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The Netherlands

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

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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

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

CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTION

The general framework for this dissertation was provided by its research question: how has Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb evolved since the 2012 Malian Crisis, and how have Mali and the international community reacted to the group's development (2012-2021). This formed the leitmotif for five peer-reviewed articles in different international journals. The first article was published at the end of 2014; the last in 2021, and each had its own focus and conclusions. James Khalil has argued that parallel literatures have emerged on terrorism and insurgencies, with little cross-referencing between the main journals dedicated to each phenomenon.⁶⁴¹ In part to bridge this divide, the conducted research was purposely published in a broad outlet of journals. A single article was published in one of the 'classic' journals of terrorism research – *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.⁶⁴² The other articles were published in journals focusing on security and defense (the scene-setter in the journal of the Royal United Services Institute); on small wars and insurgencies, strategic studies and by the International Centre on Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). The final article of this dissertation has a more policy-oriented focus. Research objectivity is essential in all social sciences, but the purpose of this article goes further than elucidating the phenomenon of terrorism in Sahel and contributing to a better understanding of the Al Qaeda and its motives. As a 'think and do-tank', ICCT aims to provide concrete propositions to reduce the threat from terrorism. By offering policy-recommendations how to address a major problem afflicting the Sahel and the broader international community, the last article has a stronger emphasis on policy-relevance than, for example, the development of theory. As critical terrorism studies have pointed out, however, the state-centricity of research, its problem-solving orientation and institutional and intellectual links to security services can have epistemic and ethical implications.⁶⁴³ Awareness of this risk was present throughout the research.

During the time of writing the dynamics of political violence in Mali changed in multiple and fundamental ways. First, once Operation Serval had transformed the conflict from a conventional 'small war' to a more traditional irregular conflict, the security situation continued to progressively deteriorate. Until the end of the period research, there was almost a linear increase in violence, signifying that policies to stabilize and reduce violence were not successful. By 2021, AQIM and the armed signatory groups were no longer the main instigators of violence, but militias and state security forces had equally killed many

⁶⁴¹ Khalil, 'Know Your Enemy'.

⁶⁴² The other main journals are *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Perspectives on Terrorism* and *Critical Studies on Terrorism*.

⁶⁴³ Jackson, 'The Core Commitments of Critical Terrorism Studies'.

civilians.⁶⁴⁴ A second important change was the addition of a new ethnic dimension to the conflict. The core conflict in Mali no longer revolved around a minority of Tuareg tribes claiming more autonomy from the central government. In 2015 the Algiers Accords had signaled an uneasy peace between Bamako, its proxy militias and Tuareg separatists. Six years later, the parties involved had still not implemented two thirds of what they had agreed to do.⁶⁴⁵ With the old conflict unresolved (and northern Mali effectively a safe-haven for AQIM), a new ethnic conflict erupted in central Mali. Relations between Fulani and Dogon had already been under tension as a result of population growth, scarce natural resources and state policies towards pastoralism.⁶⁴⁶ The establishment of Katiba Macina sparked a spiral of communal violence, with Dogon self-defence militias (and state security forces) accusing Fulani of collaborating with jihadists. Both AQIM and ISGS have capitalized on these interethnic tensions. Finally, Mali is no longer the epicenter of conflict. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has – as its name implies – always espoused a broad geographical focus, and not recognizing international borders remains a key tenet of Al Qaeda policy. In 2020, both Niger and Burkina Faso were grappling with large-scale insurgencies on their territories.⁶⁴⁷ The French DGSE even warned that JNIM was planning to expand into Benin and Ivory Coast.⁶⁴⁸ These fast-paced and fundamental changes in Sahelian conflict dynamics complicated academic research, with analyses running the risk of rapidly being outdated after publication.

