimidate. David Galula, a French officer with experience of the campaigns in Indochina and Algeria, argued that the first law of counterinsurgency asserts that support of the population is necessary for the counterinsurgent as well as the insurgent.<sup>68</sup> In what were often separatist or independence movements, insurgents tried to mobilise the masses, competing with the governing authority to gain the support of the ‘attentistes’, or ‘those in the middle’.<sup>69</sup> The continued relevance of classic theory and its conceptual understanding of insurgencies has, however, been questioned. For Kilcullen, the civil war in Iraq (2006-7)

<sup>65</sup> David J. Kilcullen, ‘Countering Global Insurgency’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (1 August 2005): 597–617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500300956>.

<sup>66</sup> David Kilcullen, ‘Counter-Insurgency Redux’, *Survival* 48, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 111–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330601062790>.

<sup>67</sup> *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>68</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 52, <http://ready4itall.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Counterinsurgency-Warfare-Theory-and-Practice.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> Richard K. Betts, ‘The Soft Underbelly of American Primacy: Tactical Advantages of Terror’, *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 1 (2002): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/798092>.

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provided an example of how an insurgency is no longer necessarily aimed at taking over a functioning body politic, but that it follows state failure, dismembering or scavenging a state's 'carcass' or contesting an 'ungoverned space'.<sup>70</sup> Other fundamental differences with classic theory were identified: the audience and actors are now global, not local; the fighting is often urban rather than rural; and the objective is no longer revolutionary change, but to keep the status quo or to repel an invader. Nonetheless, categorizing Al Qaeda and other groups remains difficult. David Kilcullen and others have argued that Al Qaeda should be considered as a global insurgency using terrorist tactics, since the jihad has the objective of re-instating the Caliphate in the Muslim world and replacing the apostate local regimes.<sup>71</sup>

Counterinsurgency, or COIN, has its own doctrine and dogmas. During the conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, 'winning the hearts and minds' played an important role in the public discourse on counterinsurgency. Its effectiveness, however, is both historically misrepresented and conceptually unfounded. Often associated with the British approach of a minimal use of violence, and juxtaposed with more repressive continental (especially French) approaches, the effectiveness of a 'hearts and minds' approach is not borne out by historical accounts.<sup>72</sup> The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), frequently hailed as an example of the successful British COIN approach, was conducted with high levels of force and did lead to abuses of human rights. The level of coercion in Northern Ireland was lower, but local 'hearts and minds' were certainly not won.<sup>73</sup> In short, many historical COIN operations were not as 'soft' as initially claimed, and the current context does not allow the application of some of the methods that have proven effective in the past. The appeal of 'winning hearts and minds' to modernist theory is logical, conveying legitimacy, democratisation and good governance. But that a governing authority's legitimacy is based on good governance – the efficient and effective provision of public services (and, of course a free and fair election to power) – is a premise not necessarily shared outside the West. Michael Fitzsimmons argues that in Iraq, for example, indicators point to legitimacy being conferred not according to how a territory is governed, but rather by whom, with group identity being the determinant factor.<sup>74</sup> For Mali too, it is clear that Western approaches to governance and legitimacy are not shared, and that the unique local context needs careful analysis.

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<sup>70</sup> Kilcullen, 'Counter-Insurgency Redux'.

<sup>71</sup> Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency'.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew Hughes, 'Introduction: British Ways of Counter-Insurgency', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, no. 4–5 (1 October 2012): 580–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2012.709771>.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Dixon, "'Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3 (1 June 2009): 353–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390902928172>.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, 'Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (1 June 2008): 337–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390802024692>.

## Academic disciplines and other fields of research

Much has been written on whether the study of terrorism constitutes a separate academic discipline or whether it should be considered a field of interdisciplinary engagement.<sup>75</sup> These debates are inherent to the sociology of scientific research, and similar questions were asked when Political Science separated from history and legal studies, or when International Relations was established as a distinct academic discipline in the 1920's.<sup>76</sup> The boundaries of disciplines are neither static nor sharply delineated, but several characteristics can indicate whether a subject is indeed a distinct academic discipline. According to Armin Krishnan, a discipline has: 1) a particular topic of research 2) a body of accumulated knowledge on this topic, that is not shared with another discipline 3) specific research methods 4) technical language or terminologies adjusted to the topic 5) developed specific research methods 6) some institutionalization at universities ensuring that knowledge is passed from one generation to the next.<sup>77</sup> It would appear that terrorism studies now meet these criteria, although there is some debate on the last point. Still, the study of terrorism remains a unique field of scholarship, benefiting from close relationships with governments (both as primary funders of research and important consumers of research findings) and with the media.<sup>78</sup> The potential implications of these relationships, as well as concerns regarding the rigorousness of some of the methodologies used, have been addressed in detail by Critical Terrorism Studies.<sup>79</sup>

Analyzing a complex – potentially wicked - problem such as terrorism requires a multi-faceted approach. This dissertation is therefore a multidisciplinary study, drawing on knowledge

<sup>75</sup> Mark Youngman, 'Building "Terrorism Studies" as an Interdisciplinary Space: Addressing Recurring Issues in the Study of Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (3 July 2020): 1091–1105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1520702>.

<sup>76</sup> Morton A. Kaplan, 'Is International Relations a Discipline?', *The Journal of Politics* 23, no. 3 (1961): 462–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2127101>.

<sup>77</sup> Armin Krishnan, 'What Are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations on the Disciplinarity vs. Interdisciplinarity Debate' (ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton, January 2009), 9, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229991542.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Lisa Stampnitzky, 'Disciplining an Unruly Field: Terrorism Experts and Theories of Scientific/Intellectual Production', *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 1 (1 March 2011): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-010-9187-4>.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Jackson, 'The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies', *European Political Science* 6, no. 3 (1 September 2007): 244–51, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210141>.

and insights from other disciplines in the social sciences.<sup>80</sup> Much of the conducted research is firmly nestled in the sub-disciplines of War and Security Studies, although there is also engagement with other disciplines. As the distinction between terrorism and insurgency is a key theme of this study, literature on several themes has been consulted and integrated in the different chapters. These themes fall under different sub-disciplines, each primarily associated with either terrorism or insurgency, and the state's commensurate policy response, as illustrated in figure 1. While this overview offers a broad impression of the topics covered, it is neither exhaustive nor definitive in its demarcation. To understand the broader context in Mali, including the causes of the Tuareg rebellion in the north and the growth of Fulani support for Salafi-Jihadist groups in the center, two particular themes or fields of research deserve particular attention. The first concerns questions of governance in Mali and the broader Sahel. The second involves an understanding of ethnic groups in the region, a topic that traditionally resides in the discipline of anthropology but has become an important component of research into political violence in many developing countries.

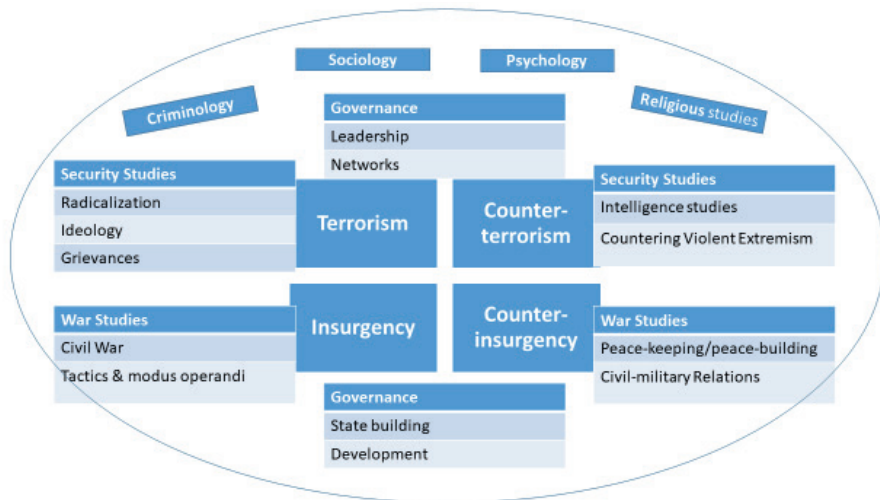


Figure 1: Disciplines, studies and topics involved in studying terrorism and insurgencies

<sup>80</sup> Multidisciplinarity draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within their boundaries. Interdisciplinarity analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and transcends their traditional boundaries. . . . The everyday words that can be used to describe the nature of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are additive, interactive, and holistic, respectively. See Bernard C. K. Choi and Anita W. P. Pak, 'Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, and Transdisciplinarity in Health Research, Services, Education and Policy: 2. Promotors, Barriers, and Strategies of Enhancement', *Clinical & Investigative Medicine* 30, no. 6 (1 December 2007): 359, <https://doi.org/10.25011/cim.v30i6.2950>.

Concerning governance, after nine eleven much literature developed on failed and failing states. These could lead to terrorist sanctuaries or safe-havens, labeled ‘black holes’ by Rem Korteweg.<sup>81</sup> The absence of government structures (and thus security forces) in what often constituted geographically difficult or inaccessible terrain, allowed terrorist groups freedom of movement and the opportunity to recruit, organize and plan terrorist attacks around the globe. From early 2000 to the end of decade, U.S. counterterrorism policy focused on addressing the perceived threat from these failed, failing or fragile states.<sup>82</sup> As the debate progressed, some recalled that the nine-eleven attacks were equally planned by cells in cities such as Hamburg, and argued that the term ‘ungoverned space’ was misleading. The remote territories or spaces in question had often been governed, but in traditional ways far removed from the Weberian concept of state governance.<sup>83</sup> These alternative forms of governance, effective during the past and in their own right, had come under pressure from climate change, population growth, societal developments or a host of other factors, and were then exploited by terrorist groups. In Mali, for instance, the state had not only relied on non-state actors for security provision (as a *primus inter pares*), but its democratic institutions actually weakened the position of the state vis-à-vis some non-governmental power-poles.<sup>84</sup>

Studying terrorism and counterterrorism in Mali and the broader Sahel also requires insights from sociology, cultural anthropology and geography. The complex and varied ethnic composition of Mali and its neighbours has been an important factor in the emergence and spread of political violence. The north – with its scarcely populated deserts – is characterized by a predominance of Tuareg, Arab and Berber peoples. In the center and south, around the greener Niger Delta and the Savana, there is an equally varied human landscape, including Fulani, Dogon and Bambara peoples. These ethnic groups often have complex tribal structures, divided along traditional hierarchies. The Fulani have traditionally been herders, the Bozo peoples fishermen, while the Dogon and Bambara have focused on agriculture.<sup>85</sup> Inter- and intra-ethnic competition for scarce resources is certainly not new, but in the past this was frequently regulated and managed by informal

<sup>81</sup> Rem Korteweg, ‘Black Holes: On Terrorist Sanctuaries and Governmental Weakness’, *Civil Wars* 10, no. 1 (1 March 2008): 60–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240701835482>.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Tricia Bacon, ‘Disaggregating and Defeating Terrorist Safe Havens’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 2 (1 February 2015): 85–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.977605>.

<sup>83</sup> Anne Clunan and Harold Trinkunas, eds., *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Security Studies, 2010).

<sup>84</sup> Martin van Vliet, ‘Beyond Institutional Blueprints: Hybrid Security Provision and Democratic Practice in Mali’ (Leiden University, 2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3160763.2021>

<sup>85</sup> ‘In Central Mali, Civilian Populations Are Caught Between Terrorism and Counterterrorism’ (FIDH: International Federation for Human Rights, November 2018), 20, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-populations-caught-between-terrorism-and-anti-terrorism>.

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conflict-resolution mechanisms. Competition has been exacerbated by population growth, climate change and modern agricultural practices. These developments have impacted, for example, the delicate balance between the grazing rights (or rights of passage) of pastoralists and the rights of agriculturists, with especially the ‘wandering’ Fulani risking being considered ‘strangers’ in their traditional roaming grounds.<sup>86</sup> In central Mali, the politics of land governance have been a factor for Fulani pastoralists to join Al Qaeda affiliated groups.<sup>87</sup> Insights from the sociological and anthropological fields of research must, therefore, be integrated in any research on terrorism in Mali.

## Methodology

### Foundational premises

Just as ‘where you stand depends on where you sit’ applies to bureaucracies, academic outcomes are determined by underlying positions. Any other dissertation addressing the exact same research question as this one will arrive at fundamentally different insights and conclusions, using different methods and sources. This is not just because the social sciences are not exact, but also because foundational research premises vary. The starting point for any research is grounded in ontology and epistemology. The first concerns the question what exists, and the second how we can know about this. The basic assumptions underpinning these approaches cannot be refuted empirically, but are directional in that they subsequently influence the methodology and methods that follow from the ontological and epistemological positions taken.<sup>88</sup> This study is based on a constructivist ontological position, which asserts that “*that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision.*”<sup>89</sup> This research was therefore written within the paradigm of constructivist grounded theory; with constructivism postulating that realities are social constructions of the mind (rather than one single objective reality), and “grounded” in empirical data.<sup>90</sup> For the epistemological

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<sup>86</sup> Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk, ‘Changing Population Mobility in West Africa: Fulbe Pastoralists in Central and South Mali’, *African Affairs* 102, no. 407 (1 April 2003): 285–307, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adg005>.

<sup>87</sup> Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, ‘Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457>.

<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Grix, ‘Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research’, *Politics* 22, no. 3 (1 September 2002): 175–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00173>.

<sup>89</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (OUP Oxford, 2012), 33.

<sup>90</sup> Jane Mills, Ann Bonner, and Karen Francis, ‘The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 29 November 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500103>.

position, this research reasons from interpretivism rather than positivism. The latter advocates using natural science methods to study social sciences; the former recognizes that research on humans by humans cannot be fully objective and requires a qualitative approach.<sup>91</sup> Once these foundational positions have been clarified, the methodology – the logic, possibilities and limitations of the research methods used – requires elucidation. This involves the techniques and procedures of collecting and analyzing data.<sup>92</sup>

## Primary sources

Early research on terrorism was marked by an overreliance on secondary sources, such as newspaper reporting. This narrow and frequently unreliable empirical base provided the foundation for extensive theorization, and the lack of primary sources was considered one of the main structural problems plaguing scientific research on terrorism.<sup>93</sup> Primary sources in this field are, amongst others, direct communications by terrorists such as public statements, propaganda, interviews and (internal) instructions or messaging. For operational-level primary sources on a terrorist group's composition, strategy and modus operandi, information is obviously difficult to come by. Terrorists are not media-shy when it comes to their goals and ideology, but they certainly do not want to compromise any information that could assist counterterrorism efforts. At the same time, security services and law enforcement agencies do possess valuable primary sources, such as communication intercepts, human source reporting and interrogation accounts. These, however, can generally not be shared with academics because they are classified and would reveal sensitive sources. This conundrum was pointedly described by Marc Sageman in 2014: *“we have a system of terrorism research in which intelligence analysts know everything but understand nothing, while academics understand everything but know nothing.”*<sup>94</sup>

With publicity seen as the oxygen of terrorism, Al Qaeda's external messaging is a valuable primary source. These communications can be videos, audiotapes, official communiques, posts on social media accounts and interviews. While perhaps not as prolific as the propaganda of IS, Al Qaeda has released many messages, in various formats. One example is the magazine 'Inspire', published by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This had the goal to stimulate, assist and instruct independent 'self starters' to conduct their

<sup>91</sup> Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> Grix, 'Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research'.

<sup>93</sup> Bart W. Schuurman and Quirine Eijkman, 'Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources', ICCT Background Note, June 2013, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schuurman-and-Eijkman-Moving-Terrorism-Research-Forward-June-2013.pdf>.

<sup>94</sup> Marc Sageman, 'The Stagnation in Terrorism Research', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (1 September 2014): 565–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.895649>.

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own terrorist attacks without any practical or financial support. Save two issues of the magazine - one directly after the launch of Operation Serval (issue 10, March 2013) and an extensive interview with Droukdel (Inspire, issue 17, Summer 2017), there has been little attention for the Sahel.<sup>95</sup> Some of Al Qaeda's important declarations have been provided in English, but much is in Arabic – leaving many researchers with a challenge. Governments have also grappled with this problem, and to meet demand, companies like SITE Institute (Search for International Terrorist Entities) provide translated terrorist content, together with analytical products. Founded by Rita Katz, SITE has pioneered Open Source intelligence on terrorism, albeit for a significant subscriber fee.<sup>96</sup> The website 'Jihadology' offers a large selection of collected jihadist statements from social-media. It is free of charge but is only accessible to registered users - as a result of government pressure.<sup>97</sup> Several influential Salafi-jihadists, such as Al Qaeda's emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are prolific writers. The Egyptian jihadist holds a PhD in Islamic studies – incidentally, like the Islamic State's late emir Al-Baghdadi - and has published many statements on Al Qaeda's standpoints and their theological underpinnings.<sup>98</sup> Interviews with journalists also offer a window into the world of Al Qaeda, although these involve practical challenges and ethical dilemmas. A famous example concerns Peter Bergen's interview with Osama Bin Laden in 1997, an event that certainly provided new insights on Al Qaeda – and greatly benefited his career and the sale of his books.<sup>99</sup> Droukdel was also extensively interviewed by the New York Times in 2008, and his successor al-Annabi (when still a deputy) by Wassim Nasr for France 24.<sup>100</sup> Finally, social media offers a deluge of primary source material, ideal both for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Some of the most valuable primary sources – in this dissertation and in other studies on Al Qaeda - involve internal communications, allowing a clearer understanding of the

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<sup>95</sup> Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, 'Reading Jihad: Mapping the Shifting Themes of Inspire Magazine', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (4 July 2018): 684–717, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1211527>.

<sup>96</sup> Benjamin Wallace-Wells, 'Private Jihad', *The New Yorker*, 21 May 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/05/29/private-jihad>.

<sup>97</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, 'The Case of Jihadology and the Securitization of Academia', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24 March 2021, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880191>.

<sup>98</sup> Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0*.

<sup>99</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader*, 1st Trade Edition edition (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>100</sup> 'An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdel', *The New York Times*, 1 July 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html>; Wassim Nasr, 'Exclusif : un chef jihadiste d'Aqmi répond aux questions de France 24', *France 24*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190530-abou-obeida-youssef-al-annabi-chef-jihadiste-aqmi-ei-terrorisme-france-petronin-algerie>.

organisation's modus operandi, organisational relationships and leadership intentions. This involves captured or found letters, where the Central or regional Leadership (in Pakistan or Algeria, respectively) communicated with local commanders (and vice versa), or commanders with each other. Al Qaeda operators communicated through letters out of operational necessity, aware that Western intelligence agencies monitored their electronic communications. As such, Bin Laden never used email, using couriers to deliver personal written messages. Many operational commanders understood that even switching on a phone could have detrimental effects on their health, possibly leading to the immediate release of a drone's payload.<sup>101</sup> Some of these letters were discovered by chance, such as by the journalist Rukmini Callimachi, who stumbled upon a cache of letters in Timbuktu after the city was liberated by French troops in 2013.<sup>102</sup> She later shifted her reporting to Syria and Iraq, where she again found a large collection of documents in an abandoned building. This discovery resulted in valuable insights on how the Islamic State ran its bureaucracy, and a Pulitzer for the author.<sup>103</sup> In 2020, however, criticism of her reporting surfaced in public, questioning the reliability of her sources and the ethics of publishing documents containing personal details.<sup>104</sup> Other Al Qaeda letters were found by American troops in the Middle East, or captured during the Abbottabad raid. The latter cache was described as a treasure trove by U.S. officials.<sup>105</sup> Initially only a selection of 17 letters (with their translation) was released by the U.S. Intelligence Community, later many others were declassified.

## Secondary sources

There is no lack of secondary sources on terrorism in the Sahel. Next to a plethora of books by academics and journalists, government and NGO reports are often a rich source of information. Mastery of the French language is essential; many valuable works on Mali and the broader Sahel are available in French only. France still has important knowledge

<sup>101</sup> Sergei Boeke and Quirine Eijkman, 'State Surveillance in Cyberspace', in *Terrorism Online: Politics, Law and Technology*, Routledge Studies in Conflict, Security and Technology (Routledge, 2015).

<sup>102</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto', Associated Press, 14 February 2013, <https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2014/international-reporting/callimachi/04callimachi2014.pdf>.

<sup>103</sup> Caitlin Roper, 'How One Journalist Uses Social Media to Get Inside the Minds of ISIS', *Wired*, 3 August 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/08/rukmini-callimachi-new-york-times-isis/>; Rukmini Callimachi, 'The ISIS Files: When Terrorists Run City Hall', *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/isis-documents-mosul-iraq.html>

<sup>104</sup> Ben Smith, 'An Arrest in Canada Casts a Shadow on a New York Times Star, and The Times', *The New York Times*, 11 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/business/media/new-york-times-rukmini-callimachi-caliphate.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Bergen, 'Secrets of the Bin Laden Treasure-Trove', CNN, 2 May 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/opinions/bergen-bin-laden-trove/index.html>.

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centers (and archives) on its former colony and French is the official language of Mali – although perhaps more than 80 % of population do not master the language. Most speak another of an estimated twenty endogenous languages, of which thirteen are recognized as ‘national languages’.<sup>106</sup> Concerning counterterrorism, journalists have published several books describing French political decision-making, with some overly critical of the government and others possibly not enough.<sup>107</sup> There are also many books and articles on the military aspects of Operation Serval, with several first-hand accounts. The general in command of Operation Serval, for example, published a memoir afterwards.<sup>108</sup> While not all focus on the Sahel, memoirs like those of an FBI investigator/interrogator, a CIA targeter, a recruited intelligence asset and a hostage who involuntarily spent 130 days getting acquainted with an Al Qaeda katiba, are valuable accounts. For analyzing counter-terrorism efforts, some can be considered primary sources, while equally offering reliable secondary sources on terrorism.<sup>109</sup> Other valuable descriptive reports on the latest developments in Mali are the quarterly updates that the UN Security Council receives from the Secretary General regarding the MINUSMA peace-keeping mission.<sup>110</sup> Several think tanks and research institutes have also dedicated research capacity to Mali. Reports by the International Crisis Group, published in both French and English, are notable for their quality and academic rigour.

In terrorism research, particular care is required to verify that reporting is reliable, objective and independent. Government interests can drive as well as stifle research into terrorism. Governments, after all, have their own interests to defend, and not all are transparent or honest all the time. Two particular examples are relevant to this dissertation, illustrating the possible effects on academic research. The first concerns a planned special issue on Mali for the (francophone) peer-reviewed journal ‘Afrique contemporaine’. This academic journal falls under the remit of the Agence française de développement (AFD) – the French Development Aid agency. More than half a dozen submissions had (successfully) undergone

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<sup>106</sup> Ingse Skattum, ‘Mali: In Defence of Cultural and Linguistic Pluralism’, in *Language and National Identity in Africa*, ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford University Press, 2008), 104.

<sup>107</sup> For an example of the former, see: Nicolas Beau, *Papa Hollande au Mali : Chronique d’un fiasco annoncé* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 2013); For an example of the latter, nonetheless very well detailed and researched, see: Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*.

<sup>108</sup> Bernard Barrera, *Opération Serval. Notes de guerre, Mali 2013* (Paris: SEUIL, 2015); Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*.

<sup>109</sup> Soufan and Freedman, *The Black Banners*; Nada Bakos and David Coburn, *The Targeter: My Life in the CIA, Hunting Terrorists and Challenging the White House* (New York: Little, Brown US, 2019); Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Global Jihad : How I Infiltrated Al Qaeda and Was Abandoned by Western Intelligence*, Reprint edition (Carlton North, Vic.: Scribe Pub., 2006); Robert Fowler, *A Season in Hell* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2011).

<sup>110</sup> See reporting instructions under article 34 of: ‘Resolution 2100 (2013)’.

the double blind peer-review process, but at the last minute the issue was cancelled. The management argued that it would put the AFD's work in Africa at risk.<sup>111</sup> The editor resigned and the articles were finally published in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*.<sup>112</sup> The high quality articles describe the deteriorating security situation in Mali and laid bare the limitations of current (government) policy; several have been cited in this dissertation. The second example illustrates how military hierarchies can be subject to a similar reflex when official policy is questioned. As part of the coalition against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, French Colonel Francois-Regis Legrier supported Kurdish forces in their ground operations. In an opinion piece for the military journal 'Revue Défense Nationale', he excoriated the coalition's tactics of avoiding infantry engagements and relying on massive artillery and air strikes to defeat ISIS. This wanton destruction risked sowing the seeds for a new insurgency, he argued, constituting a tactical victory but a strategic defeat.<sup>113</sup> The piece drew the ire of the military and political leadership – also for criticizing the American ally – and the journal withdrew the publication.<sup>114</sup> This dissertation, in contrast, has remained free of any undue influence on its research findings.

## Visits to Mali and other sources

In conflict studies (and other disciplines) fieldwork is highly rated, while risks and downsides are often downplayed. In the end, field research in conflict-riven regions is only possible when building 'own tribes' and joining social micro-systems, so that the researcher can collect data and remain safe at the same time. This implies that field researchers are neither impartial in outlook nor without impact on the ground. As such, their presence can effectively constitute a mini-intervention.<sup>115</sup> This research has nonetheless benefited from two visits to Bamako. These visits can hardly be classified as fieldwork, but both led to first-hand impressions of the situation 'on the ground' and valuable interviews with a multitude of local actors. The first visit to Bamako took place

<sup>111</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'Le Scientifique, Le Politique, Le Mali et La France: La Quadrature Du Cercle?', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 53, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 397–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1667249>.

<sup>112</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, 'Introduction Au Dossier "Mali: Les Défis de La Résolution Des Conflits"', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 53, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 403–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666018>.

<sup>113</sup> François-Régis Legrier, 'La Bataille d'Hajin : Victoire Tactique, Défaite Stratégique?', *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 817 (February 2019).

<sup>114</sup> Gil Barndollar, 'A French Officer Speaks the Truth about the War in Syria', *Defense One*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/03/french-officer-speaks-truth-about-war-syria/155304/>.

<sup>115</sup> Romain Malejacq and Dipali Mukhopadhyay, 'The "Tribal Politics" of Field Research: A Reflection on Power and Partiality in 21st-Century Warzones', *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (December 2016): 1011–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592716002899>.

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in March 2015, less than a week after the first terrorist attack in years took place in the capital - on a bar/café frequented by foreigners.<sup>116</sup> The visit consisted of attending a seminar organized by Grégory Chauzal, a researcher at Institute Clingendael. After the seminar, several interviews were conducted with local personalities, including a national politician, a Sufi imam and Tuareg notable. The findings of the seminar and the interviews were incorporated in different reports.<sup>117</sup> The second visit took place two years later, in January 2017. Increased security precautions at the airport, the hotel and in the city of Bamako were immediately visible. During this visit assistance was provided to a project run by Liesbeth van der Heide, who interviewed detainees suspected of terrorist offences, incarcerated at Bamako's central prison.<sup>118</sup> Six prisoners were interviewed, including one who proudly recounted his achievements as MUJAO's police chief in Gao during the jihadist occupation. Various MINUSMA compounds were also visited, and extensive briefings were received by the head of the All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), and separately, by the chief of the Joint Mission and Analysis Centre (JMAC) of MINUSMA.

Other sources concerned seminars and semi-structured interviews with selected experts and government officials. Many conferences and seminars were attended, with an opportunity to present at most. One high-level workshop was set up and organized for a NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Project, investigating how to transition from military interventions to a long-term counterterrorism policy.<sup>119</sup> The three case-studies concerned Afghanistan, Libya and Mali, and the Mali workshop was organized in France with assistance from the French army. It was attended by international scholars, policy-makers, French and American staff officers and several participants from Mali. Several months after the workshop, one valued Malian participant – Soumeylou Boubèye

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<sup>116</sup> 'Mali Bar Attack Leaves Five Dead', *BBC News*, 7 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31775679>.

<sup>117</sup> Grégory Chauzal, 'After the Malian Crisis: Security and Stabilization in the Sahel Region. Main Findings of an Expert Seminar', CRU Meeting Report (Clingendael, June 2015), <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/CRU%20MeetingReport%20Bamako.pdf>; Grégory Chauzal, 'A Snapshot of Mali Three Years after the 2012 Crisis', Clingendael, 8 June 2015, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/snapshot-mali-three-years-after-2012-crisis>.

<sup>118</sup> Results of this research project constitute a PhD dissertation and have been integrated in the following articles: Liesbeth van der Heide and Julie Coleman, 'The Last Frontier: Prisons and Violent Extremism in Mali' (ICCT - the Hague, 6 May 2020), <https://icct.nl/publication/the-last-frontier-prisons-and-violent-extremism-in-mali/>; Elena Dal Santo and Elizabeth Johanna van der Heide, 'Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts: Connecting Geopolitics to Individual Pathways to Terrorism in Mali', *African Security* 11, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 274–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2018.1505232>; Liesbeth van der Heide, 'A Group Affair: Understanding Terrorist Involvement in Mali' (PhD Universiteit Leiden, 11 May 2022).

<sup>119</sup> Sergei Boeke, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Mali (2013-2016)' (ICCT, April 2016).

Maïga – was appointed Secretary-General of the Presidency and later became the Prime-Minister of Mali. For the counterterrorist element of research into AQIM several semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials working in the security sector. The fact that the Netherlands contributed an intelligence unit to the UN mission (the All Source Information Fusion Unit) and that the author had a background in this sector provided a useful network for interviewees.<sup>120</sup> Special care, however, was always taken to ensure reliability through the corroboration of findings.

## Structure

The five peer-reviewed articles at the core of this dissertation constitute chapters with a sequential logic, covering the whole spectrum from the beginning to the potential end of Mali's crises, with the first and last articles incorporating policy relevant propositions. As displayed in figure 2, the chapters cover an initial scene-setter; AQIM as conceptual entity; why the 2012 crisis was not foreseen; an analysis of the effectiveness of the first military response (Operation Serval); and a focus on group desistance from terrorism and the ways AQIM could end. Apart from the scene-setter, each article utilizes a different conceptual framework to analyze its research question. The final article constitutes the substantial conclusion of the dissertation, taking stock of the latest developments in Mali and analyzing potential policy options for contesting Al Qaeda in the Sahel.

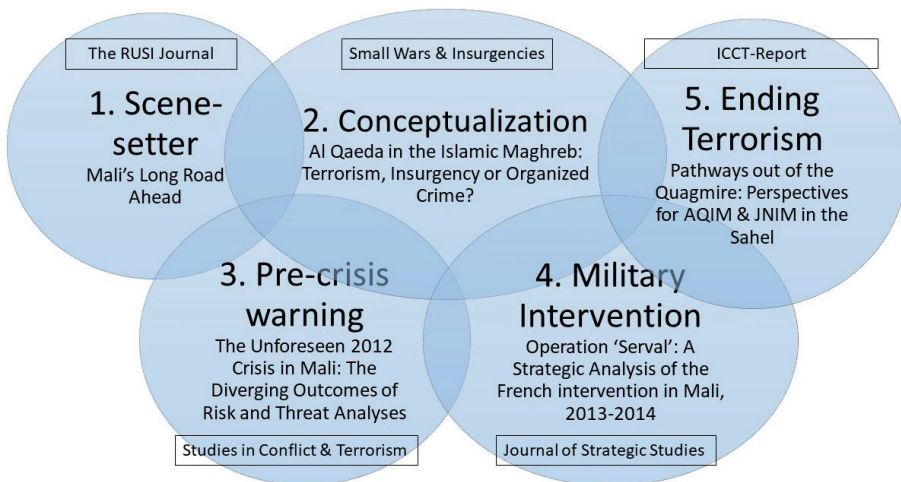


Figure 2: Overview focus articles/chapters

<sup>120</sup> Sergei Boeke, 'Nederlandse Oren En Ogen in Mali', *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 2014, [https://www.atlcom.nl/ap\\_archive/pdf/AP%202014%20nr.%201/Boeke.pdf](https://www.atlcom.nl/ap_archive/pdf/AP%202014%20nr.%201/Boeke.pdf).

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The first article provides the scene-setter for the dissertation, and was written together with Antonin Tisseron. The key questions addressed were: why did the 2012 crisis occur; what were its key components and how can Mali and the international community start to address the causes of insecurity? The article describes the role of different armed groups in the uprising and why the Malian state collapsed so rapidly. The analysis is concentrated along three axes. First, the 'jihadist galaxy' - a complex constellation of different Al Qaeda affiliated groups - is explored in depth. AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine are placed in the broader context of armed groups, some espousing separatist goals and others created as self-defence militias (many supported, albeit tacitly by the government). Connections to the multitude of crime syndicates present are also investigated, with both elements within the government and terrorist groups having links to the thriving drugs trade. The second axis offers a background on the Tuareg separatist groups that led the initial uprising, hoping to establish an independent State of Azawad. It is important to dispel the narrative of an ungovernable north and a unified popular Tuareg desire for independence struck down by a suppressive Bamako. This north-south frame oversimplifies the Tuareg question and obscures other factors that also impact the security situation. The third axis of article covers governance within Mali, describing the historical roots of Bamako's centralized French institutional model and its limitations in addressing problems in Mali's diverse and heterogeneous society. In particular, widespread corruption and nepotism within Mali's elite have undermined the legitimacy of the political system. Several policies, such as empowering militias and other armed groups to weaken Tuareg separatists through a divide-and-rule strategy have been counterproductive and exacerbated insecurity in the country.

The second chapter, an article written for the journal *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, focuses on understanding the nature of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The key question posed is whether the group should be considered as conducting terrorism, an insurgency or organized crime. Establishing a conceptual distinction between these different categories is more than an academic debate, as the outcome can determine the policy response: a counterterrorism, COIN or law enforcement approach. Each of these three responses are centered around specific government agencies, and each have their own particular best practices and dogmas. The chapter covers the background of AQIM, going back to its roots in the Algerian civil war in the 1990s and provides a brief literature review of research into the group. This component, incidentally, has been expanded into a full literature review for *Oxford Bibliographies*.<sup>121</sup> Applying a conceptual

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<sup>121</sup> Oxford Bibliographies is a subscription based service that offers research guides based on annotated bibliographies per topic. The AQIM review offers an encyclopedia-style background with more than fifty annotated sources, categorized by subtheme and historical timeframe. Sergei Boeke, 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', *Oxford Bibliographies*, 28 August 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199743292-0267>.

framework developed by Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, the article proceeds to distinguish between terrorist strategies and tactics, and investigates whether AQIM utilizes a strategy of terrorism or insurgency.<sup>122</sup> The used strategy has implications on three levels. First, each strategy aims at different political objectives. Second, the organizational structures differ also, with terrorist strategies necessitating small and secretive groups while insurgent strategies require larger shadow structures to govern territory. Third, the relationship with the population differs fundamentally. The chapter adds one extra element to the terrorist/insurgency dichotomy, covering the role of criminal activities such as the drugs trade or cigarette smuggling. One of AQIM's well known commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, has been labeled Mr. Marlboro as a result of his smuggling activities, although some have questioned the veracity of his reputation.<sup>123</sup> The conceptual findings of this article are weaved through the other four chapters.

The third article has a strong ex-ante focus, investigating why the 2012 crisis came as such a surprise. It was written with Giliam de Valk and published in the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. The focus is not on the roots of Malian crisis but rather on international awareness of Mali's structural problems and concurrent instability. The research question is why and how the international community was surprised (and caught unprepared) by the crisis. This question is pertinent for two reasons. First, there was a remarkable contrast between the general perception of Mali as a stable 'posterboy for democracy' and the reality on the ground of brewing conflict in the north. Mali was seen as much more stable than all its neighbours, yet suffered a near total political-military collapse in 2012 (while neighbouring countries did not). How and why did this chasm between perception and reality develop? Second, it remains important to scrutinize the analyses of academia and governments regarding the stability of Mali in order to improve future early warning. After all, the most effective and least cost-intensive interventions - whether local or international - occur before an incident has grown into a full blown national crisis. The article provides a broad literature review on Mali pre-2012, focusing not only on the security aspect, but also other on broader societal issues. The conceptual framework is offered by two different prisms - a risk and a threat approach - that can be used to analyze the stability of the country and its susceptibility to political violence. The chapter finally focuses on friction - where reality collides with theory - investigating to what extent the French and Dutch governments were aware of the fragile situation in the north on the eve of the rebellion.

<sup>122</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Mario Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism: Is There a Difference?', in *The Character of War in the 21st Century*, ed. Caroline Holmqvist-Jonsäter and Christopher Coker (London: Routledge, 2009), 27-41, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863312-9>.

<sup>123</sup> Boeke, 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar'; Lemine Ould M. Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris: La Martinière, 2014).

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The fourth article offers a strategic politico-military appraisal of Operation Serval. Written with Bart Schuurman for the *Journal of Strategic Studies* (JSS), it utilizes a Clausewitzian framework to assess whether its objectives were met. When AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine unexpectedly attacked southern Mali in January 2013, the government in Bamako requested immediate French military assistance. In what François Heisbourg called a ‘surprising little war’, French troops rapidly stopped the jihadist advance, and then proceeded to expel them from the north.<sup>124</sup> The military campaign – France’s biggest since the Algerian war of independence – was conducted with precision and speed, and relied on high-risk infantry engagements rather than high-tech stand-off weaponry.<sup>125</sup> As Clausewitz wrote:

*“War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.”*<sup>126</sup>

The fifth and final chapter focuses on how Al Qaeda in the Sahel could end. Whereas the third article (pre-crisis and warning) looks back to investigate what was observed and what was missed; this article looks forward to identify possible future pathways of decline. The article has been published as a Research report by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). While much literature on terrorism (and military interventions) focuses on the causes and start of the phenomenon, the literature on how terrorism ends is more limited in scope.<sup>127</sup> Taking stock of the latest developments concerning the Salafi-Jihadist galaxy in the Sahel, the article contributes to research that explores group desistance from terrorism and pathways of decline. Still, it is not a predictive study or forecast of terrorist futures as have been conducted elsewhere.<sup>128</sup> It is rather a structured investigation into how different internal and external factors could accelerate Al Qaeda’s

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<sup>124</sup> François Heisbourg, ‘A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali’, *Survival* 55, no. 2 (1 May 2013): 7–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2013.784458>.

<sup>125</sup> For a good analysis of the military elements of the campaign, see: Michael Shurkin, ‘France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army’, Product Page (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR770.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR770.html).

<sup>126</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993), 85–86.

<sup>127</sup> Serge Boeke, ‘Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy’ (ICCT, August 2014), <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Boeke-Transitioning-from-Short-Term-Military-Intervention-to-CT-Policy-August2014.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> Edwin Bakker, ‘Forecasting Terrorism: The Need for a More Systematic Approach’, *Journal of Strategic Security* 5, no. 4 (2012): 69–84.

demise in Mali and beyond. The article offers a brief literature review on how terrorist groups end, and then applies a conceptual framework developed by Audrey Cronin to structure an analysis on the state of AQIM.<sup>129</sup>

Although each article contains a stand-alone conclusion, a short summary of the combined work is provided at the end of this dissertation. The concluding chapter reflects briefly on the outcome of the research questions that were addressed, and how the study has contributed to theory. It also elaborates on the relevance of investigating terrorism and counterterrorism in the Sahel, and notes potential avenues for future research.

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<sup>129</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 1st Edition edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 9.



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# MALI'S LONG ROAD AHEAD

Sergei Boeke & Antonin Tisseron

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Operation *Serval*, the eighteen-month mission mounted by France to oust jihadists from northern Mali, came to an end in August 2014. However, despite the transition into a broader, region-wide operation to counter terrorism, both UN and French troops remain focused on securing Mali and targeting jihadists still operating within the country's borders. Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron warn against the temptation to treat the jihadists as a homogenous group with common goals and *modi operandi*, instead highlighting the multiple fractures within the myriad, smaller factions that must be addressed if stability is to be restored to Mali.

Nearly two years after the start of Operation *Serval* in January 2013, Mali remains a fragile country. The initial French-led military operation restored the country's territorial integrity and brought the north back under the control of the capital, Bamako, at least nominally. According to French government sources, the initial phase of Operation *Serval* killed approximately 700 jihadist fighters and captured several hundred,<sup>130</sup> of which half have already been released from Mali's prisons.<sup>131</sup> Some 200 tonnes of arms and ammunition were captured and destroyed, as were twenty improvised explosive device (IED) factories and several terrorist training camps.<sup>132</sup> The Ametai valley in the northeast of the country, which had been a sanctuary for Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) for at least the previous five years, was cleared in hand-to-hand combat. Reports indicated that many jihadists fled to a new sanctuary in the lawless regions of southern Libya.<sup>133</sup>

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2100 in April 2013, has deployed but is currently still around 2,000 troops short of its authorised strength of 12,640 uniformed personnel. French troops, initially participants of Operation *Serval*, are

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<sup>130</sup> This article uses the term 'jihadist' to describe those who espouse a violent Salafi agenda. See: Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (1 May 2006): 207–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004>.

<sup>131</sup> Presentation by an INTERPOL Representative during ICCT/CTED Expert Group Meeting, the Hague "Challenges Raised by the Use of Evidence Collected by the Military in Terrorism-Related Cases Prosecuted before Civilian Jurisdictions" (11 July 2014).

<sup>132</sup> Sarah Halifa-Legrand and Vincent Jauvert, 'MALI. Les Secrets d'une Guerre Éclair', *L'Obs*, 11 June 2013, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20130607.OBS2446/mali-les-secrets-d-une-guerre-eclair.html>; see also: Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*.

<sup>133</sup> Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher, 'Rapport d'Information Fait Au Nom de La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, de La Défense et Des Forces Armées (1) Par Le Groupe de Travail «Sahel», En Vue Du Débat et Du Vote Sur l'autorisation de Prolongation de l'intervention Des Forces Armées Au Mali (Article 35 de La Constitution)' (Paris: Le Sénat, 16 April 2013), <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-513/r12-513.html>; See also: Antonin Tisseron, 'What Kind of Terrorism in Sahel after Operation Serval? Nomadic Jihadism and Regional Expansion' (Institut Thomas More, October 2013), <http://institut-thomas-more.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NoteActu13-Eng-2013-10.pdf>.

deployed as a parallel escalation-force, mandated to execute counterterrorist operations and provide military assistance to MINUSMA when requested. On 1 August 2014, France terminated Operation *Serval* and launched Operation *Barkhane*, a new regional counterterrorist operation that encompasses Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.<sup>134</sup> In Mali, according to the spokesman of the French armed forces' chief of staff, operations targeting jihadists have become a 'permanent reality', with frequent strikes claiming the lives of jihadist commanders and their men.<sup>135</sup> As the conflict re-transitions from a conventional to an asymmetric one, tactics such as targeting jihadist leaders and limiting their freedom of movement should, however, not trump strategy.

Despite French operations and the deployment of UN peacekeeping troops, jihadists have returned to several regions in northern Mali. Lethal suicide attacks have occurred in northern towns such as Tessalit and Timbuktu, and IED and rocket attacks have become a regular occurrence in 2014. Mali's real problem, however, is not the various jihadist groups operating within its territory. Rather, these groups should be seen as a symptom of far deeper, underlying fractures that threaten peace and stability in Mali and the broader Sahel region. The French intervention on 11 January 2013, though directly provoked and legitimised by an attack on southern Mali by jihadist groups, was a consequence of the politics of former President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), and the unexpected collapse in 2012 of a state which had long been held up as a 'poster child for democracy' and the 'darling' of international donors.

In January 2012, a rebellion in the north by the Tuareg – a large ethnic group closely related to the Berbers – outgunned and outfought the Malian army. The Tuareg rebels were aided by AQIM and other jihadist groups. A perceived lack of government support then sparked a mutiny by young army officers in March, weeks before a general election was planned. It would turn into a *coup d'état* as ATT fled and the edifice of a corrupt government quickly crumbled. Staged with the aim of strengthening the army in the face of its plight on the battlefield, the coup paradoxically achieved the opposite as political chaos paralysed the state. The Tuareg conquest of the north accelerated and by the beginning of April two-thirds of the country was in rebel hands. However, in June the Tuareg were in turn upstaged by AQIM and other jihadist groups who, though previously

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<sup>134</sup> Alain Barluet, 'Au Sahel, l'opération «Barkhane» remplace «Serval», *Le Figaro.fr*, 13 July 2014, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/07/13/01003-20140713ARTFIG00097-au-sahel-l-operation-barkhane-remplace-serval.php>.

<sup>135</sup> Olivier Berger, 'Mali: La Chasse Aux Terroristes, "une Réalité Permanente de Serval', *La Voix Du Nord*, 20 March 2014, <http://defense.blogs.lavoixdunord.fr/archive/2014/03/20/mali-12825.html#more>.

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working in partnership, effectively hijacked the uprising, evicted secular Tuaregs and imposed their own strict control on the conquered territories. These jihadist groups would govern northern Mali until the French intervention in January 2013.

While the presence of jihadist groups in Mali continues to be the *raison d'être* of the international intervention, more is needed than either a purely counterterrorist or a purely developmental approach. Instead, both aspects need to be part of the international effort to restore stability in Mali. The current UN peacekeeping mission will offer a window of opportunity to formulate policy responses appropriate to the country's complex and interlinked problems. These cannot be resolved by quick fixes and require strong diplomatic and political action from the international community. A clear grasp of the historical, political and socioeconomic reality of the country is indispensable in order to nuance the dominant narrative of a weak state, an ungovernable north, and state complicity with criminal and terrorist groups. This article will focus on three issues that need to be addressed by the Malian government with help from the international community: the presence of jihadist groups, the position of the Tuareg in the north, and Malian government institutions and their performance.

## **The Jihadist Galaxy in Mali**

Despite the strong media and policy focus on the jihadists in Mali, there is debate as to whether the various armed groups active in the north of the country are insurgents, terrorists or members of criminal organisations. Insurgency and terrorism both involve politically motivated violence; the former seeks to overthrow the ruling party or system and establish its own authority in a geographical area, whilst the latter also seeks to undermine an established authority, but it relies on the generation of fear, by specifically attacking non-combatants.<sup>136</sup> Organised crime has no political agenda: its driving force is to maximise profit. Distinguishing the objectives of the various armed factions in Mali is important not only from an academic perspective, but also, and especially, from a policy one, as the characterisation should ultimately determine the response to the problem. A counter-insurgency (COIN) programme would put the focus on winning the support (the 'hearts and minds') of the local population; a counter-terrorist policy could entail anything from a military approach aimed at degrading terrorist networks to a civilian approach addressing the root causes of radicalisation; while a regional law-enforcement policy would focus on the rule of law and international police co-operation to combat organised crime.

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<sup>136</sup> Martha Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 1981): 379–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421717>.

Until the French-led intervention, three terrorist organisations were active in Mali and the broader Sahel region: AQIM, the '*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*' (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine.<sup>137</sup>

## AQIM

Of these, AQIM is both the largest and oldest, as well as being the source of several offshoots. AQIM itself is an international 'restart' of the fledgling Algerian 'Groupe salafiste pour la predication et le combat' (GSPC), which was in turn an offshoot of the ultra-violent Algerian terrorist group Groupe islamique armé (GIA).<sup>138</sup> The GSPC's overtures to Osama bin Laden were initially met with limited enthusiasm before the group formally pledged its allegiance to Al-Qa'ida on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, and later re-named itself AQIM. While the GSPC's agenda was focused on fighting the military dictatorship in Algeria, AQIM has a broader jihadist agenda, with aims to destabilise countries in the broader Sahel and to target Western interests, especially those of France. Representative of the despised West, France was also particularly hated for its historical role as a colonial power and its contemporary support for the autocratic regimes in Algeria and the wider region.<sup>139</sup> Despite several large attacks in Algeria in 2007 and an overhyped media picture in the wake of 9/11, at the end of the decade AQIM hardly numbered a few hundred men spread over the remotest regions in southern Algeria and northern Mali.<sup>140</sup> After a rapid expansion peaking in the autumn of 2012, the French intervention significantly reduced AQIM's size and displaced its safe haven.

AQIM's main activity has concerned kidnapping and hostage-taking, targeting Western tourists and expatriates. From 2008 onwards, these were abducted by the dozen from Mauritania, Mali, Algeria and Niger, and all ended up in AQIM's sanctuary in northern Mali. Hostage taking is an energy- and cost-intensive strategy that offers little in the form of spreading terror (apart from dissuading tourists from visiting), but much in terms of the generation of revenue (although the return on investment is inherently uncertain and

<sup>137</sup> See the UN Sanctions List (Resolution 1267). AQIM was listed on October 2001, when it was still known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) before being renamed AQIM in January 2007. MUJAO was listed on 5 December 2012 and Ansar Dine was listed on 20 March 2013 (after the launch of Operation *Serval* and once it had, in effect, ceased to exist).

<sup>138</sup> For the evolution of the Groupe Islamique armé (GIA) to the GSPC, see for instance: Luis Martínez, 'Le Cheminement Singulier de La Violence Islamiste En Algérie', *Critique Internationale* 3, no. 20 (July 2003): 165–77, <https://doi.org/10.3917/criti.020.0165>.

