



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

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

Boeke, S.

### Citation

Boeke, S. (2022, June 16). *Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: responses to terrorist tactics and insurgent strategies*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3309811>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3309811>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

---

# MALI'S LONG ROAD AHEAD

Sergei Boeke & Antonin Tisseron

The RUSI Journal, Volume 159, 2014 – Issue 5

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

## **The Jihadist Galaxy in Mali**

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

---

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

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

## AQIM

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

## MUJAO

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

### **Ansar Dine**

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

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

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

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

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

---

## Inter-Group Relations

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

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

## One War, Several Conflicts

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

<sup>159</sup> Marchal, ‘Mali’.

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

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

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

## The Problem of Governance

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>170</sup> Cessou.

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

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Way Ahead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