Methodology

The articles of this dissertation relied on different forms of data collection. The combination of literature review with semi-structured interviews formed an important element of the author's broader research on Mali. The use of direct quotes from interviews was limited in these articles, however, in part because several of the interviews were part of other projects

⁶⁴⁴ Ornella Moderan, Habibou Souley Bako, and Paul-Simon Handy, 'Sahel Counter-Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll on Civilians', ISS Africa, 14 April 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sahel-counter-terrorism-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-civilians>.

⁶⁴⁵ Mathieu Pellerin, 'Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm' (International Crisis Group, 24 June 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/laccord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire>.

⁶⁴⁶ Mirjam E. De Bruijn and Han J. W. M. Van Dijk, 'Insecurity and Pastoral Development in the Sahel', *Development and Change* 30, no. 1 (1999): 115–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00109>.

⁶⁴⁷ Jason Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 2 (February 2020): 9–14.

⁶⁴⁸ Benjamin Roger, '« Projet » jihadiste en Côte d'Ivoire et au Bénin : opération de communication ou coup de pression de la DGSE?', *Jeune Afrique*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1116183/politique/projet-jihadiste-en-cote-divoire-et-au-benin-operation-de-communication-ou-coup-de-pression-de-la-dgse/>.

that had their own specific products.⁶⁴⁹ Nonetheless, interviews with both practitioners as well as incarcerated suspects of terrorist activities served to support findings garnered from other sources. As such they were used to provide new leads for research and to corroborate and triangulate findings from other primary and secondary sources. The research was primarily of a qualitative nature, although the article on risk and threat conducted a detailed investigation of the advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Three of the articles were written with a co-author, with each collaboration supporting the saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In his 2018 analysis on the general state of terrorism research, Bart Schuurman argued that one of the most problematic issues was the scarcity of collaboration between researchers and the high number of one-time contributors. According to his data set, between 2007 and 2016 around three quarters of research papers were written by a single author, and around three quarters of all authors made only a single contribution to the field.⁶⁵⁰ These figures were still an improvement on the metrics calculated by Silke in the early 2000s. This dissertation continues the progress, on both counts.

Primary sources played an essential role in this dissertation, both in the study of AQIM and international responses to the group. The Timbuktu letters and documents from the Bin Laden cache were used to analyze AQIM's relationship with AQC, its overarching goals and strategy, and the internal dynamics afflicting the group. The group's external announcements also provided insights into AQIM and JNIM's targeting choices, its standpoints vis-à-vis its competitor ISGS and obviously its own strategic communication policy. For the last ICCT article, over one hundred AQIM and JNIM SITE transcripts from 2019 and 2020 were consulted. The insights garnered were used for the article's analysis on the group's potential pathways to decline. There is still a niche in the literature for a quantitative analysis of AQIM and JNIM's public announcements. The group's external statements have continued to increase in number, but unfortunately no new internal documents have become available to researchers since the release of the last batch of documents from the Bin Laden/Abbottabad archive. A RAND inventory, conducted upon request of the Dutch government, estimated that there was still much untapped research potential in the 470.000 text, image and audio files that were released by the

⁶⁴⁹ See for example: Boeke, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Mali (2013-2016)'; Boeke and De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Transitioning from Military Interventions to Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy: The Case of Libya (2011-2016)'.

⁶⁵⁰ Bart Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (3 July 2020): 1011–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023>.

CIA in 2017.⁶⁵¹ These documents, however, were captured in 2011 and any insights gleaned are of limited value for understanding the AQIM and JNIM of 2021. Still, some researchers have successfully used these primary sources to revisit earlier conclusions on Al Qaeda's strategies and motives.⁶⁵²