<sup>139</sup> Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, 'The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism', *Survival* 45, no. 1 (27 June 2007): 67–98.

<sup>140</sup> Roland Marchal, 'Mali: Visions of War', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (12 June 2013): Art. 17, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.bc>.

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can take years to materialise). According to Vicki Huddleston, former US ambassador to Mali, approximately \$90 million was paid in ransoms by Western governments to AQIM between 2003 and 2011 to secure the release of their nationals.<sup>141</sup> Another important, lucrative activity for AQIM has been the smuggling of drugs and other licit and illicit goods – an activity personified by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an influential AQIM commander who had earlier earned his alias ‘Mr Marlboro’ while smuggling cigarettes. Belmokhtar, however, would prove to be notoriously insubordinate to AQIM’s leadership and eventually split from the group acrimoniously in December 2012, taking his own *katiba* (fighting unit) with him. He subsequently organised the attack on the In Amenas gas complex in Algeria on 16 January 2013, killing thirty-seven Western hostages, while brazenly still claiming that he acted on behalf of Al-Qa’ida.<sup>142</sup>

The clearest example of AQIM’s jihadi-Salafist ideology is offered by a letter found by French troops in Timbuktu after the city’s liberation in early 2013. In an instruction by Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of AQIM, to his troops in the field, he sets out his Islamist project for the occupied north.<sup>143</sup> He compared the role of AQIM in Mali to that of a parent nursing a child and insisted on an approach more closely focused on ‘hearts and minds’. Droukdel chastised his commanders for moving too fast in the application of Sharia Law and implementing unpopular, harsh punishments such as stoning and amputations. His instructions fell on deaf ears, however, and by the time the French reconquered northern Mali, it had become clear that AQIM had suffered a popular defeat in the areas it had held, with large crowds cheering the liberating troops.<sup>144</sup>

## MUJAO

In 2011, a faction split off from AQIM, wanting a more African and less Algerian organisation, and founded MUJAO. Although it has a strong Mauritanian and Arab element, the organisation has successfully established itself in the Gao region of

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<sup>141</sup> Alexandria Sage and Sophie Louet, ‘France Plays down Report of Ransom Paid for Niger Hostages’, *Reuters*, 8 February 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-hostages-idUSBRE9170UQ20130208>.

<sup>142</sup> See a press release listing the charges filed in a Manhattan Federal Court against Mokhtar Belmokhtar for his role in terror attacks in Algeria and other crimes, <<http://www.justice.gov/usao/nys/pressreleases/July13/BelmokhtarChargesPR/Belmokhtar,%20Mokhtar%20Amended%20Complaint.pdf>>

<sup>143</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, ‘In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto’ (Associated Press, 14 February 2013), <https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2014/international-reporting/callimachi/04callimachi2014.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform’ (International Crisis Group, 11 April 2013), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/mali-security-dialogue-and-meaningful-reform>.

northeastern Mali, recruiting within the black Songhai and Peul communities. Here, MUJAO has set itself against the Tuareg, harnessing resentment amongst communities that have traditionally been oppressed by them.<sup>145</sup> According to local sources, MUJAO is also extensively implicated in the cocaine trade, and proceeds have contributed to attractive salaries for potential recruits.<sup>146</sup> In addition, of all the terror groups operating within Mali, MUJAO has been the most effective in dissolving into the civilian population and was responsible for Mali's first suicide attack on 8 February 2013, as well as the majority of the suicide attacks that have followed.<sup>147</sup> In May 2013, MUJAO and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's battalion co-operated in launching a simultaneous suicide attack in Niger, targeting one of the most important French strategic assets in the region: the uranium mine at Arlit. According to a communiqué released in August of that year, the two groups have now fused to create a new organisation, Al-Mourabitoun.<sup>148</sup>

### **Ansar Dine**

Ansar Dine shares the same radical Islamist agenda as AQIM. This group – not to be confused with the popular Sufi movement which has two million followers and shares the same name (Ansar Dine means 'defenders of the faith' in Arabic) – was founded by Iyad Ag Ghali, the former leader of the 1994 Tuareg rebellion. After failing to secure his election as leader of the (secular) Tuareg movement in 2011, he subsequently set up Ansar Dine – a new group which focused less on the independence of Azawad (the name given to the northern part of Mali) than on the transformation of its Sufi Islamic landscape to a more radical Wahabist one. Although Iyad Ag Ghali presented this recourse to radical Islam as the only way of transcending the ever-fractious tribal Tuareg politics, however, by destroying the shrines in Timbuktu and meting out harsh physical punishments (*huddud*), he neither gained popular support for his Islamist agenda nor furthered the Tuareg cause. His current whereabouts are unknown and little has been heard of Ansar Dine since the initial phase of Operation *Serval* targeted its fighters in January 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Baz Lecocq et al., 'One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: A Multivocal Analysis of the 2012 Political Crisis in the Divided Republic of Mali', *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no. 137 (1 September 2013): 343–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2013.799063>.

<sup>146</sup> Andrew Lebovich, 'Trying to Understand MUJWA', *Jadaliyya* - جَدَالِيَّيَا 24 August 2012, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26948>.

<sup>147</sup> Bill Roggio, 'Mali Jihadists Launch 5 Suicide Attacks in 2 Weeks', *Threat Matrix; a Blog of FDD's Long War Journal* (blog), 22 February 2013, [//www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/mali\\_jihadists\\_launch\\_5\\_suicid.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/mali_jihadists_launch_5_suicid.php).

<sup>148</sup> Boeke, 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar'.

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## Inter-Group Relations

These jihadist groups have proven fractious and divided. Yet relations between the different groups oscillate between conflict and co-operation, and there are strong personal bonds between many of the commanders, many of whom are related by marriage. Most run 'for-profit' activities that rely on the matrix of smuggling networks that have long traversed the region. Many jihadist commanders also have shared combat experience from the war in Algeria, from previous Tuareg rebellions and, most recently, as a result of Operation *Serval*. All are linked into the tribal fabric that allows for survival in the desolate and arid region. This does not mean that they enjoy local popular support and only MUJAO has managed to set up what can be described as a low-level insurgency in the loop around the River Niger.<sup>149</sup> What will be essential in terms of generating and sustaining future support will be perceptions of the government amongst the population, and whether it underperforms in the field of security and justice or fails to solve conflicts between and within communities. If so, groups such as MUJAO could once again be seen as an alternative by the locals.

Meanwhile, porous international borders and the regional agenda of the jihadist groups make them a threat not just to Mali but to the broader Sahel. While they had control of northern Mali in 2012, the jihadist groups attracted foreign fighters from all over the world, and ran a terrorist training camp that also welcomed, for example, fighters from the Nigerian militant Islamist organisation Boko Haram.<sup>150</sup> Operation *Serval* has certainly reduced the jihadist threat in Mali to a more manageable level, but at the same time it has pushed remnants of these groups into neighbouring countries, destabilising, for instance, an already fragile Niger. By replacing Operation *Serval* with the regionally focused *Barkhane*, counter-terrorist operations have adjusted to the broader geographical spread of the jihadist groups. The collapse of central authority in Libya, however, will significantly complicate international efforts in this regard, and will probably continue to offer the jihadists a safe haven in the near future.

## One War, Several Conflicts

The collapse of the Malian state in 2012 had many causes, but the spark in the powder keg was provided by NATO's intervention in Libya.<sup>151</sup> After the fall of Qadhafi in October

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<sup>149</sup> Andrew Lebovich, 'Of Mergers, MUJAO, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar', *Al-Wasat* (blog), 23 August 2013, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/of-mergers-mujao-and-mokhtar-belmokhtar/>.

<sup>150</sup> David Blair, 'Timbuktu: Al-Qaeda's Terrorist Training Academy in the Mali Desert', *The Telegraph*, 11 February 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/9860822/Timbuktu-al-Qaedas-terrorist-training-academy-in-the-Mali-desert.html>.

<sup>151</sup> Salim Chena and Antonin Tisseron, 'Rupture d'équilibres au Mali. Entre instabilité et recompositions', *Afrique contemporaine* n° 245, no. 1 (4 June 2013): 71–84.

2011, many Tuareg of Malian origin who had served in Libyan army units or militias returned to Mali, bringing their weapons with them. They united with local Tuareg separatists to form a new political organisation, the MNLA ('Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad'), effectively kickstarting the 2012 Tuareg rebellion – the fourth since Mali's independence from France in 1960.

The 'Tuareg question', however, is much older and animosity dates back to precolonial times, when the nomadic, light-skinned Tuareg extracted taxes – and took slaves – from the sedentary, black ethnic peoples. The position of the Tuareg was complicated by the political and economic policies brought by the French soldiers who arrived in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The region was essentially conquered by overzealous military officers and administered on the cheap, with the desert territories organised to provide resources for France.<sup>152</sup> When Mali became independent, decolonisation was carried out within the framework of the administrative borders of the colonial empire. The Sahara was divided into different states and the Tuareg tribes suddenly found themselves divided between the new countries of Algeria and Libya in the north, and Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in the south. In Mali authority was transferred to the black southern peoples.

The incorporation of the Tuareg by Mali was, and still is, perceived by many Tuareg as a betrayal by France.<sup>153</sup> During the colonial period, the Tuareg had benefited from a light colonial footprint in the north and did not expect to be subjugated by the new African regimes. Three years after independence, Tuareg tribes rebelled against Bamako's rule but the uprising was violently put down by the Malian army. In 1990, the conflict reignited and, in spite of the national pact of April 1992 and a ceremony of the 'Flamme de la Paix' (Flame of Peace) in Timbuktu on 27 March 1996, tensions remained high.<sup>154</sup> The resulting policy of integrating thousands of Tuareg fighters into the Malian army proved counterproductive as the new ranks assigned were related more to political connections than to soldiering ability. Leaders were appointed to senior positions without training

<sup>152</sup> On the colonial administration, see: Elmouloud Yattara, 'Les traitements différents des communautés africaines par les Français', in *Mali France: Regards sur une histoire partagée* (Mali: Université du Mali, 2005), 77–89, <https://www.cairn.info/mali-france--9782845867246-page-77.htm?contenu=resume>.

<sup>153</sup> 'Mali : éviter l'escalade' (International Crisis Group, 18 July 2012), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/west-africa/mali/mali-avoiding-escalation>.

<sup>154</sup> Thousands of weapons were burned during the 'Flamme de la Paix', symbolising a new era of peace after the rebellion of 1996. The national pact envisaged a gradual demilitarisation of the north and the complete integration of the rebels into the national forces. It also acknowledged the economic marginalisation of the north and promised an economic redress with constitutional changes to transfer a number of state prerogatives to the regions.

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or guidance and even Tuareg that had never fought were included on the lists of fighters to be integrated.<sup>155</sup> In 2006, droughts and widespread dissatisfaction amongst the integrated Tuareg would result in a new rebellion, running parallel to a Tuareg uprising in neighbouring Niger.<sup>156</sup>

Viewing the issue according to a north–south frame has, however, important limitations. The Tuareg are neither a majority in northern Mali nor united, and the groups vying for independence or autonomy are arguably as fractious and divided as the jihadists. Within the hierarchy of the confederation of Tuareg tribes, the aristocratic tribes or *Ifoghas* have frequently opposed the government, while the vassal *Imghad* tribes have either abstained or supported Bamako. An example of Tuareg divisions was provided by the conflict in 1994 between the ‘Mouvement populaire de l’Azawad’ (MPA), with its social *Ifoghas* base, and those of the ‘Armée révolutionnaire pour la libération de l’Azawad’ (ARLA), grouping together the Tuareg wishing to end the domination of the *Ifoghas*.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, during ATT’s term as president (2002–12), internal Tuareg divisions were skillfully exploited by a divide-and-rule policy.<sup>158</sup>

Even within the *Ifoghas*, the succession of the Amenokal – the traditional Tuareg leader of the Kidal heartland – is still contested, with the noble lineages, on the one hand, opposed to the peace agreements of Algiers of 2006, and groups supporting Iyad Ag Ghali on the other.<sup>159</sup> Today, the ‘Mouvement islamique de l’Azawad’ (MIA) and the ‘Coalition du peuple de l’Azawad’ (CPA) are both MNLA offshoots, as is the ‘Haut conseil pour l’unité de l’Azawad’ (HCUA). It is unclear whether these organisations are representative of the broader Tuareg people, how their goals differ and if they are backed up by the number of fighters they claim to have. With the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement of 18 June 2013

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<sup>155</sup> Charles Grémont, ‘Ancrage au sol et (nouvelles) mobilités dans l’espace saharo-sahélien : des expériences similaires et compatibles’, *L’Année du Maghreb*, no. VII (20 December 2011): 177–89, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.1203> The presence on the list of people not having fought was a result of the negotiation process between former movement leaders, faction leaders and local politicians. For the latter, the integration was above all a ‘resource in which to invest’.

<sup>156</sup> Frédéric Deycard, ‘Le Niger entre deux feux. La nouvelle rébellion touarègue face à Niamey’, *Politique africaine* N° 108, no. 4 (2007): 127–44 especially 135–36.

<sup>157</sup> Georg Klute, ‘From Friends to Enemies: Negotiating nationalism, tribal identities, and kinship in the fratricidal war of the Malian Tuareg’, *L’Année du Maghreb*, no. VII (20 December 2011): 163–75, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.1191> especially 169–72; Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh* (Editions Karthala, 2012), 532, <https://doi.org/10.3917/kart.boil.2012.01>.

<sup>158</sup> André Bourgeot, ‘La Crise Malienne : Vers Une Recomposition Géopolitique Des Espaces Sahariens’, in *Le Maghreb et Son Sud : Vers Des Liens Renouvelés*, ed. Alain Antil and Mansouria Mokhefi, Connaissance Du Monde Arabe (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2012), 93, <http://books.openedition.org/editions-cnrs/22863>.

<sup>159</sup> Marchal, ‘Mali’.

– a peace accord between the Malian government and the Tuareg rebels – several arrest warrants for MNLA and HCUA leaders were cancelled. In exchange, different Tuareg factions agreed to the return of Malian army units to Kidal.

Interethnic tensions within the north and between north and south have not abated, and have also been compounded by the formation of self-defence militias in opposition to Tuareg dominance, including the Ganda Koye and Ganda Iso, comprising mainly Songhai and Peul. Meanwhile, open conflict occurred in Kidal between Tuareg rebels and the Malian army in May 2014, leaving at least sixty dead.<sup>160</sup> Coverage by the Malian media, predominantly based in the south, is biased against the Tuareg, who are often represented as the instigators of the 2012 crisis, or as traitors undermining the unity of the Malian state. Atrocities committed in the past are used by all sides in a narrative of victimhood or as justification for revenge.

Within Tuareg communities, the Malian army is known for its executions of civilians, of which several instances have been recorded during each rebellion. In turn, in southern Mali the massacre of soldiers by Ansar Dine at Aguelhok in January 2012 has captured the popular imagination, with pictures circulating of the execution of Sékou Traoré, the unit commander.<sup>161</sup> The incident, in which between seventy and 153 captured soldiers were murdered, is under investigation by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. In this context, reducing the north–south dynamic purely to a question of Tuareg independence, or greater Tuareg autonomy, is a huge mistake and may, as such, contribute to further conflict.<sup>162</sup> Instead, the fractures are multiple: between the state and its people, between north and south, between state authorities and traditional leaders, and between and inside different communities.

## The Problem of Governance

The capacity of the Malian government to deal with these fractures is affected by Mali's governance problems, which can be defined in line with the existence of structural shortcomings on three levels: an institutional system that is incapable of absorbing or mitigating ethnic tensions; nefarious political practices that undermine the legitimacy of those in power; and a reliance on policies that have proven to be counterproductive,

<sup>160</sup> Rémi Carayol, 'La bataille de Kidal, un mal pour un bien ?', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 June 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/52733/politique/la-bataille-de-kidal-un-mal-pour-un-bien/>.

<sup>161</sup> Boubacar Boris Diop and Aminata Traoré, *La gloire des impoteurs: lettres sur le Mali et l'Afrique* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2014), 93–94.

<sup>162</sup> Katherine Høyer, 'Crisis in Mali: A Peacebuilding Approach', *International Alert*, March 2013, 2, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/crisis-mali>.

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creating problems rather than contributing to their resolution. At the macro level, ATT's democracy was based on the denial of local particularism and the promotion of a centralised state based on the French Jacobin model. The challenge for the new Malian government is to rebuild a democratic state based on the expression of differences between populations and the principle of unity in diversity. From this perspective, it should propose a new social contract, in parallel to reconciliation programmes, acknowledging the plural identities that exist within Malian society.<sup>163</sup>

An institutional solution might be found in further decentralisation and increased local autonomy, as has been achieved in neighbouring Niger. In 2011 the government in Niamey reaffirmed the importance of decentralisation in its Economic and Social Development Plan (PDES) for the period 2012–15, even though its success is not assured.<sup>164</sup> For the political elites in Bamako, however, the small size of the population in the north (relative to that in the south) does not seem to justify the investment of extra political or financial capital, considering the more pressing issues and greater number of votes to be won in the south. By the end of 2013, the combined adult population of the three regions of the north (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal) hardly numbered 600,000, while the five southern regions in Mali and the district of Bamako each had more than 1 million inhabitants.<sup>165</sup> However, even if more autonomy for the northern regions were considered desirable and feasible, there is debate on how to delineate the areas concerned – for instance, over whether they should have a purely geographic focus or an ethnic one. Tuareg rebels, with their invocation of Azawad, campaign for the latter, ignoring the fact that they are a minority in the Gao and Timbuktu regions and that the Malian constitution rules this out. Such an arrangement would also place other communities in this area at a disadvantage, and thus risk the re-emergence of multiple intercommunal grievances.<sup>166</sup>

The Malian security sector also requires deep institutional reform. The EU Training Mission in Mali, launched in February 2013, has the objective of reforming, training and advising the Malian army. Although some units had received years of training by

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<sup>163</sup> Jihane Jadrane, "Le Mali Face à Ses Défis: Comment Reconstruire l'État?", in *Forum Medays 2013: Quelles Émergences Dans Un Monde Instable* (Institut Amadeus, 2013), 31–35, <http://malilink.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/20140318-ForumMEDays2013.pdf>.

<sup>164</sup> Damien Deltenre, 'Niger: Du Coup d'État à l'engagement International. Retour Sur Trois Années de Transition Politique Sur Fond d'insécurité Régionale Grandissante' (Bruxelles: GRIP, 16 July 2013), [https://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2013/NA\\_2013-07-16\\_FR\\_D-DELLENRE.pdf](https://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2013/NA_2013-07-16_FR_D-DELLENRE.pdf).

<sup>165</sup> 'Mali', 11 April 2013, 34.

<sup>166</sup> 'André Bourgeot, Interviewed by Françoise Wasservogel, "André Bourgeot Fait Le Point Sur La Situation Au Mali"', 4 July 2014, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sa6utRtQ\\_2I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sa6utRtQ_2I)>.

Western special forces within the framework of the US Pan Sahel Initiative (2002–05) and later the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (from 2005 onwards), as well as the French RECAMP ('Renforcement des capacités africaines de maintien de la paix') programme, the army remains riddled by corruption, nepotism and incompetence.<sup>167</sup> Since the 2012 coup, and in light of the ensuing junta's influence on politics, the role of the army in society also needs addressing. Whilst the arrest of former coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo in November 2013 has helped to curtail military meddling in politics, structural reform is still needed to transform the army from being part of the problem to part of the solution. Judging by the Malian army's weak performance during the clashes in Kidal in May 2014, even the relatively simple 'technical' capacity-building efforts of the EU training mission have not yet borne fruit.

At the same time, more broadly, one of the most harmful and pernicious practices within government is corruption, which reached endemic proportions under ATT. A report by the government auditor, published in July 2007, gave an alarming picture of the scale of corruption. Twenty-six inspections carried out in 2006 ascertained that the Malian state had been deprived of more than 102 billion CFA francs (€150 million). This included missing tax and customs revenue and the embezzlement of public funds, often through incorrect or fictitious orders and invoices.<sup>168</sup> Government officials, up to and including the Presidential Palace, were also complicit in organised crime.<sup>169</sup> In September 2011, during a trip to Europe, ATT's wife allegedly purchased goods with bank notes paid as part of a ransom to AQIM.<sup>170</sup> Although this anecdote remains unconfirmed, the release of hostages has generally been secured through Malian government intermediaries, who have negotiated with the kidnappers on behalf of Western states and are widely seen to have taken a cut of the ransom.

The drugs trade has similarly been managed by 'state mafias' made up of 'segments of the business world, high-level civil servants, the relatives or the inner circle of the president and other personalities in the political world'.<sup>171</sup> The scope of the drugs trade and the extent of state involvement came to light in the 2009 'Air Cocaine' affair. A Boeing 727,

<sup>167</sup> Dorothée Thiénot, 'Mali Ungarrisoned', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1 June 2013, <https://mondediplo.com/2013/06/04mali>.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted by Georges Berghezan, 'La Corruption, Au Cœur de l'effondrement de l'état Malien', in *Sahel: Éclairer Le Passé Pour Mieux Dessiner l'avenir*, ed. Bérange Rouppert (Bruxelles: Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix, 2013), 43.

<sup>169</sup> Sabine Cessou, 'Mali: l'ex président ATT sera-t-il jugé?', *Slate Afrique*, 4 April 2012, <http://www.slateafrique.com/84473/le-bilan-conteste-de-amadou-toumani-toure>.

<sup>170</sup> Cessou.

<sup>171</sup> Simon Julien, 'Le Sahel comme espace de transit des stupéfiants. Acteurs et conséquences politiques', *Herodote* n° 142, no. 3 (23 September 2011): 125–42.

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capable of carrying around 10 tonnes of cargo, landed on a desert strip near Tarkint, north of Gao. The mayor of Tarkint and officials from Gao were present when the cocaine was unloaded and transferred to all-terrain vehicles.<sup>172</sup> Such collusion between the state and the drugs traffickers has not only undermined governance, but also the local economy, with public officials diverting their energy and efforts to generating and safeguarding the exorbitant revenues provided by the drugs trade.

One of the causes of the last Tuareg uprising, meanwhile, was the government's incapacity or unwillingness to defuse tensions in the Kidal area. During ATT's presidency, most of the donor money that Mali received (up to 60 per cent of state revenue) was invested in the highly populated south, with government capacity in providing security and administering justice in the north insufficient and neglected. After the 2006 rebellion, the government's commitments under the Algiers agreements were not implemented and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga continued hostilities. To counter Tuareg separatists, the government set up two militias, one Arab and the other Tuareg,<sup>173</sup> increasing local tensions rather than contributing to security. In addition, the Program for Peace, Security and Development in North Mali, established in July 2010 by the Malian government, had the objective of remilitarising the north – which was by this point essential from a security perspective. Yet the programme was widely criticised for its top-down implementation and lack of engagement with the local population, with further accusations of an insufficient preparation of the locals for the increased presence in the north of southern military units.<sup>174</sup>

A consequence of this broad and pervasive governance deficit has been a structurally low voter turnout during general elections, which has averaged around 35 per cent since 1991.<sup>175</sup> This was combined with widespread fraud during the presidential elections in which ATT ran for office (in 2002 and 2007), which surprisingly left Mali's reputation as a poster child for democracy untarnished.<sup>176</sup> Voter participation in the first round of the

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<sup>172</sup> Serge Daniel, 'La véritable histoire de l'avion de la cocaïne', RFI, 24 November 2009, <http://www.rfi.fr/contenu/20091124-veritable-histoire-lavion-cocaïne>.

<sup>173</sup> 'Mali', 11 April 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Marije Balt and Marco Lankhorst, 'Assisting Peacebuilding in Mali: Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past' (The Hague Institute for Global Justice, September 2013), <https://www.thehagueinstituteforglobaljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PB5-Assisting-Peacebuilding-in-Mali.pdf>.

<sup>175</sup> Mohamed Traore and Sékou Mamadou Chérif Diaby, 'Les élections au Mali. Pourquoi le taux de participation est toujours si bas.' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2011), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/09547.pdf>.

<sup>176</sup> When ATT was elected in 2002, the electoral commission annulled half a million ballots and it was widely rumoured that IBK, rather than ATT, should have gone through to the second round. Ballots were also for sale. See IFRI presentation Laurent Bigot, 'Les défis du Sahel: focus sur la crise malienne' (22 June 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn67xaLPCBM>.

2013 presidential elections was relatively high at nearly 50 per cent. This declined in the second round, although current President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) secured a clear electoral victory without reports of fraud. In the parliamentary elections of December 2013, voter turnout also dropped in the second round – to 39 per cent. This does not bode well for the legitimacy of Mali's politicians and illustrates the limited public trust in and commitment to Mali's political institutions.

## The Way Ahead

A policy to stabilise Mali and address its structural problems will need to comprise several different elements. Although MINUSMA troops are tasked with providing security for the local population, the combination of increasing jihadist activity and clashes between the Malian armed forces and Tuareg rebels has led to a deterioration of the security situation in the summer of 2014.<sup>177</sup> The shortfall of UN troops also needs to be addressed, but pledges have been slow to materialise.

To enable operations in such a vast country, MINUSMA has been equipped with a specific tactical intelligence component and several all-source information fusion cells, initially provided by a Dutch contingent.<sup>178</sup> This is unique for a UN mission. Yet broader co-operation with regional security forces will also be essential, as jihadists have migrated to sanctuaries in Libya and southern Algeria, out of the reach of Operation *Barkhane*. This move is partly based on safety considerations on the part of the jihadists, but also enables them to target and destabilise neighbouring regimes, with potential consequences for stability in Mali.<sup>179</sup> State borders, some thousands of kilometres long, will always remain porous, so the only feasible way of interdicting specific groups is through focused international co-operation.

The targeting of jihadist leaders is nonetheless a policy that requires restraint. Experience in other combat zones has shown that removing inefficient terrorist commanders is counterproductive, that killing terrorist leaders is less effective in the long term than capturing them, and that any collateral damage caused can outweigh the benefits of the policy.<sup>180</sup> The objectives and mandate of Operation *Barkhane* have at the time of writing

<sup>177</sup> 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali' (United Nations Security Council, 9 June 2014), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/772590>.

<sup>178</sup> Boeke, 'Nederlandse Oren En Ogen in Mali'.

<sup>179</sup> See: Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*.

<sup>180</sup> Although the secrecy of targeting operations means that there is little empirical data on its effectiveness, see 'Hitting the Target? How New Capabilities Are Shaping International Intervention' (Royal United Services Institute, March 2013), <https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/hitting-target-how-new-capabilities-are-shaping-international>.

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not been made clear, but the new mission seems to have a strong military approach to counter-terrorism. Another approach would be to deprive the groups of their financial revenues, such as halting ransom payments. AQIM and MUJAO's strategy of taking hostages seems to have abated for unknown reasons, despite reports that a ransom of more than €20 million was paid to secure the release of the French 'Arlit four' hostages in October 2013.<sup>181</sup>

Furthermore, the presence of international troops in Mali has caused the cocaine routes to shift to Niger, perhaps temporarily dislodging one link in a long logistical chain from the producers in South America to the users in Europe. A significant crackdown on smuggling activities by the government, however, would have serious repercussions on local communities in the border areas that depend on this source of income. Law-enforcement activities will therefore have to be conducted with consideration to development and alternative income policies. More regional co-operation is also necessary, as local law-enforcement efforts are outmaneuvered by global crime networks. The proposal by the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2012 to establish an Inter-American Center for Coordination against Transnational Organized Crime in Mexico can serve as an example for the African Union.<sup>182</sup>

Reducing corruption will also contribute enormously to strengthening the Malian state. The international community can play an important role in this area, and should draw lessons from Mali's past as a darling of the donor community – and particularly from the way in which indications of wholesale corruption within government were systematically ignored by donors and the broader international community. According to French diplomat Laurent Bigot, this was partly rooted in the Western reasoning and acceptance of the view that corruption is a part of the local culture; something that is false and by definition undermines development programmes and the assumptions upon which they are built.<sup>183</sup> More stringent controls by donor countries can limit the opportunity for corruption, while a durable anti-corruption policy will only have effect if it is implemented coherently and consistently by Mali's government. It is possible to break the vicious cycle of endemic corruption through a decisive, 'zero-tolerance' policy, as shown by a World

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<sup>181</sup> Jacques Follorou, 'Otages d'Arlit : les dessous de la négociation', *Le Monde*, 30 October 2013, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/10/30/otages-d-arlit-les-dessous-d-une-libera\\_3505240\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/10/30/otages-d-arlit-les-dessous-d-une-libera_3505240_3212.html).

<sup>182</sup> Peter Gastrow, 'Transnational Organised Crime: The Stepchild of Crime-Combating Priorities' (Institute for Security Studies, 15 October 2013), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/PolBrief46.pdf>.

<sup>183</sup> Bigot, 'Les défis du Sahel: focus sur la crise malienne'.

Bank report on the fight against corruption in Georgia, which identifies ten factors that have led to Georgia's corruption ranking by Transparency International improving from 130<sup>th</sup> place in 2005 to 55<sup>th</sup> in 2013.<sup>184</sup>

The peace talks with different Tuareg factions are moving at a glacial pace with many elements of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement still to be implemented. The roadmap for peace talks, as agreed in Algiers on 16 July 2014, seems to have restarted the negotiations but concrete results are still far off. Both the Malian government and the various Tuareg groups involved feel pressure from their constituencies not to concede too much in the negotiations. France is perceived by Bamako to be receptive to the Tuareg in general and has some leverage over the MNLA, for example, although the Tuareg groups can also turn to other countries like Algeria for support. Convincing both the rebels and the Malian government to make haste with national dialogue and reconciliation will not be easy. As long as the Tuareg groups at the negotiating table remain divided, delaying the whole process will be the easiest option for Bamako. The French position is delicate, as exerting too much pressure on the Malian government risks accusations of interference and neo-colonialism.

Finally, MINUSMA should clarify what it can, and intends to, deliver, as expectations are high while its exact role remains cloudy. Its mandate contains an inherent tension between capacity building and helping the state to restore its authority and sovereignty throughout its national territory on the one hand, and facilitating progress towards an inclusive national dialogue on the other. This, by its very nature, involves accommodating those armed groups that dispute state authority in the north.<sup>185</sup> Transforming the UN's current role as a facilitator to a strong mediatory role could restart the important process of negotiation and reconciliation with Tuareg factions. Yet whether the mission is defined as state-building or peace-building, a common denominator remains the need for strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management.<sup>186</sup> Nonetheless, international agreements, greater capacity or improved governance count for little if there is no political will to implement difficult decisions. In the end, the country's future will not be determined so much by MINUSMA and the international community as by Mali's inhabitants and its leaders.

<sup>184</sup> The World Bank, 'Fighting Corruption in Public Services : Chronicling Georgia's Reforms' (The World Bank, 9 February 2012), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/518301468256183463/Fighting-corruption-in-public-services-chronicling-Georgias-reforms>.

<sup>185</sup> Louise Arbour, 'Open Letter to the UN Security Council on Mali', International Crisis Group, 3 June 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/open-letter-un-security-council-mali>.

<sup>186</sup> S. Ndaruhutse et al., 'State-Building, Peace-Building and Service Delivery in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States: Literature Review. Final Report.' (Reading, UK: C&BT Education Trust, 1 January 2011), <https://www.gov.uk/dfid-research-outputs/state-building-peace-building-and-service-delivery-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-literature-review-final-report>.



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AL QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC  
MAGHREB: TERRORISM,  
INSURGENCY, OR ORGANIZED  
CRIME?

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## **Abstract**

After incurring significant losses during France's 2013 Operation Serval in Mali, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is back. Mokhtar Belmokhtar has rejoined the group, violent attacks are on the increase, and southern Libya offers elements of the group a new safe-haven. This article takes a long view on AQIM, looking at its objectives and ideology, organizational structure, relationship with the local population and revenue model to determine whether they should be labelled as terrorists, insurgents, or ordinary criminals. The article concludes that AQIM generally follows a strategy of terrorism, while some elements and modus operandi could also be indicative of a strategy of insurgency. AQIM's primary commanders have a long-standing relationship with the global Al Qaeda movement, are unlikely to be seduced by the Islamic State, and enjoy significant autonomy in conducting their operations. There is, however, little evidence that supports the view that AQIM is a criminal organization behind a religious façade, and its Salafi-jihadist ideology remains a leading determinant.

## Introduction

On 20 November 2015, two gunmen attacked the luxury Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali, killing 22 people before they were themselves shot by French and Malian Special Forces. The attack was initially claimed by Al Murabitoon, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Khalid Abu Al Abbas), a union of two offshoots from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Two weeks later, the ‘emir’ or commander of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud) announced that Al Murabitoon had joined AQIM and that the hotel attack was their first joint operation.<sup>187</sup> Then on 15 January 2016, the Splendid hotel and Cappuccino Café in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, were hit by a similar attack, killing 30 civilians and wounding more than 56. On the same day, militants attacked a police convoy and kidnapped an elderly Australian couple in the north of the country. AQIM claimed responsibility for the hotel attack and the kidnapping.<sup>188</sup> While these spectacular attacks garnered much international media attention, throughout 2015 neighbouring Mali had already faced a resurgent AQIM. Suicide bombings, rocket attacks, and ambushes inflicted many casualties on local security forces and made the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUMSA) one of the most dangerous UN missions ever, with some 60 peacekeepers killed already.

AQIM is not the only armed group responsible for the violence in northern Mali. There is a plethora of armed factions including criminal enterprises, Tuareg separatists, government aligned militias, and several groups that espouse a Salafi–jihadist agenda. In 2012, an armed uprising was started by the ‘Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad’ (MNLA), a Tuareg separatist faction, aided by three jihadist groups: AQIM, its offshoot ‘Mouvement pour l’unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest’ (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine. Once this coalition had forcefully evicted the Malian army and government administration from the north, what started as a secular rebellion was hijacked by the three Salafi–jihadist groups. They would govern the north until January 2013, when their sudden attack on the south provoked a French military intervention. Upon request of the beleaguered government in Bamako, France launched Operation Serval and liberated the north from the jihadists.<sup>189</sup> Since July 2013 the UN has deployed MINUSMA, France

<sup>187</sup> SITE, ‘AQIM Leader Announces Joining of Al-Murabitoon, Radisson Blu Attack in Bamako as First Joint Act’, SITE Intelligence Group, 4 December 2015, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/aqim-leader-announces-joining-of-al-murabitoon-radisson-blu-attack-in-bamako-as-first-joint-act.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Caleb Weiss, ‘AQIM Takes Australian Couple Hostage in Northern Burkina Faso’, *Threat Matrix; a Blog of FDD’s Long War Journal* (blog), 16 January 2016, [//www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/aqim-takes-australian-couple-hostage-in-northern-burkina-faso.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/01/aqim-takes-australian-couple-hostage-in-northern-burkina-faso.php).

<sup>189</sup> Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, ‘Operation “Serval”: A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (19 September 2015): 801–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494>.

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has launched a new, regional counterterrorist mission called Operation Barkhane, and the Algiers peace process is attempting to reconcile Tuareg separatists with factions that are aligned with the Malian government and the government itself. While Operation Serval inflicted serious losses on the jihadist groups in 2013, and incidental raids conducted by Barkhane have killed high-level terrorist commanders since, the groups are again becoming more active.<sup>190</sup>

This article will focus on AQIM as the main organization responsible for terrorist attacks in the Sahel and as the ‘mother’ of several violent offshoots. These include MUJAO and Belmokhtar’s Al Murabitoun, which rejoined after a split lasting nearly two years. Ansar Dine and its leader, Iyad ag Ghali (Shayk Abu Fadl), are closely allied to AQIM and are in turn well connected to the newly formed Macina Liberation Front.<sup>191</sup> The exact relationship between the major jihadist groups remains difficult to discern, and the example of an important Malian jihadist, Oumar Ould Hamaha, illustrates how a commander can switch from AQIM to Ansar Dine and finally to MUJAO.<sup>192</sup> It is no coincidence that Belmokhtar has recently rejoined forces with AQIM: both are fiercely loyal to Al Qaeda’s leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri and they are facing increasing competition from the Islamic State (IS). In the north, IS has established a firm foothold in Libya, and in the south, in Nigeria, Boko Haram has already pledged its allegiance to Al-Baghdadi. A spokesman for MUJAO announced the group’s allegiance to IS in May 2015, but this was quickly denied by other group members.<sup>193</sup> The increase of violence in Mali and beyond, an uptake of media announcements by AQIM commanders, and the budding competition with IS merits a new analysis of AQIM. Taking a long view of AQIM’s origins and actions, this article uses a conceptual framework to analyse whether the organization should be categorized as an insurgency, terrorist group, or crime syndicate.

## Labels, definitions, and concepts

AQIM has been the focus of significant academic scholarship, although many authors have confined their research to one article, frequently preferring a descriptive analytical

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<sup>190</sup> ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali’ (United Nations Security Council, 24 December 2015), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/815991>.

<sup>191</sup> Jacob Zenn, ‘The Sahel’s Militant “Melting Pot”: Hamadou Kouffas’s Macina Liberation Front (FLM)’, *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation, 13 November 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-sahels-militant-melting-pot-hamadou-kouffas-macina-liberation-front-flm/>.

<sup>192</sup> Abu Ibnein, ‘Oumar Ould Hamahada: A Case Study of the Bridges Between Three Groups’ (Geneva Centre for Training and Analysis of Terrorism, 10 January 2013).

<sup>193</sup> Andrew Lebovich, ‘The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region’, *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 1 (January 2016), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region/>.

approach to a conceptual or theoretical one. Mathieu Guidère has published extensively on AQIM and was one of three experts consulted by the Associated Press to determine the authenticity of several Al Qaeda letters that were discovered in Timbuktu, Mali.<sup>194</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, who is an Arabist like Guidère, has equally written quality works on AQIM, rich in primacy sources, before broadening his scope to Al Qaeda in general and the Islamic State.<sup>195</sup> Many authors have researched AQIM's Algerian roots, its relationship with Al Qaeda, and the dichotomy between its focus on the 'near' or 'far enemy', with Jean-Luc Marret notably labelling AQIM a 'glocal' organization.<sup>196</sup> Andrew Lebovich has recently published several works on AQIM and other related Sahel jihadist groups.<sup>197</sup> Nonetheless, the existing body of literature on AQIM is – understandably – strongly embedded in the field of terrorism studies, with consequently neither an argued case for its terrorist label, nor a consideration of other classifications and their potential implications.

From a policy perspective, the decision to label an armed group as terrorists, insurgents, or criminals is an important one. Terrorism is a politically loaded term and is dependent on the subjective opinion of the observer, illustrated by the adage that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Framing a group as terrorists effectively delegitimizes them, while simultaneously justifying a policy of violence in response. As Philip Herbst argues, '[c]onveying criminality, illegitimacy, and even madness, the application of the term terrorist shuts the door to discussion *about* the stigmatized group or *with* them, while reinforcing the righteousness of the labellers, justifying their agenda's and mobilising their responses'.<sup>198</sup> Conversely, labelling a group as ordinary criminals (notwithstanding that terrorism is also illegal), belittles the underlying grievances, ideologies, and motivations, attributing their actions to solely personal, often material gain. In all cases, the designated label channels a policy reaction that is anchored in the very different fields of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency (COIN), or law enforcement, each centred around its own principles, dogmas, and common practices.

AQIM has been designated a terrorist group by the United Nations Security Council, the United States, and the European Union. Nonetheless, reaching consensus on the definition of terrorism has proven to be extremely difficult; neither academia nor the UN

<sup>194</sup> Mathieu Guidère, 'The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM', *Res Militaris*, 2014, 25.

<sup>195</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2009), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda\\_islamic\\_maghreb.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda_islamic_maghreb.pdf).

<sup>196</sup> Jean-Luc Marret, 'Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A "Glocal" Organization', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (13 June 2008): 541–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802111824>.

<sup>197</sup> Lebovich, 'The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region'.

<sup>198</sup> Herbst, *Talking Terrorism*, 164.

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can agree on such a value-laden and subjective term. Avoiding the debate on definitions, this article will use the revised academic definition of terrorism as formulated by Alex Schmid:

Terrorism refers on the one hand to a *doctrine* about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial *practice* of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.<sup>199</sup>

The concept *insurgency* has provoked less debate, with general recognition that it is a strategy (not a tactic) to achieve political and military control over a population and territory. Traditionally insurgencies have consisted of irregular movements that have sought to mobilize a part of the population to assist in overthrowing the governing authorities.<sup>200</sup> Nonetheless, distinguishing between terrorists and insurgents remains fraught with difficulty, as they often share the same *modus operandi*.

According to Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, it is essential to regard terrorism and insurgency as two distinct *strategies* of irregular war.<sup>201</sup> The fundamental differences can be divided into three categories. First, the political objectives differ. Terrorism aims to provoke a response through violence to attain a political effect. Insurgents, conversely, intend to force political change through political and military control of a territory and its population. Secondly, the organizational structures differ as a result of the diverging objectives. Terrorists generally act in small and secret conspiracies, while insurgencies need a large and relatively open shadow state structure. Finally, for organizations following a terrorist strategy, active involvement of the population is not critical for success, although public support can shape and constrain both the actions of terrorists and the governments that counter them.<sup>202</sup> Conversely, for an insurgency, control of or support from the population is essential for strategic success.

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<sup>199</sup> Alex P. Schmid, "The Definition of Terrorism", in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research: Research, Theories and Concepts*, ed. Alex P. Schmid (London: Routledge, 2011), 86–7 (emphasis in original).

<sup>200</sup> See Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.

<sup>201</sup> Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism'.

<sup>202</sup> Bart Schuurman, 'Defeated by Popular Demand: Public Support and Counterterrorism in Three Western Democracies, 1963–1998', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (1 February 2013): 152–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.747072>.

This article will use Duyvesteyn and Fumerton's three categories to examine AQIM and add a fourth element: the financial revenue model. By their very nature, illegal organizations like terrorist or insurgent groups will revert to illegal activities to fund their operations. It is important to investigate whether these fundraising activities present an intrinsic clash with the group's professed ideology. For example, drugs are officially *haram* (forbidden or sinful) in Islam, and even smoking and alcohol were banned when the jihadists governed northern Mali. If they subsequently traffic these goods, it could imply that material gain trumps religious or ideological motives, moving the classification of the organization into the domain of organized crime. When the gap between preaching and practice is sufficiently large, this can be exploited to undermine the group's legitimacy and credibility.

This distinction between terrorism and insurgency, and even the relevance and usefulness of the exercise, is not without controversy. James Khalil, noting that academic research is stove-piped into these two categories with parallel literatures sharing few insights and sources, argues that it is impossible to arbitrarily impose binary distinctions upon continuous variables such as population support and control of territory.<sup>203</sup> David Kilcullen and John Mackinlay have argued that Al Qaeda should be seen as a global insurgency that uses terrorist tactics, since the global jihad has the objective of reinstating the Caliphate and replacing apostate local regimes.<sup>204</sup> Conceptual confusion is compounded by the complexities of the Sahel. In Mali alone, there are a more than a dozen armed groups, including separatists, militias, and jihadi groups. They have different objectives and oscillate between competition and cooperation, with fighters frequently switching groups. 'Last year alone', a Tuareg explained to Peter Tinti in 2014, 'there are people who have changed from Malian military, to separatist rebel, to jihadist, to French ally, all while being narco-traffickers.'<sup>205</sup>

## AQIM's historical roots

The origins of AQIM lie in the crucible of the Algerian civil war. Its current generation of commanders, including the Emir Droukdel and commanders such as Belmokhtar and Djamel Okacha all hark back to the original *insurgency* against the Algerian government. In 1992 a broad Islamist movement was robbed of an impending electoral victory by a

<sup>203</sup> James Khalil, 'Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing Between Terrorists and Insurgents', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 5 (1 May 2013): 419–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.775501>.

<sup>204</sup> Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency'.

<sup>205</sup> Peter Tinti, 'Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future' (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2014), <https://globalinitiative.net/illicit-trafficking-and-instability-in-mali-past-present-and-future/>.

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military coup that cancelled the elections. Algeria immediately descended into violence that only abated at the end of the decade, costing an estimated 200,000 lives. ‘Afghan Algerians’, the so-called foreign fighters who had returned from ‘jihad’ or training camps in Afghanistan, played a central role in the conflict. These trained combatants, many of whom had developed personal bonds with the future Al Qaeda leadership and had been infused with its ideology, formed the nucleus of the ‘Groupe Islamique Armé’ (GIA). The GIA was initially only one of many groups fighting the government, but by 1994 had become the predominant and most violent faction. Based on Salafi–jihadist ideology, it had a particularly uncompromising stance, symbolized by its motto: no agreement, no truce, no dialogue.<sup>206</sup> Those that the group labelled *takfir* (enemies of Islam), were classified as legitimate targets and therefore deserved to be killed, even if they were Muslim elderly, women, or children. Several notorious fatwas by the preacher Abu Qatada in the Salafist weekly bulletin *Al Ansar* (the ‘Partisan’), printed in London, justified GIA massacres.<sup>207</sup>

The GIA specifically targeted foreigners; first in Algeria and later in France. In December 1994 the GIA hijacked Air France 8969 from Algiers to Paris. France was the former colonial oppressor, and it was hated for its support of the military regime in Algiers. The hijackers probably intended to fly the plane into the Eiffel Tower but were diverted to Marseille to refuel, where the plane was stormed by elite French police. In 1995 eight bombs exploded in the Paris underground, and a year later, seven Tibherine monks were abducted and beheaded in Algeria, horrifying the French public. These actions contributed to continued international support for the military regime in its fight against the Islamists, and a soft stance on the mass torture and extrajudicial executions that had become institutionalized as part of its counterterrorism policy.<sup>208</sup> There is a strong body of evidence, including testimonies from military defectors, indicating that the security service, the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), infiltrated and manipulated the GIA. Agents provocateurs fostered infighting and purges, and its wanton violence undermined the credibility of the general Islamic opposition among locals and the international community. Even investigations into the Air France hijacking and Tibherine murders point to a duplicitous role of the DRS.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War*, 209.

<sup>207</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Revised edition (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), 263–73.

<sup>208</sup> ‘Algeria: Repression and Violence Must End’ (Amnesty International, 25 October 1994), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/document/?indexNumber=MDE28%2f008%2f1994&language=en>.

<sup>209</sup> Margaux Baralon, ‘Tibherine, Les Expertises Fragilisent La Version Officielle’, *La Croix*, 2 July 2015, <https://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/France/Tibherine-les-expertises-fragilisent-la-version-officielle-2015-07-02-1330468>.

The turning point occurred in early 1998, when hundreds of civilians were massacred in the villages of Rais, Benthalla, and others. Here, too, were worrying signs of military units aiding and abetting mass murder.<sup>210</sup> The magazine *Al Ansar* distanced itself from the GIA, and a large faction split off, founding the ‘Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat’ (GSPC), vowing only to hit government targets. The last remnants of the GIA used the government’s reconciliation programme to defect or were hunted down by the Algerian military. Bin Laden and the newly formed Al Qaeda supported the creation of the GSPC and its Afghan Algerians.<sup>211</sup> While the new group firmly aligned itself with the Salafi–jihadist Al Qaeda ideology, in its first communiqué in September 1998 the group emphasized its objective of toppling the Algerian regime, but in no way mentioned any foreign enemy.<sup>212</sup> On 11 September 2003, the GSPC’s emir pledged allegiance to Bin Laden and Mullah Omar in a communiqué.<sup>213</sup> On 11 September 2006, exactly five years after 9/11, Al Qaeda leader Al-Zawahiri announced that the GSPC had joined Al Qaeda and urged them to become ‘a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders’.<sup>214</sup> On 26 January 2007 the GSPC, led by Droukdel, announced that it had rebranded itself ‘Al Qaeda in the land of the Islamic Maghreb’.

In the mid-2000s, many GSPC/AQIM fighters travelled to Iraq to join the fight against the ‘American occupier’. Al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and Droukdel formed a close relationship, releasing propaganda statements in each other’s support.<sup>215</sup> AQIM adopted several modus operandi of Al Qaeda in Iraq, such as suicide bombings which had hardly been used by the GIA during the Algerian civil war. The ability to hit hardened targets such as UN facilities and well-protected military installations has since been an enduring AQIM capability. Although AQIM was inspired by Al-Zarqawi and copied some of his tactics, Abu Yahya al-Libi, a high-ranking Al Qaeda official, used the example of the GIA to warn Al-Zarqawi that his brutality and wanton cruelty would

<sup>210</sup> Yous Nesroulah and Salima Mellah, *Qui a tué à Benthala ?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).

<sup>211</sup> Mohamed Mokeddem, *Les Afghans Algériens de La Djamaâ à La Qaïda*, anep (Alger: anep, 2002)75–82.

<sup>212</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *Al-Qaïda à la conquête du Maghreb : Le terrorisme aux portes de l’Europe* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 2007), 63.

