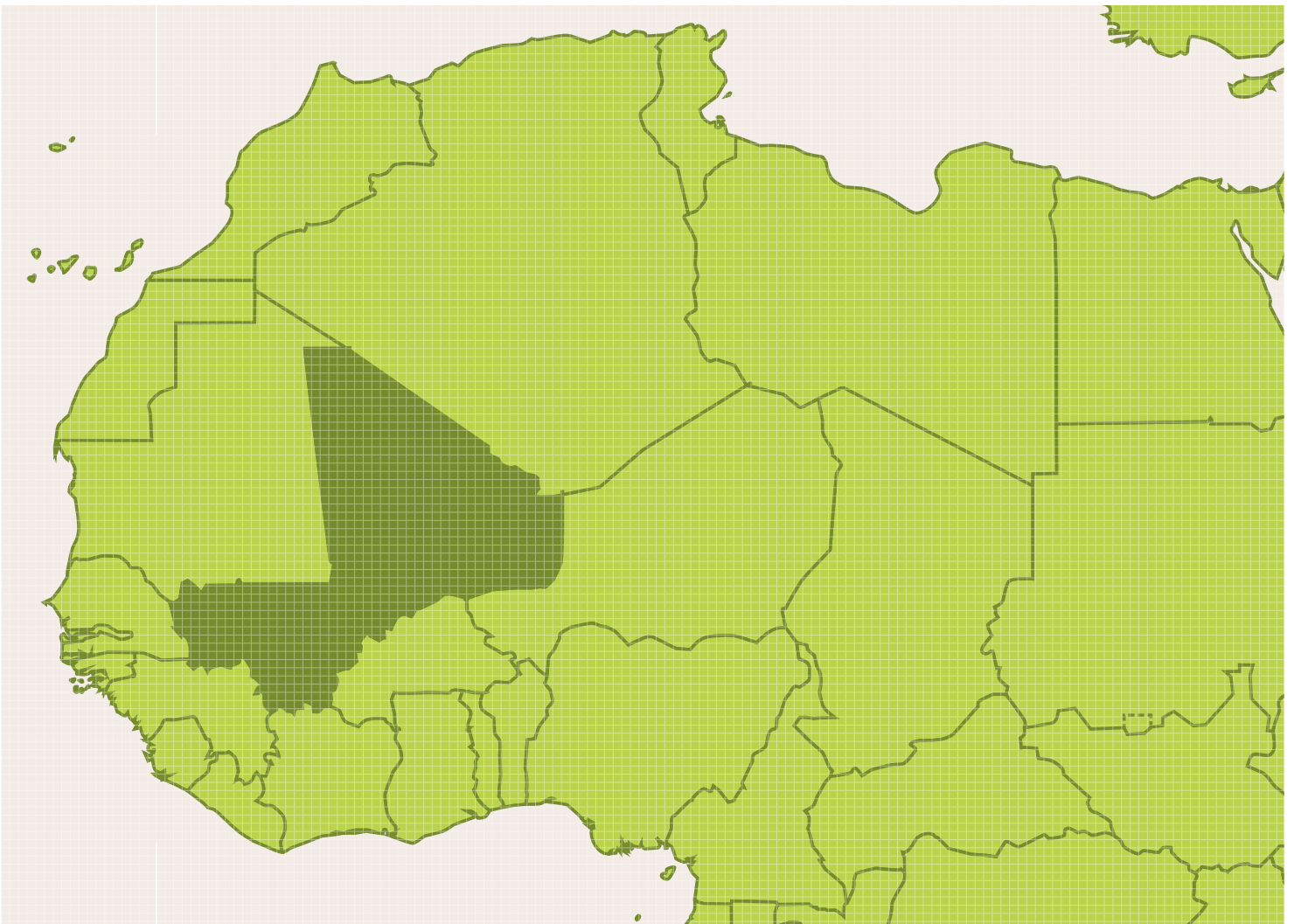




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Mali: A Political Economy Analysis