Like all research, this dissertation is subject to several limitations. Whereas a monograph generally has a single, sharp research focus, the bundling of separately published peer-reviewed articles cannot compete on coherence. Neither does it have a unified methodological framework. Aggregating the separate conclusions to form solid overarching findings risks distilling conclusions that are not sufficiently empirically grounded. Another limitation concerned the predominantly macro-level focus of this research. This was a direct outcome of the decision to focus on the theoretical concepts of insurgency and terrorism, and to investigate the strategies of AQIM and France. Micro-level studies can present strong empirical evidence for their hypotheses, but require caveats for the representativeness of the data and therefore the broader applicability of their conclusions. Macro-level studies, on the other hand, necessitate a broad 'geographical overview' of the field of research and can offer strategic conclusions. However, the data and facts underpinning these analyses will be contested by micro-level analysts, while other macro-level researchers will dispute inclusion and exclusion choices and the used conceptual frameworks. The studies of terrorism and insurgencies are both broad fields, and applying the specifics of the Sahel resulted in an extensive reach. There was also the issue of language, with French and local languages in the Sahel – all important vehicles of culture – potentially complicating a thorough understanding of the issues at hand. This could, for example, entail inaccurate translations permeating both primary and secondary sources. To study conflict in the Sahel - from a distance and with a Western perspective - risks working with hidden assumptions and biases. If the American saying "all politics is local" has value, then this equally has implications for the study of political violence.

Primary findings

The first article positioned AQIM on the backdrop of Mali's main security and governance challenges, and nuanced the predominant narratives of a crime-terror

⁶⁵¹ Jacopo Bellasio et al., 'Insights from the Bin Laden Archive: Inventory of Research and Knowledge and Initial Assessment and Characterisation of the Bin Laden Archive' (RAND Corporation, 5 May 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA109-1.html.

⁶⁵² See for example Vidar B. Skretting, 'Pragmatism and Purism in Jihadist Governance: The Islamic Emirate of Azawad Revisited', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2 January 2022, 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2007562>.

nexus, ungovernable territories and Tuareg grievances. Describing the ‘jihadist galaxy’ in Mali – the constellation of groups around AQIM that would transform with time – the article addressed the first three sub-questions of this dissertation’s research question: which factors contributed to the group’s establishment, how it was organized and what motivated its fighters. At the same time, an analysis was given of the ‘Tuareg question’ which had provided the context for the January 2012 rebellion. The final third of the article focused on the problem of governance, and how corruption had hollowed out the Malian state. The second article deepened the analysis of AQIM’s history, composition and *modus operandi*, as well as applying a conceptual framework to understand the nature of AQIM. The third and fourth articles incorporated research on the second series of sub-questions: what were the results of AQIM’s operations, how did Mali, France and the international community respond, and what impact did their CT-policies have. The final article again addressed all six sub-questions, focusing both on internal factors shaping AQIM, as well as counterterrorism efforts designed to curtail the group. This dialectical approach running through the whole dissertation avoided a single, closed focus on AQIM’s intentions and activities, positioning the research object within a broader context of relevant actors and factors, whose ‘action and reaction’ interplay contributed to the group’s evolution.

The article ‘Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency or Organized Crime?’ applied Duyvesteyn and Fumerton’s distinction of strategies to conceptualize the categorization of the group. A separate category of organized crime was added to analyze the importance and eventual role of criminal proceeds, and whether this should constitute a determining factor in labeling the group. Based on several primary and secondary sources, the conclusion was drawn that hostage ransoms constituted AQIM’s largest source of revenue, and that there was little evidence for a significant role in the drugs trade. The smuggling of licit and illicit goods, and the levying of transit fees for other groups’ transports, form part of the local fabric in northern Mali. As Guillaume de Soto-Major argues, local communities and armed groups who depend on the revenue from drugs transport and transit will never relinquish this to AQIM.⁶⁵³ Other armed signatory groups and elements inside local and national government were more important players in the flourishing drugs trade, and this has important policy implications. As for the strategy of the group, an analysis of the objectives of AQIM pointed to a strategy of terrorism, with the goals aligning with AQC’s ideology and general guidance. After all, in late 2015 and early 2016 several high-profile attacks were conducted on Western targets, killing tourists in hotels in Bamako

⁶⁵³ Guillaume de Soto-Major, ‘Traffics et Trafiquants: Éléments Structurants Des Sociétés Sahéliennes’, *Recherches Internationales*, March 2020.

and Ouagadougou, and at the Grand Bassam beach resort in Ivory Coast.⁶⁵⁴ Looking at the organizational structure and recruitment, the article described how AQIM had to change its modus operandi after Operation Serval, reverting to a small clandestine group. The relationship with the population had also changed from control to more distant contact, although this varied per region. The article concluded that many indicators pointed to a strategy of terrorism, but that developments in Timbuktu, for example, were indicative of a strategy of insurgency. This conclusion would be revised in the 2021 ICCT research article.