<sup>213</sup> For the translated text, see Atmane Tazaghart, *AQMI, enquête sur les héritiers de Ben Laden au Maghreb et en Europe* (Paris: Picollec, 2011), 212–13.

<sup>214</sup> ‘Al-Qaeda “Issues France Threat”’, *BBC News*, 14 September 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5345202.stm>.

<sup>215</sup> Emily Hunt, ‘Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa: A “Thorn in the Neck” of the United States?’ (The Washington Institute, February 2007), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/islamist-terrorism-in-northwestern-africa-a-thorn-in-the-neck-of-the-united>.

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alienate the local population and lead to his demise.<sup>216</sup> Al-Zarqawi ignored the warning, lost popular support, and was killed, but AQIM commanders had learned the lesson well.

## Objectives and ideology

A terrorist strategy aims at political change, without necessarily controlling the population. Violence serves as ‘propaganda by the deed’ and aims to influence a target audience psychologically. Terrorists want to provoke a response, and it is this response – and not their actions – that fulfils their goals. For an insurgency, the political end goal is to establish some manner of governance of the population. An example is the MNLA which launched the uprising in Mali in January 2012 to establish the independent state of Azawad, but saw their rebellion hijacked by AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine.

The main driver of Al Qaeda’s strategy is its Salafi–jihadist ideology. In a rare and extensive 2008 interview with the *New York Times*, Droukdel laid out AQIM’s objectives, ideology, and achievements and explained the rationale behind its attacks. The first question asked was why he had joined Al Qaeda, and he replied that it was essential to join forces in the face of the ‘unified oppressors’ that were fermenting division among Muslim lands, stealing their riches, and corrupting their populations. As for AQIM’s goals, Droukdel added:

Our general goals are the same goals of Al Qaeda the mother, and you know them. As far as our goals concerning the Islamic Maghreb, they are plenty. But most importantly is to rescue our countries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion, and their people.<sup>217</sup>

In the interview, Droukdel reiterated the Al Qaeda policy of not recognizing country borders: ‘We are one nation with one religion and one language. Our history is the same but our land is divided, torn apart into states by colonialism.’ In comparison to the propaganda of the Islamic State, one word was conspicuously absent during the interview: the Caliphate. For Al Qaeda, the establishment of a Caliphate is but a distant objective, one that must not be hastened.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> ‘‘Atiyah’s Letter to Zarqawi’, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2005, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

<sup>217</sup> ‘An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdel’, *The New York Times*, 1 July 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdel.html>.

<sup>218</sup> Reza Pankhurst, ‘The Caliphate, and the Changing Strategy of the Public Statements of al-Qaeda’s Leaders’, *Political Theology* 11, no. 4 (29 April 2010): 530–52, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v11i4.530>.

Essential to Al Qaeda's ideology are the teachings of the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, notably his book *Milestones* (1964), and the concepts of 'far enemy' and 'near enemy'.<sup>219</sup> Jihad is considered a personal obligation and a violent struggle against the apostate regimes in Muslim countries (the 'near enemy') and against the United States and the West (the 'far enemy'). The dilemma of which to focus on has been central to Al Qaeda and AQIM in the past decade, and priorities have changed over time. In Al-Zawahiri's recent speeches, but also in Droukdel's 2008 interview, the emphasis lies on the near enemy.

Government installations and the military – the near enemy – have been repeatedly struck by AQIM, although attacks are frequently underreported by Western media. In June 2005 the remote army base Lemgheity in the Mauritanian desert was attacked by Belmokhtar's unit, killing 17 soldiers.<sup>220</sup> Since then AQIM has conducted dozens of ambushes, killing scores of soldiers and police officers in Algeria, Tunisia, and Mali. The issue of killing civilians remains a sensitive one, eliciting debate after the multiple suicide bombings in Algiers in 2007. In the *New York Times* interview Droukdel reaffirmed that AQIM specifically aimed to strike at official government targets and Western interests, and that considerable effort went into avoiding Muslim casualties, but that some inevitable 'collateral damage' should not detract from an attack's success. The 2015 hotel attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou were specifically aimed at locations popular with foreigners, and the purported separation of Muslims from non-Muslims in the Bamako hotel was reminiscent of Belmokhtar's 2013 attack on the In Amenas gas plant, where locals were also separated from foreign employees and spared.<sup>221</sup> The specific targeting of government and security forces, and the purported care to avoid civilian casualties, is a common feature of insurgencies and guerrilla campaigns.

AQIM has threatened the 'far enemy' in countless audio and video messages. While it has attacked Western interests in the Sahel on many occasions, it has not managed to successfully launch an attack on the European mainland, unlike for instance Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP), responsible for the Charlie Hebdo attack (Paris, January 2015) or IS (Paris, November 2015). This is not for want of trying, and according to French intelligence several attacks in France have been prevented.<sup>222</sup> The hatred against France has remained a constant factor since the GIA attacks, and Droukdel, Belmokhtar, and Iyad ag Ghali have

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<sup>219</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, First Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>220</sup> Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar*, 68–72.

<sup>221</sup> Lebovich, 'The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region'.

<sup>222</sup> Vincent Jauvert and Sarah Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 10 February 2013.

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all specifically mentioned France as a primary target in their many media announcements. The 2007 killing of French tourists in Mauritania, frequent hostage takings, and specific threats have frightened away tourists and even forced the Paris–Dakar race to move to South America. AQIM, however, has not inherited the extensive GIA network that was active in London, Brussels, and Paris in the mid-nineties, nor managed to mobilize elements within the large Maghreb diaspora in France. In general, AQIM’s continuous targeting of security forces and the purported attempts to avoid civilian casualties have recently been overshadowed by the hotel attacks, strongly indicating a strategy of terrorism.

## **Organizational structure and recruitment**

The different strategies of terrorism and insurgency result in divergent organizational structures and recruitment efforts. For insurgents, whose aim is to ultimately control a population, some sort of shadow governance structure, with formal lines of hierarchy, is necessary. In parallel, the objective of building up a military force to oust the authorities requires a substantial recruitment effort among the local population. The Taliban in Afghanistan, for instance, clearly display both these elements. Groups following a terrorist strategy, conversely, do not need to mobilize the masses, but use small, secretive groups to terrorize and intimidate. They tend to exhibit selective and small-scale recruitment as a result of the secretive nature they must adopt to avoid state counterterrorist efforts.

The organizational structure of Al Qaeda has changed considerably over the years, and its secretive nature makes it hard to analyse. Under pressure from US drone strikes in Pakistan’s tribal areas, Al Qaeda has evolved from a centrally directed organization into a worldwide ‘franchiser’ of terrorist attacks. Some consider it more a ‘network organization’ or a ‘movement’ than a classical organization.<sup>223</sup> The Abbottabad letters, consisting of (only) 17 declassified letters from a treasure trove of documents captured during the Bin Laden raid in May 2011, offer a relatively recent insight into organizational issues. While probably not representative, the letters suggest that AQIM was not as important to Al Qaeda central as the other affiliates. AQIM appeared to have a significant degree of autonomy and generally followed advice given by the strategic leadership.<sup>224</sup> On the other hand, letters found in Timbuktu in 2013 offer the AQIM point of view. In a letter from

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<sup>223</sup> Katherine Zimmerman, ‘The Al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy.’ (AEI’s Critical Threats Project, September 2013), [https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Zimmerman\\_the\\_al\\_Qaeda\\_Network\\_September\\_2013-1.pdf](https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Zimmerman_the_al_Qaeda_Network_September_2013-1.pdf).

<sup>224</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, ‘Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Qaeda’s Senior Leadership’, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 22 January 2013, <http://gunpowderandlead.org/2013/01/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-and-al-qaedas-senior-leadership/>.

Droukdel to his commanders, he mentions that on several occasions he had sought advice from Al Qaeda central, but not received any guidance back.<sup>225</sup> Aware of the risks of phone or email interception and localization long before the Snowden revelations, Al Qaeda's strategic leadership had to communicate by letter. Internal communication remains a challenge for AQIM, hampering operationalization of the chosen strategy.

AQIM has adapted and adjusted the GSPC's organizational structure, which in turn was largely based on the GIA. During the height of the Algerian insurgency, the GIA consisted of a nebulous network of armed factions headed by emirs, nominally united by the central leadership, but often autonomous in practice.<sup>226</sup> The GIA had divided Algeria into nine zones, a practice that was continued by the GSPC. Over the past decade, more combat and terrorist operations have shifted from northern Algeria to the large southern expanses of the Sahara, Belmokhtar's fiefdom. Now operations have been divided into two sectors, a central emirate for northern Algeria and Tunisia, and a Sahara emirate for northern Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Libya led by Djamel Okacha (Yahia Abu El Hamam).<sup>227</sup> The central leadership consists of a 14-member Shura council, presided over by Emir Droukdel and including regional commanders and the heads of the political, military, judicial, and media committees.<sup>228</sup> The current AQIM strategic leadership is based in the mountainous region of Kabylie to the east of Algiers, where the ethnic Berber population is engaged in an ancient struggle with the central government for more autonomy.<sup>229</sup> AQIM's basic fighting unit is formed by a *katiba* (also spelled '*katibat*' or '*katibah*'), the Arabic word for phalanx or battalion, which was widely used during the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962). There is no standard number of fighters per *katiba*, and its size can vary from two dozen combatants to several hundred.

The limits of AQIM's organizational structure were laid bare during the second half of 2012, when together with Ansar Dine and MUJAO it controlled northern Mali. The

<sup>225</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, 'AP Exclusive: Al-Qaida Rips into Prima Donna Terrorist for Failing to Deliver Big Operations', *AP News*, 28 May 2013, <https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2014/international-reporting/callimachi/02callimachi2014.pdf>.

<sup>226</sup> Jacques Baud, 'Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)', *Global Terror Watch*, 7 June 2012, <http://www.globalterrorwatch.ch/?p=699>.

<sup>227</sup> Andreas Hagen, 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and Their Networks', *Critical Threats*, March 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-leaders-and-their-networks>.

<sup>228</sup> Callimachi, 'AP Exclusive: Al-Qaida Rips into Prima Donna Terrorist for Failing to Deliver Big Operations'.

<sup>229</sup> Elisa Perriguer, 'Les Montagnes de Kabylie, Refuge de Nombreux Djihadistes', *Le Monde*, 24 September 2014, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/09/24/les-montagnes-de-kabylie-refuge-de-nombreux-djihadistes\\_4492713\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2014/09/24/les-montagnes-de-kabylie-refuge-de-nombreux-djihadistes_4492713_3210.html).

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expulsion of the Malian army and the conquest of the north was initiated by the Tuareg MNLA, but the alliance of convenience with the jihadist groups quickly broke down. MNLA fighters were violently evicted by the jihadist groups or switched sides. The MNLA had become unpopular through widespread pillage and instances of rape in the towns they occupied, were not supported by the non-Tuareg majority, and lacked the finances of the jihadists.<sup>230</sup> Nonetheless, an elaborately written instruction by Droukdel to his lieutenants indicates that conflict with the MNLA was not desired.<sup>231</sup> According to the letter, the decision to go to war with the MNLA, ‘after becoming close and almost completing a deal with them. . . . was a major mistake’. The local commanders were chastised in the letter and reminded that the strategic leadership had still not received clarification on the turn of events.<sup>232</sup>

The problem of command and control – or recalcitrant commanders – led to a second strategic mistake, with disastrous consequences for their Islamic state project. Droukdel, ever mindful of the threat of a military intervention, explicitly instructed his commanders to refrain from provoking the international community, even to the point that it was ‘better for you to be silent and pretend to be a domestic movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, Qaida or any other sort of project.’ The order not to provoke was ignored by Ansar Dine, who launched the January 2013 attack on southern Mali, eliciting the immediate and overwhelming French military response. Belmokhtar was another difficult commander, and he was sharply criticized in an extensive 30-point letter from Droukdel for always doing things his own way.<sup>233</sup> The criticism ranged from agreeing to an ‘absurdly’ low ransom for hostage Robert Fowler (€700,000) to contacting Al-Zawahiri directly and failing to organize large attacks. This and Belmokhtar’s personal rivalry with Abu Zeid, another important commander in the Sahara, undoubtedly contributed to him leaving AQIM in December 2012. Days after Operation Serval was launched, his new group called *Katibat al-Mulathameen* (The Masked Brigade) attacked the Algerian In Amenas gas installation, with Belmokhtar subsequently brazenly claiming he had acted on behalf of Al Qaeda.

AQIM’s recruitment efforts have known significant ups and downs during the past decade. Diplomat Robert Fowler offers a candid account of life as an Al Qaeda hostage

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<sup>230</sup> Lecocq et al., ‘One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts’.

<sup>231</sup> Pascale Cobelles Siegel, ‘AQIM’s Playbook in Mali’, *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013), <https://ctc.usma.edu/aqims-playbook-in-mali/>.

<sup>232</sup> Callimachi, ‘In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto’.

<sup>233</sup> Callimachi, ‘AP Exclusive: Al-Qaida Rips into Prima Donna Terrorist for Failing to Deliver Big Operations’.

and describes the background of the fighters in Belmokhtar's *katiba*.<sup>234</sup> The jihadists had varied ethnic and social backgrounds, with the unit comprising fighters from all over the Sahel. The mainstay of the leadership cadre was Algerian, with 'sub-Saharan Africans clearly second class in the eyes of AQIM'.<sup>235</sup> According to analysts, this is one of the reasons that MUJAO split away, recruiting more within Songhai and other black African communities.<sup>236</sup> Fowler also noted that many of the warriors were extremely young, some even pre-adolescent. Several years later, during the jihadists' 2012 control of northern Mali, hundreds of child soldiers were recruited.<sup>237</sup> As the governing authority, the jihadists could recruit and press-gang children into service without impediment. The so-called Islamic state of Azawad also attracted many foreign fighters from all over Africa, but in contrast to Syria, only a handful from Europe. The three jihadist groups grew at such a rate, setting up training camps in the north, that according to a French intelligence official, if France had waited much longer with Operational Serval it might not have had the capacity to tackle the groups on its own.<sup>238</sup>

The French intervention caused significant losses among the jihadists, killing around 700, taking 430 prisoners, and destroying some 200 tons of arms and ammunition.<sup>239</sup> Under pressure, AQIM urged especially Tunisians not to travel to Syria but join the fight in the Maghreb: 'The front of the Islamic Maghreb today is in desperate need of the support of the sons of Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Mauritania to repel the French crusade'.<sup>240</sup> This was to no avail, as the conflict in Syria is a much bigger magnet for Tunisian Salafi-jihadists than AQIM, with now probably at least 5000 Tunisians fighting there.<sup>241</sup> This is significantly more than AQIM's current total strength. Only AQIM's small 'Uqba bin

<sup>234</sup> Fowler, *A Season in Hell*.

<sup>235</sup> Fowler, 134, 148.

<sup>236</sup> Andrew Lebovich, 'Of Mergers, MUJAO, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar', *Al-Wasat*, 23 August 2013, <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/of-mergers-mujao-and-mokhtar-belmokhtar/>.

<sup>237</sup> Umberto Bacchi, 'France's War in Mali: Child Soldiers on the Frontline', *International Business Times*, 16 January 2013, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/mali-child-soldiers-islamists-france-424816>.

<sup>238</sup> Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 43–44.

<sup>239</sup> Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead', *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 5 (3 September 2014): 32–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969942>.

<sup>240</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Al-Andalus Media Presents a New Statement from al-Qā'idah in the Islamic Maghrib: "Call to the Youth of Islam: To Those Who Aspire to Hijrah in the Way of God in the Islamic Maghrib in General and Tunisia in Particular"', *Jihadology*, 17 March 2013, <https://jihadology.net/2013/03/17/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-statement-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghrib-call-to-the-youth-of-islam-aspire-to-hijrah-in-the-way-of-god-in-the-islamic-maghrib-in-general-and-tunisia/>.

<sup>241</sup> Alex P. Schmid, 'Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues', Policy Brief (ICCT - the Hague, 27 October 2015), <https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighter-estimates-conceptual-and-data-issues/>.

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Nafi' *katiba* regularly attacks security forces in southern Tunisia.<sup>242</sup> Nonetheless, three years after Serval, AQIM is again recruiting successfully in northern Mali and beyond. By providing information that can be used to target MINUSMA convoys, a local in Mali can earn around €750. In a country where the minimum wage is less than €50 a month, the temptation to work for or with AQIM can be considerable.<sup>243</sup> AQIM's organizational structure and recruitment efforts transformed considerably during the phase that it controlled northern Mali, and reverted to the status quo ante after Operation Serval. This would not only indicate that AQIM follows a terrorist strategy, but also seems to validate this criterion to distinguish between a terrorist strategy and an insurgent one.

## Relationship with the population

According to Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, groups with an insurgent strategy have a fundamentally different interaction with the local population than those with a terrorist strategy. The French pioneer in counterinsurgency doctrine, David Galula, argues that for an insurgency the 'exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness'.<sup>244</sup> Population support, either winning the 'heart and minds' or instigating a system of collective oppression, are therefore vital to an insurgency. Terrorist groups, in part due to their secretive nature, are often alienated and isolated from the broader population. By following a terrorist strategy, through violence aimed at civilians, they actually risk being considered an enemy of the people rather than of the government.<sup>245</sup> To characterize the different levels of interaction with the local population, this section will use three levels of *freedom* that a group has in a certain territory. These are freedom of movement, freedom from interdiction (or safe-haven/sanctuary), and finally freedom to control the population. The last level indicates that an insurgency has achieved its objective.

Concerning freedom of movement, survival in the vast and arid plains of the Sahara is not an individual or group challenge, but a social and cultural undertaking. Many nomads and drivers habitually traverse the desert, and cordial relations with 'locals' are a required minimum to allow for an undisturbed travel or presence. The desert is literally dotted

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<sup>242</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, Andrew Lebovich, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy', *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 7 (July 2013), <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-tunisia-strategy/>.

<sup>243</sup> Grégory Chauzal, 'Fix the Unfixable: Dealing with Full-Blown Crisis and Instability: How to Bring Greater Stability to the Sahel?', CRU Policy Brief (The Hague: Clingendael, December 2015), <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/PB%20Fix%20the%20unfixable.pdf>.

<sup>244</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 8.

<sup>245</sup> Crenshaw, 'The Causes of Terrorism', 393.

with caches of reserve petrol supplies, water reservoirs, car tyres, or other spare materials, left by transporters as a back-up in case of vehicle breakdowns or emergencies. The locals know the owner of each cache, and it is customary practice not to use anyone else's cache unless in an emergency, under the strict condition of replenishing the goods as quickly as possible.<sup>246</sup> AQIM thus has its own caches distributed throughout the huge Sahel area, acknowledged and left untouched by others, just as AQIM respects other caches. AQIM units equally expend a considerable effort in keeping good relations with any locals that are encountered during their travels.<sup>247</sup> Marriage is another effective method of integrating into local communities, and Belmokhtar married into a noble Berabish tribe near Timbuktu, ensuring good relations with powerful tribes.<sup>248</sup> Coexistence with locals was the preferred strategy of AQIM's mobile *katibas*, enabling them to frequently change camps to foil intelligence services that attempted to locate them. Travelling large distances, their modus operandi resemble the traditional nomadic *rezzou*, swift and brutal raids to destroy the enemy. AQIM's current freedom of movement stretches from Mauritania to Niger, and southern Algeria to Burkina Faso.

Sanctuaries offer reprieve from government pursuit and allow for recovery and replenishment after sustaining losses. The whole of northern Mali was effectively a safe-haven for AQIM up until 2013. Within this vast area, they developed a mountainous redoubt in the Ametetai valley, an area of about 25 square kilometres full of caves, crevices, and valleys in the Ardar des Ifoghas. AQIM chose it because it was the only location that provided natural water sources, and it frequently held its hostages there.<sup>249</sup> The valleys were fortified by defensive positions, including heavy machinegun and mortar positions. During Operation Serval it was methodically cleared by elite French and Chadian troops, killing Abu Zeid and decimating his *katiba*. Now surveilled by drones and continuously at risk of a sudden air strike, it no longer offers a safe-haven. Libya has become the new sanctuary. Already during the last months of Gadhafi's reign in 2011, AQIM dispatched teams to establish jihadist cells in the southern regions. These have grown in importance since, and Libya's south-west has been termed a 'vipers nest' for terrorists by the French Defence Minister Le Drian.<sup>250</sup>

When AQIM governed parts of north Mali, from summer 2012 until Operation Serval,

<sup>246</sup> See Dr Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (New York, NY Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>247</sup> Fowler, *A Season in Hell*, 134, 148.

<sup>248</sup> Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar*, 56–59.

<sup>249</sup> Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali.*, 595–98.

<sup>250</sup> Alain Rodier, 'Libye: le nid de vipères', Note d'Actualité no. 352 (Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement, 20 April 2014), <https://cf2r.org/actualite/libye-le-nid-de-viperes/>.

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its relationship with the local population changed from mutual acquiescence to control. In a May 2012 audio message, Droukdel emphasized the need to gradually impose Sharia. He affirmed that it would be an error to impose all the rules of Islam in one go, but that 'places of drugs, alcohol and immorality had to be closed immediately'. He also called for his AQIM 'brothers' to ensure security in towns under their control, and that essential services such as health care, water, and electricity had to be provided.<sup>251</sup> The Timbuktu letters, probably dating from July, reinforce his earlier message and suggest making concessions with the enemy or locals. This was vital to avoid divisions between the groups and in society, as '[t]he aim of building these bridges is to make it clear that our Mujahadin are no longer isolated in society, and to integrate with the different factions, including the big tribes and the main rebel movement and tribal chiefs.'<sup>252</sup> This illustrates the difficulty of transitioning from a terrorist strategy to an insurgent one. The letter stresses prudence and moderation, comparing the Islamic project in Azawad to a small baby that must be nurtured and helped to stand on its own two feet (in a particularly hostile environment).

Droukdel was adamant that the implementation of the Sharia must not be hastened. Gradual evolution had to be applied in an environment that was ignorant of religion. 'And our previous experience proved that applying Shariah this way, without taking the environment into consideration will lead to people rejecting the religion, and engender hatred toward the Mujahadin, and will consequently lead to the failure of our experiment.'<sup>253</sup> By criminalizing alcohol, smoking, and the music and dance so central to local culture, and meting out harsh *hudud* punishments, the jihadists alienated large parts of the population. The deeply unpopular destruction of the shrines in Timbuktu, carried out by Ansar Dine, was equally criticized by Droukdel in his letter. In 2013 Operation Serval proved him right, and the French were welcomed as liberators by an euphoric population.<sup>254</sup>

Since Operation Serval, AQIM has reverted to a more distant relationship with the locals. There is widespread insecurity, caused in part by the slow Algiers peace process and inter-ethnic violence, and disillusionment with the government's lack of reform. In some areas in the north, there is apparently even less electricity than during the time the jihadists were in control, provoking nostalgia among some for the occupation by

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<sup>251</sup> Vincent Duhem, 'Nord-Mali – Aqmi : Abdelmalek Droukdel appelle à imposer « graduellement » la charia', *Jeune Afrique*, 24 May 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/175961/politique/nord-mali-aqmi-abdelmalek-droukdel-appelle-imposer-graduellement-la-charia/>.

<sup>252</sup> Mali-al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook, Chapter 1, page 2.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, page 3.

<sup>254</sup> Susanna D. Wing, 'French Intervention in Mali: Strategic Alliances, Long-Term Regional Presence?', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 59–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1123433>.

AQIM.<sup>255</sup> In November 2015, 50 masked AQIM fighters, arriving in a dozen pick-up trucks, disrupted two different intercommunal meetings in the Timbuktu region. They read out a letter encouraging reconciliation between communities, threatened those that collaborated with the ‘Enemies of Islam’, and promised to act against rural criminality. Before they left, the fighters distributed USB sticks containing copies of the letter, the Quran, and a video that featured the beheading of a collaborator.<sup>256</sup>

AQIM’s relationship with the population has thus changed significantly over time and differs considerably in the areas where it operates. In the broader Sahel, AQIM has extensive freedom of movement and is relatively isolated from the population, although it does respect local customs in the large desert regions. This points to a strategy of terrorism, but is offset for example by current AQIM intimidation in the Timbuktu area. Here the AQIM *katiba* seeks to control the population, threatening collaborators and offering to provide security from petty crime. This deviates from the concept of secretive, alienated terrorist groups and illustrates the difficulty of conceptualizing AQIM’s modus operandi in rigid frameworks.

## Criminal revenues as a goal or a means

In the fight against terrorism, violent non-state actors are often accused of involvement in organized crime and the drug trade. This is certainly the case for AQIM, with many governments and analysts arguing that its radical Islamist rhetoric merely serves as a cover for the group’s profitable criminal activities.<sup>257</sup> Some of the policy implications of this conclusion are clear: a stronger international effort is needed to disrupt illicit trafficking in West Africa, to ‘hit AQIM where it hurts’ and deprive it of much needed funds.<sup>258</sup> Mindful of the lack of reliable primary sources concerning AQIM’s financial income, this section will investigate AQIM’s three main revenue generating activities: smuggling, the drug trade, and kidnapping for ransom.

Northern Mali has traditionally been an international crossroads for trade and commerce, and smuggling has always formed a large part of local livelihood. The northern city of Kidal is almost completely dependent on goods that come from Algeria, and the price

<sup>255</sup> Chauzal, ‘A Snapshot of Mali Three Years after the 2012 Crisis’.

<sup>256</sup> Presentation Chief JMAC (MINUSMA), Lille 7 December 2015 ICCT High-level Expert Meeting, Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy.

<sup>257</sup> Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sabel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013*, 1 edition (Farnham, UK ; Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2014), 68.

<sup>258</sup> Daniel Detzi and Steven Winkleman, ‘Hitting Them Where It Hurts: A Joint Interagency Network to Disrupt Terrorist Financing in West Africa’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 3 (3 March 2016): 227–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1099994>.

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differences of subsidized goods are readily exploited by smugglers. A matrix of networks that traditionally transports licit goods, such as petrol, tobacco, and foodstuffs, has diversified into illicit goods such as weapons, narcotics, and human-trafficking. According to Judith Scheele, the official distinction between legal and illegal trans-border trade is largely meaningless and has been replaced by what locals deem morally acceptable and what is not.<sup>259</sup> Most of the economy is informal and thus difficult to quantify, but cigarette smuggling has always constituted a large share of the contraband. This is where Mokhtar Belmokhtar would have earned his notorious moniker 'Mr Marlboro'. The accuracy of his reputation, however, is disputed by Mauritanian journalist Lemine Ould Salem, who has interviewed several government officials and traffickers in the region. These are all adamant that Belmokhtar was never a member of the cigarette smuggling networks. Instead he frequently frustrated their business by intercepting contraband convoys, burning cargos of cigarettes after sternly lecturing that they were '*haram*'.<sup>260</sup>

The drug trade has an enormous impact on the region. It took off around 2004 as European port and airport controls were tightened and South American cartels discovered the soft underbelly of West Africa. For cocaine, the most important route has become 'Highway 10', named after the 10th parallel across the Atlantic Ocean. The drugs are brought in by plane or by boat, pass through failing states like Guinea-Bissau and then transit north through Mali.<sup>261</sup> The drugs are transported not by a single organization, but by a complex web of networks, each forming a small link in the supply chain that stretches from the Andes to Europe.<sup>262</sup> There is little empirical evidence to support allegations of direct AQIM involvement in drug smuggling, but it is plausible to assume that it has on occasion, like many other groups in northern Mali, imposed transit fees or provided security escorts.<sup>263</sup> Many reports credit MUJAO with a larger role in the drug trade, and the city of Gao, as their primary base and recruiting ground, is an important hub on the cocaine route.<sup>264</sup>

More important, however, is the role that the government of Mali has played in allowing the drug trade to flourish. During President Amadou Toumani Toure's rule (2001–2012), Mali's political and security structures had become deeply enmeshed in narco-trafficking, corrupting

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<sup>259</sup> Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara*, 122–23.

<sup>260</sup> Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar*, 42–45.

<sup>261</sup> Denis Destrebecq, 'Cocaine Trafficking in Western Africa' (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, October 2007), <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Cocaine-trafficking-Africa-en.pdf>.

<sup>262</sup> Tinti, 'Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali'.

<sup>263</sup> Wolfram Lacher, 'Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel\\_sahara.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf).

<sup>264</sup> Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, 149–51.

the state to the highest level. The state lost its legitimacy with the population, social relations within communities – especially between elders and the young – were disrupted, and fraught relations between ethnic groups were further exacerbated. The narco-networks embedded themselves so deeply in society that little changed during the jihadists’ occupation of the north, and even Operation Serval has not fundamentally affected the trade.<sup>265</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom is the main source of revenue for AQIM. In early 2003, 32 European tourists were abducted by the GSPC in the Algerian Sahara. Half were freed during an Algerian military operation, while the last group ended up in northern Mali and was reportedly released for a total ransom of €5 million. A precedent was set for terrorist groups to kidnap Westerners for ransom. Since 2003, nearly all of the around 60 hostages have been released, with the notable exceptions of Edwin Dyer and Michel Germaneau, who were executed in 2009 and 2010, and Antoine De Leocour and Vincent Delory, who died during a failed rescue attempt by French special forces in 2011. The ransoms have been subject to considerable inflation with €5 million to €10 million per hostage now the reported going rate. According to an investigation by the *New York Times*, at least \$91.5 million had been paid to AQIM (and presumably to its partner in crime, MUJAO) between 2008 and 2014.<sup>266</sup> This has led to a vicious cycle where each release provides the incentive for another hostage-taking.

For AQIM, hostage-taking remains a means to an end. Belmokhtar initially challenged the practice of hostage-taking and requested arbitration from AQIM’s legal committee, considering it not part of jihad as the hostages were generally non-combatants and civilians. He also feared that the practice would attract unwanted attention from Western security services. AQIM’s legal committee ruled that all actions aimed to defend or extend Islam were legitimate jihad actions (subject to ‘the Law of War in Islam’), and that Western citizens were to be regarded as combatants, as they had democratically elected governments that supported ‘the War on Terror’.<sup>267</sup> After this decision, Belmokhtar also reverted to the practice, kidnapping Robert Fowler in Niger in 2008. In the terrorism versus organized crime debate, Fowler is convinced that the former label applies to AQIM. His reasoning is worth quoting in full:

Almost since 9/11, there has been a loud debate among securocrats over whether Al Qaeda and its franchises, like AQIM, are bandits, opportunists,

<sup>265</sup> Tinti, ‘Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali’.

<sup>266</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, ‘Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror’, *The New York Times*, 29 July 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>.

<sup>267</sup> Guidère, ‘The Timbuktu Letters’.

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thugs, psychopaths, and restless, underemployed youths flying a flag of Islamic convenience, or, conversely, deeply committed religious zealots engaging, Robin Hood-like, in banditry, kidnapping and trafficking to finance the achievement of their Islamic vision. Many, probably most, have opted for some variation of the convenient first option, and many security services still favour this interpretation, mostly, I suspect, because it makes these movements easy to belittle and should make them much easier to defeat. Whatever the reasoning, based on my experience, I know it to be the wrong answer.<sup>268</sup>

The whole of Fowler's book supports the analysis that AQIM's particular fundamentalist take on Islam affected everything to do with the kidnapping and its resolution. Belmokhtar is described as a revered leader with a palpably commanding presence, principled in the radical interpretation of his faith, but who ensured that his hostages were not mistreated or tortured during their captivity. Fowler notes how he and his fellow hostage were continually hounded by many zealous members of the *katiba* 'to become slaves of Allah', but that they tenaciously managed to resist converting to Islam. Belmokhtar finally put the issue to rest by saying that a conversion could not be imposed and had to be voluntary.<sup>269</sup>

Governments invariably offer carefully formulated denials that they pay ransoms, but money is frequently paid through or by others. When confronted by the otherwise imminent death of one of their nationals, countries are less principled when it comes to the policy of offering no ransoms or significant concessions. The stance of Algeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States to under no circumstances pay ransoms is a wise one, and has been agreed as desirable state practice in the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF). It also figured in a separate declaration of the June 2013 G8 in Lough Erne. Here the agreement to 'unequivocally reject the payment of ransoms to terrorists' did not last beyond October when France paid more than €20 million to secure the release of the four hostages taken at Arlit, Niger.<sup>270</sup> For the Sahel hostages, France, Switzerland, and Spain have paid the largest share of the ransoms, and their nationals are not coincidentally kidnapped most frequently. Nonetheless, Fowler rebukes the Anglo-Saxon allies that criticized Canada for paying the ransom that secured his release, presenting several lesser known cases of hypocrisy in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>271</sup> If states and companies do manage to resist the temptation to pay large ransoms to secure the release of their nationals, this

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<sup>268</sup> Fowler, *A Season in Hell*, 150–51.

<sup>269</sup> Fowler, 227–8.

<sup>270</sup> Follorou, 'Otages d'Arilit'.

<sup>271</sup> Fowler, *A Season in Hell*, 310–11.

will impact enormously on AQIM's ability to finance its operations. It would also end the trend of continuing hostage takings in the Sahel.

The available evidence does not support the analysis that AQIM's jihadist rhetoric is merely the façade of a criminal organization that has self-enrichment as its primary objective. Just as Belmokhtar's reputation as a cigarette smuggler is hard to reconcile with local evidence, AQIM's role in the drugs trade seems equally marginal. This stands in stark contrast to the large role that the corrupt Malian government has played in allowing the drug trade to flourish, for instance by facilitating passage and obstructing law-enforcement efforts. This would imply that the counterterrorism strategy of cutting AQIM's drug revenue misses the point and could prove counterproductive. The drug trade probably has a bigger negative influence on Malian society than terrorism, and the international community should avoid approaching the problem through the prism of counterterrorism, where the state is both a victim and a partner in the fight. Only through fighting corruption and fundamentally reforming government institutions and practices can the problem of drugs be addressed.

## Conclusion

Despite experiencing serious setbacks over the past decade, AQIM has shown remarkable continuity and resilience. The jihadist galaxy in Mali and the broader Sahel may at first glance appear to be fractured, but personal connections and a shared history grant AQIM considerable influence over other Salafi-jihadist groups. AQIM's current commanding cadre, the 'old guard' harking back to the Algerian GIA and GSPC, is fiercely loyal to Al Qaeda's Al-Zawahiri, and will not be seduced by IS. The reintegration of Belmokhtar into AQIM's ranks will significantly increase operational capacity, and the recent hotel attacks indicate a potential new and deadly tactic targeting civilians and Western interests.

In distinguishing between a strategy of terrorism and one of insurgency, Duyvesteyn and Fumerton's framework offers useful categories to compare the characteristics of each. First, AQIM's objectives and ideology are closely aligned with Al Qaeda, and strongly indicate a strategy of terrorism rather than insurgency. The Caliphate is not an immediate goal, and by targeting the 'far enemy' AQIM aims at provoking Western reactions. Secondly, AQIM's organization displays all the elements of a typical terrorist one: small, mobile, and clandestine units rather than a large shadow organization. When the opportunity unexpectedly arose to govern northern Mali as an 'Islamic state' in 2012, AQIM and its partners were unprepared. Despite warnings by the strategic leadership, local commanders made all the mistakes they were instructed to avoid. Thirdly, as a result

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of their Sahelistan project, AQIM changed its relationship with the local population from acceptance of customs and loose integration into the local fabric, to a position of governance and responsibility. Ultimately, they alienated the locals, and Operation Serval removed them from power. AQIM has since recovered and reverted to its traditional and effective modus operandi: ambushes, lightning raids, and attacks across the Sahel. In the region of Timbuktu, however, it seems that AQIM is again seeking to control the population. This is more indicative of a strategy of insurgency and illustrates the limits of trying to fit AQIM's modus operandi into a conceptual framework. After all, AQIM's different commanders display strong autonomous traits, impeding management by their strategic leadership and academic conceptualization alike.

Finally, the evidence does not support the accusation that AQIM is a criminal organization with a religious façade. Within the drug trade, AQIM plays but a small role if any at all, while government corruption and complicity are primarily responsible for the flourishing narcotics trade. AQIM's main source of income remains ransoms, and as long as these are paid new hostages will be kidnapped. As for the label insurgent or terrorist, there is no controversy in concluding that AQIM is extremely adept at using terrorist tactics, and that their intent and capacity to do so is unlikely to diminish in the near future.

## **Acknowledgements**

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THE UNFORESEEN 2012 CRISIS IN  
MALI: THE DIVERGING OUTCOMES  
OF RISK AND THREAT ANALYSES

Sergei Boeke & Giliam de Valk

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## **Abstract**

The 2012 crisis in Mali, where the state collapsed and terrorist groups took over the north, came as a surprise to many. Mali had been considered a poster-child for democracy and was judged as considerably more stable than its neighbors by leading quantitative indices of state fragility. This article explores how quantitative risk and qualitative threat approaches led to incomplete analyses, and how bureaucratic processes stifled a holistic diagnosis of the situation in Mali. French and Dutch government views are analyzed, adding new empirical information on how ministries and embassies were unwilling to call out disconcerting developments in Mali.

## Introduction

The crisis that engulfed Mali in early 2012 surprised many policymakers and analysts alike. Within several months a separatist Tuareg uprising had violently evicted the security forces from the north of the country, a handful of junior officers and noncommissioned officers had launched a coup d'état, and subsequently the Tuareg rebels saw their uprising hijacked by three *Salafi-jihadist* groups. Mali had abruptly turned from a poor but relatively peaceful and stable West-African country to one where an appointed interim government attempted to govern the southern remnant of the country (and keep the influence of the junta limited), with the north—two thirds of the country—de facto an Islamic state controlled by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its partners. As perceived by its neighbors and expressed by UN resolutions and reports, the situation entailed a humanitarian crisis and a threat to international peace and security.<sup>272</sup> When the *Salafi-jihadist* groups unexpectedly attacked southern Mali in January 2013, France intervened and used a large military force to evict the terrorist groups from the north. In July/August 2013 presidential elections were held, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) of nearly 12,000 peacekeepers was established to help the government reassert its authority in the north and assist the peace process. A May 2013 international donor conference held in Brussels, Belgium, raised €3.25 billion in pledges for aid and reconstruction projects. The costs of the 2012 crisis, in human suffering, have been enormous and Mali is currently characterized by a fragile peace accord and a deteriorating security situation.

Open sources indicate that the prevailing analysis of Mali before the 2012 crisis was a rosy one. Western Ministries of Foreign Affairs saw Mali as a “poster child” for democracy in an otherwise volatile region.<sup>273</sup> At the same time it was a “donor darling” for the international aid community, receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in aid money, with aid surging during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Craven-Matthews and Englebert, from 1967 to 2013 Mali received an average of 15 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from aid, in contrast to 3.75 percent for the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>274</sup> On the Fund for Peace’s “Failed States Index” in 2011, Mali was placed in 76th

<sup>272</sup> ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali’ (United Nations Security Council, 28 November 2012), [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/894](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/894). See also UNSC Resolution 2071 (2012)

<sup>273</sup> Hussein Solomon, ‘Mali: West Africa’s Afghanistan’, *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (February 2013): 12–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.774635>.

<sup>274</sup> Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert, ‘A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction’, *African Security* 11, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2017.1419634>.

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position, on a par with India, while neighboring Niger—that shared many problems, such as Tuareg separatism—stood at 15th place.<sup>275</sup> With the exception of Algeria (81st place) and Senegal (85th), most of Mali’s seven neighbors were estimated to be much more fragile: Côte d’Ivoire (10th), Guinea (11th), Burkina Faso (37th), and Mauritania (42nd). AON, a global financial services company that provides an annual “Political Risk Map” used by insurers worldwide, judged in 2011 that Mali was at lesser risk of political upheaval than nearly all its neighbors.<sup>276</sup> There was certainly awareness that Tuareg separatism was a latent problem, with the peace process faltering after the 2006 uprising, the third since independence in 1960.<sup>277</sup> The problem of AQIM in the north was also well known, with a significant body of academic literature focusing on the kidnappings of Western tourists and terrorist attacks in the region.<sup>278</sup> So why did the collapse of Mali come as such a surprise? Considering the huge costs of the crisis—in terms of suffering and money—a more accurate appraisal of the situation could have allowed different actors, from the Malian government to the international community—to invest in preventing or cushioning the crisis.

One reason is that Mali’s crisis did not occur overnight. Rather, it was a combination of different events, each precipitating or triggering a next event. With the benefit of hindsight, several turning points can be identified. The fall of the Gadhafi regime and the exodus of several thousand Tuareg fighters back to Mali served as the initial catalyst. In October 2011, two Tuareg groups striving for an independent Azawad joined forces to form the *Mouvement national pour la libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA), which formed an informal alliance with three *Salafi-jihadist* groups (AQIM, its offshoot ‘*Mouvement pour l’unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest*’ (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine). The first turning point constituted the start of the armed insurrection on 17 January 2012. The second turning point concerned the coup on 22 March 2012. It occurred weeks before the first round of the presidential election was planned (27 April), ending two decades of democratic elections. President Amadou Toumani Touré (popularly referred to by the acronym ATT) fled the country, with few Malians mourning his departure. The coup accelerated the military’s rout in the

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<sup>275</sup> ‘The Failed States Index 2011’ (Washington, D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2011), [http://www.pucsp.br/ecopolitica/downloads/failed\\_states\\_index\\_2011.pdf](http://www.pucsp.br/ecopolitica/downloads/failed_states_index_2011.pdf).

<sup>276</sup> AON Political Risk Map 2011. For a copy of the map, see presentation Jef Vincent, ‘Political Risk Insurance: A Tool to Unlock Business Potential in Africa’, 2012 FANAF Conference, Kigali, [http://fanaf.org/article\\_ressources/file/fanaf\\_presentation\\_by\\_ati\\_feb2012\\_22.pdf](http://fanaf.org/article_ressources/file/fanaf_presentation_by_ati_feb2012_22.pdf)

<sup>277</sup> Lawrence E. Cline, ‘Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (1 August 2013): 617–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802972>.

<sup>278</sup> Martin Ewi, ‘A Decade of Kidnappings and Terrorism in West Africa and the Trans-Sahel Region’, *African Security Review* 19, no. 4 (1 December 2010): 64–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2010.539812>.

north, with the cities Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal falling into rebel hands. The third and final turning point concerned the takeover of the north by the three Al Qaeda–affiliated groups. The MNLA was violently evicted by the better resourced Al Qaeda groups. The result was a full-fledged terrorist sanctuary, encompassing two thirds of Mali’s territory. The contrast with Mali’s situation at the end of 2011 could not have been more stark. Was the crisis unforeseen as the result of a methodological issue?

## Separate Worlds of Risk and Threat

Scholarly literature on risk and threat analyses is clustered in different scientific disciplines. Risk assessment and risk management are in many respects regarded as scientific disciplines *per se*, and risk analysis is essential to engineering, the health sector, general economic activity, and the insurance business, among others. From international standards such as the ISO 27000 series to legislation on compliance, risk management has been integrated into many business and scientific fields, with several academic journals dedicated to the topic.<sup>279</sup> Political risk is a subset of the broader risk assessment field, and is in part focused on coverage for expropriation. While consensus on terminology is elusive, risk is commonly distinguished from uncertainty when the probability distribution of the factors studied can be determined objectively.<sup>280</sup> As such, risk is seen as the quantitative multiplication of the probability of the occurrence of an event by its estimated impact. When the probability is estimated on a subjective basis, this is labeled as uncertainty. In practice, much of risk assessment falls in this category, as many values and probabilities cannot be determined objectively.

Like risk, there is no single agreed-on definition of threat. Threats are generally understood as the intention of an actor to cause deliberate harm to someone or something. Although natural causes like hurricanes or floods can certainly “threaten” communities, in the social sciences the concept of threat is rooted in security studies. As the parameters of security have widened to nonmilitary phenomena, with human security now as much an object as state security, an associate broadening of the definition of threat would be logical.<sup>281</sup> Traditionally, however, safety studies (often the technical disciplines) focus on natural causes or human accidents, while malicious actors and actions fall in the field of security studies. A threat therefore has the potential to adversely impact organizational operations

<sup>279</sup> A. Ian Glendon, Sharon Clarke, and Eugene McKenna, *Human Safety and Risk Management, Second Edition* (CRC Press, 2016).

<sup>280</sup> Terje Aven, ‘Foundational Issues in Risk Assessment and Risk Management’, *Risk Analysis* 32, no. 10 (1 October 2012): 1647–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2012.01798.x>.

<sup>281</sup> Roland Paris, ‘Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?’, *International Security* 26, no. 2 (1 October 2001): 87–102, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228801753191141>.

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(including mission, functions, image, or reputation), organizational assets, or individuals. A threat is a *potential* for harm. The presence of a threat does not mean that it will necessarily cause actual harm. It is on the *nature* of the occurrences.

Concerning intelligence studies and threat analyses, a large body of research has formed around intelligence failures, investigating how analysts missed crucial threats to peace. From Pearl Harbor to Operation Barbarossa and Yom Kippur to 11 September 2001 (9/11), scholars have tried to determine whether the intelligence failure was one of collection or analysis, or both, or whether the policymaker was unwilling to heed the warning.<sup>282</sup> In many cases national security was at stake, with agencies and analysts following and focusing on certain developments, which were then missed or misinterpreted. There is also the broader field of indicator and early warning analyses.<sup>283</sup> During the Cold War, techniques were improved after decades of observing and analyzing the opponent's behavior. While this field also applies to non-state actors, it is more difficult to identify indicators that capture the few predictable paths that these groups need to follow when executing operations.<sup>284</sup> The core requirement for successful indicator and warning analyses remains a sharp focus on the actor/subject in question, time and energy to hone understanding of its behavior, and then the ability to identify deviations from the norm. For Africa, several early warning systems have been set up in the field of conflict prevention, management, and resolution.<sup>285</sup> There have been some generic studies into the effectivity of these mechanisms, but they have not focused in detail on specific case studies.<sup>286</sup>

This article explores how the quantitative risk and qualitative threat approach deal with analyzing threats to fragile states. Theoretically, causality could be demonstrated by either

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<sup>282</sup> Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1962); David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew: The Enigma of Barbarossa*, 1st Edition edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004

<sup>283</sup> Cynthia M. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning*, 9/19/04 edition (Lanham, Md.: UPA, 2004).

<sup>284</sup> James J. Wirtz, 'Indications and Warning in an Age of Uncertainty', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 26, no. 3 (1 September 2013): 550–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2013.780558>.

<sup>285</sup> Issaka K. Souaré and Paul-Simon Handy, 'The State of Conflict Early Warning in Africa: Theories and Practice', *African Security Review* 22, no. 2 (June 2013): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2013.792553>.

<sup>286</sup> Herbert Wulf and Tobias Debiel, 'Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanisms: Tools for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Regional Organisations? A Comparative Study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF' (Crisis States Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE, May 2009), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28495/1/WP49.2.pdf>.

inferring it statistically or by observation as a process. A comparative study by Tang et al. investigated how both approaches addressed the question, “does oil cause ethnic war?”. They concluded that a quantitative approach alone cannot establish causal mechanisms, including its contextual impact, but that a qualitative approach has some critical advantages, such as focusing on deep causes.<sup>287</sup> The focus on causality resulted in a more fine-grained and accurate assessment. The importance of investigating causal mechanisms is supported by other studies.<sup>288</sup> In the practical execution of research, additional problems with quantitative research are often a lack of agreement on coding and what should be the basic data set. These scholars believe that we must rely on statistical relations and logical inferences, because causality is not directly observable. By investigating how the quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied to Mali and what was observed and what was not, a clearer indication of the biases of each methodology can be distilled.

## Quantitative Risk Analyses

The Fragile States Index (FSI) is the most well-known country fragility index and a primary example of a quantitative risk assessment based on specific indicators. There are many indices for measuring fragility, as comprehensively analyzed by Mata and Ziaja in their report “User’s Guide on Measuring Fragility.”<sup>289</sup> At the time of their report (2009), there were eleven indices, including the Political Instability Index by the Economist Group, the World Bank’s Country Policy and Institutional Assessment and the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI). Some have since suffered a quiet demise, while others have been refashioned. The Failed State Index, for example, was re-baptized the Fragile State Index in 2014.<sup>290</sup> Each index or ranking uses different data sources, methodologies, and displays. Important are the underlying notions: does the index measure the fragility of the state, or of society in general? Also debated is whether violent conflict is a cause, symptom, or consequence of fragility. The underlying assumptions and foci often remain undefined. Mali was ranked differently by each index, but the scores did not deviate significantly from the general conclusion that the country was stable by regional standards. The BTI,

<sup>287</sup> Shipping Tang, Yihan Xiong, and Hui Li, ‘Does Oil Cause Ethnic War? Comparing Evidence from Process-Tracing with Quantitative Results’, *Security Studies* 26 (8 May 2017): 359–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1306392>.

<sup>288</sup> Romain Malejacq, ‘Warlords, Intervention, and State Consolidation: A Typology of Political Orders in Weak and Failed States’, *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 85–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1134191>.

