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

Boeke, S.

INTRODUCTION

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.[1] The books, written in different languages, cover topics ranging from astronomy to history, and even include works by 16th Century Islamic scholars advocating the expansion of women's rights.[2] 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 21st 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.[3] 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.[4] The hostages were freed several years later. But tourists have not returned to Timbuktu. Nearly ten years later, the whole of northern of 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

---

[1] 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.

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

[3] 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.

[4] 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.[5] Its affiliate in the Sahel, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), numbered no more than a few hundred fighters at that time.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] 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

---

[5] 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/.

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

[7] 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.

[8] 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.

[9] Just for estimates on AQIM, see: Lasserre and Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali*, 44.

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

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.[11] 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.[12] In the summer of 2013, Presidential elections were held in Mali, ensuring the return of democracy. Terrorist violence was notably absent.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15] MINUSMA peacekeepers suffered the highest number of fatalities of any UN mission, five years in a row.[16] The peace process to reconcile the separatist Tuaregs stalled.[17] Worse

---

[11] 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/.

[12] 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.

[13] 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/.

[14] 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.

[15] '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.

[16] For (current) statistics on UN fatalities, see: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities

[17] '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.

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.[18] A new Salafi-jihadist group appeared - the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) - and officially became a part of Islamic State/Daesh.[19] 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.[20] Despite some tactical successes, during the seven years of its military operations Mali's security situation progressively worsened.[21]

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.[22] The international community, noting that the crisis in Mali poses a threat to international peace and stability, has offered substantial aid.[23] But how assistance should be provided to the region, in an effective and efficient manner, is a question which still eludes governments. International

---

[18] Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, 'En Afrique, Le Fantasme d'une « communauté Peule » Radicalisée', The Conversation, 4 September 2018, http://theconversation.com/en-afrique-le-fantasme-dune-communaute-peule-radicalisee-102276.

[19] 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, //www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/analysis-islamic-state-claims-al-qaeda-started-a-war-in-west-africa.php.

[20] 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/.

[21] 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/.

[22] '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.

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

aid has not been provided in a coherent or coordinated fashion, with at least 17 different Sahel strategies guiding assistance to the region.[24] 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.[25] 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.[26] 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.[27] 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.[28] How its Sahelian affiliate has fared within this broader development will be the subject of this research.

[24] 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.

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

[26] 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.

[27] Alexis Arieff 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/.

[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] Many researchers, often financed by or sympathetic to governments, predominantly reason from a (Western) counterterrorist perspective, unable or unwilling

---

[29] 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.
[30] 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.

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.[31] 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."[32]*

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.[33] 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.[34] 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,

---

[31] Sardoc.

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

[33] 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.

[34] 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 Saharah Branch, and al-Murabitun under one umbrella.[35] 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.[36] The difficulty of understanding this kaleidoscope of jihadist groups is compounded by French targeting operations, with even Droukdel killed in June 2020.[37] 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 Huntingdon 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."*[38]

---

[35] 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.

[36] 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/.

[37] 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/.

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

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.[39] 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.[40] 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.*"[41]

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,

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*".[42] 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.[43] 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.[44] 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.[45] While terrorism is generally associated with non-state actors, some states have also – either directly or by proxy - used terrorist tactics.[46]

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.[47] 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.[48] Many people that have radical ideas never act on them, while others

---

[42] 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.

[43] 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.

[44] 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.

[45] Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, 'The Strategies of Terrorism', *International Security* 31, no. 1 (31 July 2006): 49–79.

[46] Richard Jackson, Eamon Murphy, and Scott Poynting, *Contemporary State Terrorism: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2009).

[47] Sardoc, 'Making Sense of Political Violence'.

[48] Peter R. Neumann, 'The Trouble with Radicalization', *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12049.

who have been (auto-) labeled terrorists are not motivated by extremist or radical views.[49] 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.[50] 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.[51] Other studies distinguish between push and pull factors.[52] 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.[53] 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.[54]

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 *Salafiya* in Arabic)

---

[49] 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.

[50] 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.

[51] 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.

[52] 'Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice' (Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, 2015).

[53] 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.

[54] '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."*[55]

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.[56] 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).[57] 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.[58] 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.[59] This, nonetheless, neither detracts from the group's instrumentationalism of ideology, nor the combatants' normative commitment to their set of beliefs.

---

[55] 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.

[56] 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.

[57] 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).

[58] 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.

[59] 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

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.[60] 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.[61] 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.[62] 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'.[63] 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.[64]

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

---

[60] 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.

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

[62] '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/.

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

[64] Lori-Anne Théroux-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.[65] 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.[66] 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."[67]*

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.[68] 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'.[69] 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)

---

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

[66] David Kilcullen, 'Counter-Insurgency Redux', *Survival* 48, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 111–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330601062790.

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

[68] 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.

[69] 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.

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'.[70] 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.[71]

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.[72] 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.[73] 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.[74] 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.

---

[70] Kilcullen, 'Counter-Insurgency Redux'.

[71] Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency'.

[72] 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.

[73] 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.

[74] 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.[75] 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.[76] 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.[77] 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.[78] 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.[79]

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

---

[75] 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.

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

[77] 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.

[78] 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.