The third article, a treatise on methodology, contributed to the literature why the 2012 crisis in Mali came as a surprise to many. Its findings are relevant also to research on intelligence failures and can be applied equally to the take-over of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021.⁶⁵⁵ It is not the case that the collapse of Mali and the take-over of the north by AQIM could or should have been foreseen; much was the result of an unfortunate cascade of events. Nonetheless, the outcome stood in stark contrast to Mali's reputation as beacon of stability and democracy in the region. An important conclusion is that whichever prism is used to view state stability, it will shape and potentially distort the outcome of the analysis. A quantitative risk-based approach, as applied in various stability indices, is based on metrics and indicators (deemed calculable and aggregated) while qualitative threat-based approach use drivers and patterns. A risk assessment aims at reducing the probability of a false positive (of the null hypothesis), while a threat assessment aspires to not miss a weak but existing relationship between phenomena; the probability of a false negative. Although the prevailing and optimistic view of Mali was encapsulated by the risk-based approach of the fragility indices, threat-based approaches equally have biases. These can potentially be mitigated through scenario-building exercises. Empirically, the article added new information on how the French and Dutch governments perceived Malian stability, elaborating on the differing views of various government departments. Just as NGO's had accommodated themselves to local corruption, these two Western nations could not absolve themselves from the 'political responsibility of bystanders'.⁶⁵⁶ While the international community at large was surprised by Mali's sudden collapse, insiders in Bamako were less so. Some had chosen not to speak out on the fragility of peace in northern Mali and endemic corruption in government, others saw that their unwelcome warnings went unheeded.

⁶⁵⁴ Lebovich, 'The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region'.

⁶⁵⁵ Julian E. Barnes, 'Intelligence Agencies Did Not Predict Imminence of Afghan Collapse, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 18 August 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/politics/afghanistan-intelligence-agencies.html>.

⁶⁵⁶ Esquith, 'The Political Responsibility of Bystanders'.

A powerful framework for analysing conflict - Clausewitz's first trinity from his magnum opus 'On War' - was applied to the initial French military operation to dislodge AQIM from northern Mali. This constituted the fourth article. This trinity consists of passion or violence (emotion; the irrational), the play of chance and probability (friction; the non-rational) and political purpose or policy (reason; the rational).⁶⁵⁷ Clausewitz subsequently associated each element with the people, the commander and his army, and finally the government; his second trinity. Although several scholars have taken the 'state-centric' focus of the second trinity to argue that Clausewitz's theory cannot be applied to conflicts that involve non-state actors, the first trinity remains relevant in helping to understand the nature of war as a social phenomenon.⁶⁵⁸ Despite the hype around 'new wars' and modern counterinsurgency, the application of Clausewitz's first trinity illustrates the enduring utility of the theoretical framework for studying armed conflict. At the same time, it investigates the *effect* of the first component of French counterterrorist policy. The *effectiveness* of counterterrorism policies is more difficult to measure, and as Beatrice de Graaf has argued, performativity - the way in which policies are presented and perceived - is perhaps a better indicator.⁶⁵⁹ This applies equally to Operation Serval, which was terminated when its reputation was still intact as having achieved an audacious conventional victory against the Islamist groups.