<sup>289</sup> Javier Fabra Mata and Sebastian Ziaja, ‘User’s Guide on Measuring Fragility’ (Oslo: German Development Institute and the United Nations Development Program, 2009).

<sup>290</sup> Miles M. Evers, ‘The Fatally Flawed Fragile States Index’, *The National Interest* (blog), 15 July 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-fatally-flawed-fragile-states-index-10878>.

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for example, which detailed its methodology in a more transparent fashion than the FSI, put Mali in second place (after Ghana) in its regional findings for West and Central Africa in 2012.<sup>291</sup>

The fragility indices can be qualified as variants of risk analyses. By using empirical data, standardizing certain values, aggregating results, and then weighting the scores, results are *calculated*. A consistent methodology is used for all countries and applied in a centralized fashion. Central to the methodological process are indicators. These have been identified as valuable terms of measurement—metrics—and quantified (if they do not already consist of numbers) to allow scoring. As with many risk management approaches, the emphasis lies not on the exact probability of an event and the estimated impact of its eventual occurrence, but rather the identification of several variables indicating positive measures (e.g., an organization's preparation for an event) or negative developments (risk, or in this case state fragility). From a logical perspective the fragility indices do not estimate the probability of state collapse, as the outcome of state fragility can lead to many different forms of political and economic incidents and crises, all varying in severity and impact.

There has been significant criticism of the FSI and other fragility indices. At a fundamental level, the very concept of “fragile state” has been questioned, as it presupposes successful states. Some argue that the term is a construct coined by the West to enhance the legitimacy of major donor-led reforms in the financing of development aid, promoting Western policy “remedies” such as state-building and peace-building interventions for poverty and war.<sup>292</sup> At a more substantive level, criticism of the FSI can be clustered around several themes including its effect, usefulness as a policy instrument, emphasis on internal (national) factors, problems of logic and inference, and correct use of statistical data. Some authors contend that it focuses on symptoms rather than causes of fragility. Others argue that the FSI places too much emphasis on the importance of state institutions—implying more state building as a policy solution—while at the same time underestimating the (negative) impact of Western foreign policy choices.<sup>293</sup> Questions are also placed at the assumptions underpinning the interpretation of empirical data and the valuation of local constructs. For example, sharp population growth, authoritarian regime

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<sup>291</sup> *Transformation Index BTI 2012: Regional Findings West and Central Africa* (Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3033926>.

<sup>292</sup> Olivier Nay, ‘International Organisations and the Production of Hegemonic Knowledge: How the World Bank and the Oecd Helped Invent the Fragile State Concept’, *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (7 February 2014): 210–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.878128>; David Chandler, ‘Resilience and Human Security: The Post-Interventionist Paradigm’, *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (1 June 2012): 213–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010612444151>.

<sup>293</sup> Evers, ‘The Fatally Flawed Fragile States Index’.

type, and low GDP are all implied to increase state fragility. This, however, may not be supported by empirical data.<sup>294</sup>

Opaque methodologies prevent an analysis of why the fragility indices led to such an optimistic picture of Mali pre-2012. According to the Fund for Peace, country rankings are calculated using twelve specific indicators across four categories or dimensions: Cohesion, Economic, Political, and Social. Over 100 sub-indicators are used, but they remain unspecified and no definitive list is given.<sup>295</sup> It is further unclear which metrics are used. Three types of data are used: (1) content analysis; (2) quantitative data sets; and (3) qualitative review. The content analysis involves a scan of millions of documents (media articles, reports, etc.) to assess the salience of each sub-indicator in each country. The actual process remains unspecified.<sup>296</sup> In short, the possibility of validating a calculation—a core tenet of a scientific approach—is absent.

An alternative would be to investigate whether certain indicators would have been able to identify causes or contributors to the crisis in Mali. While the causes of the crisis can be manifold (see the next section), a sectoral approach, for example, would investigate the security component that led to the crisis. This would focus on the strength of the actors posing a threat, such as the MNLA insurgent and AQIM terrorist groups, and offset this against the capacity and ability of Mali's security forces to counter them. The first aspect—measuring the strength of non-state armed groups—is notoriously difficult to do, even for seasoned intelligence analysts. The capability of security forces is also difficult to measure, for different reasons. On paper the Malian army would not have differed significantly from its regional peers. The few units that were trained by French and U.S. forces appeared to perform reasonably in combat in early 2012, but nearly all other Malian units disintegrated on contact with the enemy.<sup>297</sup> Unit personnel strength is easy to measure, operational readiness is more difficult (although some countries calculate this for their own units), but battlefield efficacy escapes quantification.

Other, more indirect contributors to the crisis would have been equally difficult to capture in metrics. All the fragility indices use economic indicators, and build on the premise that

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<sup>294</sup> Seth Kaplan, 'Identifying Truly Fragile States', *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2 January 2014): 49–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.893173>.

<sup>295</sup> The Fund for Peace, 'Fragile States Index Methodology and CAST Framework' (Washington, D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2017).

<sup>296</sup> The Fund for Peace.

<sup>297</sup> Simon J. Powelson, 'Enduring Engagement Yes, Episodic Engagement No: Lessons for SOF from Mali' (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, December 2013), [http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWEG/AY\\_2013/Powelson,%20S%202013.pdf](http://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWEG/AY_2013/Powelson,%20S%202013.pdf).

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economic development has a positive correlation with political stability. Most of Mali's economy is agricultural and informal, and escapes realistic quantification in figures. The empirical data generated by Western economies is frequently absent in developing countries, or difficult to collect and unreliable when provided. Political indicators are equally difficult to operationalize as quantifiable metrics. Elections are regarded as positive factors for stability, but events in the Balkans and Iraq, for instance, undermine this fundamental assumption. Here elections led to an increase in sectarianism, cemented the position of spoilers in society, and ultimately contributed to further instability.<sup>298</sup> During the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections in Mali, there were serious instances of fraud, with the electoral committee annulling half a million votes in 2002.<sup>299</sup> Between 1991 and 2012, turnout was extremely low at around thirty percent each time, and even less for the parliamentary elections.<sup>300</sup> Close observers were well aware of the façade of Malian democracy, and estimated that ATT was not so much fairly elected as anointed by his predecessor, President Alpha Oumar Konaré, in 2002. Nonetheless, the country's reputation as a "poster child for democracy" stuck.

When determining which indicators are best used for measuring fragility, the debate on metrics for progress during counterinsurgency (COIN) operations can provide valuable insights. The Western intervention in Afghanistan (2001–present) grappled with the dilemma of how to measure the effect of military and development policies. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) initially focused on the number of incidents and killed/wounded in action (on both the enemy and their own sides), not dissimilar to the U.S. military's reliance on body counts during the Vietnam War. Security, however, is more complex than tallying incidents and losses.<sup>301</sup> Sometimes insurgents exerted such control over an area that they did not need to launch attacks. As part of COIN doctrine, David Kilcullen proposed using other metrics to analyze progress and security. Potential indicators for local security could be the price of vegetables and fruit, the assassination/kidnap rate, where local officials sleep, and where their business interests lie.<sup>302</sup> On the development side, statistics often focused on the *input* of the international effort—for

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<sup>298</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

<sup>299</sup> Laurent Bigot, 'Les Défis Du Sahel: Focus Sur La Crise Au Mali' (Le Sahel en 2012: évolutions, sécurité et développement. Conférence organisée par le Programme Afrique de l'Ifri, Paris, 22 June 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn67xaLPCBM>.

<sup>300</sup> Mohamed Traore and Sékou Mamadou Chérif Diaby, 'Les Elections Au Mali. Pourquoi Le Taux de Participation Est Toujours Si Bas?' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2011).

<sup>301</sup> Boeke, 'Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy'.

<sup>302</sup> David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56–76.

instance, money spent—or the *output*, such as schools built—rather than the *outcome*, such as children finishing school. It raises the question how the qualitative approach—compared to the quantitative—then deals with such issues.

## A Qualitative Threat Approach

The broad body of qualitative research on Mali pre-2012 can be divided into two groups: generic social sciences and specific security studies. Authors like Benjamin Soares, Bas Lecocq, Georg Klute, and others focused on the role of Islam, tribal politics, local politics, and Sahelian cultures, noting the complexities of Malian society and the nuances of different societal developments.<sup>303</sup> A separate body of academic research, rooted in the field of security studies, focused on the specific terrorist groups that claimed responsibility for the attacks and hostage-takings occurring in the Sahel. Jean-Pierre Filiu, Mathieu Guidère, and Djallil Lounnas focused on whether AQIM was a local Algerian organization, or a global Al Qaeda one, and what role it played in the Arab Spring.<sup>304</sup> Several scholars expressed their skepticism regarding the assumption then underpinning the Global War on Terrorism, and U.S. (and Algerian) policy to include the Sahel in counterterrorism efforts. A 2004 article in *Air Force Magazine* titled “Swamp of Terror in the Sahara” warned that “Unless unchecked, the terrorist infestation could turn parts of Africa into launchpads for tomorrow’s murderous outrages.”<sup>305</sup> The article embodied the policy hyperbole on terrorism and ungoverned spaces, and was extensively cited by scholars as an example of securitization. Jeremy Keenan took a more radical view, arguing that the terrorist threat had actually been fabricated by Algeria (and the United States) to further geopolitical and economic interests.<sup>306</sup> Keenan expanded the theme of state terrorism, arguing that the Algerian intelligence service (DRS) was at the heart of

<sup>303</sup> Benjamin F. Soares, ‘Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era’, *African Affairs* 105, no. 418 (1 January 2006): 77–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adi088>; Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, ‘Tuareg Separatism in Mali’, *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (30 September 2013): 424–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702013505431>.

<sup>304</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, ‘Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?’ (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2009), [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda\\_islamic\\_maghreb.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al-qaeda_islamic_maghreb.pdf); Mathieu Guidère, ‘Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique: le tournant des révolutions arabes’, *Maghreb - Machrek*, no. 208 (2011): 59–73, <https://doi.org/10.3917/machr.208.0059>; Djallil Lounnas, ‘AQMI, filiale d’Al-Qaïda ou organisation algérienne ? AQIM, Subsidiary of Al-Qaeda or Algerian Organization?’, *Maghreb - Machrek*, no. 208 (2011): 37–57, <https://doi.org/10.3917/machr.208.0037>.

<sup>305</sup> Stewart M. Powell, ‘Swamp of Terror in the Sahara’, *Air Force Magazine*, November 2004, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2004/November%202004/1104sahara.aspx>.

<sup>306</sup> Jeremy Keenan, *The Dark Sahara: America’s War on Terror in Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

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AQIM.<sup>307</sup> Coherent with this take, he and other authors argued that the Malian state had become more unstable, not so much due to growing radicalism, but rather as a direct result of U.S. and Malian counterterrorist policies.<sup>308</sup>

Concerning the qualitative threat analysis, it is important to determine which threat actor is threatening which object. Is the object the Malian state, government, or society, and are the malicious threat actors insurgents, criminals, or terrorists?<sup>309</sup> If applied to a terrorist grouping, a threat approach investigates the possibility of the group conducting operations against certain targets. Because it involves human intent, a threat is difficult to calculate. In contrast to risk analyses, therefore, threat analyses are qualitative and not quantitative in nature, and specific rather than generic. The focus lies on the malicious actor. In the intelligence sector a threat analysis is frequently accompanied by a predictive element. For example, potential aggressive military operations by an adversary will be estimated on a spectrum that can range from impossible, highly unlikely to highly likely or ultimately, imminent. This estimation is generally further circumscribed by a disclaimer framework, accompanying the judgment with a statement of high or low confidence.<sup>310</sup> As most scholarly research on fragile states and terrorism does not seek to forecast but to elucidate, this framework is absent in the social sciences.

The design of a threat analysis often involves the identification of drivers. When analyzing developments in the field of international affairs or conflict studies, three layers can generally be distinguished: events, patterns of events, and drivers. Drivers are at the “deepest” level and have a causal relationship with the pattern of events.<sup>311</sup> They are not only useful for analysis and scenario building, but their identification can help policymakers influence the pattern of events towards certain desired directions. Within some military intelligence units, analyses are made through so-called driver-based scenario building. In this approach drivers on actors are generated through a Strengths-

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<sup>307</sup> Jeremy Keenan, *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

<sup>308</sup> David Gutelius, ‘Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, no. 1 (1 January 2007): 59–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589000601157063>.

<sup>309</sup> Sergei Boeke, ‘Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 914–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280>.

<sup>310</sup> Jeffrey A. Friedman and Richard Zeckhauser, ‘Assessing Uncertainty in Intelligence’, *Intelligence and National Security* 27, no. 6 (1 December 2012): 824–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2012.708275>.

<sup>311</sup> George Wright and Paul Goodwin, ‘Decision Making and Planning under Low Levels of Predictability: Enhancing the Scenario Method’, *International Journal of Forecasting*, Special section: Decision making and planning under low levels of predictability, 25, no. 4 (1 October 2009): 813–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijforecast.2009.05.019>.

Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats inventory.<sup>312</sup> A causal loop diagram for the drivers on factors is made for the different drivers and factors involved. This consists of nodes (the variables, or drivers in this case) and edges; the links that indicate a connection or relationship between nodes. It is not known whether such analyses were made before the Mali crisis of 2012, but several actor/factor driver-based threat analyses were made for the MINUSMA mission in Mali in the years after the crisis.<sup>313</sup>

Intelligence reports frequently use the categories of activities, capabilities, and intentions to structure analyses. Rather than the indicators of risk analyses, a threat approach identifies drivers—factors or processes that contribute to violent conflict. Researchers often disagree which ones matter: greed or grievance; push or pull.<sup>314</sup> A threat approach also faces different methodological challenges than a risk approach. Whereas a risk approach is predicated on a systematic process, a calculation of certain selected variables and metrics, a threat estimation frequently lacks a structured methodology that is similar to a risk analysis. This mirrors post-crisis research, where the term “root causes” can serve as a label without methodological basis. Important, therefore, is clarity on the conceptual framework used when analyzing potential threats posed by actors.

A qualitative approach to state fragility and human security, focusing on threats, therefore produces different results from a risk approach. While the latter is predicated on a structured methodology—that is albeit flawed—a threat approach often lacks one in the first place. And if there are structured approaches present, they may vary consistently. With relative consensus among the indices on Mali’s stability, the (threat) literature on Mali pre-crisis is characterized by extremes poles of interpretation. Media and policy discourse emphasized the terrorist threat, juxtaposed by the albeit minority claim that terrorism was a fabricated construct, camouflaging oil and geopolitical interests. At the same time studies were generally narrow analyses, focusing on specific malicious actors, or covering an element in the political, economic, or social domain. The country was the exclusive research domain of a handful of experts, each working from a specific scientific discipline and on a narrow topic. Holistic approaches were lacking, and as such the general fragility of the Malian society and state was not recognized. Between 2001 and 2012 the International Crisis Group, as purveyor of quality analyses of fragile states,

<sup>312</sup> John A. Sokolowski and Catherine M. Banks, ‘Modeling Complex Social Behavior: A System Dynamics Approach’, in *Proceedings of the 19th Conference on Behavior Representation in Modeling and Simulation* (Charleston, SC, 2010), <http://cc.ist.psu.edu/BRIMS/archives/2010/papers/10-BRIMS-108%20Sokolowski.pdf>.

<sup>313</sup> One of the authors has had access to several UN scenario-building exercises

<sup>314</sup> Maria Kett and Michael Rowson, ‘Drivers of Violent Conflict’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 100, no. 9 (September 2007): 403–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/014107680710000912>.

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wrote only one report on Mali—the 2005 study of Sahelian terror threats.<sup>315</sup> Since the crisis erupted in 2012, it has published several reports annually. If there is no consensus that a state or region is prone to crises, very little research will focus on it. Once a crisis has erupted, it attracts all the attention.

## Comparing Threat and Risk Analyses

There is a fundamental difference in the methodological orientation of risk and threat assessments. As a result, they have different characteristics. They will be arranged in the next table. Before doing so, however, the differences in orientation at its deepest methodological level—the  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ —need explanation. The  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  concern erroneous outcomes of hypothesis testing. The  $\alpha$  is the chance that an observer *incorrectly* concludes that there is a significant relationship between phenomena. The  $\beta$  is the chance that one does *not discover* a weak, but actual existing, relationship between phenomena. In statistical hypothesis testing, these are analogous to a type I error where a true null hypothesis is incorrectly rejected (a false positive) and a type II error corresponds to incorrectly retaining a false null hypothesis (a false negative). In an analogy between statistical testing and a judge's decision (where the null hypothesis equates to the presumption of innocence), a Type 1 error concerns the conviction of an innocent person, and a type 2 the acquittal of a guilty one.<sup>316</sup> In the field of international relations, an example of a type 1 error is the rejection of the hypothesis that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction; a type 2 error is the failure to determine a link between the arrested Al Qaeda member Zacarias Moussaoui and the other hijackers, after his flight instructor became suspicious and informed the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Put differently, the  $\alpha$  is on proof and explanation—on the certainty of the relationships discovered—and the  $\beta$  on the relationships missed. A risk assessment, therefore, is aimed at reducing the  $\alpha$  (and the probability of a false positive). A threat analysis primarily aims at not missing a threat, reducing the value of the  $\beta$ .

To produce forecasts in the risk assessment column, sufficient data need to be present to produce correlations with a satisfying/set level of significance. This limits the time span that risk assessments can remain valid. Drivers, on the contrary, deal with the deep-level processes that characterize longer-term threat assessments. Quantitative analysis is per definition trend oriented. Only when a qualitative analysis is also made can other factors be

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<sup>315</sup> 'Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?', Africa Report No92 (International Crisis Group, 31 March 2005), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/chad/islamist-terrorism-sahel-fact-or-fiction>.

<sup>316</sup> Amitav Banerjee et al., 'Hypothesis Testing, Type I and Type II Errors', *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 18, no. 2 (2009): 127–31, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.62274>.

incorporated. In driver-based scenario building, the speed and direction in which drivers evolve are assessed. The focus lies on core uncertainties, with the objective of making an inventory of the drivers with the highest impact and the highest uncertainty. Those drivers will then be selected to construct the axes of the scenario. These scenarios can be enriched by a system of qualitatively selected critical indicators. These critical indicators are—as a result of the selection process—unique for every case. The indicators used in the FSI or other fragility indices, however, are generic for the whole sample of countries under investigation. In risk analyses the emphasis lies on mitigating impact and occurrence, and the focus lies not on unique cases but rather a systematic overview. In contrast, a threat analysis uses the data unique to the case to develop an understanding at the level of drivers.

The quantitative approach, associated with risk management and inherent to the indices on state fragility, therefore has certain characteristics and biases that determine what is observed and what is not. First, the format—numbers, rankings, even color-codings—impress the recipient with a notion of accuracy and reliability when neither is necessarily present, and distort proportions, times, or other dimensions through the chosen display. Numbers and visuals—certainly in relation to state fragility—inherently obscure nuance and over-simplify the intricate. Second, while a methodology is clearly present for calculating scores, this can be built on untested or hidden assumptions. When the methodology is not transparent, as it is for several fragility indices—these presuppositions remain camouflaged, and calculations cannot be validated. Third, it remains difficult to identify metrics that operationalize indicators. While electoral turnout, security incidents, or police strength can be quantified, many others cannot. Another issue is how to weigh and aggregate these numbers to the final “fragility” score. Finally, the purpose of these indices needs consideration. They can serve as guidance for general (strategic) policy advice, but early warning will only work when indicators are sensitive enough to register small but relevant variations and reporting is at regular but short intervals. Annual indices are by their very nature unqualified for early warning.

In a large study comparing U.S. military theater-level assessments in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Connable researched the use of metrics and assessments.<sup>317</sup> He concluded that centralized and decontextualized quantitative methods shaped counterinsurgency assessments at the expense of contextual, relevant qualitative data and comprehensive analytical methods. While quantitative data can still be valuable for a commander's

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<sup>317</sup> Ben Connable, ‘Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency’ (RAND Corporation, 2012), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND\\_MG1086.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1086.pdf).

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assessments, his core message was that context is king. Further investigation into the efficacy of metrics for progress (focus on the positive) and indicators of fragility (bias toward the negative) could generate valuable insights. Some of these problems can be countered by driver-based scenario building, at least in theory. The advantage is that drivers can identify possible points of mitigation, highlighting policy options in certain areas.

Are these findings in line with studies on international relations? All the problems for the quantitative approach—coding, basic set of data—are present. These are further aggravated, however, by issues as untested and hidden assumptions, oversimplifications, imperviousness to small but important variations, a lack of calculable data, and a lack of transparency. Additional problems apply to the qualitative approach as well. This concerns issues with sources, a lack of agreement on drivers and cause-and-effect relationships that matter, and even a lack of impartiality. This last issue—impartiality—leads to a problem of a different nature—framing. Describing the dangers of applying the terrorism frame postulated by U.S. and Western policy discourse, Judith Scheele warned that “As a result, the few scholarly works that are based on an actual knowledge of the areas concerned are increasingly swallowed up by the budding literature on security concerns in the Sahara that, through its initial postulate of ‘great danger’ and ‘radical changes’ precludes in-depth local case studies or historical approaches.”<sup>318</sup> She added that “the threat” risked becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. Academics (and analysts) searching for Islamic terrorists will probably find them, exacerbating existing misunderstandings and conceptual divisions.

## Friction

Practice does not always conform to theory. In his magnum opus *On War*, von Clausewitz distinguished friction as the concept that distinguishes real war from war on paper.<sup>319</sup> Friction is arguably not limited to war in a narrow sense but is applicable where large organizations strive to accomplish a certain mission. Friction occurs when theory collides with the practical course of events, with chance impacting decisions as well as actions. This section will investigate to what extent the Malian crisis took two European governments by surprise. The case studies concern France and the Netherlands, countries with differing but significant interests in Mali (both continued to play an important role in Mali after the crisis). The reason for this selection is twofold. First, the authors had access to French and Dutch language reports, and were able to conduct several semi-structured interviews

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<sup>318</sup> Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (New York, NY Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 234.

<sup>319</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 138–140.

with (former) government officials involved with policy/analyses on Mali. Second, both countries saw Mali as an important partner but from different perspectives. For France, Mali was vital for security (and economic and cultural) reasons. For the Netherlands the development aid sector played a pivotal role. By focusing on the governments' assessments of the situation on the ground, it will become clear if and how these countries' analyses diverged from the public indices on the Malian state fragility. After all, intelligence analysts and policymakers equally use open source data for their own analyses and policy advice. This section will further investigate which agencies within government held particular viewpoints on Mali's fragility. In doing so, it will compare how intelligence communities viewed Mali, and what the analyses of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs were, distinguishing between the ministries in the capitals and the French and Dutch embassies in Bamako. These disparate organizational units have diverging interests, outlooks, and standpoints.

Both France and the Netherlands represent different relationships that Western countries have with African ones, potentially revealing how the prisms of geopolitics and development aid can lead to different understandings of the local situation. France, as the former colonial power in Mali, retained strong political, economic, and cultural ties with Mali and Francophone West Africa. The Netherlands was an important donor country, having provided hundreds of millions of euros in development aid to Mali in the decade before the 2012 crisis, and continuing to do so afterward. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) community as a whole also deserves mention. As Steven Esquith argued, power shifted in Mali from a traditional process of constitutional dialogue and democratic deliberation to an arrangement of corrupt "consensus" politics controlled by government officials, donors, and the participation of NGOs.<sup>320</sup> These NGOs were therefore no longer innocent bystanders but accommodated themselves to state corruption. The other major power in the Sahel was the United States, having launched and run several multi- and bilateral counterterrorist programs from its African Command (AFRICOM) after 9/11. As these programs and the underlying U.S. interests have been covered extensively elsewhere, the next section will focus on the French and Dutch positions.

## The French Perspective

France remained an important player in Bamako after its independence in 1960. In contrast to other West African Francophone countries, French influence was more indirect from a political-military and an economic perspective. No military intervention took place

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<sup>320</sup> Stephen L. Esquith, "The Political Responsibility of Bystanders: The Case of Mali", *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no. 3 (1 December 2013): 377–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2013.849289>.

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between independence and Operation Serval, and the country was much less enmeshed in the “Francafrique” network that characterized many of its neighbors.<sup>321</sup> From a domestic and political perspective there was the question of hostages; in 2011 seven different French nationals were held in captivity by AQIM. Government policy focused on both negotiating their release (and paying ransoms) as well as conducting violent rescue attempts by Special Forces if and when the opportunity arose. As such, the Sahel was a priority for France’s foreign intelligence service (la direction générale de la sécurité extérieure [DGSE]), so much so that operators involved in France’s largest military operation at the time, in the dangerous Afghan district of Surobi, felt that they were the fifth wheel on the wagon.<sup>322</sup> The *Salafi-jihadists* considered France and French interests as their main target and AQIM’s links to diaspora in France made them a direct threat to national security. As a result, French intelligence had a strong focus on the *jihadist* groups, collecting intelligence on their capabilities, activities, and intentions. One of their primary goals was to find out where the hostages were being held, and secure their release, either through negotiations or French military operations. In March 2012 the DGSE briefly learned of the whereabouts of several leading AQIM commanders in Timbuktu and a Special Forces raid was considered but eventually rejected by President Sarkozy.<sup>323</sup>

The DGSE had a strong focus on the tribal dynamics in the north and national politics in Bamako. Many authors in France, as well as Mali, suspect that the DGSE have a strong pro-Tuareg bias.<sup>324</sup> Their respect for the “blue warriors” appears in part historical, in part a result of the Tuareg’s practical assistance in securing the release of hostages. This bias, however, not only shaped perception in Southern Mali of France aiding and abetting separatists, but even influenced inter-ministerial relations in Paris. According to author Jean-Christophe Notin, diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), or the *Quai d’Orsay*, felt that the DGSE’s reports were so pro-Tuareg that they stopped reading them.<sup>325</sup> The DGSE did not foresee the creation of Ansar Dine, the *Salafi-jihadist* Tuareg group that was formed in the fall of 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, but was certainly well aware of the dynamics leading to the January 2012 attack.<sup>326</sup> After the attack was launched, even open source intelligence would have provided ample information on the

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<sup>321</sup> Tony Chafer, ‘Hollande and Africa Policy’, *Modern & Contemporary France* 22, no. 4 (October 2014): 513–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2014.957966>.

<sup>322</sup> Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 22–23.

<sup>323</sup> Lasserre and Oberlé, 23.

<sup>324</sup> Catherine Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa: Security Prestige and the Legacy of Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>325</sup> Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali.*, 65.

<sup>326</sup> Notin, 65.

MNLA and their progress on the battlefield in the north. Having learned from the “Arab Spring” demonstrations in 2011, the MNLA extensively used social media platforms like Facebook to coordinate, direct, and publicize their military operations.

Reports indicate that the DGSE had an equally strong understanding of Malian politics. It was no secret that corruption had hollowed out the state, and apparently the French intelligence agency even had proof of collusion between ATT and the *ihadists*, with details on how a senior member of his entourage informed AQIM.<sup>327</sup> The DGSE also had good intelligence on the state of the Malian security forces, predicting on 19 March that a military coup would probably take place on Saturday 24 March.<sup>328</sup> It occurred two days earlier than predicted. While indicative of good sources and a thorough understanding of the dynamics in Bamako, this warning still needs contextualization. An advisor at the Elysée palace—the presidential cabinet—noted that hardly a week went by without a warning of a possible coup somewhere in Africa.<sup>329</sup> At the same time it is unclear what French policymakers could realistically have done with the information provided.

The French MFA had its own sources and opinions on developments in Mali. At the central level in Paris, policymakers were aware that Malian society suffered from extreme corruption and that there was collusion between the state and organized crime. For policymakers, the turning point that dispelled all doubts was the “Air Cocaine” affair of 2009, where a Boeing 727 loaded with drugs landed in the desert and was burned after unloading.<sup>330</sup> In Bamako, Ambassador Christian Rouyer, a generalist with experience in France’s prefectures and humanitarian work, succeeded Michel Reveyrand de Menthon in March 2011. The latter had been ambassador for four years and would later become the European Union’s Special Sahel Envoy. According to Notin, Ambassador Rouyer concluded that corruption had permeated Malian institutions, up to and including the presidential office, but more importantly, he was the first ambassador to say so openly.<sup>331</sup> For him the Malians were in complete denial of the problems facing their country. Malian officials in turn accused France of exaggerating the fundamentalist threat, with the French MFA’s warnings of insecurity scaring away tourists that were so vital to the economy. For the embassy in Bamako, the diplomats in 2011 estimated that their leeway to shape or influence ATT’s policy was severely restricted. They needed all his assistance on the delicate issue of the French hostages held by the *ihadists*.

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<sup>327</sup> Notin, 57.

<sup>328</sup> Notin, 72.

<sup>329</sup> Notin, 72.

<sup>330</sup> Interview, former French policy-maker, The Hague, 2018

<sup>331</sup> Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*, 55.

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The French MFA was reluctant to criticize the Malian government or acknowledge fundamental problems. Laurent Bigot, nicknamed Mr. Mali by the French press, was deputy director of the West Africa Department and visited Mali in the fall of 2011. He wrote a note warning of the explosive situation, but it had no effect. In July 2012, he gave a presentation on the situation in Mali at an academic conference of the *Institut Français des relations internationales* in Paris.<sup>332</sup> Discarding the language of diplomacy, he emphasized how the West did not want to see the extent of corruption in Mali, arguing that a feeling of superiority and intellectual laziness had led many to accept the phenomenon of corruption as part of African culture. Serious incidents of electoral fraud in the previous decade had been systematically downplayed, as Mali's reputation as a poster-boy for democracy continued to be lauded by Western observers. Since much of the population continued to languish in poverty, radical Islam offered one of the few outlets. Bigot finished his presentation by predicting that Burkina Faso would be next to collapse. He was proven right in October 2014, when the country erupted in violence after President Blaise Compaoré attempted to change the constitution to further prolong his 27 years in office. Even after the collapse of Mali, Bigot's politically incorrect description of Mali as a façade-democracy was unwelcome, and probably contributed to his firing hardly a year later.<sup>333</sup> He subsequently founded a consultancy advising on African affairs, and argued that many of the indicators and drivers of the crisis in Mali applied equally to its neighbors.<sup>334</sup> Before Mali's collapse, the French MFA did not share—or at least espouse—the view that Mali's political system was corrupt to the core, preferring to stay optimistic and focus on improving cooperation.<sup>335</sup>

## The Dutch Perspective

The Dutch governmental prism for analyzing Mali originated in a different contextual setting, but led to similar outcomes, including a shared reticence to recognize and publicize the spoiler role of the Malian government. For the Dutch MFA, Mali was one of 15 partner countries earmarked for significant development aid. In 2010 Bamako received at least €42 million through bilateral channels and more through multilateral programs, making Mali the second largest recipient of Dutch aid after Afghanistan (where the Dutch

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<sup>332</sup> Bigot, 'Les Défis Du Sahel: Focus Sur La Crise Au Mali'.

<sup>333</sup> Alain Barluet, 'Le Mali fait tomber des têtes au Quai d'Orsay', *Le Figaro*, 11 March 2013, sec. International.

<sup>334</sup> Laurent Bigot, '« Le terrorisme au Sahel, conséquence de la prévarication érigée en mode de gouvernance »', *Le Monde*, 16 August 2017, [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/08/16/le-terrorisme-au-sahel-conséquence-de-la-prevarication-erigee-en-mode-de-gouvernance\\_5172873\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/08/16/le-terrorisme-au-sahel-conséquence-de-la-prevarication-erigee-en-mode-de-gouvernance_5172873_3212.html).

<sup>335</sup> Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali.*, 67; Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 193.

contributed more than 2,000 soldiers to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] ISAF mission).<sup>336</sup> In 2011, the MFA recalibrated the focus for development aid, reducing the number of countries that were earmarked for large donor projects. Mali remained one of the primary recipients of Dutch donor aid, and the government's letters to Parliament took note of programs where fraud/corruption had been discovered. The bilateral relationship between both countries was good, and in December 2011 President ATT was welcomed by Queen Beatrix for an official state visit. His visit occurred one month after Dutch citizen Sjaak Rijke was abducted by AQIM fighters in Timbuktu (together with a Swedish and South African citizen), and concerns about the security situation in northern Mali were covered by the Dutch media. During ATT's stay in the Netherlands, he mentioned the influx of Tuareg fighters from Libya and requested material assistance for the Malian armed forces. Dutch press coverage of the visit, however, focused more on how skilled the Malian government was in attracting donor money.<sup>337</sup>

The Dutch development community in Mali objected to what they perceived as possible "securitization" of their domain. Their concern was not unfounded with studies indicating that development aid was being recalibrated to fit the goals of the Global War on Terror.<sup>338</sup> As such, the MFA sought to keep Mali out of the remit of the intelligence community. In the Netherlands, foreign intelligence operations are conducted by the two intelligence agencies, the general intelligence and security service (AIVD) and the military intelligence and security service (MIVD). To coordinate and allocate their operations and analytical foci, the government establishes a classified tasking instruction, allocating countries as well as topics to one of the two intelligence services. This mission list, that is regularly updated, is a product of a political process involving several ministries and is signed off on by the prime minister. The MFA played a strong role in the interdepartmental negotiations as one of the primary intelligence consumers, with the intelligence services vying with each other to cover—or to avoid—certain topics. Several factors influence the allocation decision making, including the military or civilian signature of the developments or threats in question and the limited capacity to cover all areas of national (security) interest. As for Mali, two (former) intelligence officials noted that the MFA

<sup>336</sup> Marije Balt, 'Westen Hielp Mali van Regen in de Drup', OneWorld.nl, 6 June 2012, <https://www.oneworld.nl/bloggen/blogs/opinieblog/westen-hielp-mali-van-regen-de-drup>.

<sup>337</sup> Wim Bossema, 'Mali is heel bedreven in het paaien van donoren', *De Volkskrant*, 2 December 2011, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/mali-is-heel-bedreven-in-het-paaien-van-donoren-a3060652/>.

<sup>338</sup> Kwesi Aning, 'Security, the War on Terror, and Official Development Assistance', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 1 (26 April 2010): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539151003594178>; Stephan Keukeleire and Kolja Raube, 'The Security–Development Nexus and Securitization in the EU's Policies towards Developing Countries', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 3 (1 September 2013): 556–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.822851>.

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wanted Mali to remain the exclusive domain of the Foreign development aid sector, and consequently neither intelligence service was designated to monitor developments there.<sup>339</sup> Libya was initially not allocated for a special intelligence focus either, but became the remit of the MIVD once NATO was involved.

The uprising in Libya, and the broader Arab Spring, had taken the Western intelligence community by surprise. Events unrolled rapidly in early 2011, and as concerns grew that Gadhafi would massacre the remnants of the uprising in Benghazi, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States started preparing for a military intervention. The U.K. government, for instance, discovered that most of its initial intelligence on Libya was based on maps dating from the Second World War and Wikipedia.<sup>340</sup> The Dutch MIVD had an equally limited information position on Libya, and started following the developments as the anti-Gadhafi protests turned violent in February 2011.<sup>341</sup> Once Gadhafi had been killed and spillover from the intervention began to impact northern Mali, the single analyst covering Libya also became responsible for reporting on these developments. In the last months of 2011, the analyst in question briefed Dutch Special Forces ready to be deployed to West Africa as part of the annual Flintlock training exercise. According to someone present at the briefing, the analyst concluded that the exodus of Tuareg fighters from Libya to Mali would probably not lead to armed violence in the north.<sup>342</sup> This was, as events later proved, an incorrect assessment.

Before the 2012 crisis, the Dutch MFA was reluctant to accept warnings and negative news from northern Mali. In 2010 the Department of State Fragility at the ministry in the Hague had commissioned Wolfram Lacher, a researcher from the *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), to write an internal report on the Program for Peace, Security and Development in North Mali. This program intended to strengthen the Malian state presence in the north. The report meant to investigate whether, and if so how, the Dutch government should support the initiative. The author conducted field work in Timbuktu and interviews in Bamako, and concluded that there was little political will in Bamako to address grievances in the north. Another important but politically inopportune conclusion was that the Malian state was involved in extensive collusion with organized crime and the drug trade. In addition, he estimated that the way the program was conceived would only

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<sup>339</sup> Interview anonymous Dutch officials, The Hague, September 2017

<sup>340</sup> Sergei Boeke and Jeanine De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Libya (2011-2016)' (ICCT, April 2016), 47.

<sup>341</sup> 'Toezichtsrapport Inzake de Rol van de MIVD En de AIVD Bij Een Evacuatiemissie in Libië' (Commissie van Toezicht Betreffende de Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdiensten, 31 August 2011), <https://www.ctivd.nl/binaries/ctivd/documenten/rapporten/.../CTIVD+rapport+27.pdf>.

<sup>342</sup> Interview anonymous Dutch official, December 2016.

exacerbate tensions. The reactions within the Dutch MFA to his report were negative, and although the findings were briefly discussed at an international workshop in December 2010 in Bamako, the report was not allowed to be distributed.<sup>343</sup> Lacher later published a shorter and adapted version of the report as a Comments paper for the think tank SWP.<sup>344</sup>

## Conclusion

From an empirical perspective, this article has shown that many Western organizations operating in Mali were well aware of the extreme fragility of the government pre-2012. Embassies and NGOs contributed to upholding the façade, unable to disentangle themselves from the country's endemic corruption and unwilling to reconsider its status as a "donor darling." The country's elite knew how to game the system, and the international donor community became complicit in sustaining corruption through the involved preferred partnerships. As such, the frailties of the state were acknowledged but not openly discussed until late 2011. This article does not posit that the crisis could or should have been predicted or foreseen. The 2012 crisis consisted of a cascade of events, each turning out in a uniquely unfortunate way for the government in Bamako (and the citizens in the north), and precipitating a subsequent turning point. Once the crisis had run its course to the full *jihadist* occupation of the north, the framework of reference for analysts also shifted. In the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Sebastian Elischer predicted that "After Mali Comes Niger."<sup>345</sup> While he avoided any dates, six years later Niger has still been spared a crisis of this magnitude. Laurent Bigot was more prescient; he correctly identified Burkina Faso as the next government that would collapse.

Exogenous factors played an important role in the 2012 Malian crisis. The influx of Tuareg fighters that sparked the initial uprising was a direct but unintended consequence of NATO's intervention in Libya. It is possible that the French, British, and American governments had not considered this potential side-effect as the intervention was planned in haste, to prevent an impending massacre at Benghazi. Conversely, organizational dividing lines between the Middle East/North Africa (and Sub-Sahara Africa departments (traditional distinctions in business as well as governments) may have impeded an integral analysis of the possible implications of Gadhafi's removal. Several MFAs, including the Dutch and French ministries, have resorted to the use of intra-departmental Task Forces to improve policymaking on

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<sup>343</sup> Interview anonymous former diplomat, December 2016, and telephone interview Wolfram Lacher

<sup>344</sup> Wolfram Lacher, 'Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel: Drivers, Actors, Options' (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2011), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/organized-crime-and-terrorism-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>345</sup> Sebastian Elischer, 'After Mali Comes Niger', *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/mali/2013-02-12/after-mali-comes-niger>.

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specific missions and themes. As shown by the Dutch analysis of northern Mali, however, even a holistic and detailed consideration of the factors at play can still lead to the wrong conclusions. Terrorism, and AQIM in the Sahel, remain a transnational phenomena that transcends national frontiers as well as traditional organizational boundaries within and among government ministries. Driver-based scenario building should, by its very nature, integrate exogenous factors into the analytical framework.

The authors have not been able to identify open source articles that combined a quantitative and qualitative approach to analyze the general state of Mali pre-2012. An example of a qualitative but multidisciplinary and holistic analysis is offered by the article “One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts,” but it was published in 2013, after the crisis.<sup>346</sup> Here the authors argued that the complex situation in Mali, including Tuareg tribal politics, a contested political system in Bamako, *jihadist* developments in the Sahel and regional/French power relationships, could only be addressed by a multivocal analysis by different specialists. Using the Hippopotamus as an example—Mali’s national mascot—they illustrated how blind scholars touching different parts of an object come up with differing explanations of what it is. The article incorporated several strands of thinking and research, but is nonetheless retrospective, predominantly explaining how events unfurled and to a lesser extent why. This interdisciplinary cooperation would have been helpful before the crisis. Still, its holistic approach does not address issues as framing, friction, and impartiality. These elements remain problematic.

For Mali, the differing quantitative and qualitative approaches contributed to alternative realities, with neither contested by those in the field (who knew better). As illustrated by Table 1, the two approaches can be considered complementary rather than competing, and a well-designed driver-based scenario-building exercise offers a practical instrument that mitigates some of the biases. As such, by identifying drivers, wild cards, and causal loops, policymakers will be better able to conceptualize the threats facing fragile states. Ideally, a scenario exercise would include participants from different government agencies: policy departments, embassies, and intelligence services. Just bringing them together to exchange views contributes to transcending departmental stovepipes and mitigating inherent tensions between organizations. This would allow governments to better anticipate crises in the broader Sahel, as the region faces increasing insecurity and violent conflict. A concerted effort to aid and support African early warning systems would also benefit all parties.

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<sup>346</sup> Lecocq et al., ‘One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts’.

	<b>Risk assessment, quantitative (FSI/ GPI)</b>	<b>Threat assessment, qualitative (Driver Based Scenario Building)</b>
Methodology	Primarily $\alpha$ -oriented (to assess/explain)	Primarily $\beta$ -oriented (not to miss)
Focus	To assess the state of a nation	To develop policy options
Future	Present + near and mid term	Mid and long term
Level	Superficial level (indicator)	Deeper level (driver)
Continuity	Trend orientated (calculable)	Change orientated (speed and direction in which drivers develop; focus on core uncertainties)
Data	Event-based. Vulnerable for manipulated, ambivalent, incomplete, hidden and dirty data	To test the driver-based findings. Explicitly designed to deal with data absent/ambivalent
Type of insight	Insurance-like: not pin-point, but a generalization of insights	Pin-point and case unique
Policy options	To reduce impact and occurrence	To manipulate drivers

**Table 1. FSI and driver-based scenario building in intelligence research.**

The French and Dutch governmental outlook on Mali pre-2012 shows how friction, between theory and practice and between different governmental players, hampered an effective analysis of the local situation. Some government departments were well aware of the extreme fragility of the Malian state and society, but their assessments failed to reach or influence policymakers. The political element of analyzing fragility remains a challenge for national governments, and is even more problematic for international organizations. The African Union (AU)'s early warning system, for example, is hampered by member states' general reluctance to have their domestic situation assessed or even discussed by an external actor such as the AU.<sup>347</sup> As Sherman Kent noted on intelligence products, there is no effective warning if policymakers do not read the assessment, read it but do not believe it, or believe it but do not take the conclusions aboard.<sup>348</sup> The crisis in 2012 might not have been foreseen, but those immersed in Malian politics and society were not surprised.

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank Isabelle Duyvesteyn for her valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>347</sup> 'Denialism Plagues Africa's Early Warning System', PSC Insights (ISS Africa, 19 April 2017), <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/denialism-plagues-africas-early-warning-system>.

<sup>348</sup> Jack Davis, 'Sherman Kent's Final Thoughts on Analyst - Policymaker Relations', *The Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis* Volume 3, number 3 (June 2003), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/kent-vol2no3/pdf/v02n3p.pdf>.



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OPERATION 'SERVAL': A STRATEGIC  
ANALYSIS OF THE FRENCH  
INTERVENTION IN MALI, 2013–2014

Sergei Boeke & Bart Schuurman

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## **Abstract**

In 2013, France launched Operation 'Serval' to halt the southwards advance of Islamist insurgents in Mali. Using a Clausewitzian analytical framework, this article provides an assessment of France's political and military aims in Mali and the degree to which they have been attained. Clear political goals, coordinated international diplomacy, an effective use of military force and blunders by the rebel forces turned 'Serval' into a short-term success. Strategically, however, the mission has proven unable to address the conflict's underlying causes. Serval's long-term effect is probably better measured by what it prevented than what it contributed.

## Introduction

In January 2013, the Islamist militants who held northern Mali launched a military offensive against the government-controlled south. In the capital Bamako, interim-president Dioncounda Traoré, fearing that the Army would not be able to withstand the attack, made an official request to France and the United Nations (UN) for military assistance. On 11 January 2013, French President Hollande deployed troops to Mali. The intervention was called Operation 'Serval', after a desert wild cat. Within a matter of days, a combination of French airpower and Special Forces had succeeded in halting the rebel offensive. Key northern cities were retaken by French troops. Abandoning their drive south, the militants fled back to safe havens in the inhospitable mountains along Mali's north-eastern border with Algeria and Niger.

Over the course of the following three and a half months, French forces and their African allies tracked down the insurgents and engaged them in close quarters combat. Ultimately, a third of the estimated 2,000 Islamist fighters are believed to have been killed with 430 taken prisoner.<sup>349</sup> Many others fled to Niger and Libya, or dissolved into the local Malian population. Six French troops and, according to official accounts, 38 Chadian soldiers were killed in the fighting during this phase.<sup>350</sup>

As the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, initial military success does not guarantee long-term strategic gain. France launched Operation 'Serval' to halt an Islamist offensive on politically fragile and embattled southern Mali. During the operation, these limited objectives expanded to reconquering of all of the territory held by rebel forces. By intervening, France secured key regional political and economic interests in the short term, at the cost of becoming co-proprietor of a complex set of security and governance problems in Mali. More than two years on from Serval, which ended in August 2014, many of the fractures in Malian society that gave rise to the conflict in the first place are proving difficult to address.<sup>351</sup> Various parties within Mali have been undermining the precarious restoration of the government's authority and territorial control. Concurrently, the Malian government has proven an unreliable partner.<sup>352</sup> Corruption is still rife, the government has frustrated reconciliation and negotiation efforts with rebel factions, and

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<sup>349</sup> Thomas Hofnung, 'Mali : raid audiovisuel sur l'opération Serval', *Libération*, 16 October 2016, [https://www.liberation.fr/ecrans/2013/10/16/mali-raid-audiovisuel-sur-l-operation-serval\\_940100](https://www.liberation.fr/ecrans/2013/10/16/mali-raid-audiovisuel-sur-l-operation-serval_940100).

<sup>350</sup> Halifa-Legrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les Secrets d'une Guerre Éclair'.

<sup>351</sup> In Serval's wake, a regional counterterrorism operation has been launched labeled Operation 'Barkhane'.

<sup>352</sup> Grégory Chauzal, 'Commentary: Bamako's New Government', Clingendael, 11 February 2015, <https://www.clingendael.org/nl/publication/commentary-bamakos-new-government>.

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in large parts of the country the state is losing the little legitimacy it had by failing to provide basic services.<sup>353</sup>

The French government has declared ‘Serval’ a success.<sup>354</sup> However, the mission’s inability to address any of the socio-political causes of the Malian conflict raises the question to what extent ‘Serval’s’ accomplishments extend beyond a series of initial military victories. This article asks what ‘Serval’s’ political and military objectives were, the degree to which these were attained and, most importantly, to what extent the pursuit of these objectives has translated into strategic gains for the French government. In one of few reports written in English, Michael Shurkin provides a good tactical and operational analysis of the operation.<sup>355</sup> This article complements his analyses with a discussion of the strategic, political and military aspects of the mission.

To address these questions, the authors use an analytical framework based on the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s trinitarian conception of war.<sup>356</sup> Consequently, the core of this article draws attention to the military, political and chance-related factors that most strongly influenced the design, execution and outcomes of ‘Serval’. This analysis is preceded by a brief discussion of the continued relevance of Clausewitz’s nineteenth century ideas to contemporary armed conflicts and the provision of some relevant background information on the Malian conflict. With regard to sources, this article relies on Francophone media reporting, academic studies and official reports issued by the French government. The authors believe that their analysis is relevant to both academics interested in contemporary asymmetric conflicts and policy-makers faced with the continuing threat posed by Islamist non-state actors using strategies of insurgency and terrorism.

## Clausewitz, ‘New Wars’ and Operation ‘Serval’

Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* has arguably become the most authoritative work on strategy in the Western world.<sup>357</sup> It has also attracted considerable criticism from authors who question its applicability to contemporary armed conflicts. Because Clausewitz

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<sup>353</sup> ‘World Report 2015: Mali’, Country Summary (Human Rights Watch, January 2015), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mali>.

<sup>354</sup> ‘Terrorisme: après Serval au Mali, la France lance “Barkhane” au Sahel’, L’Obs, 13 July 2014, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20140713.AFP1816/terrorisme-apres-serval-au-mali-la-france-lance-barkhane-au-sahel.html>.

<sup>355</sup> Shurkin, ‘France’s War in Mali’.

<sup>356</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.