Boubacar Ba and Morten Bøås



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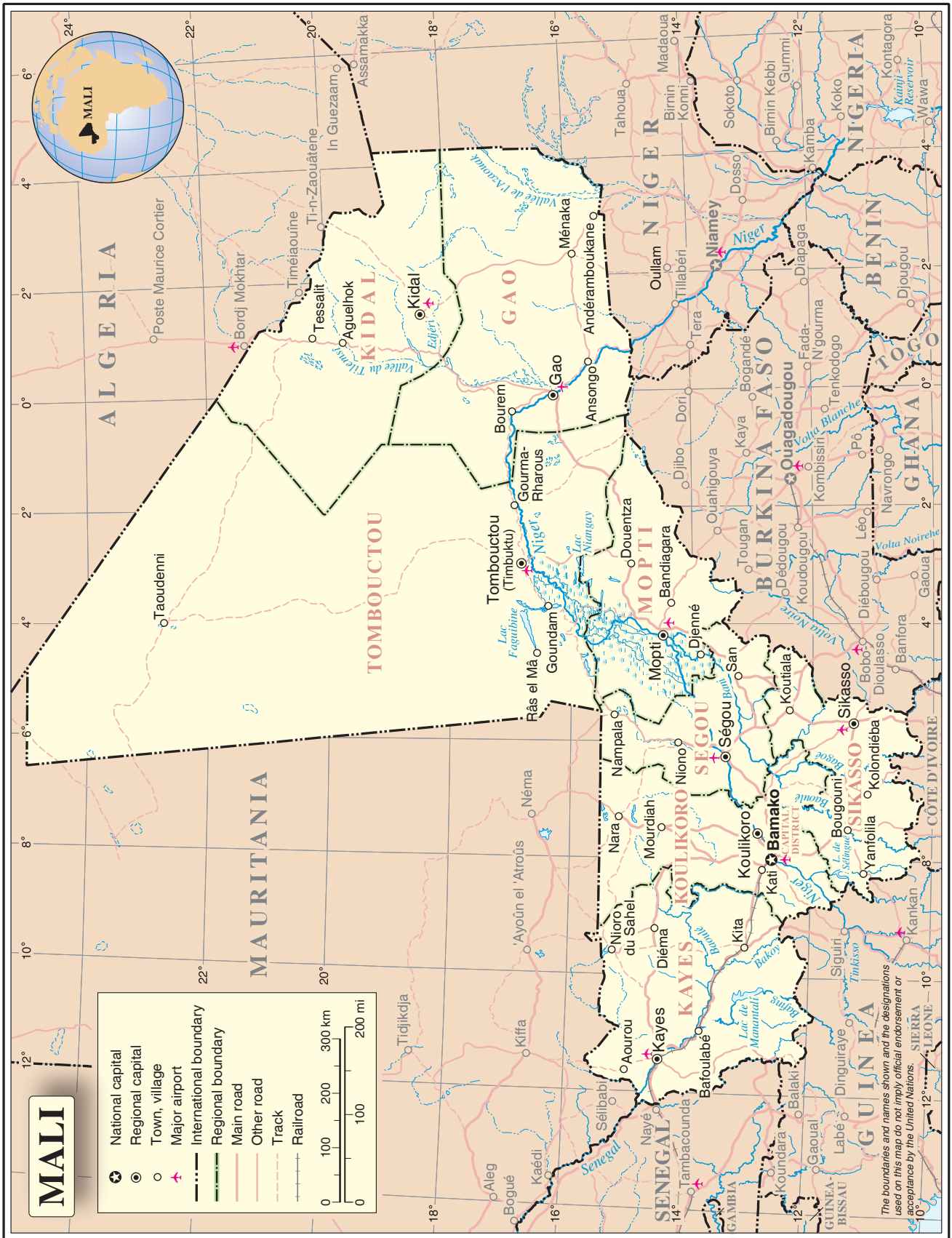
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Map of Mali



About the report

In June 2016, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) commissioned NUPI to provide political economy analyses of eleven countries (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Somalia, South Sudan and Tanzania) deemed important to Norwegian development cooperation. The intention was to consolidate and enhance expertise on these countries, so as to improve the quality of the MFA's future country-specific involvement and strategy development. Such political economy analyses focus on how political and economic power is constituted, exercised and contested.

Comprehensive Terms of Reference (ToR) were developed to serve as a general template for all eleven country analyses. The country-specific ToR and scope of these analyses were further determined in meetings between the MFA, the Norwegian embassies, NUPI and the individual researchers responsible for the country studies. NUPI has also provided administrative support and quality assurance of the overall process. In some cases, NUPI has commissioned partner institutions to write the political economy analyses.

List of acronyms

ADC	Democratic Alliance of May 23 for Change
ADEMA	Alliance for Democracy in Mali
AFISMA	African Union International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
AU	African Union
CMA	Coordination Movement for Azawad
CMFPR I	Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance I
CMFPR II	Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance II
CNDRE	National Committee for Recovering Democracy and Restoring the State
CPA	Coalition du Peuple de l'Azawad
CSCR	Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMA	Malian Armed Forces
FLM	Macina Liberation Front
GAITA	Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés
GIA	Armed Islamic Group
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen
MAA	Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali
MNA	National Movement of Azawad
MNLA	Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad
MPA	Popular Movement of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Jihad in West Africa
RPM	The Rally for Mali