The final article of this dissertation also serves as its substantial conclusion, revisiting the primary research question and bringing together various strands of investigation. It focuses both on internal factors that have an impact AQIM and its units, as well as government policies of repression, decapitation and negotiation. A conceptual framework developed by Audrey Kurth Cronin in her book 'How Terrorism ends' was used to structure insights on possible pathways of decline. The book received positive reviews and combined a quantitative approach with multiple case-studies.⁶⁶⁰ Her framework had several limitations, however. Different categories of actors, actions and outcomes are involved in the pathways; both at the external and the group level.⁶⁶¹ As such, external drivers such

⁶⁵⁷ Villacres and Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity'.

⁶⁵⁸ Schuurman, 'Clausewitz and the "New Wars" Scholars'.

⁶⁵⁹ Beatrice de Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance: A Comparative Study* (Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁶⁰ Andrew L Stigler, 'How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns', *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (2011): 3; Max Abrahms, 'Review of How Terrorism Ends', *Middle East Quarterly*, 1 September 2010, <https://www.meforum.org/2797/how-terrorism-ends>; John R. Schindler, 'H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable on Audrey Kurth Cronin. How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns', H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable, Volume II, No. 8, 2011, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-2-8.pdf>.

⁶⁶¹ Clark McCauley, 'Group Desistance from Terrorism: A Dynamic Perspective', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1, no. 3 (1 November 2008): 269–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467580902948158>.

as counterterrorism operations could constitute actions just as well as precipitate internal group decisions, while outcomes could be political or organizational. For example, a counterterrorism policy (action) could impact fractionalization or burn-out (internal outcome) and lead to defeat (external outcome). As a result, the boundaries of the pathways blurred and the multitude of factors involved complicated the identification of causal mechanisms that contribute to outcomes. Nonetheless, the concept still provided a useful framework to structure a holistic analysis of group desistance from terrorism. The distinction between terrorism and insurgency - and by extension AQIM's territorial presence and organizational structure - was applied almost in a matrix fashion across Cronin's six pathways, leading to several sub-conclusions on potential pathways for the group.

An important conclusion of this article ran counter to the earlier findings in the conceptual chapter on terrorism, insurgency and organized crime. Five years on, the situation on the ground had changed fundamentally, and when the Duyvesteyn and Fumerton framework was applied again, the outcome was different. Most indicators now pointed to AQIM and its new subunit JNIM following a strategy of insurgency. The Malian government had lost control of much of rural central Mali, which was enveloped in an escalating spiral of interethnic violence. Although appraisals of group size must always be regarded with care, in 2020 JNIM was estimated to consist of around 2,000 fighters.⁶⁶² This is no longer a small, clandestine force. Instead of conducting high-profile attacks that targeted civilians, JNIM's guerilla campaign targeted physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges to isolate and then overrun army outposts in Mali and Burkina Faso.⁶⁶³ MINUSMA, troops from Barkhane and Malian security forces were primary targets of jihadist violence. A study into AQIM's use of suicide bombers concluded that as these attacks shifted from the northern Maghreb (2007-2012) to the Sahel, they were accompanied by a general decline in the use of this tactic. Whereas the first phase of suicide bombings in the north had a strong focus on civilian targets, suicide attacks in the Sahel avoided soft targets and predominantly focused on (international) military and governmental targets.⁶⁶⁴ This focus on military objectives, and to hold and govern territory, are not indicative of a

⁶⁶² Danielle Paquette and Joby Warrick, 'Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Groups Are Working Together in West Africa to Grab Large Swaths of Territory', *Washington Post*, 22 February 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-islamic-state-sahel-west-africa/2020/02/21/7218bc50-536f-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html.

⁶⁶³ Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole'.

⁶⁶⁴ Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, 'Desert Drift, Declining Deadline: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombings', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/desert-drift-declining-deadline-understanding-the-evolution-of-aqims-suicide-bombings/>.

strategy of terrorism. In the areas JNIM controlled, voting was prevented during the 2018 presidential election, NGO access was restricted, schools were closed and justice was dispensed. In short, AQIM had successfully transitioned from a strategy of terrorism to insurgency, and their influence and control over local populations continued to expand.