<sup>357</sup> Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 12–23.

died before completely revising *On War*, he bequeathed an unfinished book containing numerous puzzling contradictions that have enabled myriad interpretations of his work.<sup>358</sup> Scholarship has affirmed that chapter one of book one contains Clausewitz's most mature insights, making it only logical to focus on this part of *On War* as the most valuable for deducing theoretical insights into the nature of war.<sup>359</sup> The most important of these is that war's essence resembles a 'trinity' composed of primordial violence, chance and instrumental purpose.<sup>360</sup> Clausewitz, *by way of example*, connected these elements to the people, the military and the political leadership in what has become known as his 'secondary trinity'.<sup>361</sup>

Critics have used the secondary trinity to claim that Clausewitz's work is state-centric and of limited utility to understanding contemporary conflicts in which non-state actors are proliferate.<sup>362</sup> But it is the *primary* trinity that deserves our attention as the most mature synthesis of Clausewitz's thinking, a concept that is applicable across a broad range of conflicts and combatants.<sup>363</sup> That Clausewitz also lectured and wrote extensively on guerrilla warfare provides further reason to assume that the ideas he set out about war's nature are as applicable to 'big' and 'conventional' wars as they are to 'small', 'irregular' or 'new' ones.<sup>364</sup>

Clausewitz's trinity is the synthesis of his argument about the nature of war. Its first part is the thesis that war, *in theory*, will escalate to absolute levels of violence as the combatants attempt to best each other.<sup>365</sup> His antithesis is that war *in reality* looks quite different. The

<sup>358</sup> Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, New edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 201–2.

<sup>359</sup> Eugenio Diniz and Domício Proença Júnior, 'A Criterion for Settling Inconsistencies in Clausewitz's *On War*', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 6–7 (10 November 2014): 879–902, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.621725>.

<sup>360</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 101.

<sup>361</sup> Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', *Parameters*, Autumn 1995, 13–14.

<sup>362</sup> Mary Kaldor, 'Inconclusive Wars: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant in These Global Times?', *Global Policy* 1, no. 3 (2010): 271–3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2010.00041.x>; Martin van Creveld, *On Future War* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 40.

<sup>363</sup> Colin S. Gray, 'War-Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity', *Parameters* 40, no. 2 (2010): 6–8; M. L. R. Smith, 'Escalation in Irregular War: Using Strategic Theory to Examine from First Principles', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 5 (1 October 2012): 618, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.706967>.

<sup>364</sup> Sebastian Kaempf, 'Lost through Non-Translation: Bringing Clausewitz's Writings on "New Wars" Back In', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 4 (1 October 2011): 548–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2011.599164>; Beatrice Heuser, 'Small Wars in the Age of Clausewitz: The Watershed Between Partisan War and People's War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 1 (1 February 2010): 139–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402391003603623>.

<sup>365</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 83–87.

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tendency towards extremes is thwarted by untold sources of 'friction', such as bad weather or poor intelligence, and the fact that war is an instrument of policy and politics, which means that the levels of violence correspond with the nature of the goals being pursued.<sup>366</sup> Thesis and antithesis are then subsumed in Clausewitz's primary trinity, which adds the element of chance and allows us to understand war as the interplay of irrational (violence), *non*-rational (chance) and rational (use as an instrument of politics/policy) elements.<sup>367</sup>

Yael Brahm's argues that, even if essential characteristics of war exist, knowledge of them is of limited practical benefit to soldiers and generals.<sup>368</sup> Clausewitz never intended his work to be used as an operational manual, but as a means of stimulating his readers' critical thinking on matters of strategy.<sup>369</sup> It is precisely in this fashion that his ideas on the nature of war are used here. If war is governed by the interplay between violence, chance and rational purpose, then gaining an understanding of the outcomes of particular conflicts will require an evaluation of all three of these factors and the links between them. Far from being state-centric, the timeless elements of war captured in Clausewitz's primary trinity make it an analytical framework suitable for studying a broad range of conflicts.<sup>370</sup> As a result, this study investigates France's political aims, its military strategy and the influence of chance to luck to better understand Operation 'Serval's' outcome and its longer-term strategic significance.

## Background to the French Deployment

Until 2012, Mali was described as a 'poster child for democracy' and considered the most politically stable country in a region rife with *coups d'état*.<sup>371</sup> In reality, Mali was plagued by ethnic, social and economic fractures. Arguably the most important of these has been the conflict between the Tuareg, a large, nomadic ethnic group situated in northern Mali, southern Algeria and Western Niger, and the sedentary peoples of southern Mali. The Tuareg do not constitute a majority in Mali's north nor have they formed a united front against the government in Bamako. Within the complex federation of Tuareg tribes, several factions have historically fought for more autonomy from the capital, while others were co-opted by Bamako through a policy of divide and rule. Since the 1960s,

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<sup>366</sup> Clausewitz, 86–100.

<sup>367</sup> Villacres and Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', 13.

<sup>368</sup> Yael Brahm's, "'Get Real" – A Pragmatic Approach to a Philosophical Debate on the Changing Nature of War', *Defense & Security Analysis* 27, no. 3 (1 September 2011): 225–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2011.604483>.

<sup>369</sup> Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, 8–12.

<sup>370</sup> Bart Schuurman, 'Clausewitz and the "New Wars" Scholars', *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (2010): 89–100.

<sup>371</sup> Hussein Solomon, 'Mali: West Africa's Afghanistan', *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (1 February 2013): 12–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.774635>.

those tribes claiming more autonomy have launched several rebellions against the central government, each of which was met with violent state repression. While an elaborate peace-accord (*flamme de la paix*) was concluded in 1994, mutual distrust remained.<sup>372</sup>

In January 2012, Tuareg rebels in Northern Mali launched the fourth and most destructive rebellion since the country's independence from France in 1960. Catalysts for the re-ignition of ethnic conflict were the formation of a new political movement for Tuareg self-rule, the *Mouvement National pour la Liberation d'Azawad* (MNLA) in 2011 and the return to Mali of Tuareg fighters and weapons after the collapse Gaddafi's Libyan regime in the summer of 2011. From this perspective, the crisis in Mali can be seen as one of the unintended consequences of NATO's intervention in Libya, which formed the spark that re-ignited a simmering conflict.<sup>373</sup>

In addition to the Tuareg issue, Mali has been afflicted by bad governance and endemic corruption. During the 2002–12 tenure of President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), a small elite hoarded the country's political power and economic riches. Although underdevelopment of the north is a key Tuareg grievance, southern towns outside Bamako are equally underdeveloped and under-resourced. The Malian Army too was hollowed out by corruption and nepotism, and crumbled as the MNLA rebels advanced south. On 22 March 2012, hardly a month before the presidential elections and with the country's north beset by rebellion, a mutiny by junior army officers turned into a spontaneous coup, ending 20 years of uninterrupted democratic process.<sup>374</sup>

The coup accelerated the complete rout of the Malian Army. The north's major cities and two thirds of the country's territory were lost to rebel forces. As Mali struggled to establish an interim presidency, MNLA rebels in the occupied North saw their own ethnic-separatist uprising hijacked by their radical Islamist partners of convenience. The MNLA was marginalised in June 2012 by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for oneness and Jihad in Africa (known by its French acronym MUJAO) and Ansar Dine. These groups violently wrested the newly-won power from the Tuareg separatists. From the summer of 2012 onwards, the three Islamist groups effectively exercised control over northern Mali.<sup>375</sup>

<sup>372</sup> Boeke and Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead'.

<sup>373</sup> Boeke and Tisseron.

<sup>374</sup> Johanna Siméant and Laure Traoré, 'Mali : Le Putsch et Le Nord Vus de Bamako', *CERI: Sciences Po*, 20 October 2012, [http://www.sciencespo.fr/newsletter/actu\\_medias/3532/Mali\\_le%20putsch\\_et\\_le%20Nord\\_vus\\_de\\_Bamako%20-%20Dossier%20CERI%20octobre%202012.pdf](http://www.sciencespo.fr/newsletter/actu_medias/3532/Mali_le%20putsch_et_le%20Nord_vus_de_Bamako%20-%20Dossier%20CERI%20octobre%202012.pdf).

<sup>375</sup> Olivier J. Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, 'Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (27 May 2015): 497–519, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.809340>.

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## France's Strategic Interests

France's primary national interests in Mali are economic and security-related. Mali's eastern neighbour Niger is the world's fourth-largest uranium exporter. The mines at Arlit and Akoka, near the border with Mali and also situated in Tuareg country, are exploited by Areva, one of the world's biggest producers of uranium and one of France's national economic champions. Niger's uranium provides 20 per cent of the fuel for France's 58 nuclear reactors, which are in turn responsible for generating nearly 75 per cent of France's electricity.<sup>376</sup> The importance of these mines for France is illustrated by the fact that they are protected, from a secret nearby location, by French commandos. Their strategic importance has also been recognised by terrorist groups, as on 23 May 2013 MUJAO and an AQIM splinter cell launched a simultaneous suicide attack on the mine at Arlit and a nearby Nigerian army barracks.<sup>377</sup>

France's security-related interests in Mali focus on preventing the emergence of a large terrorist sanctuary. France and its overseas interests have formed key targets for terrorist groups from North and North-West Africa since the early 1990s. For instance, AQIM has attacked French embassies in West Africa and kidnapped numerous French nationals for ransom. In addition, the French domestic intelligence agency La Direction centrale du Renseignement intérieur has been concerned about the potential radicalisation of the Malian diaspora. During their time in control of Northern Mali, the terrorist groups significantly expanded in size, with for instance AQIM growing from an estimated 350 fighters in 2011 to around 1,500 in January 2013.<sup>378</sup> The groups faced no impediments in ramping up local recruiting efforts, and many foreign fighters travelled to Mali to join their ranks.<sup>379</sup> As Bruno Tertrais writes, French decision-makers had a strong incentive to 'break AQIM's back' when the opportunity arose in January 2013.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Jean-Michel Bezat, 'Areva et la bataille mondiale pour l'uranium', *Le Monde*, 7 October 2010, [https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2010/10/07/areva-et-la-bataille-mondiale-pour-l-uranium\\_1421240\\_3234.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2010/10/07/areva-et-la-bataille-mondiale-pour-l-uranium_1421240_3234.html).

<sup>377</sup> 'Attentats au Niger: la présence de forces spéciales françaises n'a pas empêché l'attaque d'Arilit - RFI', RFI Afrique, accessed 20 January 2020, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130523-attentats-niger-presence-forces-speciales-france-pas-attaque-arlit>.

<sup>378</sup> Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 40.

<sup>379</sup> Bill Roggio, 'Foreign Jihadists Continue to Pour into Mali', Threat Matrix: A Blog of FDD's Long War Journal, 27 October 2012, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/foreign\\_jihadists\\_continue\\_to.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/foreign_jihadists_continue_to.php).

<sup>380</sup> Bruno Tertrais, 'Leading on the Cheap? French Security Policy in Austerity', *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1 August 2013): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.825549>.

## The Political Dimension of Serval's Success

Clausewitz emphasised the strict primacy of the political over the military: '[p]olicy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa'.<sup>381</sup> He also stressed that political leaders should only pursue those goals that lay within the boundaries of the (military) means available to them.<sup>382</sup> Thus, if war is to be an effective 'continuation of policy by other means', clear overall goals must be elaborated that are based on a realistic assessment of the warring party's capacity to achieve them. Four elements were crucial to Serval's political feasibility. France pro-actively crafted international support for an intervention in Mali, it prepared military contingency plans should the insurgents strike sooner than expected, established clear overall political goals for 'Serval' and, finally, France benefited from a robust executive and a political culture not averse to taking military risks.

### Prelude: Procuring International Support for Intervening in Mali

On 31 May 2012, President Hollande chaired a select Cabinet meeting on defence. At the time, six French hostages were being held by AQIM and MUJAO. The insurgency was then still Tuareg-led and had just taken over two thirds of Mali's territory. The Cabinet concluded that a new, more aggressive approach was needed to dislodge AQIM from its sanctuary in the country's north. A multi-pronged approach was conceived. One part would focus on the build-up of the Malian Army, another on harnessing the support of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), while the third centred on mobilising support for an EU-mission in Mali.<sup>383</sup>

The path towards establishing an EU military training mission proved to be an arduous one, delayed by the institutional procedures governing European decision-making in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the end, the insurgents' unexpected attack southwards on 9 January 2013 catalysed the slow decision making process. The European Council authorised the European Union Training Mission to Mali (EUTM) on 17 January 2013, when French troops were already moving northwards. The mission, which was officially launched on 18 February 2013, encompasses some 400–500 European trainers and is tasked with rebuilding and training the Malian armed forces.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 607.

<sup>382</sup> Clausewitz, 98–9, 733.

<sup>383</sup> Romain Rosso, 'Mali: Comment Paris conduit la guerre', *L'Express*, 31 January 2013, [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-comment-paris-conduit-la-guerre\\_1215453.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-comment-paris-conduit-la-guerre_1215453.html).

<sup>384</sup> 'Council Conclusions on Mali' (Council of the European Union, 17 January 2013), [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134756.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134756.pdf).

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In contrast to the EU member states, Mali's African neighbours, with the exception of Algeria, needed little encouragement to adopt a more assertive stance. Until June 2012, the initial regional response centred on establishing an ECOWAS Mission in Mali (MICEMA), but this proved impossible to deploy. Differences on the purpose of the mission were compounded by logistical and financial constraints. The effort was lifted to the African Union (AU) level, and when the AU proved unable to fund an eventual intervention, to the United Nations (UN) level. While the jihadists consolidated their control over northern Mali, the slow bureaucratic processes focused on the creation on a UN-mandated and funded but African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).<sup>385</sup>

French diplomats in New York played an instrumental role in shaping UN decision-making to enable a more assertive approach towards the crisis in Mali. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), France introduced all draft resolutions on Mali and coordinated negotiations to ensure they were passed unanimously. UNSC resolution 2056 of 5 July 2012 expressed support for the joint efforts of ECOWAS, the African Union and the transitional authorities in Mali to restore the country's territorial integrity.<sup>386</sup> October's UNSC resolution 2071 expressed the Council's readiness to respond positively to a request from Mali for an intervention force to reclaim the north.<sup>387</sup> Separately, on 5 December MUJAO was designated a terrorist organisation and joined AQIM on the UN's al-Qaeda sanctions list.<sup>388</sup>

Key negotiations on the authority, tasking and funding of AFISMA took place in the first weeks of December 2012. After France circulated a draft resolution to authorise AFISMA, considerable disagreements on the proposition emerged. The US were especially sceptical of the mission's feasibility and the Malian interim government's democratic credentials; going so far as to describe the French plan as 'crap'.<sup>389</sup> After considerable wrangling, however, UNSC Resolution 2085 was passed unanimously on 20 December, authorising

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<sup>385</sup> Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, 'The Long Path to MINUSMA: Assessing the International Response to the Crisis in Mali', in *Peacekeeping in Africa: The Evolving Security Architecture*, ed. Marco Wyss and Thierry Tardy (London: Routledge, 2014), 171–89, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850764-21>.

<sup>386</sup> 'Resolution 2056 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 5 July 2012), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2056>.

<sup>387</sup> 'Resolution 2071 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 12 October 2012), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2071>.

<sup>388</sup> 'Al-Qaida Sanctions List' (United Nations Security Council, 2014).

<sup>389</sup> Colum Lynch, 'Rice: French Plan for Mali Intervention Is "Crap"', *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/11/rice-french-plan-for-mali-intervention-is-crap/>.

the deployment of AFISMA.<sup>390</sup> Even so, given the logistical challenge of deploying a multinational force and the still unresolved question of how exactly it would be funded, it appears that the UN did not envision military action against the insurgents being possible before summer 2013.<sup>391</sup>

Resolution 2085 did not authorise Operation 'Serval'. But it paved the way for a French military intervention by creating an international consensus that the security situation in Mali needed to be addressed. Furthermore, the creation of AFISMA and its UN authorisation also provided the French with the outlines of an exit strategy by enabling them to hand over responsibility for Mali to this international task force upon achieving French objectives. French diplomatic efforts were integral to creating international political conditions favourable to a military intervention.

### Contingency Planning

Throughout this period of international negotiations, France repeatedly emphasised in public that it would not intervene in Mali, stating that support for an African-led solution was the only option available for the former colonial power.<sup>392</sup> However, after UNSC resolution 2071 was adopted, enabling the creation of an African-led intervention force, President Hollande received several calls from African leaders expressing concern over the viability of such a force and requests for French combat air support should it be needed.<sup>393</sup> As a result, and contrary to the government's public statements, the French Defence Ministry was ordered to create a contingency plan for providing military support in Mali.<sup>394</sup>

Crucially, however, the ministry was also ordered to prepare an additional contingency plan to cover the eventuality that the insurgents would strike before the international force could be deployed. This resulted in a second scenario that foresaw the use of ground forces as well as air assets. It led the French foreign intelligence service La Direction

<sup>390</sup> 'Resolution 2085 (2012)' (United Nations Security Council, 20 December 2012), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2085>.

<sup>391</sup> Zakia Abdennebi and Andrew Hammond, 'U.N. Envoy Rules out International Action in Mali for Now', *Reuters*, 20 November 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-militants-prodi-idUSBRE8AJ1FW20121120>.

<sup>392</sup> See, for instance, an October 2012 statement by Foreign Minister Fabius: Parti Socialiste, 'Laurent Fabius Sur Le Nord-Mali: <<Par Rapport Au Terrorisme, on Ne Peut Pas Transiger>>', <[www.parti-socialiste.fr/articles/laurent-fabius-sur-le-nord-mali-par-rapport-au-terrorisme-ne-peut-pas-transiger](http://www.parti-socialiste.fr/articles/laurent-fabius-sur-le-nord-mali-par-rapport-au-terrorisme-ne-peut-pas-transiger)>.

<sup>393</sup> Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

<sup>394</sup> Rosso, 'Mali: Comment Paris Conduit La Guerre'.

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générale de la sécurité extérieure to prepare target packs of jihadist camps in Mali and to the deployment of Special Forces to locate jihadist command nodes, fuel depots and logistical centres.<sup>395</sup> This planning for two scenarios laid the foundations for Operation 'Serval' and allowed the French to react quickly when the insurgents attacked.

Signals intelligence received in the last days of December 2012 warned the French that AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine were preparing a move southwards. Intercepts indicated that the jihadists intended to target Sévaré. The potential loss of its strategic airport, the only one besides the runway at Bamako that was able to handle large transport planes, would seriously hamper the AFISMA plan to reconquer the north and threaten the political future of the interim government. Intelligence also indicated that the jihadists did not expect France to react to their offensive, citing French refusal to intervene militarily to aid the beleaguered president of the Central African Republic only days earlier.<sup>396</sup> Jihadist groups attacked the strategic town of Konna, some 60 km from Sévaré, on 9 January 2013 and took it one day later.<sup>397</sup>

## The Formulation of Clear Political Objectives

On the day of the jihadists' move southwards, Mali's interim President Traoré sent an urgent request to France for military assistance. The letter was initially returned by Paris, requiring the Malian government to reformulate a more precise request limited to air support for the Malian troops' counter-attack, which was submitted a day later.<sup>398</sup> Upon receipt, French diplomats in New York convened an emergency UNSC meeting to discuss the situation.<sup>399</sup> After the closed meeting, a Security Council press statement called on UN member states 'to provide assistance to the Malian Defence and Security Forces in order to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organizations and associated groups'.<sup>400</sup> The next day, President Hollande announced that France would meet the Malian and UN request by launching military operations against the terrorist groups.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

<sup>396</sup> Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand.

<sup>397</sup> Laurent Touchard, 'Mali : retour sur la bataille décisive de Konna', *Jeune Afrique*, 30 January 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/165872/politique/mali-retour-sur-la-bataille-d-cisive-de-konna/>.

<sup>398</sup> Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand, 'Mali: Histoire Secrète d'une Guerre Surprise'.

<sup>399</sup> 'UN Calls for "swift Deployment" of Troops', *BBC News*, 11 January 2013, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20981837>; 'Mali - Remarks to the Press by Mr Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations', Représentation permanente de la France auprès des Nations Unies à New York, 10 January 2013.

<sup>400</sup> 'Security Council Press Statement on Mali' (United Nations Security Council, 10 January 2013), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc10878.doc.htm>.

<sup>401</sup> 'Déclaration du président de la République - Intervention au Mali', Palais de l'Élysée, Paris, 11 January 2013, <https://newyork.consulfrance.org/Declaration-du-president-de-la>.

At a press conference on 12 January 2013, France clarified its main objectives: (1) stop the jihadist advance, (2) prevent these groups from further endangering Mali's stability, and (3) protect European and especially French nationals present in Mali.<sup>402</sup> A day later, Foreign Minister Fabius announced the additional goal of (4) restoring Mali's territorial integrity. 'Serval' was no longer limited to air strikes and Special Forces actions, but had the aim of reconquering an area the size of France.<sup>403</sup> The exact reason for this change remains unclear. It seems likely that France sought to capitalise on the international community's support for the mission. There were also practical reasons; while the first air attacks had stopped the jihadist advance, they had not defeated the insurgents, who were still able to launch further attacks on 14 January.<sup>404</sup> Also, on 13 January AFISMA participants had pledged to accelerate the deployment of the UN mission and to immediately send their troops to Mali, effectively enabling the roll-out of the international mission.<sup>405</sup>

The final political decision determining the parameters of Operation 'Serval' was taken during a French Cabinet meeting on 14 January 2013. The Commander of the French armed forces wanted to wait for the necessary logistics to arrive in theatre before launching the ground offensive to reconquer the north. President Hollande, on the other hand, did not want to wait until late February and demanded the quick liberation of key towns in the north.<sup>406</sup> This approach envisaged fast and symbolic victories, but entailed more military risks. Nonetheless, the unambiguous mandate to move fast and to neutralise the jihadists was welcomed by military commanders in the field.<sup>407</sup>

In all of France's public statements, the emphasis lay on halting the rebel attack and supporting Malian armed forces. The means to achieve these aims were nonetheless formulated broadly, with for example military operations foreseen for 'as long as

<sup>402</sup> 'Conférence de presse du Ministre de La défense, Jean-Yves Le Drian', 12 January 2013, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/operations/conference-de-presse-samedi-12-janvier-2013-mali-somalie>.

<sup>403</sup> 'Mali - Somalie - Russie - Entretien Du Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères, M. Laurent Fabius, Avec «Le Grand Jury RTL-LCI-Le Figaro» - Extraits - Paris' (Paris, 13 January 2013), <https://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=bafr2013-01-14.html#Chapitre5>.

<sup>404</sup> AFP, 'Mali: attaque des islamistes contre la ville de Diabali sur la route de Bamako', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 January 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/41959/politique/mali-attaque-des-islamistes-contre-la-ville-de-diabali-sur-la-route-de-bamako/>.

<sup>405</sup> AFP, 'Mali : le Togo va envoyer 500 soldats', *Le Figaro*, 13 January 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2013/01/13/97001-20130113FILWWW00108-mali-le-togo-va-envoyer-500-soldats.php>.

<sup>406</sup> Halifa-Légrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les secrets d'une guerre éclair'.

<sup>407</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchet, 'Général Barrera : « Mes ordres étaient clairs : détruisez les djihadistes ! »', *L'Opinion*, 11 July 2013, <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/general-barrera-mes-ordres-etaient-clairs-detruisez-djihadistes-1942>.

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necessary'.<sup>408</sup> France did not act to further its own interests, claimed President Hollande, but had the sole aim of fighting terrorism.<sup>409</sup> As previously pointed out, however, the collapse of Mali would threaten France's considerable economic and political interests in the region. The four objectives for 'Serval' that the French government publicly announced thus reflected the underlying strategic interests that France wanted to safeguard.

### **A Powerful Executive and a Willingness to take Risks**

Obtaining Parliamentary support for military interventions, often a contentious issue for France's European partners, is less problematic in Paris. The Constitution of the Fifth Republic strongly favours the executive and according to article 35, the government need only inform Parliament within three days of launching a military intervention. For Operation 'Serval, the French parliamentary debate was held on 16 January 2013, during which broad cross-party support for the mission was established with few dissenting voices.<sup>410</sup>

Looking at the political prerequisites that Clausewitz identifies as being essential for the successful use of military force, France could muster clear goals, contingency planning, a robust executive and international diplomatic support. The Malian request for military assistance provided the legal basis while the UN resolutions on the Malian crisis effectively 'blessed' the intervention in retrospect.<sup>411</sup> As a result, France was able to react quickly and decisively to events in the first week of January 2013.

### **The Strategic Dimension of Serval's Success**

For Clausewitz, strategy was 'the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war'.<sup>412</sup> Short though this definition is, it brings to light a crucial element; namely that war is not just about winning battles. It is about planning engagements and using the outcomes of those battles to further the political causes that brought about war in the first place. When evaluating military effectiveness, it is therefore not enough to determine whether

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<sup>408</sup> 'Déclaration du président de la République - Intervention au Mali'.

<sup>409</sup> 'Hollande : l'opération au Mali "n'a pas d'autre but que la lutte contre le terrorisme"', *Le Monde*, 12 January 2013, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/12/la-france-demande-une-acceleration-de-la-mise-en-place-de-la-force-internationale-au-mali\\_1816033\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/12/la-france-demande-une-acceleration-de-la-mise-en-place-de-la-force-internationale-au-mali_1816033_3212.html).

<sup>410</sup> Dominique de Villepin, 'Villepin : "Non, la guerre ce n'est pas la France"', *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 12 January 2013, <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Villepin-Non-la-guerre-ce-n-est-pas-la-France-585627-3206198>.

<sup>411</sup> Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, 'Under the UN Security Council's Watchful Eyes: Military Intervention by Invitation in the Malian Conflict', *Leiden Journal of International Law* 26, no. 4 (December 2013): 855–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156513000447>.

<sup>412</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 207.

individual battles or the larger campaigns they were a part of ended in victory or defeat. Ultimately, success is determined by asking if and how these outcomes contributed to the overarching political or 'grand strategy' goals.

The French-led military operation can be divided in three phases: (1) stopping the jihadist advance; (2) reconquering the north and (3) clearing the rebel sanctuaries. During the initial phase the Malian Army played an important role before French assistance arrived by defending border towns against the jihadists. During the second and third phases, however, the French consciously shouldered the brunt of the combat duties, preferring to sideline the Malian army for military as well as political reasons. The approximately 6,000 AFISMA troops would also see little fighting at this stage.<sup>413</sup> In contrast, 2,000 troops from Chad would become involved in the intensive fighting to clear rebel strongholds in Mali's mountainous border regions.

The fact that France already had troops prepositioned in Africa enabled a fast response to the jihadist attack. Special Forces had been stationed in Burkina Faso for several years, as an eventual intervention force to rescue French hostages held in the Sahel. The day before the official decision was taken to intervene in Mali, these units were flown from Burkina Faso to the airport of Sévaré in Mali, close to the front lines. On 11 January 2013 these units would play an important role in assisting the Malian Army in stopping the jihadists' advance. In the afternoon, Gazelle helicopters strafed the advancing enemy vehicles. That evening, Mirage 2000 fighter jets based approximately 2,000 km away in Chad carried out numerous attacks. In total, some 800 French troops based in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Chad, would contribute to the military operation in Mali.<sup>414</sup>

The quick mobilisation of additional troops in France was made possible by the Guepard alert system. Within eight hours of receiving orders on 12 January, a company of marines based in France was able to deploy to Bamako to secure the airport. The Guepard system also has one of France's eight 'inter-arms' brigades (5,500 soldiers each) on standby for periods of six months, and on 13 January General Barrera's 3rd Mechanised Brigade was mobilised. Ten days later the brigade staff installed its headquarters at Bamako, and elements of the brigade joined the Special Forces already present.<sup>415</sup> At the peak of military operations, nearly 5,000 French troops were present in Mali.

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<sup>413</sup> Rémi Carayol, 'Guerre au Mali : la Misma, faible force', *Jeune Afrique*, 16 April 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/137695/politique/guerre-au-mali-la-misma-faible-force/>.

<sup>414</sup> Christophe Guilloteau and Philippe Nauche, 'Rapport d'information sur l'opération Serval au Mali' (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 18 July 2013), 37, [http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/rap-info/i1288/\(index\)/rapports-information](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/rap-info/i1288/(index)/rapports-information).

<sup>415</sup> Merchet, 'Général Barrera'.

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After the city of Konna was retaken and an AQIM counter-attack on Diabely was repulsed on 18 January, the second phase of retaking the North began. The French strategy called for the quick liberation of the important northern towns of Gao, Timbuctu and Kidal, largely through the use of special forces. During the night of 25 January, a transport plane landed on Gao's insurgent-held runway and disembarked special forces soldiers who secured the airport. They were joined by armoured units that had approached Gao by road, enabling the city's recapture.<sup>416</sup> At Timbuctu, AQIM fighters had learned from the operation at Gao and used explosives to blow craters into the runway. To maintain the element of surprise, on 28 January around 250 paratroopers of the Foreign Legion were dropped to secure the airport and the north of the city. They were also joined by an armoured column and engineers and bulldozers were subsequently parachuted in to repair the runway.<sup>417</sup> The next target, Kidal, was taken with help from the Chadian military and the assistance of Tuareg fighters who had allied themselves with the French troops.<sup>418</sup>

Despite the rapid capture of key airfields and cities, some Islamist fighters continued to mount an effective resistance. For instance, after Gao's recapture, MUJAO fighters dissolved into the local population. Mere weeks later, small groups of insurgents re-emerged to occupy key government buildings. The French supported the Malian Army with heavy ordinance in street fighting, but MUJAO continued to conduct attacks in and around the city. Mali's first suicide attack was executed by MUJAO on 9 February 2013, and it was quickly followed by several more. MUJAO had managed to recruit successfully from the ethnic Peul and Songhai tribes that were traditionally oppressed by the Tuareg, and with some local support a low-level but effective insurgency quickly emerged.<sup>419</sup>

The third phase of Operation 'Serval', clearing AQIM's sanctuary in the Adrar des Ifoghas massif, was conducted jointly by Chadian and French troops. Between 19 February and 25 March, French marines, paras, legionnaires and elite Chadian troops took on several hundred AQIM fighters. French and Chadian troops cornered the insurgents in the Ammetettai valley and cleared the area cave by cave. Close air support proved essential and an air strike killed the key AQIM commander, Abu Zeid, on 25 February. Unaccustomed to AQIM's tactics of feigning surrender and then using suicide bombers,

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<sup>416</sup> Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*, 303–22.

<sup>417</sup> Jean Fleury, *La France en guerre au Mali : Les combats d'AQMI et la révolte des Touareg* (Paris: Jean Picollec, 2013), 159.

<sup>418</sup> 'Mali: Réformer Ou Rechuter', Rapport Afrique N°210 (Bruxelles: International Crisis Group, 10 January 2014), 15, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/mali-reform-or-relapse-french.pdf>.

<sup>419</sup> Laurent Lagneau, 'Mali : Le Mujao Revendique Les Attaques de Gao et Kidal', Zone Militaire / Opex360.com, 22 February 2013, <http://www.opex360.com/2013/02/22/mali-le-mujao-revendique-les-attaques-de-gao-et-kidal/>.

Chadian troops suffered heavy casualties in an initial ambush and ensuing fire fights. The valley of around 25 square kilometres had been used and fortified by AQIM since the mid-2000s, with support points and defensive positions hidden in caves and crevices. It took around three weeks, and more than a 1,000 French and Chadian troops to clear the area. Set against this success was the failure to liberate French hostages who had been captured by Malian insurgents in preceding years. They were ushered out of the valley by AQIM before the troops' arrival.<sup>420</sup>

### Enabling Serval's Military Effectiveness

Several factors enabled French military success in Mali. First and foremost, combat air power was vital for stopping the jihadist advance and later supporting ground troops in the reconquest of Mali's north. This was assured by flying more fighter jets from France into theatre, basing some in Mali and others in Chad. With flights from Chad already necessitating in-flight refuellings, obtaining overflight permission from Algeria was important from a military perspective. The fraught bilateral relationship between Algeria and France made this a contentious issue, even though French planes did ultimately use Algerian airspace.<sup>421</sup>

Logistics would prove to be a second crucial enabler of Operation 'Serval'. Serval's daily logistical requirements averaged 4,500 rations, 45,000 litres of water, 10 tons of munitions, 30,000 litres of vehicle fuel and 200,000 litres of kerosene.<sup>422</sup> Through maritime and air transport, 19,000 tons of equipment and supplies were transported to Mali during the first five weeks of the operation.<sup>423</sup> Without the assistance of cargo planes from NATO partners the deployment would have been delayed by weeks. Additionally, without additional in-flight refueling capacity, provided predominantly by the United States, operations would have been severely hindered. As it was, a shortage of this latter capacity prevented missions from being flown and deprived troops of combat air support on several occasions.<sup>424</sup>

<sup>420</sup> Jean-Louis Tremblais, 'Mali : la traque aux islamistes', *Le Figaro*, 26 April 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/04/26/01003-20130426ARTFIG00370-mali-la-traque-aux-islamistes.php>.

<sup>421</sup> Christophe Boisbouvier and Elise Colette, 'Exclusif : les Rafale français n'ont pas survolé l'Algérie', *Jeune Afrique*, 21 January 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/172621/politique/exclusif-les-rafale-fran-ais-n-ont-pas-survol-l-alg-rie/>.

<sup>422</sup> Guilloteau and Nauche, 'Rapport d'information Sur l'opération Serval Au Mali', 45.

<sup>423</sup> Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Gérard Larcher, 'Rapport d'Information fait au nom de la commission des affaires Étrangères, de la Défense et des Forces Armées (1) par le groupe de travail «Sahel», en vue du débat et du vote sur l'autorisation de prolongation de l'intervention Des Forces Armées Au Mali (Article 35 de La Constitution)' (Paris: Le Senat, 16 April 2013), 128, <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r12-513/r12-513.html>.

<sup>424</sup> Chevènement and Larcher, 72.

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Other military enablers were good tactical intelligence, French troops' combat experience and limited media coverage. Mali had become a priority for French intelligence services, which led to insight into the capabilities and intentions of the different terrorist groups.<sup>425</sup> According to French military sources, the troops' experience in Afghanistan contributed significantly to their professionalism and capacity to operate in the harsh environment of Northern Mali. Finally, limited media coverage of the military operations gave the French freedom of manoeuvre and probably contributed to the lack of criticism in the international press. Access to information and war-zones was strictly controlled by the French and Malian armed forces. Billed as a '*guerre sans images*' (war without images) by journalists, there were no videos of collateral damage or human rights violations that could detract from the broad public support for the intervention.<sup>426</sup>

## The Role of Chance and Luck

Clausewitz likened war to a 'game of cards' and frequently emphasised the influence of chance and luck on war plans and the conduct of operations.<sup>427</sup> In the case of Operation 'Serval', the luck of the draw appears to have benefited the French. In hindsight, several errors by the Islamist insurgents can be identified that worked in the favour of France and its allies.

The first strategic miscalculation by the insurgents was their initial attack southwards on 9 January 2013, which provided the pretext and international legitimacy for the French intervention. According to letters discovered in Timbuktu, the emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, did expect an eventual international military intervention in northern Mali but ordered his commanders not take any risks in provoking one.<sup>428</sup> The attack on the south was, however, initiated by fighters from Ansar Dine who were not under his direct command. Their motives remain unclear, but their leader Iyad ag Ghali may have wanted to assert his authority over the fractious group by an audacious move to break the stalemate.

A second strategic mistake was former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar's attack on the Algerian gas complex at In Amenas on 17 January 2013. Although framed by the attackers as retribution for Algeria providing France with overflight permission, the attack had probably been planned long beforehand as the assailants had detailed knowledge of

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<sup>425</sup> Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 22.

<sup>426</sup> 'Mali: Premier Bilan de La Situation Des Droits Humains Après Trois Semaines de Combats' (London: Amnesty International, 1 February 2013), <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/12000/af370032013fr.pdf>; 'French Military Intervention Achieves "Zero Image of the War Front" Media Objective.

<sup>427</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 96–7.

<sup>428</sup> Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto'.

the facilities. To the international public, the attack illustrated that the Malian insurgent groups formed a key regional threat and it helped consolidate international political support for the French intervention. Most importantly, the involvement of American civilians in the hostage crisis led to more active American support for the French operation. The US had initially remained on the sidelines, and only agreed to meet French requests for large transport and refueling planes after the In Amenas attack.<sup>429</sup>

During the reconquest of Mali's north, chance sided with the French once more when many of the insurgents decided not to oppose the initial assault but retreated to their mountainous hideouts instead. The northern airfields and cities were predominantly taken by Special Forces through parachute drops and airborne landings, and these high risk operations could have led to many more French casualties had the insurgents remained behind in larger numbers. AQIM's decision to stand and fight in the Ardar des Ifoghas can in retrospect also be qualified as an unwise one. They could have easily crossed the porous border into Niger to live and fight another day, but chose not to. As a result, AQIM lost the important local commander Abu Zeid, an estimated 130 experienced fighters and 50 tons of arms and ammunition during this phase of combat alone.<sup>430</sup>

In general, the French reconquest of the North was facilitated by the local population's welcoming attitude towards the 'liberating' troops, frequently informing them of the whereabouts of their opponents and preventing these from dissolving into the local community. This was not predestined, as France was not particularly popular in Mali prior to Operation 'Serval'. Once again, France benefited from mistakes made by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine. In another letter written by Droukel to his commanders, he chastises them for rushing the implementation of Islamic Sharia law (especially the harsh punishments), ascertaining that they had alienated large segments of the population that were not yet 'ready' for this lifestyle. The failure to win the local hearts and minds effectively complemented the terrorists' military defeat with a popular one.<sup>431</sup>

## 'Serval's' Longer-Term Effects

By the end of March 2013, the jihadists' advance southwards had been halted, Mali's further destabilisation had been prevented and territorial control had been largely restored to the provisional government in Bamako. In addition, France and its African allies had dislodged the jihadists from their sanctuary in the Malian version of Tora Bora.

<sup>429</sup> Fleury, *La France en guerre au Mali*, 148–9.

<sup>430</sup> Halifa-Legrand and Jauvert, 'MALI. Les Secrets d'une Guerre Éclair'.

<sup>431</sup> Callimachi, 'In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto'.

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AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine had suffered a severe tactical defeat, losing important commanders, many fighters and significant stocks of arms. Operation 'Serval' appears to have been successful in halting Mali's collapse and safeguarding French regional economic assets. The question is whether these short-term military success will prove to have staying power. To what extent has 'Serval' been able to contribute to lasting peace and security in Mali?

Arguably, 'Serval's' most concrete contribution to Mali's longer-term stability was its role in restoring the country's democratic legitimacy. Malian presidential elections were held in mid and late 2013. Despite serious shortcomings in the preparations for these elections, France resisted calls to postpone them and significantly slowed down the withdrawal timetable of its troops to provide security.<sup>432</sup> The relatively successful, free and fair conduct of these elections was an essential precondition for Mali to access the €3.25 billion in donor aid pledged by the international community in May 2013.<sup>433</sup> Serval also accelerated the deployment of the UN peace-keeping mission and renewed the focus of the international donor community on Mali.<sup>434</sup>

Democratic elections, however, are insufficient to guarantee the longer-term stability of Mali. Although AQIM and MUJAO lost possibly a third of their fighters during 'Serval', they have since regrouped in southern Libya, creating a new sanctuary and base of operations there.<sup>435</sup> Like the guerilla campaign that arose in the wake of Gao's recapture, this development indicates that military force alone is hard pressed to provide long-term solutions to armed conflict. The broader political goal of stabilising Mali is dependent on the ability to bridge historic ethnic divides, combat endemic corruption and tackle pervasive organised crime. Despite 'Serval's' military success and Mali's elections, the issue of reconciliation between the Tuareg peoples and the regime and population in the south is far from resolved.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Boeke, 'Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy', 10.

<sup>433</sup> Press Release, 'International Donor Conference: €3.25 Billion Mobilised by International Community to Rebuild Mali', Text, European Commission, 15 May 2013, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_13\\_429](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_429).

<sup>434</sup> For the French disappointment with the EU and the slow process of authorising and deploying the European Union Training Force (EUTM), see Guilloteau and Nauche, 'Rapport d'information Sur l'opération Serval Au Mali'.

<sup>435</sup> Chevènement and Larcher, 'Rapport d'Information Fait Au Nom de La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, de La Défense et Des Forces Armées (1) Par Le Groupe de Travail «Sahel», En Vue Du Débat et Du Vote Sur l'autorisation de Prolongation de l'intervention Des Forces Armées Au Mali (Article 35 de La Constitution)'.

<sup>436</sup> 'Mali: Réformer Ou Rechuter'.

'Serval's' military success and its contribution to the restoration of democracy in Mali offered a window of opportunity to address issues of good governance and initiate reconciliation and peace talks between the government and the rebel factions. Unfortunately, at the time of writing it appears that this chance has been missed. Like all military interventions, 'Serval' created a dynamic of its own and its shortcomings and unintended consequences shaped the future prospects for peace and stability. On the battlefield the French could not but accept the assistance of the Tuareg MNLA separatists, who turned on their initial jihadist allies to exact revenge for the hijacking of their rebellion. But from the perspective of Bamako these forces were responsible for launching the rebellion in the first place. Their close cooperation with France further complicates already fraught peace negotiations.<sup>437</sup>

From the perspective of Paris, 'Serval' had the narrow goal of preventing Mali's collapse and then removing a terrorist safe-haven. Responsibility for addressing the causes of Mali's crisis was seen to lie with the government in Bamako. As the Malian government is currently proving unwilling and unable to structurally reform, France is stuck between the Scylla and Charybdis of perceived excessive interference by a former colonial power on the one hand and being seen as a passive accomplice to a new failing state on the other. While it is clear that France and MINUSMA are currently struggling with the situation, their challenge will be to avoid becoming a permanent part of the problem. In short, while Operation 'Serval' safeguarded French interests in the short term, its ability to make a long-term contribution to peace and stability in Mali remains doubtful.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Mali is one of the latest in a long list of post-1945 examples of states' military power being employed against violent non-state actors.<sup>438</sup> Various authors have claimed that such conflicts dominated by irregular forces have ushered in a 'new' form of warfare that is essentially post-Clausewitzian.<sup>439</sup> Often, such arguments have been based on a questionable reading of Clausewitz's thinking on the nature of war, falsely attributing to him a state-centric perspective on armed conflict. As this contribution has hoped to

<sup>437</sup> Cheikh Diouara, 'French Battle Mali Islamists as Tuareg Problem Looms', *Reuters*, 7 February 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-rebels-idUKBRE91514X20130207>.

<sup>438</sup> Bart Schuurman, 'Trinitarian Troubles: Governmental, Military, and Societal Explanations for Post-1945 Western Failures in Asymmetric Conflicts', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 1 (1 March 2011): 32–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2010.518849>.

<sup>439</sup> For example, see: Mary Kaldor, 'Elaborating the "New War" Thesis', in *Rethinking the Nature of War*, ed. Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jan Angstrom (London: Routledge, 2005), 210–24, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/books/e/9780203001332/chapters/10.4324/9780203001332-15>.

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demonstrate, Clausewitz's trinity of violence, rational purpose and chance and luck not only continues to be relevant to contemporary warfare, but provides a useful lens through which to study such conflicts.

This article provided a case study of France's intervention in Mali. By using a Clausewitzian analytical framework, the authors analysed Operation 'Serval' from three separate but related angles; its political aims and background, its military-strategic development and the role of luck and chance. Clausewitz considered clear and realistic political aims crucial for the successful use of military force. In this case, France had clearly recognisable strategic interests that would be threatened by the Malian government's collapse. These were preventing the establishment of a radical Islamist 'free state' that could destabilise the region and threaten France and French interests and the safeguarding of its economic interests in the region. These interests were translated into several clear political goals; to stop the jihadists' attack on southern Mali, to prevent the further destabilisation of Mali's interim government and to restore its territorial integrity.

Greatly improving the political feasibility of Operation 'Serval' were France's extensive diplomatic efforts. These contributed to the creation of an EU training mission to bolster Mali's military capabilities and UN support for an African led support mission, AFISMA, as well as international recognition that the Islamist insurgents needed to be dealt with. Rounding off the political aspect of Serval was the French government's contingency planning, which provided both the plans and the intelligence necessary to react quickly to the Islamists' unexpected push southwards in early 2013, before the UN-mandated mission had time to arrive in theatre. When France's unilateral military intervention began, it was able to benefit from broad international support and accurate intelligence.

Military operations during Serval were characterised by decisiveness on the part of France's political executive, which mandated a rapid response to the insurgents' advance, and the accompanying willingness to take considerable risks. The early stages of Serval saw the Islamists' assault halted through a combination of Malian troops, French Special Forces and air power. Days after the launch of Operation 'Serval', French objectives were significantly expanded by adding the goal of retaking the north. This entailed the deployment of considerable ground forces which, together with the forces of several African allies, notably Chad, managed to inflict heavy losses on the insurgents and drive them from their strongholds. Important 'enablers' of French military operations were the availability of combat air support, reliable intelligence, experienced troops and the crucial assistance provided by NATO allies with regards to in-flight refueling and air-lift capacity.

Clausewitzian theory teaches that chance and luck will work their influence on even the most carefully prepared operations. On the whole, these unpredictable influences worked in the favour of France and its allies. For instance, the Islamist forces had not counted on France actually intervening to stop their assault southwards and their harsh imposition of Sharia law lost them the crucial factor of popular support. By contrast, terrorist attacks such as those carried out in Algeria bolstered the international community's resolution to tackle Mali's Islamist threat and contributed to the availability of military assets to 'Serval', such as in-flight refueling capacity provided by the US. Such mistakes, combined with French military effectiveness, led to 'Serval's' ability to quickly achieve its overarching political objectives.

However, while 'Serval' was a success as far as the attainment of French political goals was concerned, its ability to contribute to a longer-term solution to the Malian conflict appears limited. Set against Mali's broader political context, the insurgency is one of the symptoms of several fractures that underlie Malian society. Their causes cannot be addressed by military means alone. At most, Operational 'Serval' has diminished what was a growing threat to the region and offered a window of opportunity to work on the complex political, social, ethnic and economic issues that continue to plague Mali. From this perspective, Operation 'Serval' provided a stop-gap solution and restored Mali to the status quo ante before the Tuareg rebellion and coup d'état. What it did not do, however, was address any of the causes that led to both.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Boeke and Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead'.



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PATHWAYS OUT OF THE  
QUAGMIRE? PERSPECTIVES  
FOR AL-QAEDA IN THE SAHEL

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## Executive summary

This article focuses on counter-terrorism efforts against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), its main confederation of combat units. Using literature on how terrorist groups end, the article analyses perspectives for AQIM and JNIM. It distinguishes between groups that use a strategy of insurgency, where the ultimate aim is to control a territory and a population, or a strategy of terrorism, where the goal is to provoke political change through fear and violence. Even though insurgencies often employ terrorist tactics, the difference in strategy has important implications for the way the group is organised and its relationship with the local population.

Using a conceptual framework developed by Audrey Cronin, this article applies six possible pathways of decline to AQIM and JNIN. The pathways blur in theory as well as in practice, but allow a structuring of insights on actors and relevant factors that contribute to the groups' demise. The conclusions per pathway are as follows:

1. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation).

AQIM and its affiliates have transitioned from conducting a terrorist strategy to a large organisation fighting an insurgency. JNIM is now responsible for a large-scale insurgency in parts of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. As for transitions into organised crime, AQIM's proceeds from the drug trade appears limited, while the group has probably received between € 117 million and € 125 million in ransoms for hostages since 2003.

2. Defeat and elimination by brute force (repression).

The recently terminated Operation Barkhane was not based on the principles of counter-insurgency, but encompassed a counter-terrorism approach of hunting armed extremist groups. Despite some tactical successes, AQIM and JNIM have continued to grow and expand their operations. Targeting errors and human rights abuses by local troops have fuelled AQIM's recruitment and undermined support for governments and international counter-terrorism operations.

3. Capture or killing of the groups' leaders (decapitation).

Although academic literature is divided on the efficacy of this strategy, developments in the Sahel clearly indicate that leadership attrition has been a French policy (and will remain so), and that it has not managed to severely destabilise AQIM. After all, large and networked insurgent organisations can more easily replace leaders than small, clandestine groups conducting a strategy of terrorism.

4. Entry of the group into a legitimate political process (negotiation).

This option has been underexplored, in part because of a taboo on negotiating with terrorists, which is not the case for insurgents. France has ruled out talks with AQIM's leaders, while the Sahelian countries are keen to negotiate with both high- and low-level commanders. Local and bottom-up ceasefires have reduced violence in many areas, but risk benefiting AQIM and JNIM in the mid-term.

5. Implosion or loss of the group's public support (failure).

Many fighters have split from AQIM-affiliated groups to join the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Initially AQIM and ISGS cooperated, but when the relationship turned violent in mid-2020, fratricide probably killed more fighters from both groups than Operation Barkhane did in the same timeframe. More research is warranted on how internal strife or the loss of local support can be provoked or leveraged to precipitate the groups' decline.