[79] 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.[80] 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.
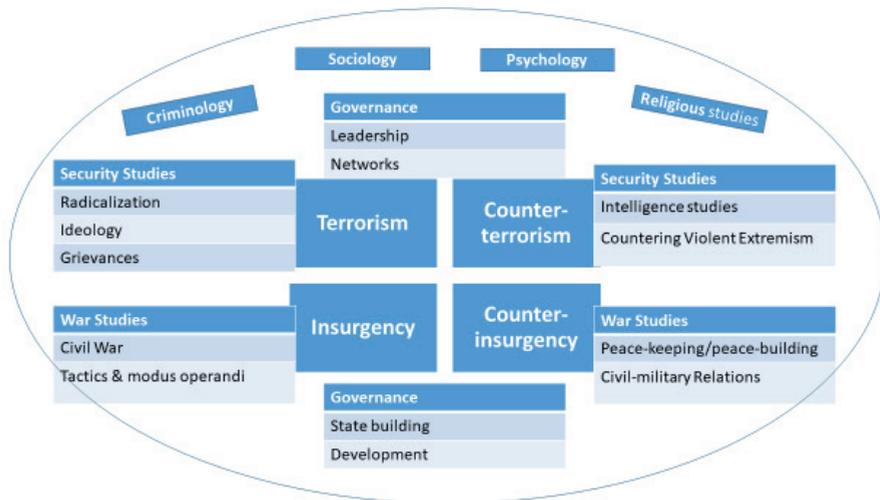

Figure 1: Disciplines, studies and topics involved in studying terrorism and insurgencies

---

[80] 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.[81] 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.[82] 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.[83] 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.[84]

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.[85] Inter- and intra-ethnic competition for scarce resources is certainly not new, but in the past this was frequently regulated and managed by informal

---

[81] 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.

[82] 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.

[83] 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).

[84] Martin van Vliet, 'Beyond Institutional Blueprints: Hybrid Security Provision and Democratic Practice in Mali' (Leiden University, 2021), https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3160763.2021

[85] '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.

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. [86] In central Mali, the politics of land governance have been a factor for Fulani pastoralists to join Al Qaeda affiliated groups.[87] 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.[88] 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.*"[89] 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.[90] For the epistemological

---

[86] 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.

[87] 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.

[88] 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.

[89] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (OUP Oxford, 2012), 33.

[90] 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.[91] 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.[92]

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.[93] 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."*[94]

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

---

[91] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 36.

[92] Grix, 'Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research'.

[93] 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.

[94] 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.

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.[95] 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.[96] The website 'Jihadilogy' 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.[97] 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.[98] 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.[99] 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.[100] 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

---

[95] 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.

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

[97] 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.

[98] Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0.*

[99] 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).

[100] 'An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal', *The New York Times*, 1 July 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.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.[101] 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.[102] 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.[103] 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.[104] 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.[105] 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

---

[101] 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).

[102] 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.

[103] 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

[104] 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.

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

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'.[106] Concerning counterterrorism, journalists have published
several books describing French political decision-making, with some overly critical
of the government and others possibly not enough.[107] 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.[108]
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.[109] 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.[110] 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

---

[106] Inge Skattum, 'Mali: In Defence of Cultural and Linguistic Pluralism', in *Language and National
Identity in Africa*, ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford University Press, 2008), 104.

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

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

[109] 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).

[110] 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.[111] The editor resigned and the articles were finally published in Canadian Journal of African Studies.[112] 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.[113] The piece drew the ire of the military and political leadership – also for criticizing the American ally – and the journal withdrew the publication.[114] 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.[115] 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

---

[111] 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.

[112] 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.

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

[114] 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/.

[115] 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.

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.[116] 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.[117] 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.[118] 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.[119] 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

---

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

[117] 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.

[118] 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).

[119] 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.[120] 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.
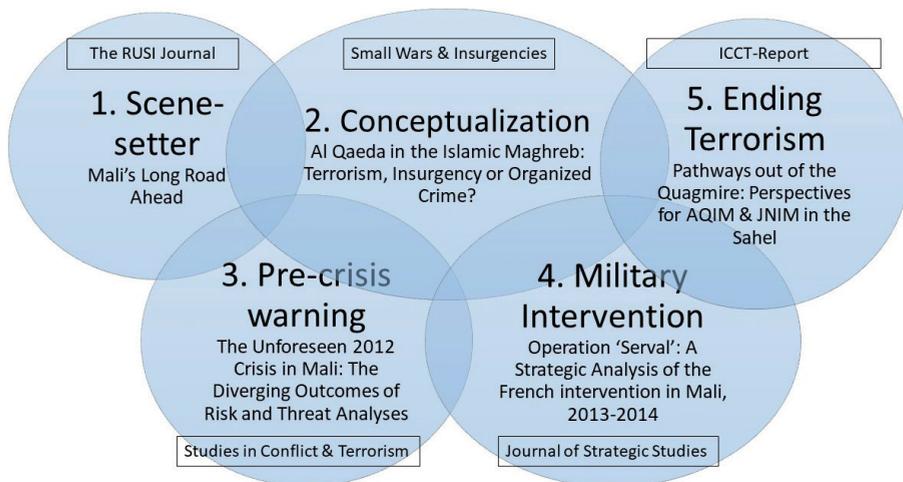

Figure 2: Overview focus articles/chapters

---

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

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.[121] Applying a conceptual

---

[121] 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.[122] 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.[123] 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.

---

[122] 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.

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

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.[124] 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.[125] 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."*[126]

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.[127] 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.[128] It is rather a structured investigation into how different internal and external factors could accelerate Al Qaeda's

---

[124] 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.

[125] 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.

[126] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), 85–86.

[127] 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.

[128] 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.[129]

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.

---

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