The French policy response, however, appeared to remain rooted in the paradigm of counterterrorism. Since Operation Serval, political discourse has labeled the French military operations in the Sahel as a fight against terrorism. This was logical: as an affiliate of the larger Al Qaeda movement, AQIM was officially branded as a terrorist group. Part of the domestic argument for the interventions abroad was to prevent terrorist attacks in France. The terrorist label was even integrated in military parlance, with the acronym for these non-signatory armed groups ‘GAT’; *les groupes armés terroristes*. One of the implications of this label was described by French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2017: “They are terrorists. How do you negotiate with terrorists? This is a fight with no ambiguity”.⁶⁶⁵ This absolutist stance stood in stark contrast with the outcome of Mali’s *Conférence d’Entente Nationale*, which expressed a desire to explore the possibilities of dialogue with the leaders of JNIM. Both France and the international community had previously ruled out talks with AQIM’s leadership, although the Sahelian governments were more open to the idea – and had some discreet experience in this field. The literature on terrorism and insurgencies does not suggest that dialogue often succeeds in resolving conflict, but as a part of a broader policy, negotiations can contribute to reducing violence. Here the label terrorist, rather than insurgent, constrains the possible policy options available for governments. While the assertion that governments do not talk to terrorists to avoid legitimizing them is not born out by facts, from a sociological perspective audiences judge terrorists as being less rational than insurgents, potentially influencing their choice to bomb them or negotiate.⁶⁶⁶

The literature on insurgencies - while no less heterogeneous than the literature on terrorism - emphasizes its nature as a social phenomenon. Insurgencies arise as a result of political or social exclusion or a lack of security and governance, and they are unique products of the local circumstances.⁶⁶⁷ To address such an uprising, the French strategist

⁶⁶⁵ John Irish, ‘Mali, France Rule out Talks with Jihadists after Attacks’, *Reuters*, 7 April 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-jihadist-idUSKBN1792NF>.

⁶⁶⁶ Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented ‘Terrorism’*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch, ‘Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality’, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 385–92, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_12.

⁶⁶⁷ Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2012).

David Galula contended, a large part of the solution must lie in the political realm.⁶⁶⁸ American and by extension NATO doctrine proscribes a ‘hearts and minds’ approach, but academics have noted that there is a mismatch between ideology and historical fact, with little empirical evidence for the success of such an approach.⁶⁶⁹ There is, however, broad agreement in academia that the centre of gravity lies with the population and the political and social policies needed to address grievances. In the Sahel, however, the military effort to ensure security – by fighting the insurgents – predominated. In part because Barkhane lacked the manpower to secure any area for a longer period of time, France conducted a policy of targeting AQIM’s leadership. The annex to the ICCT-article provided an overview of all the commanders killed or captured, and the list contains a significant number of high-level commanders. Nevertheless, the direct impact on AQIM and JNIM appeared limited. It follows that a large organisation conducting a strategy of insurgency is less vulnerable to leadership decapitation than a small clandestine group that follows a strategy of terrorism.

This dissertation’s chapter on Operation Serval is one of the few works that investigates the combination of political goals of and military means of the intervention, and the literature would profit from a similar approach on Barkhane. The jury, however, on the military intervention’s effects is already out. As already mentioned, during the time of operation Barkhane (2014–2021), insecurity increased significantly and spread into the tri-border area and into Niger and Burkina. AQIM expanded in size and reach and transformed its strategy from terrorism to insurgency. In short, despite many tactical victories, Barkhane cannot be considered a strategic success. Further research is required to investigate what its goals were, which means were employed, and why they failed to achieve their objectives. Michael Shurkin has already made a start, looking at the historical development of French COIN doctrine and how this has been applied in the Sahel.⁶⁷⁰ He, like several other authors, concluded that French policy was overly militarized, with little regard for the required political transformation at the heart of COIN-thinking.⁶⁷¹ As Yvan Guichaoua noted, despite efforts to formulate and implement an integrated and comprehensive multi-level policy, French civil servants and military regarded projects and operations as ‘technical’ issues. They were primarily conceived in Paris, and implemented through a de-politicized

⁶⁶⁸ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.