6. Achievement of the group's aims (success).

It is unlikely that AQIM will again fully control a proto-caliphate (as in 2012). However, AQIM does not need to achieve its main goal for counter-terrorism efforts to fail. Although JNIM currently emphasises that it does not target mainland France, if the insurgency in the Sahel loses momentum, it is conceivable that the group could revert to a strategy of terrorism. Few indications point to al-Qaeda's current decline, and it is time for renewed reflection on the effectiveness of established counter-terrorism efforts.

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## Abstract

This article focuses on counter-terrorism efforts against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), its main confederation of combat units. Using literature on how terrorist groups end, the article analyses perspectives for AQIM and JNIM. It describes the conceptual distinction between insurgency and terrorism, and structures insights along six pathways of decline, namely reorientation, repression, decapitation, negotiation, failure or success. JNIM is currently fighting a large-scale insurgency in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while policy responses remain grounded in the paradigm of counter-terrorism, not counter-insurgency. The search and destroy missions of recently terminated Operation Barkhane did not manage to secure areas, and tactical successes were offset by targeting errors and exactions, fuelling jihadist recruitment. Leadership decapitation – also a focus of future French counter-terrorist efforts - has proved ineffective. The option of negotiations merits further exploration, but France and the Sahelian countries diverge in their approaches. Bottom-up ceasefires have improved local security in some areas, but risk benefiting AQIM in the long term. Finally, violent conflict between AQIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has hurt both groups, and their vulnerabilities to internal strife and the loss of public support could be leveraged more in counter-terrorism efforts.

## Introduction

Despite successive French and international military efforts, the security situation in the Sahel has continued to deteriorate. The year 2020 was the deadliest year on record, with nearly 6,250 fatalities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a 35 percent increase compared to the previous year.<sup>441</sup> The crisis started in 2012 when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), together with its offshoot *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) and ally Ansar Dine appropriated a Tuareg rebellion against central Malian rule, and established a proto-caliphate in northern Mali. The French Operation 'Serval', a conventional military onslaught, wrested control of the north from the Salafi-jihadist groups, who quickly reverted to irregular warfare. The jihadist landscape fractured further, with a group calling itself al-Murabitun breaking away from AQIM in 2014 – but staying loyal to al-Qaeda Central (AQC) – to return to AQIM's fold in late 2015. In March 2017, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (*Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*; commonly referred to by its Arabic acronym JNIM) was created. This umbrella organisation comprised al-Muribatun, Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina and AQIM's Sahara branch, all under the leadership of the Tuareg leader Iyad ag Ghali. Its leadership pledged allegiance to AQIM's emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Afghan Taliban's emir Mullah Haibatullah.<sup>442</sup> Within JNIM, Katiba Macina is particularly active, led by the charismatic Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa. It has established control of the river Niger's flooded inner delta (*zone inondable*) and has expanded into the non-flooded area (*zone exondée*) and beyond, including in Burkina Faso.<sup>443</sup> The patchwork of al-Qaeda affiliated groups remains diffuse, with different katibas (combat units) operating across Mali.<sup>444</sup> In addition, in May 2015 the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was created after a faction split from al-Murabitun, becoming a formal affiliate of the Islamic State.<sup>445</sup>

<sup>441</sup> 'Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021,' The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), February 2021, 35. <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/02/ten-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2021/>

<sup>442</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, 'Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa', FDD's Long War Journal, 13 March 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.

<sup>443</sup> 'Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence', International Crisis Group, 9 November 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali>.

<sup>444</sup> For a rough overview of the operating areas of different armed groups, see: Andrew Lebovich, 'Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel', European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel\\_mapping/](https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/).

<sup>445</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2019), 91–97.

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Given the current expansion of political violence, this article focuses on how the demise of terrorist groups can be facilitated – and applies insights from literature to AQIM and JNIM. Few current indications point to the groups’ decline – on the contrary - but the question remains pertinent since all terrorist campaigns ultimately do end. The aim is to place current developments into historical perspective, and to investigate if (and how) certain factors can potentially be leveraged to accelerate the group’s decline. This approach is novel for two reasons. First, most terrorism research focuses on the causes and beginnings of terrorism, rather than its decline.<sup>446</sup> Secondly, applying insights on how terrorism can end – through internal and external factors - necessitates a predominantly macro-level analysis. This contrasts with the micro- or meso-level focus of the bulk of current terrorism research. Research on terrorism has seen a significant increase in quality over the last few years, with more rigorous methodologies applied and less reliance on secondary sources.<sup>447</sup> Recent scholarship on AQIM and JNIM reflects this trend, with some excellent studies building on fieldwork and utilising primary sources such as jihadist correspondence and their statements in (social) media.<sup>448</sup> This article first provides a brief literature review on group desistance from terrorism, and then describes a conceptual approach developed by Audrey Kurth Cronin. She has identified six pathways how terrorist groups meet their ends, and this research applies developments, actors and factors relevant to AQIM and JNIM to each pathway. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications for the current counter-terrorism approach in the Sahel.

## Literature review on group desistance from terrorism

Reflection on the potential demise of terrorists groups is contingent on several contextual and ontological factors. Despite the tendency to elevate terrorist groups to public enemy number one and to present a nation’s military as the primary solution, terrorism is generally neither an existential threat to society nor its most pressing affliction. Arguably, the real problem of developing countries like Mali lies not in the presence of jihadist groups, but in a host of underlying social-economic fractures and political developments –

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<sup>446</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>447</sup> Bart Schuurman, ‘Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* (1 March 2018): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023>.

<sup>448</sup> Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771160>; Vidar B. Skretting, ‘Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib’s Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (24 September 2020): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1822593>.

many of which empower terrorist groups.<sup>449</sup> Questioning the centrality of the problem of terrorism should be followed by uncovering assumptions on its origins and (root) causes; factors that by deduction need addressing before reasons for decline can be identified. Analysts that place an emphasis on religion and ideology as a driver will naturally point to initiatives in the domain of deradicalisation and countering violent extremism; those that identify socio-economic grievances or other push-and pull factors will see remedy in addressing these.<sup>450</sup> The politics behind political violence - an often under-analysed aspect, according to Alexander Thurston - are equally important.<sup>451</sup> As such, jihadist field commanders can be considered political entrepreneurs embedded in particular socio-political constituencies; an analytical approach that generates different insights than treating them as actors who simply subjugate passive locals. This rhymes with Marc Sageman's dialectical understanding of political violence, where terrorism constitutes competition between the state and an 'out' group. The aggrieved group provokes the state into repressive actions, resulting in a circle of reciprocal violence. This can only be reversed through a policy of de-escalation.<sup>452</sup>

The literature on the decline of terrorism differentiates between individual disengagement and group-level desistance. More studies have been conducted on individual deradicalisation, reintegration, and demobilisation than on group lifecycles and longevity.<sup>453</sup> Those on group desistance consist of quantitative and qualitative studies; the latter often inferring trends from comprehensive datasets. Jones and Libicki analysed 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, and found that most groups within the sample stopped using terrorism when they entered a political process (43 percent), or because the leaders were imprisoned or killed (40 percent). Their data indicated that religious terrorist groups took longer to end than others; that larger groups achieved their goals more often and lasted longer than smaller ones, and that military force as a counter-terrorism policy

<sup>449</sup> Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead', *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 5 (3 September 2014): 32–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969942>.

<sup>450</sup> Edward Newman, 'Exploring the "Root Causes" of Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (1 December 2006): 749–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600704069>; Edwin Bakker, 'EU Counter-Radicalization Policies: A Comprehensive and Consistent Approach?' *Intelligence and National Security* 30, no. 2–3 (4 May 2015): 281–305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2014.988442>.

<sup>451</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 1–26.

<sup>452</sup> Mitja Sardoc, 'Making Sense of Political Violence: An Interview with Marc Sageman', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 3 (2 April 2020): 670–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1726581>.

<sup>453</sup> Tore Bjorgo and John G. Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2008).

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was rarely effective.<sup>454</sup> Leonard Weinberg reached broadly similar conclusions, examining 268 groups and looking for central tendencies instead of single factors.<sup>455</sup> However, quantitative studies that categorise groups, code goals and judge outcomes remain fraught with difficulties. Specialists on terrorist groups dispute key coding decisions, and binaries cannot capture nuance.<sup>456</sup> At the same time, some findings are difficult to reconcile with broader, generational trends. There are limitations to comparing contemporary Islamist terrorism with terrorist campaigns from the 1970s and 1980s. The first three of David Rapoport's four waves of terrorism (anarchism, anti-colonial, new left, and religious) each lasted approximately thirty years before petering out.<sup>457</sup> Al-Qaeda, however, was founded in 1988 and still appears remarkably resilient.<sup>458</sup>

The most comprehensive account of the decline of terrorist campaigns is provided by Audrey Kurth Cronin, in her book *How Terrorism Ends*.<sup>459</sup> Her research was conducted in the twilight of the Global War on Terror, when many in academia questioned the feasibility of defeating al-Qaeda through military means. Cronin combines both a quantitative approach, examining the essential dynamics of 457 terrorist organisations active from 1968 to 2009, as well as a qualitative approach, using comparative case studies to illustrate trends and outcomes.<sup>460</sup> The conceptual framework investigates the dynamic relationship between three strategic actors – the group, the government and the audience – and integrates this in six patterns of decline that have emerged in the history of terrorism. The boundaries between these different endings or pathways are in many cases not distinct, with most case studies reflecting a combination of multiple dynamics that led to a group's demise. Cronin does not provide exact figures for the six different outcomes. The endings, or pathways as presented by Cronin, are summed up below.

1. Capture or killing the group's leader (decapitation)
2. Entry of the group into a legitimate political process (negotiation)
3. Achievement of the group's aims (success)

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<sup>454</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, 'How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida' (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 3 August 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741-1.html>.

<sup>455</sup> Leonard Weinberg, *The End of Terrorism?*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>456</sup> Clark McCauley, 'Group Desistance from Terrorism: A Dynamic Perspective', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1, no. 3 (1 November 2008): 269–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467580902948158>.

<sup>457</sup> David C. Rapoport, 'The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism', *Current History* 100, no. 650 (1 December 2001): 419–24, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2001.100.650.419>.

<sup>458</sup> Camille Tawil, *Brothers In Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists*, trans. Robin Bray, English edition (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 26.

<sup>459</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*

<sup>460</sup> See Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, pages 207 - 222 for the statistical underpinning of the empirical data of the research.

4. Implosion or loss of the group's public support (failure)
5. defeat and elimination by brute force (repression)
6. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation)<sup>461</sup>

This article applies Cronin's categories to AQIM & JNIM, analysing past events and perspectives for each pathway. As Sarah Marsden notes in her own comprehensive literature review of how terrorism ends, the downside of these pathways is that they conflate external and internal actions with political and organisational outcomes, making it more difficult to identify causal mechanisms.<sup>462</sup> Nonetheless, the pathways do offer a framework that structures insights on decline. To facilitate the specific narrative on AQIM the sequence of these six pathways has been changed. The article starts with reorientation – the transition into other forms of violence – and expands on the distinction between terrorism and insurgency; a central tenet of this piece. Repression – the most important element of current counter-terrorism policy – is the second category, followed by its subset of leadership decapitation. Within each pathway, this article structures the analysis differently from the book, using both more recent research on phenomena and new data on developments in the Sahel. Cronin's methodology is based on literature analysis and case-studies, but it is not always apparent how conclusions are inferred from the underlying data. This is in part inherent to the topic. It is, for example, very difficult to objectively measure the effects of counter-terrorism policies, as Beatrice de Graaf and Bob de Graaff argue, making the discourse and perception on its “performativity” more important.<sup>463</sup> Within these limitations, the pathways should therefore not be considered as independent theoretical constructs. They blur in both theory and practice, but still allow a structured reflection on which factors influence a terrorist group's decline.

The distinction between insurgency and terrorism – which is lightly applied throughout the book – remains fundamental for understanding these transitions, and the particular case of AQIM. From a conceptual standpoint, armed groups either conduct a strategy of terrorism or one of insurgency.<sup>464</sup> An insurgency ultimately aims to achieve political-military control of a territory and its population, requiring the population's tacit or explicit support at best,

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>462</sup> Sarah Marsden, 'How Terrorism Ends', in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, ed. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Gordon Clubb, and Simon Mabon (London: Sage, 2015), 199–225, <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/76173/>.

<sup>463</sup> Beatrice de Graaf and Bob de Graaff, 'Bringing Politics Back in: The Introduction of the “Performative Power” of Counterterrorism', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (13 August 2010): 261–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2010.491337>.

<sup>464</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Mario Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism: Is There a Difference?', in *The Character of War in the 21st Century*, ed. Caroline Holmqvist-Jonsäter and Christopher Coker (London: Routledge, 2009), 27–41, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863312-9>.

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or submissiveness at worst.<sup>465</sup> The debate on the definition on terrorism includes many components – violence, fear, publicity, the targeting of civilians – but the goal of establishing some form of governance is certainly not one of them.<sup>466</sup> A *strategy* of terrorism can therefore be defined as pursuing political change through violence, ideally by provoking the state into overreaction.<sup>467</sup> The *tactic* of terrorism is generally used by groups following a terrorist strategy, but can also be employed by insurgents or even nation states. The strategy, however, determines essential characteristics of the group, such as whether it is small and secretive or constitutes a large parallel governance structure. Other features, such as the group's relationship with the local population, are fundamentally different for each strategy.<sup>468</sup> The conceptual debate remains relevant as policy responses to terrorism or insurgencies often involve different government departments, doctrines and dogmas. This is irrespective of governments and the United Nations labelling the group – in this case al-Qaeda – as an official terrorist organisation.

## 1. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation)

Terrorism sometimes ends when it transitions into other forms of violence or criminality. Cronin presents the campaign of the Algerian Group Islamique Armé (GIA) – a group from which AQIM and many of its senior commanders originate - as an example where terrorism transitioned into a full-scale civil war.<sup>469</sup> The subsequent transition back to low-level terrorism is unfortunately not analysed. A concept that encapsulates the potential transition from terrorism to insurgency is Stig Jarle Hansen's categorisation of territoriality. He has identified four categories of presence for jihadist groups: the clandestine network, accepted presence, semi-territoriality and territorial control.<sup>470</sup> In semi-territoriality, control is contested and can oscillate between government forces and the insurgents, while full territorial control is the ultimate achievement of the insurgency's objective. Where insurgents have territorial control or semi-territorial presence, local recruitment can quickly replenish losses incurred in combat. Territorial presence also greatly facilitates the generation of income. Taxes can be levied (such as zakat), and enterprises (like artisanal gold mines) can be run – with

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<sup>465</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 1–10.

<sup>466</sup> Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (1 January 2004): 777–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768>.

<sup>467</sup> Tom Parker, 'It's a Trap', *The RUSI Journal* 160, no. 3 (4 May 2015): 38–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1054732>.

<sup>468</sup> Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism'.

<sup>469</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 146–66.

<sup>470</sup> Hansen, *Horn, Sabel and Rift*, 17–50.

revenues in turn aiding recruitment.<sup>471</sup> Once a territorial presence is ensured, insurgent groups shoulder the responsibility of providing services, such as security, justice, energy, healthcare and education. Where Western doctrine prioritises security provision, jihadists – with Islam’s strong focus on justice and righteousness as the ideal vehicle – focus on providing justice. There is ample evidence that both ISGS and JNIM are widely perceived by locals as effectively delivering justice and solving family, land, or cattle conflicts. State justice is considered slow, inefficient and corrupt. The provision of services does not need to be continuous or permanent, and can be highly mobile with motorcycles intermittently visiting villages.<sup>472</sup> Ironically, state provision of services is often just as sporadic.

In 2015, after Katiba Macina established a foothold in central Mali, it started an insurgency against the government. While AQIM conducted several terrorist attacks in 2015/2016, murdering civilians in hotels in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Ivory Coast, the bulk of its operations targeted security forces. Large-scale complex attacks were conducted against Malian security forces, UN MINUSMA peacekeepers and French Barkhane troops. Between February 2013 and September 2020 AQIM was responsible for 41 suicide attacks in Mali; nearly all avoided targeting civilians.<sup>473</sup> Statistics from 2020 confirm that AQIM and JNIM are prolific in using Improvised Explosive Devices, small arms and mortar attacks against security forces.<sup>474</sup> This points to a strategy of insurgency rather than terrorism; one that is confirmed by the contested nature of state presence. Already wholly absent in the north, the government now only exerts its authority in large cities in central Mali, with much of the rural area effectively controlled by JNIM.<sup>475</sup> This ‘shadow governance’ does not, of course, resemble their proto-Caliphate as established in 2012, but still significantly impacts public life. Hundreds of schools have been forced to close,

<sup>471</sup> See for example: David Lewis and Ryan McNeill, ‘How Jihadists Struck Gold in Africa’s Sahel’, Reuters, 22 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/>.

<sup>472</sup> Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane, ‘Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?’, *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 118–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833567>.

<sup>473</sup> Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, ‘Desert Drift, Declining Deadline: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM’s Suicide Bombings’, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/desert-drift-declining-deadline-understanding-the-evolution-of-aqims-suicide-bombings/>.

<sup>474</sup> NATO Strategic Communication - South, ‘Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures,’ Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST, September 2020, [https://thesouthernhub.org/resources/site1/General/NSD-S%20Hub%20Publications/20200909\\_NU\\_NSDS\\_HUB\\_ACSRT\\_Joint\\_Report\\_Terrorism\\_in\\_the\\_Sahel.pdf](https://thesouthernhub.org/resources/site1/General/NSD-S%20Hub%20Publications/20200909_NU_NSDS_HUB_ACSRT_Joint_Report_Terrorism_in_the_Sahel.pdf).

<sup>475</sup> ‘Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-Terrorism,’ FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights, 20 November 2018, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-populations-caught-between-terrorism-and-anti-terrorism>.

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state representatives have fled and access to humanitarian NGO's has been restricted – only those in the field health care are permitted.<sup>476</sup> In 2018 jihadists effectively prevented the Presidential elections from taking place in the Mopti area, forcing many polling sites to close.<sup>477</sup> In short, as Mathieu Pellerin concludes, JNIM is fighting an insurgency that is fuelled by micro-local societal realities rather than global jihadist aspirations.<sup>478</sup>

As for a transition into criminality, AQIM's involvement in organised crime defies simple categorisations. Northern Mali has traditionally formed an important crossroads in transnational smuggling networks for licit and illicit goods.<sup>479</sup> Local communities have long been intricately involved in the trade of (subsidised) fuel, cigarettes and foodstuffs, while drugs, arms and immigrants follow different routes and are managed by other networks. The narcotics trade is not only a source of revenue for armed groups, but also a driver of conflict. The primary beneficiaries in the narcotics trade, however, are not jihadists, but the armed signatory groups of the Coordination and Platform. Some have close links to influential individuals inside the Sahelian central and local governments.<sup>480</sup> Cocaine is smuggled from the Gold Coast through Mali to the north, but Cannabis from Morocco – transported on routes running anti-clockwise through the Sahel to the Mediterranean – constitutes the brunt of the narcotics trade and forms the most stable income for smugglers.<sup>481</sup> In the complex social landscape of border communities, jihadists, smugglers and state representatives co-exist, and sometimes cooperate when it comes to rights of passage.<sup>482</sup> In the broader context, the large sums involved in the drugs trade have both upended social structures within communities, and further strained traditional tribal hierarchies between, for example, the Ifoghas and Imghad (Tuareg) and the Kunta and Tilemsi-Lamhar (Arabs). Organised crime has an enormous impact on security and stability in the Sahel, but remains difficult to 'fight' as it is interwoven in local and informal structures. For AQIM, its primary revenues lie elsewhere.

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<sup>476</sup> "Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists," Bruxelles: International Crisis Group, 28 May 2019, 19, 20, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists>.

<sup>477</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 148.

<sup>478</sup> Mathieu Pellerin, 'Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?', *Études de l'Ifri* (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, November 2019), [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin\\_armed\\_violence\\_sahara\\_2020\\_okes.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_armed_violence_sahara_2020_okes.pdf).

<sup>479</sup> Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (New York, NY Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>480</sup> "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," International Crisis Group, 13 December 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>.

<sup>481</sup> Guillaume Soto-Major, 'Traffics et Trafiquants: Éléments Structurants Des Sociétés Sahéliennes', *Recherches Internationales*, March 2020.

<sup>482</sup> Francesco Strazzari, 'Azawad and the Rights of Passage: The Role of Illicit Trade in the Logic of Armed Group Formation in Northern Mali' (NOREF, January 2015).

Since 2003, an industry around kidnapping developed in the Sahel, with jihadist groups earning fortunes in ransoms.<sup>483</sup> A 2010 letter from an AQIM commander to AQC underscored the importance of ransoms, emphasizing that it was the organisation's only significant source of funding.<sup>484</sup> In turn, AQIM's leadership shura chastised one of their primary commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for only demanding the meagre sum of €700,000 for the Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler.<sup>485</sup> These ransoms would be subject to significant inflation in the following years. A recent case involved the release of Malian politician Soumaïla Cissé (who tragically died of COVID 19 a few months later) and three Western hostages in October 2020. JNIM supposedly received a ransom that was between € 10 million and € 30 million, and 200 JNIM fighters were released, many of which were capable commanders.<sup>486</sup> Several studies have attempted to estimate how much has been paid in ransoms to AQIM and its affiliates. Updating these figures leads to the conclusion that the group has probably received between € 117 million and € 125 million in ransoms since 2003.<sup>487</sup> Of all countries that have paid ransoms, France – though not necessarily the state – has paid most. There is little information on how the jihadists have kept these large stashes of cash. According to some reports, money is invested through local businessmen who are allowed keep a part of the profit. In this way AQIM is financially integrated into local communities, ensuring local support and at the same time safeguarding investments.<sup>488</sup> In what has been labelled a 'boom and bust cycle', jihadists rule and tax in times of abundance, and can rely on their (illicit) business investments in times of hardship.<sup>489</sup>

AQIM has therefore been able to transition into other forms of violence. It has arguably fulfilled all four of Hansen's types of presence since its inception in 2007, shifting from a strategy of terrorism to one of insurgency (and back again) when opportunities arose or external actors

<sup>483</sup> Rida Lyammouri, 'Kidnapping Remains a Big Deal in the Sahel' (Policy Center for the New South, October 2020), <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/kidnapping-remains-big-deal-sahel>.

<sup>484</sup> Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.

<sup>485</sup> Mathieu Guidère, 'The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM', *Res Militaris*, 2014, 25.

<sup>486</sup> Adlène Meddi, 'Algérie : révélations d'un terroriste sur le « deal » des otages du Mali', *Le Point*, 7 December 2020, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algérie-revelations-d-un-terroriste-sur-le-deal-des-otages-du-mali-07-12-2020-2404607\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algérie-revelations-d-un-terroriste-sur-le-deal-des-otages-du-mali-07-12-2020-2404607_3826.php).

<sup>487</sup> Author's calculations based on two overviews and supplementary articles. See: Rukmini Callimachi, 'Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror', *The New York Times*, 29 July 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>; Camille Lafrance and Marie Toulemonde, '[Infographie] Maghreb-Sahel : le business lucratif des otages', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1116358/politique/infographie-maghreb-sahel-le-business-lucratif-des-otages/>.

<sup>488</sup> Olivier Dubois, 'Mali : la difficile traque des djihadistes de l'intérieur', *Le Point*, 17 January 2021, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-la-difficile-traque-des-djihadistes-de-l-interie-ur-17-01-2021-2409972\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-la-difficile-traque-des-djihadistes-de-l-interie-ur-17-01-2021-2409972_3826.php).

<sup>489</sup> Aisha Ahmad, 'The Long Jihad: The Boom–Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, (23 January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa048>.

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forced it to. Each type of presence entailed a unique type of organisation, and transitions from one to another required organisational transformations and flexibility. JNIM's current semi-territorial presence and its choice of targets, conducting attacks on security forces rather than terror attacks on civilians – reflect a strategy of insurgency. Previous phases in AQIM's violent operations – such as the campaign of suicide bombings in Algeria between 2007 -2009 – were more indicative of a strategy of terrorism. It is possible that if AQIM or JNIM lose ground in their insurgency, that they will revert to spectacular attacks on civilian targets.

## 2. Defeat and elimination by brute force (repression)

Terrorist acts are meant to provoke, and human instinct is to retaliate and fight fire with fire. Nation states, in particular, have a long history of repression. Repression seldom succeeds because terrorists aim to provoke and use the state's strength against itself. There is a clear difference in fighting a small, clandestine terrorist group and a fully-fledged insurgency that has mobilised thousands of fighters. The first allows a counter-terrorist approach that, at least for its repressive element, relies on intelligence and policing. This is not the case for an insurgency, where a state finds itself fighting a guerrilla war. When foreign troops are deployed, these become favoured targets for insurgents.<sup>490</sup> The literature on counterinsurgency (COIN) is extensive, and it is and noteworthy that French officers such as Roger Trinquier, Hubert Lyautey and David Galula provided much inspiration for current Anglo-Saxon doctrine on the subject.<sup>491</sup> Current Western doctrine has made a population-centric approach the key tenet of COIN, with fighting rebels but a small component of a broader political, social and economic effort to address the causes of the insurrection. This follows Galula's argument that COIN is 80 percent political and 20 percent military.<sup>492</sup> Intervening states have, however, always struggled with the practical implementation of this political and civilian component. When in 2011 the US ambassador in Afghanistan remarked to General Kenneth Dahl that the civilian surge had reached its high-water mark, the reply was “[t]hat's great, I can feel it lapping at my ankles.”<sup>493</sup> The conventional wisdom that good governance is an essential element of COIN is, however, contested. Jacqueline Hazelton has argued that there is no historical evidence that a ‘hearts and minds’ has been effective in the past, and that coercion and brute force were critical to success.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>491</sup> Bertrand Valeyre and Alexandre Guerin, ‘From Galula to Petraeus: The French Legacy in the US Counterinsurgency Doctrine’ (Centre de Doctrine d’Emploi des Forces, 7 July 2010), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/galulatopetraeus.pdf>.

<sup>492</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

<sup>493</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 308.

<sup>494</sup> Jacqueline L. Hazelton, ‘The “Hearts and Minds” Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare’, *International Security* 42, no. 1 (10 August 2017): 80–113.

The French military effort in Mali has been subject to much criticism in academia. Many authors ascertain that the approach is overly securitised, and correlate this to the deterioration of the security situation across the Sahel. Bruce Charbonneau argues that the response to the conflict in Mali has imposed a conceptual framework that does not align with the complex realities on the ground; a binary distinction between signatory armed groups and terrorists that has led to an international division of labour.<sup>495</sup> Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos questions French motives, its understanding of ‘jihadism’, the effectiveness of a militarised policy, and assesses that the war has already been lost.<sup>496</sup> Yvan Guichanou argues that a depoliticised, bureaucratic logic is sustaining the French military approach, clashing with Malian sovereignty.<sup>497</sup> This is magnified on the international level, with a ‘security traffic jam’ of barely coordinated policies by a multitude of different actors, compounding unintended effects.<sup>498</sup> There are a few positive notes. Contrasting with a history of unilateral action in its African sphere of influence, France’s current efforts are more internationalised, expressing a desire (and need) for further Europeanisation and *Sahelisation*.<sup>499</sup> In a comprehensive analysis of the French military campaign in the Sahel, Michael Shurkin compares the modesty of French ambitions to the American propensity for thinking big, as illustrated by the nation building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>500</sup> But as French casualties rise and more doubts on the efficacy of Operation Barkhane surface in the media, popular support for the mission erodes in both France and Mali. Public opinion, after all, is a key factor in escalation and de-escalation processes in counter-terrorism operations.<sup>501</sup>

Although fighting an insurgency, current military operations are *not* based on the principles of COIN. Operation Barkhane, succeeding Operation Serval in August 2014, became responsible for counter-terrorism operations Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina

<sup>495</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, ‘Faire La Paix Au Mali: Les Limites de l’acharnement Contre-Terroriste’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 53, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 447–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666017>.

<sup>496</sup> Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue: La France au Sahel* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2020).

<sup>497</sup> Yvan Guichanou, ‘The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 895–911, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa094>.

<sup>498</sup> Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, ‘Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism’, *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 855–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa093>.

<sup>499</sup> Benedikt Erforth, ‘Multilateralism as a Tool: Exploring French Military Cooperation in the Sahel’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 0, no. 0 (4 March 2020): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1733986>.

<sup>500</sup> Michael Shurkin, ‘France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine’, *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2020/2021), <http://tnsr.org/2020/11/frances-war-in-the-sahel-and-the-evolution-of-counter-insurgency-doctrine/>.

<sup>501</sup> Bart Schuurman, ‘Defeated by Popular Demand: Public Support and Counterterrorism in Three Western Democracies, 1963–1998’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (1 February 2013): 152–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.747072>.

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Faso. These countries cooperate on security in the G5 Sahel.<sup>502</sup> At Barkhane's high watermark, France deployed around 5,100 troops. It has deployed Special Forces in Task Force Sabre, and also leads the multinational Task Force Takuba, that incorporates Special Forces from Sweden, Estonia and the Czech Republic. Although many operations are conducted with G5 security forces, the sheer size of this geographic space precludes traditional COIN operations where ground is held and secured after it is cleared (under the doctrine 'shape, clear, hold, build'). The exact strategy remained difficult to discern, but appeared to rest on Operation Barkhane hunting terrorists in the short-term; MINUSMA stabilising in the mid-term, and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) building capability so that the Malian security forces could take care of their own security in the long term.<sup>503</sup> French political discourse is rife with importance of three Ds (Defence, Diplomacy and Development), and clearly recognises that there is no military solution to the problem. There remains, nonetheless, a disconnect between the military and civilian effort. As highlighted in the 2021 Senate debate, Operation Barkhane's cost around €900 million, while France only spent €85 million on bilateral development aid to Mali.<sup>504</sup> What is more, as admitted by Foreign minister Le Drian, development aid is not arriving in areas pacified by Operation Barkhane. As such, areas might be briefly secured, but if nothing outside cities and a few military outposts is held, then building anything lasting will remain impossible.<sup>505</sup> Rather than focusing on securing and stabilizing zones, French operations hunt jihadist groups in search and destroy operations.

The effectiveness of these search and destroy operations remains, however, difficult to measure. Despite many tactical Barkhane successes, the number of insurgent attacks continues to increase. The Pau Summit designated ISGS as the priority target, and while the group was significantly degraded by French strikes, statistics indicate that it nonetheless managed to increase the number of attacks it conducted in early 2021.<sup>506</sup> The French military recognise the temporary nature of kinetic operations, calling them 'mowing the lawn'.<sup>507</sup> For Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal remarked: "You can kill *Taliban*

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<sup>502</sup> Sergei Boeke and Grégory Chauzal, 'Le G5 Sahel : une avancée de la coopération régionale pour la paix et la sécurité?', *Annuaire français des relations internationales* XVIII (3 July 2017): 569–79.

<sup>503</sup> Louise Wiuff Moe, 'The Dark Side of Institutional Collaboration: How Peacekeeping-Counterterrorism Convergences Weaken the Protection of Civilians in Mali', *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (14 October 2020): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2020.1821364>.

<sup>504</sup> 'Débat Sur l'opération Barkhane: Bilan et Perspectives', § La commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (2021), [http://www.senat.fr/cra/s20210209/s20210209\\_2.html#par\\_396](http://www.senat.fr/cra/s20210209/s20210209_2.html#par_396).

<sup>505</sup> Ismaël Fournier, 'Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Dynamics in Mali', *Canadian Military Journal* 21, no. 1 (20 November 2020), <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol21/no1/page4-eng.asp>.

<sup>506</sup> Marie Toulemonde, '[Infographie] Niger, Mali, Burkina : la stratégie de Barkhane a-t-elle atteint ses limites?', *Jeune Afrique*, 25 March 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1143167/politique/infographie-niger-mali-burkina-la-strategie-de-barkhane-a-t-elle-atteint-ses-limites/>.

<sup>507</sup> Thomas Hofnung, 'Djihadisme au Mali : la « pyramide » et le « gazon »', *Le Monde*, 5 December 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/05/djihadisme-au-mali-la-pyramide-et-le-gazon\\_5393195\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/05/djihadisme-au-mali-la-pyramide-et-le-gazon_5393195_3212.html).

forever because they are *not a finite* number.”<sup>508</sup> He argued that the nature of local grievances and the dynamics of revenge lead to ‘insurgent math’; for every innocent person killed, ten new enemies are created.<sup>509</sup> The same applies to Mali, where Operation Barkhane has already inadvertently killed several innocent civilians over the years. A case in point is the airstrike that killed 22 people in Bounti, Mali, on 3 January 2021. Locals insisted that a wedding ceremony was struck, while France remained adamant that only jihadists had been targeted.<sup>510</sup> An elaborate report by MINUSMA concluded that three of the victims were armed members of a katiba affiliated with JNIM, but that 19 unarmed civilians were also killed.<sup>511</sup> France contested the report’s methodology, conclusions and its interpretation of international law, but offered no evidence supporting its own version of events.<sup>512</sup> The killings at Bounti illustrate the legal and practical problems of signature strikes, where the identity of the target(s) is unknown, but where behavioural patterns indicate potential involvement with armed groups.<sup>513</sup> AQIM exploited Bounti in its propaganda, and these events risk further undermining public support for Operation Barkhane.

As with many international interventions, strengthening local security forces constitutes an important element of the French exit strategy.<sup>514</sup> Malian security forces have been trained by France, the US and other partners for nearly two decades, but the results have been meagre. Since 2013, the EUTM has trained nearly 15,000 soldiers, with tactical proficiency improving. A recurrent problem, however, lies in the realm of logistics, human resources management and command relationships. These remain inadequate for sustaining

<sup>508</sup> Dexter Filkins, ‘Stanley McChrystal’s Long War’, *The New York Times*, 14 October 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/magazine/18Afghanistan-t.html>.

<sup>509</sup> Michael Hastings, ‘The Runaway General: The Profile That Brought Down McChrystal’, *Rolling Stone*, 22 June 2010, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/>.

<sup>510</sup> Omar Ouahmane, ‘Un carnage, deux versions : témoignages après les frappes meurtrières de Bounti, au Mali’, *France Inter*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/le-zoom-de-la-redaction-02-fevrier-2021>.

<sup>511</sup> ‘Rapport Sur l’incident de Bounti Du 3 Janvier 2021’ (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, March 2021), [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_final\\_bounty\\_bounty9.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_final_bounty_bounty9.pdf).

<sup>512</sup> Cyril Bensimon and Elise Vincent, ‘L’armée française aurait bien commis une bavure au Mali, selon un rapport de la Minusma’, *Le Monde*, 31 March 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/31/l-armee-francaise-auroit-bien-commis-une-bavure-au-mali-selon-un-rapport-de-la-minusma\\_6075044\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/31/l-armee-francaise-auroit-bien-commis-une-bavure-au-mali-selon-un-rapport-de-la-minusma_6075044_3212.html).

<sup>513</sup> Rebecca Mignot-Mahdavi, ‘Le Silence Des Agneaux: France’s War Against “Jihadist Groups” and Associated Legal Rationale’ (ICCT - the Hague, 15 May 2020), For the legality of French counterterrorism operations, see, <https://icct.nl/publication/le-silence-des-agneaux-frances-war-against-jihadist-groups-and-associated-legal-rationale/>.

<sup>514</sup> Sergei Boeke, ‘Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy’ (ICCT, August 2014), <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Boeke-Transitioning-from-Short-Term-Military-Intervention-to-CT-Policy-August2014.pdf>.

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operations, and Malians have successfully frustrated international attempts at reform. In part, the Malian military elite remain ensnared in corruption and nepotism, but their views on sovereignty and the kind of military that should be (re-)constructed diverges from donor expectations.<sup>515</sup> Most problematic, however, is the Malian army's historical tendency to mete out collective punishment. In the past, Tuaregs suspected of separatism risked extrajudicial execution; now Fulanis, perceived as aiding or abetting jihadism, suffer a similar fate. As documented by human rights organisations, the security forces of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have committed dozens of massacres.<sup>516</sup> Data from ACLED indicates that state security services have been responsible for more civilian deaths than jihadists, with communal militias third in terms of the numbers of casualties inflicted.<sup>517</sup> None of these abuses have led to convictions, and there are few indications that this impunity will change. The unwillingness of Western nations to address these abuses is part of a larger problem - undemocratic and corrupt practices at the heart of Sahelian regimes. Both the predatory nature of the state and exactions committed by security forces are strong drivers for jihadist recruitment. There is ample evidence that the killing or arrest of family members often forms the 'tipping point' for an individual to join a jihadist group.<sup>518</sup>

The final element in the toolbox of repression concerns militias. In the literature on civil wars this has been a neglected subject.<sup>519</sup> Jessica Stanton argues that governments often can and do control militia behaviour, and that if these recruit from the same constituency as insurgents, the militia will be less likely to target civilians.<sup>520</sup> Militias have been used during the Algerian civil war, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have recently been

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<sup>515</sup> Denis M. Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and Its International Partners', *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (1 March 2019): 405–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz003>.

<sup>516</sup> Corinne Dufka, 'Sahel: Atrocities by the Security Forces Are Fueling Recruitment by Armed Islamists', Human Rights Watch, 1 July 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/sahel-atrocities-security-forces-are-fueling-recruitment-armed-islamists>.

<sup>517</sup> Ornella Moderan, Habibou Souley Bako, and Paul-Simon Handy, 'Sahel Counter-Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll on Civilians', ISS Africa, 14 April 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sahel-counter-terrorism-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-civilians>.

<sup>518</sup> 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment' (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), 73,74, <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>; Héli Nsaibia, 'State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results Is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians', *ACLEDD* (blog), 20 May 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>.

<sup>519</sup> Corinna Jentsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, 'Militias in Civil Wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (1 August 2015): 755–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576753>.

<sup>520</sup> Jessica A. Stanton, 'Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (1 August 2015): 899–923, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576751>.

formalised in Burkina Faso and Nigeria.<sup>521</sup> The Malian state has a long history of using armed groups/militias as proxies as part of a divide and rule strategy in the north.<sup>522</sup> After Operation Serval, the government helped to set up a Tuareg Imghad militia – GATIA – to counterbalance those striving for more autonomy. France had also allied with armed groups to fight jihadists, such as the Tuareg separatist MNLA during Operation Serval; much to Bamako's distaste. Operation Barkhane cooperated with GATIA and MAA in 2015, and was widely seen as fuelling local tensions and contributing to insecurity.<sup>523</sup> The current ethnic conflict between Fulani, Dogon and Dassouak in central Mali has led to a proliferation of self-defence militias. The militia Dan Na Ambassagou, composed of Dogon, is accused of the massacre of Fulani at Ogossagou and was officially dissolved by the government. Its leader simply refused to disband.<sup>524</sup> Where the state is unable to protect its citizens, the active or passive support of local militias constitutes a Faustian pact that might provide short-term local security. At the same time, it empowers groups that are difficult to control, arms individuals who could drift into banditry (or the insurgency) and further proliferates small arms in a region already awash with weapons.

While the counter-terrorism operations of Barkhane and the G5 contained strong elements of military repression, their effectiveness was questionable. The operations were not modelled along COIN doctrine, and as widely recognised there was a large imbalance between the military and civilian components. Galula's 80/20 guideline has thus been inverted. A 2010 RAND study that analysed 30 different insurgencies identified successful and unsuccessful approaches.<sup>525</sup> Of the twelve 'Bad COIN approaches', most appear directly applicable to the Sahel. The first four include: the COIN force used both collective punishment and escalating repression; the primary COIN force was an external occupier; the COIN force or government actions contributed to substantial new grievances; militias worked at cross-purposes with the COIN force or government. Both

<sup>521</sup> Aïssatou Diallo, 'Burkina Faso : « Armer des civils ne peut qu'augmenter le risque d'exactions »', *Jeune Afrique*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/885838/politique/burkina-faso-armed-civilians-ne-peut-quaugmenter-le-risque-d'exactions/>.

<sup>522</sup> Grégory Chauzal and Thibault Van Damme, 'The Roots of Mali's Conflict; Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis', CRU Report (Clingendael, March 2015), [https://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the\\_roots\\_of\\_malis\\_conflict/](https://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/).

<sup>523</sup> Adam Sandor, 'Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust, and Armed Actor Governance in Central and Northern Mali' (Centre FrancoPaix, August 2017), <https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Sandor-english-Report.pdf>.

<sup>524</sup> Aïssatou Diallo, 'Mali : accusé du pire, le chef de milice Youssouf Toloba ne désarme pas – Jeune Afrique', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/773231/politique/mali-accuse-du-pire-le-chef-de-milice-youssouf-toloba-ne-desarme-pas/>.

<sup>525</sup> Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Rand Corporation, 2010), xvii.

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the statistics of violence and the literature suggest that the current military strategy is not a viable one. This does not mean that France is stuck in a quagmire it cannot leave. President Macron's actions make it clear that French military presence in the Sahel is not an independent goal by itself, but is subservient to political objectives in France's broader Africa policy. Macron initially intended to announce a troop reduction during the N'Djamena G5 summit in 2021, but African leaders requested a delay in the military drawdown.<sup>526</sup> In return, Macron received a promise from the Malian government to implement the Algiers Agreement and the Chadian deployment of 1,200 troops to the Tri-border region.<sup>527</sup> In June 2021, Macron announced the termination of Operation Barkhane, and a probable halving of the number of French troops that will continue to conduct counterterrorist operations.<sup>528</sup> As France had a large military presence across the Sahel even before Operation Serval, a complete withdrawal in the near future is unlikely. At the N'Djamena Summit, Macron had already explicitly mentioned that military efforts would concentrate on decapitating the jihadist organisations, and a further reduced French presence will put even more emphasis on these focused and less risky type of operations.<sup>529</sup>

### 3. Capturing or killing a group's leader (decapitation)

Governments often attempt to decapitate terrorist groups by killing or capturing their leader. The effects vary and depend on the commander's charisma (and whether a personality cult has developed around him), the availability of a capable successor, the nature of the group's ideology, and whether the leader was killed or imprisoned. Cronin argues that arresting a leader is more effective than killing him, especially if he is humbled before the media and prevented from communicating with his followers once in prison.<sup>530</sup> If however, a leader of a group with widespread popular support is killed, this either has

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<sup>526</sup> Benjamin Roger, 'Sans Macron, l'avenir de Barkhane au menu du sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena', *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1120673/politique/sans-macron-lavenir-de-barkhane-au-menu-du-sommet-du-g5-sahel-a-ndjamena/>.

<sup>527</sup> 'Dans les coulisses du huis clos au sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena', *Jeune Afrique*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1122786/politique/dans-les-coulisses-du-huis-clos-au-sommet-du-g5-sahel-a-ndjamena/>.

<sup>528</sup> Fatoumata Diallo, 'Macron mise sur Bazoum et fait du Niger le cœur du dispositif français au Sahel', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 July 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1201242/politique/macron-mise-sur-bazoum-et-fait-du-niger-le-coeur-du-dispositif-francais-au-sahel/>.

<sup>529</sup> Le Monde avec AFP, 'Au sommet du G5 Sahel, Emmanuel Macron écarte toute baisse des effectifs militaires français dans la région « dans l'immédiat »', *Le Monde*, 16 February 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/16/au-g5-sahel-macron-appelle-a-renforcer-la-lutte-contre-les-djihadistes-et-au-retour-de-l-etat\\_6070141\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/16/au-g5-sahel-macron-appelle-a-renforcer-la-lutte-contre-les-djihadistes-et-au-retour-de-l-etat_6070141_3212.html).

<sup>530</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 14.

no measurable effect or is counterproductive.<sup>531</sup> As the book was written in 2009, there is no mention of the demise of Osama Bin Laden and Abu al-Baghdadi, but the analysis of al-Zarqawi's killing in 2006 and its effect on al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is surprisingly brief. Another example that has been under-researched in decapitation studies involves Mohamed Yusuf, Boko Haram's leader, who was captured by the Nigerian army in Maiduguri in July 2009, and subsequently tortured and killed by the police.<sup>532</sup> Recognised by Nigerian officials as an enormous strategic error, Yusuf's extrajudicial execution led to the appointment of a new but equally charismatic and radical leader, Abubakar Shekau.<sup>533</sup>

There is a significant body of literature on targeted killing and leadership decapitation. Researchers, however, are divided on its effectiveness, with some arguing that it helps degrade terrorist groups by keeping the leadership on its back foot and others concluding that the tactic is ineffective at best or counterproductive at worst. Patrick Johnston's quantitative study indicated that decapitation increases governments' chances of reducing violence and defeating insurgencies, and using an extensive dataset (1970-2008) Bryan Brice found that the tactic increased terrorist group mortality rates.<sup>534</sup> In an equally comprehensive study, Jenna Jordan came to an opposite conclusion, arguing that "[o]verall, the evidence suggests that decapitation is not an effective counterterrorism strategy, that it is especially unlikely to be effective in the cases of bureaucratized Islamist organizations, and that it is especially ineffective against groups that have managed to amass popular support."<sup>535</sup> The debate on its efficacy is unlikely to be settled soon, complicated by issues of methodology (how to measure effect and causality) and the challenge of collecting and coding empirical data. Meanwhile, for over two decades al-Qaeda, Hamas and the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan have been subjected to a systematic and structured campaign of decapitation, but as organisations, they have adapted and survived. It has become clear that the military

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

<sup>532</sup> David Cook, 'Boko Haram: A Prognosis', 16 December 2011, <https://bakerinstitute.org/research/boko-haram-a-prognosis/>.

<sup>533</sup> Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue*, 75–76.

<sup>534</sup> Patrick B. Johnston, 'Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns', *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): 47–79; Bryan Brice, *Targeting Top Terrorists: Understanding Leadership Removal in Counterterrorism Strategy*, Illustrated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Nichola E. J. Rew, 'Book Review of "Targeting Top Terrorists: Understanding Leadership Removal in Counterterrorism Strategy"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2 July 2020): 500–502, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2020.1764791>.

<sup>535</sup> Jenna Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation of Terrorist Organizations: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, Illustrated edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 186; See also: Jenna Jordan, 'Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes', *International Security* 38, no. 4 (1 April 2014): 7–38, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00157](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00157).

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mantra of “cutting off the snake’s head” simply does not work when it concerns networked organisations consisting of many decentralised cells or units.

In practice, decapitation efforts no-longer entail a focus on the single commander at the top of the pyramid (or as a central node in a network), but encompass targeting the whole leadership cadre of the group. Pioneered by Israel, adapted by general Stanley McChrystal in Iraq (Task Force 714) and later transposed to Afghanistan, this new way of war relied on detailed and real-time intelligence (specifically Signals Intelligence, SIGINT) to identify, locate and target individuals.<sup>536</sup> In Afghanistan, this worked on basis of a list of targets, called the Joint Prioritized Effects List (JPEL). John Nagl, a former advisor to general Petraeus, described the effort as “an almost industrial scale counterterrorism killing machine.”<sup>537</sup> Academics argued that if neither top-level commanders or grass roots fighters provided al-Qaeda with sufficient strategic force on their own, then the mid-level commanders (‘managers’) also needed to be targeted to cause the network to collapse on itself.<sup>538</sup> Arrests generated new leads and individuals to kill or capture. Although dependent on intelligence, this so called ‘daisy chaining’ created a momentum of its own, with the military sometimes killing the very sources that intelligence was running.<sup>539</sup> In Afghanistan hundreds if not thousands of mid-level Taliban commanders have been killed during the past two decades, but the insurgency has triumphed.<sup>540</sup> As counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations focus more on targeting key individuals in adversarial networks, the term leadership decapitation no longer appears accurate. It has become leadership attrition.

In Mali, France has long attempted to target al-Qaeda leaders. In March 2012, when AQIM and its partners were chasing the Malian army out of northern Mali, French intelligence located several commanders in Timbuktu but refrained from striking them, in part not to risk the lives of hostages held by the group.<sup>541</sup> Before Operation Serval was

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<sup>536</sup> Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, Illustrated Edition (New York, New York: Portfolio, 2015).

<sup>537</sup> Gretchen Gavett, ‘What Is the Secretive U.S. “Kill/Capture” Campaign?’, *Frontline*, 17 June 2011, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-is-the-secretive-us-killca/>.

<sup>538</sup> Peter Neumann, Ryan Evans, and Raffaello Pantucci, ‘Locating Al Qaeda’s Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 11 (1 November 2011): 825–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.611936>.

<sup>539</sup> Nada Bakos and David Coburn, *The Targeter: My Life in the CIA, Hunting Terrorists and Challenging the White House* (New York: Little, Brown US, 2019), 228–32.

<sup>540</sup> Keith Patrick Dear, ‘Beheading the Hydra? Does Killing Terrorist or Insurgent Leaders Work?’, *Defence Studies* 13, no. 3 (1 September 2013): 293–337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2013.845383>.

<sup>541</sup> Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali: Les nouvelles menaces contre la France* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 23.

launched in January 2013, many targeting packages had already been prepared.<sup>542</sup> Weeks after combat started, Abu Zeid, one of the primary AQIM commanders, was killed when he was located through his satellite phone.<sup>543</sup> Mokhtar Belmokhtar, another important commander, was declared dead multiple times but managed to resurface each time.<sup>544</sup> While Belmokhtar has not been delisted by the UN or eulogised by AQIM, reports suggest that he was killed by a French airstrike in Libya in November 2016.<sup>545</sup> The largest coup was the killing of Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's emir (overall commander). He was killed on 3 June 2020, soon after he crossed the Algerian frontier into northern Mali.<sup>546</sup> American intelligence proved vital to the French operation, illustrating that decapitation strikes are often chance opportunities that arise when crucial intelligence is received, whether from one's own human or signal intelligence assets or from international partners. It took AQIM more than five months - as coordination had to be sought with other al-Qaeda affiliates - to name the successor, Abu Ubaidah Yusef al Annabi.<sup>547</sup> The new emir was a long-serving Algerian who was head of AQIM's "Council of Notables".<sup>548</sup> It will probably take a while before the effects of this leadership change can be discerned.

It is therefore clear that Operation Barkhane conducts a strategy of leadership decapitation. This has become a fixed element of counter-terrorism operations, and like in Iraq and Afghanistan, has evolved into the broader policy of leadership attrition. Traditional thinking behind decapitating terrorist groups has underpinned French policy, as emphasised by Defence Minister Florence Parly: "we are targeting [jihadists] at the top of the pyramid because

<sup>542</sup> Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 'Operation "Serval": A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (19 September 2015): 801–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494>.

<sup>543</sup> Jean-Christophe Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali*. (Paris: TALLANDIER, 2014), 466–68.

<sup>544</sup> Timothée Vilars, 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar, le djihadiste aux mille et une morts', *L'Obs*, 28 November 2016, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20161128.OBS1850/mokhtar-belmokhtar-le-djihadiste-aux-mille-et-une-morts.html>.

<sup>545</sup> Elise Vincent, 'Les confidences d'« Ibrahim 10 », djihadiste au Sahel', *Le Monde*, 25 February 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/25/les-confidences-d-ibrahim-10-djihadiste-au-sahel\\_5427750\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/25/les-confidences-d-ibrahim-10-djihadiste-au-sahel_5427750_3212.html).

<sup>546</sup> Julie Coleman and Méryl Demuynck, 'The Death of Droukdel: Implications for AQIM and the Sahel', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - the Hague*, 9 June 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-death-of-droukdel-implications-for-aqim-and-the-sahel/>.

<sup>547</sup> Wassim Nasr, 'Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership', *Newlines Institute*, 8 February 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/al-qaeda/implications-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-new-leadership/>.

<sup>548</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, 'AQIM Names Veteran Jihadist as New Emir', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 21 November 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/11/aqim-names-veteran-jihadist-as-new-emir.php>.

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it is the best way to weaken [their] base”.<sup>549</sup> Since December 2019, French armed Reaper drones based in Niger also take part in targeting operations. From a military perspective these operations are an efficient use of resources, as strikes can be conducted without risks to own troops. As the table in annex 1 illustrates, many JNIM high-level commanders have been killed or captured during the past eight years, but violence on the ground has continued to increase. Even in the direct aftermath of the February 2018 Tinzouaten strike, which killed several high-ranking JNIM commanders, the group managed to execute three of its largest ever complex attacks.<sup>550</sup> This is not indicative of a weakened organisation, and there is little chance that leadership attrition will significantly weaken AQIM and JNIM. Finally, it is important to note that two key figures on France’s targeting list – Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa (who survived a strike but was declared dead by Minister Parly) – are precisely the ones the Malian government wants to start a dialogue with.<sup>551</sup>

#### **4. Entry of group into legitimate political process (negotiation)**

Cronin’s most extensive chapter focuses on negotiations with terrorist groups. The saying that democracies do not talk to terrorists - to avoid legitimising them - is not borne out by the facts. Here the distinction between terrorism and insurgency is relevant, as insurgents are deemed rational and political, while this is questioned for terrorists, rendering negotiations with them both undesirable and unfeasible.<sup>552</sup> A sociological experiment by Emily Pronin et al illustrated that the degree of rationality imputed to terrorists influenced people’s choice of whether to bomb or negotiate with them.<sup>553</sup> Some countries, like the US, will not negotiate with groups that they have themselves designated as terrorist entities. The effects of proscription – the listing of terrorist groups – also extends to third parties (like NGOs), whose avenues for engagement are consequently narrowed.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> Assemblée Nationale Française, “Questionnement au gouvernement 28/11/2018”, La Chaîne Parlementaire; quoted in (footnote 32, p.58): ‘Speaking with the “Bad Guys”: Toward Dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists’.

<sup>550</sup> Targeting the Burkinabe military headquarters and the French embassy in Ouagadougou in March, the MINUSMA camp in Timbuktu in April and the headquarters of the G 5 Sahel force at Sévaré in June: Pellerin, ‘Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?’, 12.

<sup>551</sup> Cyril Bensimon, ‘Mali : la mort d’Amadou Koufa, un coup dur pour les djihadistes au Sahel’, *Le Monde*, 3 December 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/03/mali-la-mort-d-amadou-koufa-un-coup-dur-pour-les-djihadistes-au-sahel\\_5392124\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/03/mali-la-mort-d-amadou-koufa-un-coup-dur-pour-les-djihadistes-au-sahel_5392124_3212.html).

<sup>552</sup> Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented ‘Terrorism’*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>553</sup> Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch, ‘Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality’, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 385–92, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_12).

<sup>554</sup> Sophie Haspelagh, “Listing Terrorists”: The Impact of Proscription on Third-Party Efforts to Engage Armed Groups in Peace Processes – a Practitioner’s Perspective’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 1 (1 April 2013): 189–208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2013.765706>.

Cronin's empirical data shows that a little less than one in five terrorist groups actually entered into negotiations, and these generally did not lead to an agreement and end of the conflict. In most cases, negotiations were long and drawn out, with continued violence from both sides during the process. Typically, negotiations were rarely the single factor in a group's desistance from terrorism, but contributed to a process of managed decline.<sup>555</sup>

Negotiating with terrorists and insurgents is not without risk for states. According to Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bart Schuurman, there are three paradoxes.<sup>556</sup> First, warring parties have often used negotiations to win time in order to recuperate and prepare the next offensive. Second, negotiations can provoke splits within parties, with hardliners promoting an increase in violence. Finally, the literature on civil wars indicates that negotiated settlements are more brittle than military victories, making a resumption of violence more likely.<sup>557</sup> As a result, some argue that the feasibility of negotiations should be explored before states embark on them.<sup>558</sup> Military force thus becomes the normative legitimate (and legal) counter-terrorism policy, with dialogue the controversial exception. This poses problems for mediators in armed conflicts, who are expected to incorporate liberal norms such as inclusivity in their approach, but must at the same time exclude terrorist groups.<sup>559</sup> This applies especially to Mali, where the aforementioned 2015 Algiers peace accord, under significant international pressure, specifically excluded the al-Qaeda affiliated groups as non-signatory armed groups. As Bruno Charbonneau emphasises, this artificial distinction is not only blurred in practice, but the dichotomy underpins the formal division of labour between the UN MINUSMA mission and the French-led Barkhane G5 counter-terrorism operation.<sup>560</sup> This, of course, does not mean that the jihadist groups wanted or should have been included in the peace-process at that time; only that their exclusion has shaped the conflict in Mali since.

The taboo on negotiating with violent extremists is not as solid as it seems. After nearly two decades of combat operations in Afghanistan, the US embarked on negotiations with

<sup>555</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 35–72.

<sup>556</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bart Schuurman, 'The Paradoxes of Negotiating with Terrorist and Insurgent Organisations', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 4 (1 November 2011): 677–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2011.615612>.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.; Alexander B. Downes, 'The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars', *Security Studies* 13, no. 4 (1 July 2004): 230–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410490945893>.

<sup>558</sup> Daniel Byman, 'The Decision to Begin Talks with Terrorists: Lessons for Policymakers', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (1 August 2006): 403–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600703996>.

<sup>559</sup> Julia Palmiano Federer, 'We Do Negotiate with Terrorists: Navigating Liberal and Illiberal Norms in Peace Mediation', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1472727>.

<sup>560</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, 'Intervention in Mali: Building Peace between Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 415–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2017.1363383>.

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the Afghan Taliban.<sup>561</sup> The US has astutely continued to consider the Taliban as insurgents rather than terrorists, although the Taliban does not shy from using terrorist tactics, maintains ties with al-Qaeda and strives to establish a type of Islamic state that does not fundamentally differ from al-Qaeda's ultimate objective. Negotiations with the Taliban attempted to reach a power-sharing agreement, but the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops precipitated a Taliban victory. The original Doha agreement was conditional on the Taliban severing all ties with al-Qaeda, but it appeared that they actually strengthened their relationship.<sup>562</sup> The process to start a dialogue in Mali has similarly needed time, with France ruling out any negotiations during the first years of tactical military successes. The classic government standpoint was described by Foreign minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2017: "They are terrorists. How do you negotiate with terrorists? This is a fight with no ambiguity".<sup>563</sup> President Macron has also repeated that France does 'not talk to terrorists, but fights them'.<sup>564</sup> The official stance on negotiations did soften, but during the 2021 N'Djamena G5 Summit, Macron emphasised that while community-level dialogue was fine, talks with al-Qaeda's top-level hierarchy were impossible.<sup>565</sup>

Both the Malian and Burkinabe governments support opening negotiations with JNIM. Burkina Faso, its territory only recently enveloped by terrorism, has rapidly accepted the option of opening dialogue with JNIM and welcoming back its *'fils égarés'* (wayward sons).<sup>566</sup> Mali's position on negotiating with AQIM & JNIM has taken longer to crystallise. Before the 2012 crisis, the Malian government was not overly concerned by the presence of AQIM fighters in the north – the Tuareg separatists were deemed the real threat.<sup>567</sup> Negotiations with AQIM did take place regularly to free Western hostages, often through Malian and Burkinabe government intermediaries, and notably Iyad ag Ghali (then still allied with the government). While the Algiers peace process excluded the three Salafi-jihadist groups, many key leaders in Ansar Dine switched to official signatory

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<sup>561</sup> Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, 'White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations', *The New York Times*, 15 July 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html>.

<sup>562</sup> 'Letter Dated 19 May 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council' (United Nations Security Council, 27 May 2020), 13, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3862716?ln=en>.

<sup>563</sup> John Irish, 'Mali, France Rule out Talks with Jihadists after Attacks', *Reuters*, 7 April 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-jihadist-idUSKBN1792NF>.

<sup>564</sup> Débat sur l'opération Barkhane: bilan et perspectives.

<sup>565</sup> 'Dans les coulisses du huis clos au sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena'.

<sup>566</sup> Sophie Douce, 'Négocier avec les djihadistes ? Au Burkina Faso, une option de moins en moins taboue', *Le Monde*, 10 February 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/10/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-au-burkina-faso-une-option-de-moins-en-moins-taboue\\_6069462\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/10/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-au-burkina-faso-une-option-de-moins-en-moins-taboue_6069462_3212.html).

<sup>567</sup> 'New Algerian Ambassador to Meets with Ambassador' (Cable 10BAMAKO98\_a; divulged by Wikileaks, 19 February 2010), [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BAMAKO98\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BAMAKO98_a.html).

groups such as the HCUA and MAA. As central Mali descended into violence, the option of dialogue with jihadists resurfaced. In 2017 hundreds of delegates from all over Mali convened to promote peace and national reconciliation (*Conférence d'Entente Nationale*). In the final report they urged the government to engage in a dialogue with Iyad ag Ghali and JNIM.<sup>568</sup> This proposal was initially rejected by the Malian government. Only after the Pau Summit did IBK state that he was open to dialogue with JNIM.<sup>569</sup> In December 2020 the transitional government affirmed that dialogue with terrorists was the desire of the Malian people, and that this would be complimentary to continuing military strikes on the group.<sup>570</sup>

There are two ways parties can negotiate: a top-down or a bottom-up approach. Within the top-down approach the objective can be strategic – political accommodation and/or the cessation of hostilities – or tactical, such as securing the release of hostages. Top-down negotiations are not only difficult for governments to consider; terrorist groups must also be open to the idea. Some categorically rule out negotiations, such the Algerian GIA, that had the slogan *no agreement, no truce, no dialogue* inscribed on every communiqué.<sup>571</sup> Based on a study of the magazines *Inspire* and *Dabiq*, issued by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State respectively, Seth Cantey argues that both organisations are more receptive to dialogue than assumed.<sup>572</sup> AQC has, for example, recommended that affiliate AQAP seek a truce with Yemen's President Saleh, so that it could focus on defensive operations and preaching.<sup>573</sup> Droukdel also requested AQC for advice on whether AQIM should enter into a non-aggression pact with the Mauritanian

<sup>568</sup> 'Actes de La Conférence d'Entente Nationale' (Bamako, April 2017), 62,89, <https://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/files/RAPPORT-Confe%CC%81rence-d27Entente-Nationale.pdf>.

<sup>569</sup> Benjamin Roger, 'Au Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta prêt au dialogue avec les jihadistes, au risque de négocier avec le diable', *Jeune Afrique*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/900111/politique/negotiation-avec-le-diable-au-mali-quand-ibk-se-dit-pret-a-ouvrir-le-dialogue-avec-les-jihadistes/>.

<sup>570</sup> Marc Perelman and David Baché, "Le dialogue avec les terroristes est une volonté des Maliens", assure le Premier ministre du Mali', *France 24*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.france24.com/fr/émissions/l-entretien/20201203-le-dialogue-avec-les-terroristes-est-une-volonté-des-maliens-assure-le-premier-ministre-du-mali>.

<sup>571</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Revised edition (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), 266.

<sup>572</sup> Seth Cantey, 'Beyond the Pale? Exploring Prospects for Negotiations with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 10 (3 October 2018): 757–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1348096>.

<sup>573</sup> 'Three Stages Letter' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, ODNI, January 19, 2017), <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Three%20Stages%20Letter.pdf>; 'Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, ODNI, March 1, 2016), <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Give%20the%20tribes%20more%20than%20they%20can%20handle.pdf>.

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government; a ceasefire notably proposed by the Mauritanian side.<sup>574</sup> In March 2010 AQIC concluded that it was doctrinally permitted, suggested a one year trial subject to renewal, and proposed that the Mauritanian government should release all AQIC prisoners and pay 10 to 20 million euros annually in exchange for the ceasefire.<sup>575</sup> While it is remarkable that no terrorist attacks occurred after 2011 in Mauritania, the government has denied any deal with AQIC, and there are no indications that the group's demands were met.<sup>576</sup> However, there are some reports suggesting that Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré agreed to a temporary truce with AQIC. Al-Qaeda therefore appears practical and not dogmatic on the issue of dialogue. On 8 March 2020, JNIM released a communique indicating its willingness to negotiate with the Malian government, on the precondition that the French military 'occupation' would end.<sup>577</sup> It was rapidly followed by a statement from AQIC urging Sahelian governments to pursue serious talks with the group.<sup>578</sup>

There have been several developments on bottom-up agreements in the Sahel. During the November 2020 elections in Burkina Faso there was a clear lull in violence, with a reduction in both terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism operations.<sup>579</sup> This bucked the general trend of an increase in terrorist violence as election dates move closer, and stands in contrast to JNIM's prevention of voting in Central Mali during the 2018 Presidential election.<sup>580</sup> Local leaders affirmed having been in touch with jihadists but the extent of government involvement remains unclear. Some locals deplored the lack of guidance from above, aware that the act of talking to one party could precipitate a death sentence from the other.<sup>581</sup> Local ceasefires have been agreed in Djibo (Burkina Faso) and around

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<sup>574</sup> Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.

<sup>575</sup> 'Letter about Matter of the Islamic Maghreb' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, n.d.), <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20about%20matter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf>.

<sup>576</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 290–92.

<sup>577</sup> 'Echoing Taliban, JNIM Expresses Openness to Negotiations with Malian Government If France, UN Withdraws' (SITE Intelligence Group, 9 March 2020).

<sup>578</sup> 'AQIC Leader Urges Sahel Governments Pursue "Serious Talks," End French Military Presence' (SITE Intelligence Group, 16 March 2020).

<sup>579</sup> Aïssatou Diallo, 'Burkina Faso : « Face à la menace terroriste, nous ne faisons que colmater les brèches »', *Jeune Afrique*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1114980/politique/burkina-faso-face-a-la-menace-terroriste-nous-ne-faisons-que-colmater-les-breches/>.

<sup>580</sup> Lindsay Shorr Newman, 'Do Terrorist Attacks Increase Closer to Elections?', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 1 (1 January 2013): 8–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.733247>.

<sup>581</sup> Diallo, 'Burkina Faso'

Mopti and Ségou (Mali), with public life starting to resume.<sup>582</sup> Although positive in that they reduce violence, these agreements also have downsides. The negotiations reflect the balance of power on the ground, and JNIM has imposed some of its demands on the locals. In Koro, for example, locals are forbidden from carrying weapons, drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Jihadists, however, are free to preach anywhere.<sup>583</sup> These truces could allow JNIM to solidify its grip on different communities, if (local) governments miss the opportunity to reinvest in governance and development. This would constitute a classic example where insurgents use negotiations to consolidate power, rearm or prepare for their next attack/expansion.

The issue of negotiations with JNIM remains a complex and sensitive topic. Several studies detail promising avenues for dialogue, such as a discussion between religious scholars and JNIM intermediaries to find areas of compromise.<sup>584</sup> An option is to involve the preacher Mahmoud Dicko, one of most influential actors in Malian politics. He had reached out to Iyad ag Ghaly when Ansar Dine occupied northern Mali, and also tentatively in 2015 and 2016, to explore avenues for dialogue.<sup>585</sup> Malians explicitly name Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa as potential interlocutors, while France rules them out – this would cross Macron’s red line of talking to al-Qaeda’s top-level hierarchy. In a surprisingly political speech in February 2021, the director of the French Intelligence Agency DGSE elevated Iyad ag Ghali to France’s primary enemy, calling him the “spiritual son of Osama Bin Laden” and “not someone who just thinks terrorism, but someone who practices it on a daily basis.”<sup>586</sup> While the avenue of dialogue is worth exploring, there will be opposition from states, victims organisations, militias such as Dan na Ambassagou and NGOs concerned that implementation of Sharia law will undermine human rights.<sup>587</sup> Although

<sup>582</sup> Olivier Dubois, ‘Mali : dans la région de Mopti, une « paix » précaire avec les jihadistes’, *Jeune Afrique*, 4 October 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1052437/societe/mali-dans-la-region-de-mopti-une-paix-precaire-avec-les-jihadistes/>; David Baché, ‘Mali: cessez-le-feu temporaire entre jihadistes et chasseurs dozos dans le cercle de Niono’, RFI, 16 March 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210316-mali-cessez-le-feu-temporaire-entre-jihadistes-et-chasseurs-dozos-dans-le-cercle-de-niono>.

<sup>583</sup> Dubois, ‘Mali’

<sup>584</sup> ‘Speaking with the “Bad Guys”: Toward Dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists’, 24–26.

<sup>585</sup> Nicolas Normand, ‘Négocier avec les djihadistes : une solution pour le Mali ?’, *Le Point*, 8 December 2020, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-une-solution-pour-le-mali-08-12-2020-2404709\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-une-solution-pour-le-mali-08-12-2020-2404709_3826.php).

<sup>586</sup> Elise Vincent, ‘Au Mali, les djihadistes « réfléchissent à des attaques en Europe », selon le patron de la DGSE’, *Le Monde*, 2 February 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/02/au-mali-les-djihadistes-reflechissent-a-des-attaques-en-europe-selon-le-patron-de-la-dgse\\_6068492\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/02/au-mali-les-djihadistes-reflechissent-a-des-attaques-en-europe-selon-le-patron-de-la-dgse_6068492_3210.html).

<sup>587</sup> Olivier Dubois, ‘Mali : voyage en Pays Dogon au cœur de Dan Na Ambassagou’, *Le Point*, 11 March 2021, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/voyage-en-pays-dogon-au-coeur-de-dan-na-ambassagou-11-03-2021-2417325\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/voyage-en-pays-dogon-au-coeur-de-dan-na-ambassagou-11-03-2021-2417325_3826.php).

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Cronin argues that negotiations rarely end terrorism in the short term, they are:

*“best thought of an essential element in a broader range of policies to marginalize a group, as conciliatory gestures or proposals that change the dynamics of support; to exploit differences, hive off factions, and enable members to leave or constituencies to turn elsewhere; to provide crucial information about how a group functions; and to reduce the degree and intensity of attacks over time, as groups lose momentum or make errors.”*<sup>588</sup>

## 5. Implosion or loss of group’s public support (failure)

Terrorist groups, like armed insurgencies, often start in a fractured fashion and struggle to unite. As David Cunningham et al have illustrated, intrastate conflicts do not necessarily involve a dyadic relationship between the state and the opposition, and rebels often fight each other more than the government.<sup>589</sup> There has been increasing scholarly attention for the factors that cause rebel fragmentation and its effects on violence, but much research is based on nationalist or separatist movements. Some argue that terrorist groups can ‘outbid’ other factions by conducting more attacks, and thus last longer.<sup>590</sup> Charles Mahoney assesses that the relative membership size at the time of the division is a determinant factor for the groups’ duration. When groups splinter, the bigger group survives longer, whereas a schism into roughly similar size groups will lead to other factors such as strategy coming into play.<sup>591</sup> Next to internecine competition and conflict, terrorist groups can be self-defeating in many other ways. Cronin identifies four typical scenarios for group implosion: failing to navigate the transition between generations, succumbing to infighting among members, losing operational control and accepting amnesties or other exit pathways on offer.<sup>592</sup> Marginalisation is also a permanent risk, where the group loses public support. This can be through its ideology becoming outdated or irrelevant, a detachment from its grassroots sympathisers or targeting errors.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 71.

<sup>589</sup> David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, ‘It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (1 August 2009): 570–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709336458>.

<sup>590</sup> Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, ‘Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure’, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (24 April 2014), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/334>.

<sup>591</sup> Charles W. Mahoney, ‘Splinters and Schisms: Rebel Group Fragmentation and the Durability of Insurgencies’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 2 (17 February 2020): 345–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1374254>.

<sup>592</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 95.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

The relationship between AQC and its affiliate is a crucial factor. After all, if the insurgency disassociates itself (or is prized away) from al-Qaeda and its brand, more avenues would open in the field of dialogue and negotiation. Much has been written on AQIM's global versus local agenda, but a close review of Abbottabad letters indicate that AQC had a greater influence on AQIM than initially thought.<sup>594</sup> This appears to be corroborated by the French analysis, publicised after Droukdel's death, that the late emir was the third deputy to Ayman al-Zawahiri and a member of al-Qaeda's management committee.<sup>595</sup> Despite the rise of Islamic State, core AQIM and JNIM commanders have stayed loyal to al-Zawahiri, and the current structure appears solidly embedded in al-Qaeda. The new emir al-Annabi is an old hand and a strong proponent of the link to al-Qaeda, having personally announced the GSPC's allegiance to Bin Laden and his organisation on 25 January 2007. In an interview with journalist Wassim Nasr (nearly two years before he became emir), al-Annabi explained:

“JNIM is a non-dissociable part of AQIM, which in turn is a non-dissociable part of al-Qaeda central....Regarding the geographical reality and the military pressure on its leaders and commanders, al-Qaeda had to adapt with flexible command and control, therefore giving general and strategic guidelines, and then tactically it is up to each branch to reach toward achieving those guidelines depending on their realities...”<sup>596</sup>

From an internal perspective, fragmentation has been a central tenet of AQIM's development in the Sahel. There have been frequent personality clashes between jihadist commanders based far from the organisation's central command and free to conduct operations as they deem fit. Before Operation Serval, AQIM was beset by competition between Abu Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, which Alex Thurston has labelled a 'broken triangle' (with the leadership shura at the apex).<sup>597</sup> Ethnic divisions have been another factor, with MUJAO splitting from the Algerian-heavy AQIM cadre to establish a less Maghrebian organisation.<sup>598</sup> The ethnic focus of Katiba Macina could also pose a strategic dilemma for Koufa. Initially he focused on fighting the Malian state, and his rhetoric emphasised the multi-ethnic composition of Katiba Macina. Since becoming part of JNIM, Koufa has called for the Fulani in neighbouring countries to rise up in jihad,

<sup>594</sup> Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.

<sup>595</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, 'AQIM Emir Reportedly Killed by French Forces in Mali', FDD's Long War Journal, 6 June 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/aqim-emir-reportedly-killed-by-french-forces-in-mali.php>.

<sup>596</sup> Nasr, 'Implications of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership'.

<sup>597</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 75–85.

<sup>598</sup> Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue*, 185.

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but excessive involvement in the cycle of interethnic conflict risks alienating non-Fulani fighters in his unit.<sup>599</sup> Nonetheless, as the defender of Fulani interests he competes directly with ISGS. The construct of JNIM as a loose federation of units probably allows AQIM to better absorb interethnic tensions, with each katiba free to recruit in the communities it operates in. It is difficult to gauge group dynamics in JNIM, but there are indications that responsibilities are clearly delineated. For example, in reply to informal probes exploring avenues for dialogue, Amadou Koufa referred his interlocutor straight through to his emir, Iyad ag Ghali, saying that if he wanted peace he needed to talk to the leader himself.<sup>600</sup> As a federation of katibas, JNIM has not yet suffered from fracturing, although defections to ISGS are a serious concern for the organisation.

An important split, not schism, concerns the establishment of ISGS. The group was established by one of the founders of MUJAO, after a leadership struggle in al-Murabitun erupted when its emir al-Tilemsi was killed by a French strike in December 2014. Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahraoui pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in May 2015. His oath was not recognised by Islamic State for a full fifteen months.<sup>601</sup> Other al-Murabitun commanders reaffirmed their loyalty to al-Qaeda, and the rise of ISGS probably triggered the establishment of JNIM in 2017. JNIM and ISGS initially cooperated, jointly conducting attacks against security forces in the broader Sahel, including the ambush of US Special Forces at Tongo Tongo in Niger. They also jointly attacked GATIA and MSA.<sup>602</sup> In summer 2019 the relationship soured and descended into open warfare.<sup>603</sup> Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss identified several drivers that led to conflict, including longstanding ideological differences between the two groups.<sup>604</sup> This was exacerbated in March 2019 when ISGS officially became a regional subunit

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<sup>599</sup> Koufa specifically mentioned Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Benin and Cameroun (but not Mauritania & Guinée, where many Fulani also live). See also Benjamin Roger, 'Mali : Amadou Koufa, le visage peul d'Al-Qaïda', *Jeune Afrique*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/665565/politique/mali-amadou-koufa-le-visage-peul-dal-qaida/>.

<sup>600</sup> 'Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists', 15.

<sup>601</sup> Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 91–97.

<sup>602</sup> Caleb Weiss, 'Analysis: Conflict within a Conflict in Mali's Northern Menaka Region', FDD's Long War Journal, 4 May 2018, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/analysis-conflict-within-a-conflict-in-malis-northern-menaka-region.php>.

<sup>603</sup> Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 7 (July 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>; Edoardo Balduino and Yida Seydou Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali', *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 69–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566>.

<sup>604</sup> Nsaibia and Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly'.

of Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), situated in Nigeria, and Islamic State Central (in Syria) took over its media output. Continued defections from JNIM to ISGS also drove competition.<sup>605</sup> According to data from ACLED, violence between the two groups cost the lives of at least 600 fighters, from the start of hostilities until mid-2020.<sup>606</sup> Bearing in mind earlier mentioned disclaimers on insurgent numbers and fatality counts, this implies that JNIM and ISGS have probably lost more fighters to fratricide than to counter-terrorism operations since hostilities broke out between them.<sup>607</sup>

Al-Qaeda is acutely aware that its own movement can be self-defeating. Two examples are frequently referenced in its own historical narratives.<sup>608</sup> The first concerns the GIA, which was not at the time officially part of al-Qaeda, but considered kinsmen in jihad with many Arab Afghans. As a federation of different armed groups, like JNIM, it disintegrated violently into internal purges and fratricide. Already known for brutal violence, this became wanton in 1997 when whole villages were massacred. When the GIA subsequently condemned all the Algerian people for impiety, the propaganda outlet *Al Ansar* bulletin withdrew its support, as did last remnants of Algerian population.<sup>609</sup> A decade later, similar development befell al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under the leadership of al-Zarqawi. A large-scale and very violent insurgency developed in the Sunni heartlands around Faluja. Al-Zarqawi provoked a civil war with the Shia and fought American troops. Al Zawahiri, then Bin Laden's second in command, reminded his commander in Iraq that the main battleground remained the media, that support of the population was essential and that the "Mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve". This included 'unpalatable' scenes of slaughter (such as Al Zarqawi's videotaped beheadings of hostages) that alienated support.<sup>610</sup> These instructions were ignored, and al-Zarqawi's movement was defeated during the 'Anbar Awakening' by a

<sup>605</sup> Baldaro and Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception'.

<sup>606</sup> Nsaibia and Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly'.

<sup>607</sup> Defense analyst Michel Goya estimates that Operation Barkhane killed around ten fighters a month in 2017-2018, around 40 in 2019 and nearly 80 in 2020 (of which were 40 percent attributed to armed drones); see: Xavier Frere, 'Michel Goya, spécialiste des conflits armés : "Barkhane ne peut plus durer plus de deux ans"', *Le Républicain Lorrain*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.republicain-lorrain.fr/defense-guerre-conflit/2021/02/09/michel-goya-specialiste-des-conflits-armes-barkhane-ne-peut-plus-durer-plus-de-deux-ans>.

<sup>608</sup> J. M. Lacey, *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 140-45.

<sup>609</sup> Kepel, *Jihad*, 273.

<sup>610</sup> 'Letter from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Released by the ODNI on 11 October 2005)', 9 July 2005, <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

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combination of Sunni tribes (militias) that were turned against al-Qaeda (negotiation), leadership attrition (targeting & decapitation) and operational overreach.<sup>611</sup>

AQIM has been diligent to avoid mistakes (such as internal organisational splintering) and alienate the local population. When AQIM took control of northern Mali, Droukdel instructed his commanders not to rush the implementation of harsh Sharia punishments, as the population was not ready for them. At level of AQC, this policy was continued in the September 2013 General guidelines for the work of jihad. These stipulated avoiding killing and harming civilians, the targeting of mosques and markets, and avoiding confrontation with Christians, Sikhs and Hindus in Islamic countries.<sup>612</sup> Amadou Koufa has continued this policy. Although Katiba Macina's initial expansion was predicated on killing local leaders and intimidating the population, Koufa has been careful in his choice of targets, predominantly focusing on Malian security forces, and French and international troops. After a deadly attack on a market near Mopti, JNIM denied the strike, stressed that it only targeted 'occupying forces' and disavowed any attacks against Muslim masses, and also against Christians and churches.<sup>613</sup> Another statement justified JNIM's choice not to implement Sharia based punishments for crimes, arguing that during war this does not serve the greater interest of Muslims and can push people into the arms of the enemy.<sup>614</sup> When more than 130 civilians were killed in Solhan, Burkino Faso, ISGS accused JNIM of responsibility for the massacre, which was strenuously denied by the latter.<sup>615</sup> Although in this case indications do point to JNIM involvement – and could be due to a loss of control of the (child) fighters – JNIM and ISGS follow a different approach.

While all terrorist groups carry the seeds of their own destruction, the Islamic State and its affiliates are particularly prone to self-defeating actions. This is inherent to both their ideology and the means employed to further their goals. Like the GIA and AQI before them, Islamic State doctrine resembles takfirism. This radical current within Salafi-

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<sup>611</sup> Andrew Phillips, 'How al Qaeda Lost Iraq', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 1 (1 March 2009): 64–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357710802649840>; Brian Fishman, 'Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from al Qai'da in Iraq' (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 16 March 2009), <https://ctc.usma.edu/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaeda-in-iraq/>.

<sup>612</sup> Donald Holbrook and Cerwyn Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*, 1st edition (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–57.

<sup>613</sup> 'JNIM Denies Attack on Dogo Market, Disavows Strikes on Churches' (SITE Intelligence Group, 26 February 2020).

<sup>614</sup> 'JNIM Religious Scholar Dispels Notion It Ignores Punishments Required by Islamic Law' (SITE Intelligence Group, 30 January 2020).

<sup>615</sup> 'IS Accuses JNIM of Solhan Massacre in Burkina Faso Despite Denial, Distributes Printed Copies of Naba Newspaper in Afghanistan' (SITE Intelligence Group, 25 June 2021).

jihadism, labels Muslims apostates (rather than just sinners) if they do not adhere to certain aspects of Islamic law, and subsequently judges that they have forfeited their right to property and life.<sup>616</sup> This uncompromising theological approach impacts how ISGS interacts with the local population, but also how it treats dissenters within its own ranks (and competes with factions such as JNIM). It elicits a natural predisposition to tyranny and internal purges, with dissenters risking the takfir label and its lethal consequences, as illustrated by the GIA and AQI. While there is no evidence yet of violent internal ISGS purges, the language towards AQIM is uncompromising, accusing them of blasphemy.<sup>617</sup> This stands in stark contrast to al-Qaeda's more reconciliatory tone vis-a-vis its upstart, keeping the door open for compromise and defectors to return.<sup>618</sup> Second, hardline policies can antagonise and alienate the local populace, whether it involves a brutal implementation of Sharia - going against the cultural grain in many communities - or the upending of traditional power structures like the Djowros, the statutory Fulani upper class. IGSG has also instigated a policy of collective punishment against civilians, with scores killed in different villages.<sup>619</sup> Wanton violence instills fear but also repels, and where al-Qaeda instrumentalises violence, IS glorifies it. ISGS is more 'extreme' in many aspects than AQIM or JNIM, making both compromise impossible and increasing the chances of the movement derailing into tyranny and barbarism.

From a policy perspective, it pays to investigate how terrorist groups can be nudged into self-defeat and implosion, rather than expending all effort in trying to militarily ground them down. For the Sahel this leads to two questions. First, can internal strife and internecine conflict be exacerbated by selective targeting? At the 2020 G5 Pau Summit, the coalition decided to focus on fighting ISGS, and only in November of that year shifted its efforts to combating JNIM. But the US considers JNIM a greater long-term threat to US and Western interests, arguing that it possesses a more numerous and effective fighting force that has pushed ISGS out of Mali and into other regions in the Sahel.<sup>620</sup> It is unclear on which factors the G5 based their decision to prioritise ISGS, and whether they

<sup>616</sup> See for example: Eli Alshech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism : A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis', *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 4 (22 September 2014): 419–52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00214p04>.

<sup>617</sup> Baldaro and Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception'.

<sup>618</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 99.

<sup>619</sup> 'Niger: les attaques de masse contre les civils, nouvelle méthode sauvage des jihadistes', RFI, 24 March 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210324-niger-les-attaques-de-masse-contre-les-civils-nouvelle-m%C3%A9thode-sauvage-des-djihadistes>.

<sup>620</sup> Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole'; 'East Africa Counterterrorism Operation; North & West Africa Counterterrorism Operation' (Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 1 July 2020), 48.

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included the hypothesis that the group is more prone to self-destruction in their decision. Second, there are a myriad of ways to ferment group division, stoke internal dissent and stimulate jihadist fratricide. Their targeting mistakes can also be publicised and amplified. Traditionally, these activities lie in the realm of intelligence and covert action. This is a separate academic discipline, and there is little open source information on whether and how AQIM and JNIM are being manipulated in this way. Academia currently has much interest in the drivers and effects of al-Qaeda and Islamic State competition, but ideally this would be combined with more historical research in cases where terrorist groups were successfully manipulated.

## 6. Achievement of the group's aims (success)

According to Cronin, Europeans generally build their reasoning on the assumption that terrorism does not succeed in the long run, while Americans, still traumatised by 9/11, often consider that the uniquely dangerous phenomenon generally succeeds.<sup>621</sup> The truth is somewhere in the middle, as some terrorist movements have achieved their goals. Success remains dependent on perceptions and the set objectives, with a group's goals often differing on the tactical, operational and strategic level, with achievements on one level potentially contradicting other goals and leading to ultimate failure.<sup>622</sup> Max Abrahams conducted an empirical study on the achievements of all 28 terrorist groups listed on the US Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) list. Data suggested that they rarely achieved their policy objectives, with those attacking civilian rather than military ones systematically failing to achieve their objectives.<sup>623</sup> In a follow-up piece, he argued that escalation to terrorism leads states to dig in, and not concede.<sup>624</sup> Many academics thus conclude that terrorism is not a particular promising avenue for change, and Cronin's data points to less than 5 percent succeeding in fully achieving their aims (by their own standards).<sup>625</sup> Nonetheless, a too strict reckoning whether groups fully achieve their stated objectives is unfair; most political actors seldom do either - unless they are remarkably unambitious.

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<sup>621</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 73.

<sup>622</sup> Sarah V. Marsden, 'Successful Terrorism: Framework and Review', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 2 (1 May 2012): 134–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2011.582705>.

<sup>623</sup> Max Abrahams, 'Why Terrorism Does Not Work', *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 42–78.

<sup>624</sup> Max Abrahams, 'Does Terrorism Really Work? Evolution in the Conventional Wisdom since 9/11', *Defence and Peace Economics* 22, no. 6 (1 December 2011): 583–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2011.635954>.

<sup>625</sup> Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 81.

The criteria for success differ significantly for insurgencies and groups following a terrorist strategy. For jihadist insurgents the goal is to govern territory, but as Hansen acknowledges, “in Africa (full) territorial control by a jihadist organization has always resulted in a foreign intervention, as regional powers and in some cases international actors simply do not tolerate territorial control by jihadists.”<sup>626</sup> Nations remain wary of sanctuaries forming magnets for foreign fighters and constituting staging areas for terrorist attacks on their homelands.<sup>627</sup> The consequences of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan will undoubtedly also figure in the debate to reduce troops in the Sahel. From this perspective, ultimate success for jihadist insurgents will probably remain elusive. For a strategy of terrorism, objectives are more modest, with terrorist attacks meant to provoke political change. Since its inception, AQIM has been unable to execute a terrorist attack outside Africa, despite repeated statements identifying France as its main enemy and AQC prioritising the ‘far enemy’ over the ‘near enemy’.<sup>628</sup> The prevention of terrorist attacks at home remains, after all, an important argument underpinning the French intervention in the Sahel. It is unclear why AQIM has not conducted attacks on mainland France, while its predecessor GIA, did. Was AQIM unwilling or incapable? Despite numerous reports (unverified) of foiled attacks in the West, there have been no high-profile court cases or convictions. JNIM statements have recently played on this theme, noting that no terrorist attacks occurred in France, that the group only opposed the French military ‘occupation’ in the Sahel, and that both sides should let each other live in peace.<sup>629</sup> This, however, does not rhyme with a statement released by AQIM two months earlier, accusing President Macron of blasphemy. It called upon all Muslims to kill those who insult the Prophet and lauded the actions of the Chechen ‘martyr’ who beheaded French teacher Samuel Paty.<sup>630</sup> While JNIM might appear preoccupied with its insurgency against the ‘near enemy’, AQIM still wants to terrorise the ‘far enemy’.

<sup>626</sup> Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 37.

<sup>627</sup> Sergei Boeke and Daan Weggemans, ‘Destination Jihad: Why Syria and Not Mali’, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - the Hague*, 10 April 2013, <https://icct.nl/publication/destination-jihad-why-syria-and-not-mali/>.

<sup>628</sup> Sergei Boeke, ‘Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 914–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280>.

<sup>629</sup> ‘JNIM Claims Suicide Bombing, Rocket Attack in Retaliation for French Drone Strike on Alleged Wedding Party in Mali’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 14 January 2021).

<sup>630</sup> ‘AQIM Demands Physical Violence and Death over Economic Harm to France in Revenge for Prophet Insults’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2 November 2020).

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## Conclusion

Despite strong state commitment to repression and decapitation, AQIM and JNIM do not appear on these pathways of decline. JNIM has clearly transitioned to a fully-fledged insurgency and semi-territorial presence, but the policy response does not follow conventional COIN doctrine. Hunting ‘terrorist’ groups through search and destroy operations and leadership targeting might bring tactical successes, but the continued growth of AQIM and JNIM’s operations necessitate a reassessment of the strategic effects attained by these operations. Perhaps JNIM has not expanded despite the military operations targeting it, but rather as a direct result of them. McChrystal’s ‘insurgent math’ indicates that abuses and collateral damage generate new grievances and fuel local resentment. As such, targeting errors and Malian exactions have undoubtedly boosted jihadist recruitment. Furthermore, as Cronin noted, in prolonged wars four common patterns play out: means become ends, tactics become strategy, boundaries are blurred and the search for a perfect peace replaces reality.<sup>631</sup> This applies also to Mali. Sahel scholars resist comparisons to Afghanistan, rightly identifying fundamental contextual differences.<sup>632</sup> For war scholars, however, the conceptual parallels are important. In both cases, the foreign intervention has propped up a state that has traditionally struggled to impose its authority across its territory, and supported a government widely perceived as ineffective and corrupt. Many counterinsurgency lessons can be learned from Afghanistan, although it will always remain debatable whether failure was caused by bad policy, good policy implemented badly, or the intractability of the problem at large. Military strikes against AQIM and JNIM undoubtedly remain necessary to keep some pressure on the groups, but if the soldiers’ crude metaphor of “mowing the lawn” is not accompanied by policies that de-escalate and remove grievances, it is an activity without end. The French recalibration from Operation Barkhane to a new operational setting offer a unique opportunity to reflect on lessons identified and adapt the strategy accordingly.

There are currently no indications that the Sahelian states are able to reduce their insurgencies to a manageable level, let alone accommodate or defeat them. The termination of Operation Barkhane and the French troop reduction will undoubtedly be portrayed as a success by and for the jihadists. Of the Sahelian countries, only Algeria and Mauritania

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<sup>631</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, ‘The “War on Terrorism”: What Does It Mean to Win?’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (23 February 2014): 174–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.850423>.

<sup>632</sup> Romain Malejacq and Adam Sandor, ‘Sahelistan? Military Intervention and Patronage Politics in Afghanistan and Mali’, *Civil Wars* 22, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 543–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1813405>.

have avoided a (recent) jihadist insurgency and have managed to keep terrorist violence low.<sup>633</sup> AQIM has not given up in Algeria, as many of its public statements support the enduring protests against the government and attempt to ‘keep the flame of jihad burning’.<sup>634</sup> Nonetheless, despite sporadic attacks against army patrols and installations, the level of violence has reduced enormously since a wave of suicide attacks – some 34 in total - between 2007 and 2012.<sup>635</sup> In a 2017 interview with AQAP magazine INSPIRE, Droukdel discussed the issue of recruitment and admitted “the Algerian front suffers from a rarity – and at times a complete absence – of those willing to support and assist, whether nationally or internationally”.<sup>636</sup> The Algerian government’s counter-terrorism policy has evolved significantly since the country’s brutal civil war, when two opposing factions within the military regime – *éradicateurs* and *dialoguistes* – exemplified the policies of repression and negotiation. Although Algeria espouses a repressive counter-terrorist stance – with no room for dialogue - it has at times successfully included reconciliation and amnesty policies. A comprehensive analysis on Algerian counter-terrorism policies – including the controversial role of the DRS – would provide useful insights for the Sahelian countries currently struggling with terrorism.

The pathway of negotiation has still been underexplored by France and the Sahelian states. The jihadists’ association with the al-Qaeda brand and organisation makes it difficult for states for negotiate – although al-Qaeda appears prepared to do so. On the French side, the fight has from the beginning been framed in absolutist terms, emphasizing that one fights terrorists and does not talk to them. Even the military do not identify their adversaries as insurgents or violent extremists, but call them GATs - *Groupes Armés Terroristes*. The taboo on strategic talks with AQIM and JNIM will likely remain, with strong international pressure to resist negotiations. If, incidentally, all countries extended this taboo to tactical negotiations and paying ransoms for hostages, this would severely curtail AQIM’s revenues and financial staying power. The Sahelian states’ open attitude to bottom up negotiations has significantly reduced violence in several districts in Central Mali and Western Burkina Faso. But without a coordinated follow-up by governments and NGOs – in the field of governance, justice and development – these truces risk cementing

<sup>633</sup> Malek Bachir and Akram Kharief, ‘ANALYSIS: The Slow Death of al-Qaeda in Algeria’, Middle East Eye, 2 February 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-slow-death-al-qaeda-algeria>.

<sup>634</sup> ‘AQIM Official Confirms Group’s Continued Existence in Algeria, Reiterates Support to Algerian Protestors’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 29 November 2019).

<sup>635</sup> Warner, Chapin, and Weiss, ‘Desert Drift, Declining Deadlines’.

<sup>636</sup> ‘Interview with Abu Musab Abdul Wadood (Droukdel)’ (INSPIRE Media publications, 13 August 2017).

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the jihadists' control over local communities. On a strategic level, al-Qaeda remains wary of laying down its arms and being drawn into 'the rotten game of democracy', to then be thrown into prison just as "they did with the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt."<sup>637</sup> Still, although negotiations alone are unlikely to solve the conflict, dialogue – behind the screens - could de-escalate and lead to a better understanding of where potential solutions lie.

Historically, many terrorist groups have suffered from infighting, internal distrust and strategic mistakes. Violence between JNIM and ISGS has already weakened both organisations, and in concert with military strikes and dialogue, this could contribute to their decline. Nudging them further in this pathway is difficult and inherently political, requiring a detailed understanding of the local context. Western governments already struggle with the political aspects of their assistance to Sahelian countries – both military and civilian – preferring a technical, apolitical approach. In addition, governments have to contend with their own pathways. Institutions, procedures and cultures form inconspicuous but often insurmountable rivets that channel decision-making.<sup>638</sup> Western security and development organisations appear ill-suited to understand the micro-local political complexities of the insurgencies in the Sahel and too stove piped to be able to formulate an integrated policy response. For their part, Sahelian governmental bureaucracies - a fraction in size of their Western counterparts – cannot deliver the 'good governance' that donors and partners hope will provide the solution to the crises engulfing the Sahel.<sup>639</sup> As the US commander of AFRICOM heard from an African leader, 'a drowning man will accept any hand'.<sup>640</sup> It is clear that the hand offered constitutes a security-heavy counter-terrorism approach, but that AQIM and JNIM have only grown in strength. It is therefore time to reflect on the viability of other pathways, since AQIM and JNIM's current trajectory does not point to their decline.

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<sup>637</sup> From the writings of al-Zawahiri: Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0*, 266.

<sup>638</sup> Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, 'The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (29 March 2019): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1592356>.

<sup>639</sup> Alex Thurston, 'The Hollowness of "Governance Talk" in and about the Sahel', Text, ISPI, 12 April 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>.

<sup>640</sup> 'Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army, Commander United States Africa Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee', 30 January 2020. <https://www.africom.mil/document/32925/2020-posture-statement-to-congress>.

## Appendix 1

### Individuals targeted by counter-terrorism operations

Name	Role/position	Date captured or killed
Abdelhamid Abou Zeid (Mohamed Ghadir)	Commander AQIM Katiba Tarik Ibn Zaid	Killed, 25 February 2013
Omar Ould Hamaha	Head military Operations MUJAO	Killed, 8 March 2014
Abubakr al-Nasri (Abu Bakr al-Masri)	Leader al-Muribatun	Killed, 10 April 2014
Haroun ag Saïd (Abu Jemal)	Leadership cadre Ansar Dine, confidant Iyad ag Ghali	Killed, 24 April 2014
Ahmed al-Tilemsi (Abderrahmane Ould el-Amar)	Co-founder MUJAO, Leader al-Muribatun	Killed, 11 December 2014
Malick Ag Wanasnat;  Mohammed Ould Nouini (Abu Hassan al-Ansari)	(former col FAMA), close ally Iyad ag Ghaly. Leader Al-Muribatun  Preacher	Killed, 14 February 2018
Sidi Mohamed Ag Ougana (Abu Habib)		
Abdallah Ag Oufata (Abou Oumar )	Former Mayor of Boughessa	
Cheikh Abou Ahmad al-Fullani	A commander in katiba Macina	
Attaher Ag Ihadou	A commander of Ansar Dine	Arrested, 24 November 2016
Djamel Okacha (Yahya Abu Hammam)	AQIM second in command	Killed, 21 February 2019
Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (Seifallah Ben Hassine)	Founder Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia	Killed, 21 February 2019
Yehya Abu al-Humam	AQIM commander	Killed, 21 February 2019
Abu Abderrahmane Al-Maghribi (Ali Maychou)	JNIM second in command	Killed, 8 October 2019
Abou Yahia al-Jazairi	JNIM chief of operations	Killed, 6 April 2020
Mohamed el Mrabat	Local commander ISGS	Arrested, 19 May 2020
Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud)	Emir (overall commander) AQIM	Killed, 3 June 2020
Bah Ag Moussa	Ansar Dine second in command	Killed, 10 November 2020



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## CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTION

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The general framework for this dissertation was provided by its research question: how has Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb evolved since the 2012 Malian Crisis, and how have Mali and the international community reacted to the group's development (2012-2021). This formed the leitmotif for five peer-reviewed articles in different international journals. The first article was published at the end of 2014; the last in 2021, and each had its own focus and conclusions. James Khalil has argued that parallel literatures have emerged on terrorism and insurgencies, with little cross-referencing between the main journals dedicated to each phenomenon.<sup>641</sup> In part to bridge this divide, the conducted research was purposely published in a broad outlet of journals. A single article was published in one of the 'classic' journals of terrorism research – *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.<sup>642</sup> The other articles were published in journals focusing on security and defense (the scene-setter in the journal of the Royal United Services Institute); on small wars and insurgencies, strategic studies and by the International Centre on Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). The final article of this dissertation has a more policy-oriented focus. Research objectivity is essential in all social sciences, but the purpose of this article goes further than elucidating the phenomenon of terrorism in Sahel and contributing to a better understanding of the Al Qaeda and its motives. As a 'think and do-tank', ICCT aims to provide concrete propositions to reduce the threat from terrorism. By offering policy-recommendations how to address a major problem afflicting the Sahel and the broader international community, the last article has a stronger emphasis on policy-relevance than, for example, the development of theory. As critical terrorism studies have pointed out, however, the state-centricity of research, its problem-solving orientation and institutional and intellectual links to security services can have epistemic and ethical implications.<sup>643</sup> Awareness of this risk was present throughout the research.