⁶⁶⁹ Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, 361.

⁶⁷⁰ Michael Shurkin, ‘France’s War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine’, *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter /2021 2020), <http://tnsr.org/2020/11/frances-war-in-the-sahel-and-the-evolution-of-counter-insurgency-doctrine/>.

⁶⁷¹ Charbonneau, ‘Faire La Paix Au Mali’; Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue*.

bureaucratic logic. At heart, however, these policies remained inherently political and clashed with Malian expectations and their notions of sovereignty.⁶⁷²

Relevance and avenues for further research

During the time-frame of this research, the study of terrorism in the Sahel has remained a policy-relevant topic in the field of international relations. Operation Serval was predominantly a French affair, but with MINUSMA, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), the G5 Sahel and Operation Barkhane, international involvement increased substantially. The Netherlands, having previously fostered a strong relationship with Mali (through development aid in particular), contributed significantly to MINUSMA between 2014 and 2019. For the Dutch, the mission entailed not only a contribution to peace and stability in the Sahel, but also an experiment to test a new concept in providing intelligence to UN peacekeeping operations.⁶⁷³ As the articles of this dissertation were published over time, they contributed to the academic and policy debate on two levels. First, they elucidated the nature of threat that AQIM - as Al Qaeda's official affiliate in West Africa - posed in the Sahel and beyond, and investigated some of the international policy reactions to it. Second, the articles strove to provide context and nuance on a region little understood in the West, but recognized as a strategic and important area. As politicians and policy makers have frequently emphasized, developments in Mali and the broader Sahel are relevant because their impact will be felt in Europe, whether through terrorist attacks, refugees, organized crime or other phenomena that transcend national frontiers. Even divorced from an interest-based international relations perspective, fostering a better understanding of the political and social challenges facing the Sahel remains a worthwhile endeavor.

Some have argued that it is futile to distinguish between terrorism and insurgency, as this would impose a binary distinction on continuous variables, with little agreement on what those identifying characteristics would be.⁶⁷⁴ David Ucko and Thomas Marks have made the point that it is important from a policy perspective to understand whether those causing unrest are a self-contained group or the vanguard of a mass movement.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷² Yvan Guichaoua, 'The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 895–911, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa094>.

⁶⁷³ Sebastiaan Rietjens and Erik de Waard, 'UN Peacekeeping Intelligence: The ASIFU Experiment', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 30, no. 3 (3 July 2017): 532–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2017.1297108>.

⁶⁷⁴ Khalil, 'Know Your Enemy'.

⁶⁷⁵ David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, 'Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 206–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1432922>.

The articles in this dissertation here have shown that different variables can indicate whether an armed group follows a strategy of insurgency or one of terrorism, but that the distinction is not always clear cut in practice, and that it can change with time. The strategy is also related to a much researched question: why do people join terrorist groups? Several works cited here argue that various local grievances have led people to join JNIM and AQIM, and not necessarily the desire to wage global jihad. The policy response to political violence will differ if it is considered as a micro-rebellion against a corrupt or failing government, or if it is labelled as terrorist violence by an affiliate of the group responsible for 9/11.