During the time of writing the dynamics of political violence in Mali changed in multiple and fundamental ways. First, once Operation Serval had transformed the conflict from a conventional 'small war' to a more traditional irregular conflict, the security situation continued to progressively deteriorate. Until the end of the period research, there was almost a linear increase in violence, signifying that policies to stabilize and reduce violence were not successful. By 2021, AQIM and the armed signatory groups were no longer the main instigators of violence, but militias and state security forces had equally killed many

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<sup>641</sup> Khalil, 'Know Your Enemy'.

<sup>642</sup> The other main journals are *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Perspectives on Terrorism and Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

<sup>643</sup> Jackson, 'The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies'.

civilians.<sup>644</sup> A second important change was the addition of a new ethnic dimension to the conflict. The core conflict in Mali no longer revolved around a minority of Tuareg tribes claiming more autonomy from the central government. In 2015 the Algiers Accords had signaled an uneasy peace between Bamako, its proxy militias and Tuareg separatists. Six years later, the parties involved had still not implemented two thirds of what they had agreed to do.<sup>645</sup> With the old conflict unresolved (and northern Mali effectively a safe-haven for AQIM), a new ethnic conflict erupted in central Mali. Relations between Fulani and Dogon had already been under tension as a result of population growth, scarce natural resources and state policies towards pastoralism.<sup>646</sup> The establishment of Katiba Macina sparked a spiral of communal violence, with Dogon self-defence militias (and state security forces) accusing Fulani of collaborating with jihadists. Both AQIM and ISGS have capitalized on these interethnic tensions. Finally, Mali is no longer the epicenter of conflict. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has – as its name implies – always espoused a broad geographical focus, and not recognizing international borders remains a key tenet of Al Qaeda policy. In 2020, both Niger and Burkina Faso were grappling with large-scale insurgencies on their territories.<sup>647</sup> The French DGSE even warned that JNIM was planning to expand into Benin and Ivory Coast.<sup>648</sup> These fast-paced and fundamental changes in Sahelian conflict dynamics complicated academic research, with analyses running the risk of rapidly being outdated after publication.

## Methodology

The articles of this dissertation relied on different forms of data collection. The combination of literature review with semi-structured interviews formed an important element of the author's broader research on Mali. The use of direct quotes from interviews was limited in these articles, however, in part because several of the interviews were part of other projects

<sup>644</sup> Ornella Moderan, Habibou Souley Bako, and Paul-Simon Handy, 'Sahel Counter-Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll on Civilians', ISS Africa, 14 April 2021, <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/sahel-counter-terrorism-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-civilians>.

<sup>645</sup> Mathieu Pellerin, 'Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm' (International Crisis Group, 24 June 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/laccord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire>.

<sup>646</sup> Mirjam E. De Bruijn and Han J. W. M. Van Dijk, 'Insecurity and Pastoral Development in the Sahel', *Development and Change* 30, no. 1 (1999): 115–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00109>.

<sup>647</sup> Jason Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 2 (February 2020): 9–14.

<sup>648</sup> Benjamin Roger, '« Projet » jihadiste en Côte d'Ivoire et au Bénin : opération de communication ou coup de pression de la DGSE ?', *Jeune Afrique*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1116183/politique/projet-jihadiste-en-cote-divoire-et-au-benin-operation-de-communication-ou-coup-de-pression-de-la-dgse/>.

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that had their own specific products.<sup>649</sup> Nonetheless, interviews with both practitioners as well as incarcerated suspects of terrorist activities served to support findings garnered from other sources. As such they were used to provide new leads for research and to corroborate and triangulate findings from other primary and secondary sources. The research was primarily of a qualitative nature, although the article on risk and threat conducted a detailed investigation of the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Three of the articles were written with a co-author, with each collaboration supporting the saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In his 2018 analysis on the general state of terrorism research, Bart Schuurman argued that one of the most problematic issues was the scarcity of collaboration between researchers and the high number of one-time contributors. According to his data set, between 2007 and 2016 around three quarters of research papers were written by a single author, and around three quarters of all authors made only a single contribution to the field.<sup>650</sup> These figures were still an improvement on the metrics calculated by Silke in the early 2000s. This dissertation continues the progress, on both counts.

Primary sources played an essential role in this dissertation, both in the study of AQIM and international responses to the group. The Timbuktu letters and documents from the Bin Laden cache were used to analyze AQIM's relationship with AQC, its overarching goals and strategy, and the internal dynamics afflicting the group. The group's external announcements also provided insights into AQIM and JNIM's targeting choices, its standpoints vis-à-vis its competitor ISGS and obviously its own strategic communication policy. For the last ICCT article, over one hundred AQIM and JNIM SITE transcripts from 2019 and 2020 were consulted. The insights garnered were used for the article's analysis on the group's potential pathways to decline. There is still a niche in the literature for a quantitative analysis of AQIM and JNIM's public announcements. The group's external statements have continued to increase in number, but unfortunately no new internal documents have become available to researchers since the release of the last batch of documents from the Bin Laden/Abbottabad archive. A RAND inventory, conducted upon request of the Dutch government, estimated that there was still much untapped research potential in the 470.000 text, image and audio files that were released by the

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<sup>649</sup> See for example: Boeke, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Mali (2013-2016)'; Boeke and De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Libya (2011-2016)'.

<sup>650</sup> Bart Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (3 July 2020): 1011–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023>.

CIA in 2017.<sup>651</sup> These documents, however, were captured in 2011 and any insights gleaned are of limited value for understanding the AQIM and JNIM of 2021. Still, some researchers have successfully used these primary sources to revisit earlier conclusions on Al Qaeda's strategies and motives.<sup>652</sup>

Like all research, this dissertation is subject to several limitations. Whereas a monograph generally has a single, sharp research focus, the bundling of separately published peer-reviewed articles cannot compete on coherence. Neither does it have a unified methodological framework. Aggregating the separate conclusions to form solid overarching findings risks distilling conclusions that are not sufficiently empirically grounded. Another limitation concerned the predominantly macro-level focus of this research. This was a direct outcome of the decision to focus on the theoretical concepts of insurgency and terrorism, and to investigate the strategies of AQIM and France. Micro-level studies can present strong empirical evidence for their hypotheses, but require caveats for the representativeness of the data and therefore the broader applicability of their conclusions. Macro-level studies, on the other hand, necessitate a broad 'geographical overview' of the field of research and can offer strategic conclusions. However, the data and facts underpinning these analyses will be contested by micro-level analysts, while other macro-level researchers will dispute inclusion and exclusion choices and the used conceptual frameworks. The studies of terrorism and insurgencies are both broad fields, and applying the specifics of the Sahel resulted in an extensive reach. There was also the issue of language, with French and local languages in the Sahel – all important vehicles of culture – potentially complicating a thorough understanding of the issues at hand. This could, for example, entail inaccurate translations permeating both primary and secondary sources. To study conflict in the Sahel - from a distance and with a Western perspective - risks working with hidden assumptions and biases. If the American saying "all politics is local" has value, then this equally has implications for the study of political violence.

## Primary findings

The first article positioned AQIM on the backdrop of Mali's main security and governance challenges, and nuanced the predominant narratives of a crime-terror

<sup>651</sup> Jacopo Bellasio et al., 'Insights from the Bin Laden Archive: Inventory of Research and Knowledge and Initial Assessment and Characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive' (RAND Corporation, 5 May 2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA109-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA109-1.html).

<sup>652</sup> See for example Vidar B. Skretting, 'Pragmatism and Purism in Jihadist Governance: The Islamic Emirate of Azawad Revisited', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2 January 2022, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2007562>.

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nexus, ungovernable territories and Tuareg grievances. Describing the ‘jihadist galaxy’ in Mali – the constellation of groups around AQIM that would transform with time – the article addressed the first three sub-questions of this dissertation’s research question: which factors contributed to the group’s establishment, how it was organized and what motivated its fighters. At the same time, an analysis was given of the ‘Tuareg question’ which had provided the context for the January 2012 rebellion. The final third of the article focused on the problem of governance, and how corruption had hollowed out the Malian state. The second article deepened the analysis of AQIM’s history, composition and *modus operandi*, as well as applying a conceptual framework to understand the nature of AQIM. The third and fourth articles incorporated research on the second series of sub-questions: what were the results of AQIM’s operations, how did Mali, France and the international community respond, and what impact did their CT-policies have. The final article again addressed all six sub-questions, focusing both on internal factors shaping AQIM, as well as counterterrorism efforts designed to curtail the group. This dialectical approach running through the whole dissertation avoided a single, closed focus on AQIM’s intentions and activities, positioning the research object within a broader context of relevant actors and factors, whose ‘action and reaction’ interplay contributed to the group’s evolution.

The article ‘Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency or Organized Crime?’ applied Duyvesteyn and Fumerton’s distinction of strategies to conceptualize the categorization of the group. A separate category of organized crime was added to analyze the importance and eventual role of criminal proceeds, and whether this should constitute a determining factor in labeling the group. Based on several primary and secondary sources, the conclusion was drawn that hostage ransoms constituted AQIM’s largest source of revenue, and that there was little evidence for a significant role in the drugs trade. The smuggling of licit and illicit goods, and the levying of transit fees for other groups’ transports, form part of the local fabric in northern Mali. As Guillaume de Soto-Major argues, local communities and armed groups who depend on the revenue from drugs transport and transit will never relinquish this to AQIM.<sup>653</sup> Other armed signatory groups and elements inside local and national government were more important players in the flourishing drugs trade, and this has important policy implications. As for the strategy of the group, an analysis of the objectives of AQIM pointed to a strategy of terrorism, with the goals aligning with AQC’s ideology and general guidance. After all, in late 2015 and early 2016 several high-profile attacks were conducted on Western targets, killing tourists in hotels in Bamako

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<sup>653</sup> Guillaume Soto-Major, ‘Traffics et Trafiquants: Éléments Structurants Des Sociétés Sahéliennes’, *Recherches Internationales*, March 2020.

and Ouagadougou, and at the Grand Bassam beach resort in Ivory Coast.<sup>654</sup> Looking at the organizational structure and recruitment, the article described how AQIM had to change its modus operandi after Operation Serval, reverting to a small clandestine group. The relationship with the population had also changed from control to more distant contact, although this varied per region. The article concluded that many indicators pointed to a strategy of terrorism, but that developments in Timbuktu, for example, were indicative of a strategy of insurgency. This conclusion would be revised in the 2021 ICCT research article.

The third article, a treatise on methodology, contributed to the literature why the 2012 crisis in Mali came as a surprise to many. Its findings are relevant also to research on intelligence failures and can be applied equally to the take-over of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021.<sup>655</sup> It is not the case that the collapse of Mali and the take-over of the north by AQIM could or should have been foreseen; much was the result of an unfortunate cascade of events. Nonetheless, the outcome stood in stark contrast to Mali's reputation as beacon of stability and democracy in the region. An important conclusion is that whichever prism is used to view state stability, it will shape and potentially distort the outcome of the analysis. A quantitative risk-based approach, as applied in various stability indices, is based on metrics and indicators (deemed calculable and aggregated) while qualitative threat-based approach use drivers and patterns. A risk assessment aims at reducing the probability of a false positive (of the null hypothesis), while a threat assessment aspires to not miss a weak but existing relationship between phenomena; the probability of a false negative. Although the prevailing and optimistic view of Mali was encapsulated by the risk-based approach of the fragility indices, threat-based approaches equally have biases. These can potentially be mitigated through scenario-building exercises. Empirically, the article added new information on how the French and Dutch governments perceived Malian stability, elaborating on the differing views of various government departments. Just as NGO's had accommodated themselves to local corruption, these two Western nations could not absolve themselves from the 'political responsibility of bystanders'.<sup>656</sup> While the international community at large was surprised by Mali's sudden collapse, insiders in Bamako were less so. Some had chosen not to speak out on the fragility of peace in northern Mali and endemic corruption in government, others saw that their unwelcome warnings went unheeded.

<sup>654</sup> Lebovich, 'The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region'.

<sup>655</sup> Julian E. Barnes, 'Intelligence Agencies Did Not Predict Imminence of Afghan Collapse, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 18 August 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-intelligence-agencies.html>.

<sup>656</sup> Esquith, 'The Political Responsibility of Bystanders'.

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A powerful framework for analysing conflict - Clausewitz's first trinity from his magnum opus 'On War' - was applied to the initial French military operation to dislodge AQIM from northern Mali. This constituted the fourth article. This trinity consists of passion or violence (emotion; the irrational), the play of chance and probability (friction; the non-rational) and political purpose or policy (reason; the rational).<sup>657</sup> Clausewitz subsequently associated each element with the people, the commander and his army, and finally the government; his second trinity. Although several scholars have taken the 'state-centric' focus of the second trinity to argue that Clausewitz's theory cannot be applied to conflicts that involve non-state actors, the first trinity remains relevant in helping to understand the nature of war as a social phenomenon.<sup>658</sup> Despite the hype around 'new wars' and modern counterinsurgency, the application of Clausewitz's first trinity illustrates the enduring utility of the theoretical framework for studying armed conflict. At the same time, it investigates the *effect* of the first component of French counterterrorist policy. The *effectiveness* of counterterrorism policies is more difficult to measure, and as Beatrice de Graaf has argued, performativity - the way in which policies are presented and perceived - is perhaps a better indicator.<sup>659</sup> This applies equally to Operation Serval, which was terminated when its reputation was still intact as having achieved an audacious conventional victory against the Islamist groups.

The final article of this dissertation also serves as its substantial conclusion, revisiting the primary research question and bringing together various strands of investigation. It focuses both on internal factors that have an impact AQIM and its units, as well as government policies of repression, decapitation and negotiation. A conceptual framework developed by Audrey Kurth Cronin in her book 'How Terrorism ends' was used to structure insights on possible pathways of decline. The book received positive reviews and combined a quantitative approach with multiple case-studies.<sup>660</sup> Her framework had several limitations, however. Different categories of actors, actions and outcomes are involved in the pathways; both at the external and the group level.<sup>661</sup> As such, external drivers such

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<sup>657</sup> Villacres and Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity'.

<sup>658</sup> Schuurman, 'Clausewitz and the "New Wars" Scholars'.

<sup>659</sup> Beatrice de Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance: A Comparative Study* (Routledge, 2011).

<sup>660</sup> Andrew L Stigler, 'How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns', *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (2011): 3; Max Abrahms, 'Review of How Terrorism Ends', *Middle East Quarterly*, 1 September 2010, <https://www.meforum.org/2797/how-terrorism-ends>; John R. Schindler, 'H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable on Audrey Kurth Cronin. How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns', H- Diplo|ISSF Roundtable , Volume II , No. 8, 2011, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-2-8.pdf>.

<sup>661</sup> Clark McCauley, 'Group Desistance from Terrorism: A Dynamic Perspective', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1, no. 3 (1 November 2008): 269–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467580902948158>.

as counterterrorism operations could constitute actions just as well as precipitate internal group decisions, while outcomes could be political or organizational. For example, a counterterrorism policy (action) could impact fractionalization or burn-out (internal outcome) and lead to defeat (external outcome). As a result, the boundaries of the pathways blurred and the multitude of factors involved complicated the identification of causal mechanisms that contribute to outcomes. Nonetheless, the concept still provided a useful framework to structure a holistic analysis of group desistance from terrorism. The distinction between terrorism and insurgency - and by extension AQIM's territorial presence and organizational structure - was applied almost in a matrix fashion across Cronin's six pathways, leading to several sub-conclusions on potential pathways for the group.

An important conclusion of this article ran counter to the earlier findings in the conceptual chapter on terrorism, insurgency and organized crime. Five years on, the situation on the ground had changed fundamentally, and when the Duyvesteyn and Fumerton framework was applied again, the outcome was different. Most indicators now pointed to AQIM and its new subunit JNIM following a strategy of insurgency. The Malian government had lost control of much of rural central Mali, which was enveloped in an escalating spiral of interethnic violence. Although appraisals of group size must always be regarded with care, in 2020 JNIM was estimated to consist of around 2,000 fighters.<sup>662</sup> This is no longer a small, clandestine force. Instead of conducting high-profile attacks that targeted civilians, JNIM's guerilla campaign targeted physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges to isolate and then overrun army outposts in Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>663</sup> MINUSMA, troops from Barkhane and Malian security forces were primary targets of jihadist violence. A study into AQIM's use of suicide bombers concluded that as these attacks shifted from the northern Maghreb (2007-2012) to the Sahel, they were accompanied by a general decline in the use of this tactic. Whereas the first phase of suicide bombings in the north had a strong focus on civilian targets, suicide attacks in the Sahel avoided soft targets and predominantly focused on (international) military and governmental targets.<sup>664</sup> This focus on military objectives, and to hold and govern territory, are not indicative of a

<sup>662</sup> Danielle Paquette and Joby Warrick, 'Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Groups Are Working Together in West Africa to Grab Large Swaths of Territory', *Washington Post*, 22 February 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-islamic-state-sahel-west-africa/2020/02/21/7218bc50-536f-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-islamic-state-sahel-west-africa/2020/02/21/7218bc50-536f-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html).

<sup>663</sup> Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole'.

<sup>664</sup> Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, 'Desert Drift, Declining Deadline: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombings', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/desert-drift-declining-deadline-understanding-the-evolution-of-aqims-suicide-bombings/>.

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strategy of terrorism. In the areas JNIM controlled, voting was prevented during the 2018 presidential election, NGO access was restricted, schools were closed and justice was dispensed. In short, AQIM had successfully transitioned from a strategy of terrorism to insurgency, and their influence and control over local populations continued to expand.

The French policy response, however, appeared to remain rooted in the paradigm of counterterrorism. Since Operation Serval, political discourse has labeled the French military operations in the Sahel as a fight against terrorism. This was logical: as an affiliate of the larger Al Qaeda movement, AQIM was officially branded as a terrorist group. Part of the domestic argument for the interventions abroad was to prevent terrorist attacks in France. The terrorist label was even integrated in military parlance, with the acronym for these non-signatory armed groups 'GAT'; *les groupes armés terroristes*. One of the implications of this label was described by French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2017: "They are terrorists. How do you negotiate with terrorists? This is a fight with no ambiguity".<sup>665</sup> This absolutist stance stood in stark contrast with the outcome of Mali's *Conférence d'Entente Nationale*, which expressed a desire to explore the possibilities of dialogue with the leaders of JNIM. Both France and the international community had previously ruled out talks with AQIM's leadership, although the Sahelian governments were more open to the idea – and had some discreet experience in this field. The literature on terrorism and insurgencies does not suggest that dialogue often succeeds in resolving conflict, but as a part of a broader policy, negotiations can contribute to reducing violence. Here the label terrorist, rather than insurgent, constrains the possible policy options available for governments. While the assertion that governments do not talk to terrorists to avoid legitimizing them is not born out by facts, from a sociological perspective audiences judge terrorists as being less rational than insurgents, potentially influencing their choice to bomb them or negotiate.<sup>666</sup>

The literature on insurgencies - while no less heterogeneous than the literature on terrorism - emphasizes its nature as a social phenomenon. Insurgencies arise as a result of political or social exclusion or a lack of security and governance, and they are unique products of the local circumstances.<sup>667</sup> To address such an uprising, the French strategist

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<sup>665</sup> John Irish, 'Mali, France Rule out Talks with Jihadists after Attacks', *Reuters*, 7 April 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-jihadist-idUSKBN1792NF>.

<sup>666</sup> Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch, 'Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 385–92, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_12).

<sup>667</sup> Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2012).

David Galula contended, a large part of the solution must lie in the political realm.<sup>668</sup> American and by extension NATO doctrine proscribes a ‘hearts and minds’ approach, but academics have noted that there is a mismatch between ideology and historical fact, with little empirical evidence for the success of such an approach.<sup>669</sup> There is, however, broad agreement in academia that the centre of gravity lies with the population and the political and social policies needed to address grievances. In the Sahel, however, the military effort to ensure security – by fighting the insurgents – predominated. In part because Barkhane lacked the manpower to secure any area for a longer period of time, France conducted a policy of targeting AQIM’s leadership. The annex to the ICCT-article provided an overview of all the commanders killed or captured, and the list contains a significant number of high-level commanders. Nevertheless, the direct impact on AQIM and JNIM appeared limited. It follows that a large organisation conducting a strategy of insurgency is less vulnerable to leadership decapitation than a small clandestine group that follows a strategy of terrorism.

This dissertation’s chapter on Operation Serval is one of the few works that investigates the combination of political goals of and military means of the intervention, and the literature would profit from a similar approach on Barkhane. The jury, however, on the military intervention’s effects is already out. As already mentioned, during the time of operation Barkhane (2014–2021), insecurity increased significantly and spread into the tri-border area and into Niger and Burkina. AQIM expanded in size and reach and transformed its strategy from terrorism to insurgency. In short, despite many tactical victories, Barkhane cannot be considered a strategic success. Further research is required to investigate what its goals were, which means were employed, and why they failed to achieve their objectives. Michael Shurkin has already made a start, looking at the historical development of French COIN doctrine and how this has been applied in the Sahel.<sup>670</sup> He, like several other authors, concluded that French policy was overly militarized, with little regard for the required political transformation at the heart of COIN-thinking.<sup>671</sup> As Yvan Guichaoua noted, despite efforts to formulate and implement an integrated and comprehensive multi-level policy, French civil servants and military regarded projects and operations as ‘technical’ issues. They were primarily conceived in Paris, and implemented through a de-politicized

<sup>668</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.

<sup>669</sup> Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, 361.

<sup>670</sup> Michael Shurkin, ‘France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine’, *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter /2021–2020), <http://tnsr.org/2020/11/frances-war-in-the-sahel-and-the-evolution-of-counter-insurgency-doctrine/>.

<sup>671</sup> Charbonneau, ‘Faire La Paix Au Mali’; Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue*.

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bureaucratic logic. At heart, however, these policies remained inherently political and clashed with Malian expectations and their notions of sovereignty.<sup>672</sup>

## Relevance and avenues for further research

During the time-frame of this research, the study of terrorism in the Sahel has remained a policy-relevant topic in the field of international relations. Operation Serval was predominantly a French affair, but with MINUSMA, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), the G5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane, international involvement increased substantially. The Netherlands, having previously fostered a strong relationship with Mali (through development aid in particular), contributed significantly to MINUSMA between 2014 and 2019. For the Dutch, the mission entailed not only a contribution to peace and stability in the Sahel, but also an experiment to test a new concept in providing intelligence to UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>673</sup> As the articles of this dissertation were published over time, they contributed to the academic and policy debate on two levels. First, they elucidated the nature of threat that AQIM - as Al Qaeda's official affiliate in West Africa - posed in the Sahel and beyond, and investigated some of the international policy reactions to it. Second, the articles strove to provide context and nuance on a region little understood in the West, but recognized as a strategic and important area. As politicians and policy makers have frequently emphasized, developments in Mali and the broader Sahel are relevant because their impact will be felt in Europe, whether through terrorist attacks, refugees, organized crime or other phenomena that transcend national frontiers. Even divorced from an interest-based international relations perspective, fostering a better understanding of the political and social challenges facing the Sahel remains a worthwhile endeavor.

Some have argued that it is futile to distinguish between terrorism and insurgency, as this would impose a binary distinction on continuous variables, with little agreement on what those identifying characteristics would be.<sup>674</sup> David Ucko and Thomas Marks have made the point that it is important from a policy perspective to understand whether those causing unrest are a self-contained group or the vanguard of a mass movement.<sup>675</sup>

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<sup>672</sup> Yvan Guichaoua, 'The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 895–911, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa094>.

<sup>673</sup> Sebastiaan Rietjens and Erik de Waard, 'UN Peacekeeping Intelligence: The ASIFU Experiment', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 30, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 532–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1297108>.

<sup>674</sup> Khalil, 'Know Your Enemy'.

<sup>675</sup> David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, 'Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 206–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1432922>.

The articles in this dissertation here have shown that different variables can indicate whether an armed group follows a strategy of insurgency or one of terrorism, but that the distinction is not always clear cut in practice, and that it can change with time. The strategy is also related to a much researched question: why do people join terrorist groups? Several works cited here argue that various local grievances have led people to join JNIM and AQIM, and not necessarily the desire to wage global jihad. The policy response to political violence will differ if it is considered as a micro-rebellion against a corrupt or failing government, or if it is labelled as terrorist violence by an affiliate of the group responsible for 9/11.

In aggregate, the findings of this research contribute to the broader literature on insurgencies. Twenty years of Western military and civilian effort in Afghanistan have resulted in a humiliating defeat and exit. Researchers will continue to investigate whether this failure was due to an unrealistic strategy and COIN-doctrine, an inadequate implementation of good policy, or simply a case of an intractable problem-set. Similar analyses will be made for Mali, but it is possible that insurgency studies will wane with the end of major Western military interventions and the return of great power competition and conflict. The study of insurgencies, after all, has waxed and waned over the years, with little interest in the phenomenon in the 1990's, and a revival mid-2000 during the U.S. occupation of Iraq.<sup>676</sup> The core tension at the problem of COIN-doctrine has been highlighted during both the Afghanistan and Mali missions: what if the host nation has little appetite for the political reform required to address the grievances that contributed to the insurrection? How can an intervening power, ostensibly on behalf of an embattled government, attempt to win 'heart and minds' without a thorough understanding of local politics? Improving governance, therefore, forms an essential element in any counterterrorism and COIN policy, but this must rest on local ownership. The governance situation in Mali has hardly improved, with a coup in August 2020, followed by another one in May 2021. Like a Potemkin state in the Sahel, Craven-Matthews and Englebert argue that the Malian state has been mimicked more than it was built and that its reconstruction has been imagined more than it has been implemented.<sup>677</sup> As ISAF discovered in Afghanistan, investing in good governance and service provision risks an ever-expanding task that descends into nation building. Perhaps 'More is Less', as Astri Suhrke argued in her prescient 2012 book on Afghanistan.<sup>678</sup> France was scrupulous in avoiding this mission creep in Mali, but the strategic outcome of Barkhane's military operations is no less meagre.

<sup>676</sup> Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*.

<sup>677</sup> Craven-Matthews and Englebert, 'A Potemkin State in the Sahel?'

<sup>678</sup> Craven-Matthews and Englebert.

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The evolution of the crises in Mali has been accompanied by a significant expansion of academic research on AQIM and terrorism in the Sahel. Hardly a dozen researchers focused on GSPC/AQIM before 2012; many more have since discovered the topic.<sup>679</sup> At the same time, the quantity and availability of primary sources has significantly increased, enlarging the empirical base for detailed analysis of terrorism in the Sahel in all its facets. Nonetheless, many avenues for future research remain. While the whole gamut of possibilities is too broad to work out here, two immediate policy-relevant areas spring to mind. First, further investigation into the threat that AQIM poses in the West is merited. AQIM has frequently called for attacks in mainland France – just as France has argued that the domestic threat necessitates military interventions abroad.<sup>680</sup> Nonetheless, as of yet no successful attack by AQIM has taken place on European soil. Although French intelligence services claim to have foiled several attempts, there have been no high-profile court cases where AQIM operators – or individuals inspired by the group – have been convicted.<sup>681</sup> The choice of targeting is linked to Al Qaeda's dichotomy of the near and the far enemy - that al-Zawahiri has recently appeared to move away from – and will permit a clearer understanding of the intentions and targeting capabilities of AQIM.<sup>682</sup> Secondly, research could focus on the local (shadow) governance models that JNIM utilizes in its insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, comparing modus operandi with their adversary ISGS. As local context is key, understanding dynamics at the village level could feed into policies that reduce traction of jihadist groups among the population. This necessitates fieldwork, an excellent understanding of local history and culture, and meticulous scholarship. This was once a feature of the libraries of Timbuktu, and it is to be hoped that the region will again be known as a central hub for trade and the peaceful exchange of ideas.

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<sup>679</sup> Detailed in the Oxford Bibliographies literature review, see: Boeke, 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb'.

<sup>680</sup> 'AQIM Demands Physical Violence and Death Over Economic Harm to France in Revenge for Prophet Insults' (SITE Intelligence Group, 2 November 2020).

<sup>681</sup> For one example, see: 'Le terroriste ciblait le musée du Louvre', *Le Parisien*, 9 July 2014, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/le-terroriste-ciblait-le-musee-du-louvre-09-07-2014-3987735.php>.

<sup>682</sup> Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0*, 249; Colin P. Clarke and Asfandyar Mir, 'Is Ayman Al-Zawahiri Really the Future of Al-Qaida?', *The RAND Blog*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/is-ayman-al-zawahiri-really-the-future-of-al-qaida.html>.





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# NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

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Precies tien jaar geleden stond het Afrikaanse land Mali bekend als een stabiele democratie en een ‘*donor darling*’ voor de ontwikkelingshulpsector. Op 30 November 2011 werd President Amadou Toumani Touré (beter bekend als AKK) ontvangen door Koningin Beatrix en premier Rutte. Het staatsbezoek bevestigde de nauwe band - vooral op het gebied van ontwikkelingshulp - die Nederland en Mali onderhielden. Al Qaeda in de Islamitische Maghreb (AQIM) stond op dat moment bekend als een kleine terreurgroep die vooral Westerse toeristen gijzelde in de Sahel – Sjaak Rijke was een week eerder gevangen genomen. In januari 2012 kantelde het beeld. Er ontstond een cascade van gebeurtenissen die Mali tot de rand van de afgrond bracht: een opstand van Toeareg rebellen die het noorden veroverden, een staatsgreep die de regering omver wierp, en vervolgens een overname van de Toeareg-opstand door AQIM en twee andere jihadistische groeperingen, waardoor noord-Mali een proto-kalifaat werd. In Bamako rouwde niemand om de vlucht van President AKK – het was een publiek geheim dat de regering corrupt was. Begin 2013 vielen de jihadistische groeperingen zuid-Mali aan, en Frankrijk stuurde een grote interventiemacht – Operatie Serval. Deze verjoeg AQIM uit het noorden. De overwinning bleek echter van korte duur. Al ontplooidde de VN een contingent aan vredestroepen (MINUSMA) en keerden ngo’s terug naar Mali, de veiligheidssituatie bleef gestaag verslechteren. Nederland nam tussen 2014 en 2019 deel aan MINUSMA, en lanceerde een nieuw inlichtingenconcept voor VN-vredesmissies. Frankrijk verving operatie Serval door operatie Barkhane, een contraterrore missie die vijf landen besloeg (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritanië en Tsjaad). Anno 2021 blijkt het geweld enorm toegenomen en ontsnappen grote delen van Mali aan het gezag van de hoofdstad.

Dit proefschrift is gecentreerd rond vijf artikelen, allen gepubliceerd in internationale wetenschappelijke tijdschriften. Een aparte inleiding gaf het breder kader aan, en formuleerde de onderzoeksvraag: hoe heeft Al Qaeda in de Islamitische Maghreb zich ontwikkeld sinds de 2012 crisis in Mali, en hoe hebben Mali en de internationale gemeenschap hierop gereageerd. Verschillende deelvragen worden vervolgens door de artikelen geadresseerd. Deze vragen betreffen: welke factoren hebben bijgedragen tot het ontstaan van AQIM; hoe is AQIM georganiseerd, welke relatie heeft het met Al Qaeda Centraal en hoe staat de organisatie in verhouding tot andere jihadistische organisaties; wat motiveert de strijders van AQIM; welke effecten hebben hun aanslagen en operaties gehad op Mali en de buurlanden; hoe hebben Mali, Frankrijk en de internationale gemeenschap hierop gereageerd, en tot slot; welk effect heeft het contraterrore beleid op de groep gehad. Een rode draad in dit onderzoek is het verschil tussen terrorisme en *insurgency* (ofwel opstand), en definities en concepten uit de wetenschappelijke literatuur

zijn toegepast op AQIM. Er is tweemaal een bezoek gebracht naar Mali, en verscheidene mensen zijn geïnterviewd. Het onderzoek heeft in het bijzonder aandacht besteed aan primaire bronnen; een gebrek hieraan is al een tijd een punt van aandacht in terrorisme studies. Zo maakten de eerste artikelen gebruik van brieven geschreven door het Al Qaeda leiderschap. Sommigen waren gevonden in Timbuktu na Operatie Serval, anderen waren buitgemaakt tijdens de Amerikaanse operatie die in 2011 Bin Laden in Abbottabad doodde. Ook zijn media publicaties van AQIM geanalyseerd.

## Het verschil tussen terrorisme en opstand

Het onderscheid tussen terrorisme en *insurgency* is van belang voor de beleidsreactie, want contra-terrorisme en *counterinsurgency* worden op verschillende wijzen door andere overheidsdiensten (bijvoorbeeld politie of leger) uitgevoerd. Het is lastig gebleken om terrorisme te definiëren, mede omdat het een politiek-geladen term betreft. Onderzoekers zijn het over het algemeen eens dat het fenomeen verschillende componenten bevat, waaronder het dreigen met of plegen van geweld, het zaaien van angst of terreur, het nastreven van politieke doelen en het bewust aangrijpen van (onschuldige) burgers. In parallel aan de academische discussie hebben internationale beleidsmakers en onderhandelaars wel overeenstemming gevonden in het bestempelen van verschillende gewapende groeperingen als terroristen, waaronder Al Qaeda en zijn sub-groepen zoals AQIM. Een *insurgency*, daarentegen, heeft een ander doel - namelijk het controleren van een gebied en/of een bevolking. De lokale bevolking kan door overtuiging of onderdrukking worden gemobiliseerd, maar uiteindelijk is het doel van opstandelingen om het bestuur over te nemen. Dit vereist een gedifferentieerde strategie, een ander organisatiemodel en ook afwijkende modus-operandi. Zo vallen opstandelingen vaak veiligheidstroepen aan (en andere vertegenwoordigers van de staat), en pogen gebieden onder controle te krijgen. Vervolgens moet men voorzieningen verschaffen (zoals energie en water), veiligheid garanderen, onderwijs bieden en recht spreken. Groepen die daarentegen een strategie van terrorisme volgen, zijn kleiner en geheimzinniger dan die van opstandelingen, en willen niet per se een gebied te besturen. Vaak is voor hen het provoceren van een staat - tot bijvoorbeeld een overreactie - een primair doel.

Als dit conceptueel kader wordt toegepast op AQIM enkele jaren na Serval leidt tot de conclusie dat de groep op dat moment voornamelijk een strategie van terrorisme volgde. De jihadististen konden niet meer het lokaal bestuur uitoefenen, belastingen innen of openlijk en op grote schaal nieuwe strijders rekruteren. Na Operatie Serval moest AQIM zich transformeren van een grote organisatie naar een kleine clandestiene groep. Verschillende

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aanslagen op burgerdoelen werden uitgevoerd. Enkele aanwijzingen wezen destijds wel op een strategie van opstand, zoals systematische aanvallen op Barkhane, MINUSMA en Malinese veiligheidstroepen. Vijf jaar later leidt een herziening van de vraag tot een andere conclusie, en was AQIM terug getransformeerd naar een groep die een strategie van opstand voert. De dynamiek van het conflict was eveneens fundamenteel veranderd. Noord-Mali was niet langer het epicentrum van geweld: dit was verschoven naar het drielandpunt, waarbij ook Niger en Burkina Faso betrokken waren. De geografische verschuiving ging gepaard met een nieuwe etnische component in het escalerende geweld, waarbij AQIM en zijn primaire gevechtseenheid 'Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin' (JNIM – groep voor steun aan Islam en Moslims) niet langer de enige aanstichters van geweld waren. Ook milities en lokale veiligheidstroepen bleken verantwoordelijk voor grote aantallen burgerslachtoffers. Tegelijk kreeg AQIM een nog gewelddadigere concurrent. Strijders vertrokken uit een afsplitsing van AQIM – al-Mourabitoen – om een afvaardiging van de Islamitische Staat te vormen (ISGS). Gevechten tussen JNIM en ISGS kostten honderden doden aan beide kanten. JNIM richtte zich op het controleren van grote gebieden, en het doelwit van hun aanslagen bleek vooral de aanwezigheid van de staat. Hoewel het nieuwe gevecht van AQIM en JNIM meer kenmerken had van een strategie van opstand dan één van terrorisme, bleef het beleid van Frankrijk en haar bondgenoten geworteld in het paradigma van terrorismebestrijding.

## **De onvoorziene crisis en Operatie Serval**

Nu Mali gebukt lijkt te gaan onder een doorlopende crisis is de vraag waarom de crisis van 2012 voor velen als een verrassing kwam. De bevindingen zijn ook relevant voor onderzoek naar *'intelligence failures'* en kunnen evenzeer worden toegepast op de overname van Kabul door de Afghaanse Taliban in augustus 2021. Het is onredelijk om te stellen dat de ineenstorting van Mali en de overname van het noorden door AQIM had moeten worden voorzien; veel was immers het resultaat van een ongelukkige cascade van gebeurtenissen. Desalniettemin stond de uitkomst in schril contrast met Mali's reputatie als baken van stabiliteit en democratie in de regio. In de *Fund for Peace's 'Failed States Index'* van 2011 (later hernoemd tot *Fragile States Index*) stond Mali op de 76<sup>e</sup> plaats. Bijna alle buurlanden werden als veel meer fragiel beschouwd. In de *'political risk'* analyses van verzekeraars werd Mali als stabiel ingeschat, en het Amerikaanse State Department beschreef Mali als een *'posterboy for democracy'*. Toch was het Mali dat in 2012 als een kaartenhuis ineenstortte, met een opstand die twee derde van het land veroverde en een staatsgreep die een einde bracht aan twintig jaar onafgebroken stembusgang.

De prisma die wordt gebruikt om de stabiliteit van een land te analyseren bepaalt voor een groot deel de uitkomst van het onderzoek. Een kwantitatieve, op risico's gebaseerde benadering, zoals aangewend in verschillende stabiliteitsindices zoals de *'Fragile States index'*, is gebaseerd op meetwaarden en indicatoren (berekenbaar en geaggregeerd), terwijl een kwalitatieve, op bedreigingen gebaseerde benadering gebruikmaakt van drijfveren en patronen. Een risicobeoordeling heeft tot doel de kans op een vals positief (van de nulhypothese) te verkleinen, terwijl een dreigingsbeoordeling ernaar streeft een zwakke maar bestaande relatie tussen fenomenen niet te missen; de kans op een vals negatief. De heersende en optimistische kijk op Mali werd vooral ingegeven door een op risico's gebaseerde benadering van de fragiliteitsindices. De ingebakken nadelen van deze invalshoeken kunnen mogelijk worden verzacht door scenario-oefeningen te organiseren. Onderzoek naar hoe de Franse en Nederlandse regeringen de Malinese stabiliteit destijds inschatten leert dat ambassades, ministeries en inlichtingendiensten verschillende conclusies trokken. Frankrijk had een redelijk scherp beeld van wat zich afspeelde in Mali, maar het ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken wilde de corruptie niet aan de grote klok hangen. Net zoals de ngo's had men zich moeten aanpassen aan lokale corruptie, met als gevolg dat 'bijstanders' ook een bepaalde mate van verantwoordelijkheid hiervoor zijn gaan dragen. Terwijl de internationale gemeenschap in het algemeen verrast was door de plotselinge ineenstorting van Mali, waren insiders in Bamako dat minder. Sommigen hadden zich bewust niet uitgesproken over de broosheid van de vrede in het noorden van Mali en de endemische corruptie in de regering, anderen zagen dat hun ongewenste waarschuwingen niet werden opgevolgd.

## Operatie Serval

Voor het analyseren van militaire operaties is de theorie van Carl von Clausewitz zeer geschikt. Zo kan de eerste drie-eenheid uit zijn magnum opus *'Vom Kriege'* worden toegepast op Operatie Serval. Deze drie-eenheid bestaat uit hartstocht of geweld (emotie; het irrationele), het spel van kans en waarschijnlijkheid (wrijving; het niet-rationele) en politiek doel of beleid (reden; het rationele). Clausewitz associeerde vervolgens elk element met het volk, de commandant en zijn leger, en tenslotte de regering; zijn tweede drie-eenheid. Hoewel verschillende onderzoekers betogen dat de 'staat-centrische' focus van de tweede drie-eenheid betekent dat de theorie van Clausewitz niet goed kan worden toegepast op conflicten waarbij niet-staatelijke actoren betrokken zijn, blijft de eerste drie-eenheid nuttig om de aard van oorlog en conflict als een sociaal fenomeen te helpen begrijpen. Ondanks de hype rond 'nieuwe oorlogen' en moderne *counterinsurgency*, blijft Clausewitz' eerste drie-eenheid een relevant en toepasselijk theoretische raamwerk bieden voor het bestuderen van gewapende conflicten.

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Een analyse van het politieke element van Serval leert dat Parijs duidelijke en scherpe doelstellingen formuleerde. Men had al een raamwerk van plannen liggen, dus toen AQIM zuid-Mali aanviel en hierna Bamako om hulp vroeg, kon snel gehandeld worden. In tegenstelling tot Nederland kan in de Vijfde Republiek de uitvoerende macht – de President – Franse troepen onmiddellijk inzetten. Een debat moet binnen vijf dagen plaatsvinden in het Parlement, maar zelfs een stemming is niet nodig. Ook had Parijs veel aandacht voor het vergaren van internationale steun. Zo werd de operatie, immers op verzoek van Mali zelf, achteraf door de Veiligheidsraad goedgekeurd. Tenslotte formuleerde Parijs heldere doelstellingen en kregen de militairen ruimte om naar eigen inzicht te behalen. Op militair vlak hielp het dat Frankrijk veel militairen permanent in Afrika had gestationeerd, en een goed inlichtingenbeeld had van AQIM. Ook werden troepen speciaal ingevlogen uit Frankrijk zodat men snel ter plaatse was. De operatie draaide om snelheid en durf – anders dan voorzichtige operaties in Afghanistan om het risico op eigen verliezen te minimaliseren. Uiteindelijk hadden de Fransen ook geluk – het derde onderdeel van de drie-eenheid van Clausewitz. AQIM gaf weinig weerstand in de steden en vluchtte naar een bergachtig gebied dat zij vooraf ingericht hadden voor de verdediging. Wellicht hadden men niet verwacht dat het tot een hand-tot-hand gevecht in de grotten en valleien van de Adrar des Ifoghas zou komen, maar infanterie uit Frankrijk en Tsjaad zochten hen op. De conventionele strijd was snel beslecht, en veel strijders van AQIM konden niet ontsnappen. Toch bleek de overwinning niet duurzaam. Tegen het einde van de operatie werkte Frankrijk samen met Tuareg rebellen, die de kans schoon zagen om AQIM terug te pakken nadat hun eigen opstand door de jihadisten was gekaapt. Dit was tegen het zere been van Bamako, die de Tuareg-rebellen altijd als een groter gevaar had gezien dan AQIM. Uiteindelijk kon Serval niet de oorzaken van het conflict adresseren; iets wat de Malinese regering zelf moest doen. In de jaren die volgende werd duidelijk dat Bamako weinig interesse hierin had. Toen Operatie Serval in 2014 werd vervangen door Operatie Barkhane was de asymmetrische strijd van de jihadistische groeperingen al op gang, en dit zou later een volwaardige opstand worden.

## **Paden en perspectieven**

Bij het analyseren van de toekomstige perspectieven van AQIM kan een ander conceptueel kader worden toegepast. Veel van de literatuur over terrorisme onderzoekt de oorsprong van het fenomeen, met betrekkelijk weinig aandacht voor de wijze waarop groepen aan hun einde komen of de gewelddadige strijd staken. Weerstand op groepsniveau tegen terrorisme is een apart onderwerp voor onderzoek op mesoniveau, en een paar kwantitatieve studies hebben de ondergang van terroristische groeperingen geanalyseerd. Een boek van Audrey

Kurth Cronin - 'How Terrorism Ends' - biedt een praktisch kader voor het structureren van inzichten over hoe AQIM zich zou kunnen ontwikkelen. Cronin identificeert zes verschillende wegen hoe terroristische groeperingen in het algemeen eindigen: De leider van de groep wordt gedood of gevangen genomen (zogenaamd *decapitation*); de groep treedt toe tot een legitiem politiek proces (onderhandelingen); de groep realiseert zijn doelstellingen (succes); de groep implodeert of verliest zijn draagvlak (falen); nederlaag en eliminatie door brute kracht (repressie); of terrorisme gaat over in andere vormen van geweld zoals criminaliteit (heroriëntatie). In de praktijk kunnen deze paden natuurlijk in elkaar overlopen, maar ze schetsen scherp verschillende mogelijkheden en kunnen goed worden gebruikt om inzichten te structureren.

Het tot doelwit maken van terroristische leiders (*decapitation*) maakt lange tijd deel uit van het Franse contraterrorisme beleid. Veel jihadistische commandanten zijn gedood of gevangen genomen, en in juni 2020 werd zelfs de emir van AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, door Franse speciale troepen gedood. Onlangs sneuvelde ook Al-Sahraoui, de algemene commandant van de Islamitische Staat in de Grotere Sahara (ISGS). Desalniettemin lijkt het effect van *leadership targeting* op beide organisaties beperkt. Groepen die een opstand voeren en een sterke territoriale aanwezigheid hebben, kunnen immers veel gemakkelijker rekruteren dan kleine groepen die een terrorismestrategie voeren. Wat onderhandelingen betreft, willen de Sahel-landen graag een dialoog aangaan met AQIM (en JNIM). Er zijn al verschillende lokale wapenstilstanden overeengekomen. Deze worden toegejuicht door de bevolking maar het overzicht van staat-het-vuren ontbreekt en soms zullen ze de machtspositie van AQIM versterken. Dialoog met de leiders van AQIM ziet Frankrijk niet zitten, al zijn de Malinezen ook hier voorstander van. Wat betreft het pad van implosie of verlies van lokale steun, de machtsstrijd tussen AQIM en ISGS heeft beide groepen aanzienlijk beschadigd. De vragen hoe deze verdeeldheid verder aan te jagen en hoe lokale steun aan AQIM te beperken verdienen dus meer aandacht. De focus op repressie en *leadership targeting* hebben immers tot nu toe maar magere resultaten geboekt. AQIM en JNIM lijken momenteel veerkrachtig en sterk geïmplant in een groot deel van het drielandpunt, en weerstaan de druk van ISGS en internationale veiligheidstroepen. De illusie van kracht camoufleert echter zwakheden, en door AQIM beter te begrijpen kan deze effectiever worden bestreden.

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# CURRICULUM VITAE

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Sergei Boeke (1976) was born in the Hague, the Netherlands. He completed his secondary education at the Royal Grammar School, Guildford, in the United Kingdom. In 1994 he joined the Royal Netherlands Naval College in Den Helder. Commissioned as a supply officer in 1997, he studied law at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, specialising in international and criminal law. After graduation he held several posts in the Navy, serving on various warships and with the Second Marine Battalion. He completed mountain and arctic training in Norway, and was deployed with Stabilization Force Iraq (SFIR 2) to Al-Muthanna in 2003/4. After a short posting as fellow at the Netherlands Institute for International Relations Clingendael, he took part in the 'diplomatic class' and worked in the Department of Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. Moving back to the Ministry of Defense in 2008, he became deputy head of the Afghanistan Team in military intelligence. In 2011, he completed a nine-month training for high-level civil servants at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) in Strasbourg, France. In February 2013, he switched to academia, lecturing and conducting research at Leiden University, Campus the Hague. His areas of interest included cyber-security governance and terrorism in the Sahel. In July 2019 he left university and became the Political Advisor (POLAD) of the Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC), a new NATO headquarters based in Ulm, Germany. He is married to Anne and has four children: Joséphine, Vadim, Helena and Raphael.