In aggregate, the findings of this research contribute to the broader literature on insurgencies. Twenty years of Western military and civilian effort in Afghanistan have resulted in a humiliating defeat and exit. Researchers will continue to investigate whether this failure was due to an unrealistic strategy and COIN-doctrine, an inadequate implementation of good policy, or simply a case of an intractable problem-set. Similar analyses will be made for Mali, but it is possible that insurgency studies will wane with the end of major Western military interventions and the return of great power competition and conflict. The study of insurgencies, after all, has waxed and waned over the years, with little interest in the phenomenon in the 1990's, and a revival mid-2000 during the U.S. occupation of Iraq.⁶⁷⁶ The core tension at the problem of COIN-doctrine has been highlighted during both the Afghanistan and Mali missions: what if the host nation has little appetite for the political reform required to address the grievances that contributed to the insurrection? How can an intervening power, ostensibly on behalf of an embattled government, attempt to win 'heart and minds' without a thorough understanding of local politics? Improving governance, therefore, forms an essential element in any counterterrorism and COIN policy, but this must rest on local ownership. The governance situation in Mali has hardly improved, with a coup in August 2020, followed by another one in May 2021. Like a Potemkin state in the Sahel, Craven-Matthews and Englebert argue that the Malian state has been mimicked more than it was built and that its reconstruction has been imagined more than it has been implemented.⁶⁷⁷ As ISAF discovered in Afghanistan, investing in good governance and service provision risks an ever-expanding task that descends into nation building. Perhaps 'More is Less', as Astri Suhrke argued in her prescient 2012 book on Afghanistan.⁶⁷⁸ France was scrupulous in avoiding this mission creep in Mali, but the strategic outcome of Barkhane's military operations is no less meagre.

⁶⁷⁶ Rich and Duyvesteyn, *Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*.

⁶⁷⁷ Craven-Matthews and Englebert, 'A Potemkin State in the Sahel?'

⁶⁷⁸ Craven-Matthews and Englebert.

The evolution of the crises in Mali has been accompanied by a significant expansion of academic research on AQIM and terrorism in the Sahel. Hardly a dozen researchers focused on GSPC/AQIM before 2012; many more have since discovered the topic.⁶⁷⁹ At the same time, the quantity and availability of primary sources has significantly increased, enlarging the empirical base for detailed analysis of terrorism in the Sahel in all its facets. Nonetheless, many avenues for future research remain. While the whole gamut of possibilities is too broad to work out here, two immediate policy-relevant areas spring to mind. First, further investigation into the threat that AQIM poses in the West is merited. AQIM has frequently called for attacks in mainland France – just as France has argued that the domestic threat necessitates military interventions abroad.⁶⁸⁰ Nonetheless, as of yet no successful attack by AQIM has taken place on European soil. Although French intelligence services claim to have foiled several attempts, there have been no high-profile court cases where AQIM operators – or individuals inspired by the group – have been convicted.⁶⁸¹ The choice of targeting is linked to Al Qaeda's dichotomy of the near and the far enemy – that al-Zawahiri has recently appeared to move away from – and will permit a clearer understanding of the intentions and targeting capabilities of AQIM.⁶⁸² Secondly, research could focus on the local (shadow) governance models that JNIM utilizes in its insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, comparing *modus operandi* with their adversary ISGS. As local context is key, understanding dynamics at the village level could feed into policies that reduce traction of jihadist groups among the population. This necessitates fieldwork, an excellent understanding of local history and culture, and meticulous scholarship. This was once a feature of the libraries of Timbuktu, and it is to be hoped that the region will again be known as a central hub for trade and the peaceful exchange of ideas.

⁶⁷⁹ Detailed in the Oxford Bibliographies literature review, see: Boeke, 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb'.

⁶⁸⁰ 'AQIM Demands Physical Violence and Death Over Economic Harm to France in Revenge for Prophet Insults' (SITE Intelligence Group, 2 November 2020).

⁶⁸¹ For one example, see: 'Le terroriste ciblait le musée du Louvre', *Le Parisien*, 9 July 2014, <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/le-terroriste-ciblait-le-musee-du-louvre-09-07-2014-3987735.php>.

⁶⁸² Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0*, 249; Colin P. Clarke and Asfandiyar Mir, 'Is Ayman Al-Zawahiri Really the Future of Al-Qaida?', *The RAND Blog*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/is-ayman-al-zawahiri-really-the-future-of-al-qaida.html>.