1. Introducing Mali: 2012, the ‘long’ year

Mali is in serious trouble. The rebellion in the North that surfaced simultaneously with the military coup in 2012 has still not resulted in a sustainable settlement. This is evident in the prevailing insecurity in the North that allows groups such as Belmokhtar’s *al-Mourabitoun* to conduct attacks like that of 18 January 2017 against a UN base in Gao that killed more than 70 Malian army soldiers and militia members (see *France 24* 2017). The continuing Jihadist insurgency has now spread to Mali’s central region, embedding itself in local conflicts in the Niger River Delta in the Gourma-Mopti area (see Guichaoua and Ba-Konaré 2016). Trafficking is a serious issue and corruption a major problem. Many Malians have lost faith in the modern state, as it does not present credible answers to their livelihood challenges (Bøås 2015a). In some areas in the North and in the Delta of the central region, the Jihadist insurgents have become more relevant than the Malian state and its external stakeholders. The crisis of 2012 is not yet solved, but continues in similar and in different forms, making 2012 the ‘long’ year in Mali’s history. Indeed, the current crisis is far more serious than the one in the 1990s, and it can no longer be defined as a crisis of North Mali.

This report aims to shed light on the structures and actors responsible for this situation, and indicate some of the opportunities, constraints and risks for Norwegian development co-operation with Mali.

When Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (henceforth: IBK) was elected president in August 2013 by a huge majority, he won on the basis of a campaign platform of restoring Mali’s territorial integrity and tackling the massive corruption and mismanagement of the country (Ba and Bøås 2013). Not much progress has been made on these fronts, and the people of Mali blame their president as well as his external sponsors for this. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has lost much of its initial popularity; likewise with France and Operation Berkhané.

The crisis currently engulfing Mali is complex and multidimensional, its full details far beyond the scope of this brief report. What we seek to do here is to identify underlying factors such as poverty, state weakness, and the fractured relationships between different groups in Mali; and on this basis, discuss the role of main actors such as politicians, other leaders in society (traditional, religious and civil society) business leaders, and insurgents. We aim to show that what is happening in Mali can be interpreted as collusion between various interests (political and economic) of a local and a regional nature, and involves elites as well as ordinary poor people. Sustainably assisting and contributing to the stabilisation of Mali is a task requiring a long-term commitment. Real progress cannot be expected in a year or two.

2. Mali today

Mali is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked as number 179 of 187 countries (UNDP 2017), where most people make a living from agriculture and animal husbandry. Its current population of approximately 18.6 million is projected to increase to over 45 million by 2050. This projection is based on the current annual population growth of over 3%, and each woman in Mali giving birth to an average of 6.2 children. Half of the population are below the age of 15, and two out of three persons in Mali live on less than two dollars per day (World Bank 2016).

This trend is not sustainable in the long run, and its consequences are further exacerbated by the effects of climate change. Like its neighbours in the Sahel, Mali is in the unfortunate position of being among the countries in the world least responsible for global CO² emissions, but among those most negatively affected. In the Sahel, a rise in temperature of only a few degrees will have devastating consequences for local livelihoods.

For Mali, the combined forces of population growth and climate-change effects decrease the amount of land available for agriculture, while sales of land involving monetary transactions are increasing. What most often is sold is land not used by the owner, but that has been loaned to someone else, who now loses access to land. The inevitable result is greater competition for land – sometimes but not necessarily always violent, and with the potential of being appropriated by those who employ force, as is taking place in the Delta area of central Mali. Traditional arrangements such as customary tenure regimes have increasingly become dysfunctional or are simply not able to cope with more and more conflicts, while the apparatus of modern administration (courts, etc.) is scanty and often far away, as well

as being expensive to use and often ridden by corruption and biased mismanagement.

Land-rights conflicts in Mali are nothing new, but their importance as *drivers of conflict* is clearly rising. The main reason is that land is an existential commodity in a country like Mali. It provides current survival as well as being a guarantee for future coping. If access to land is under threat it must be protected, and this protection must be sought where it can be found – also among Jihadist insurgents, if no other alternatives are credible or available (see also Bøås and Dunn 2013). Such conflicts can emerge in communities (between different lineages, for example) or between communities with differing preferences for land use, as with agriculturalists vs pastoralists. Not all land-rights conflicts in Mali are based on this cleavage, but as more and more land in the Delta along the River Niger and branch rivers is cultivated, there are fewer corridors available that allow access to water resources for pastoralists and their herds of cattle. Thus, in the Delta along the River Niger we find a multitude of such conflicts, some of them appropriated by Jihadist insurgents.

The first evidence came from in and around the town of Konna in 2013, with Fulani herders pitted against local farmers. That same year, there were similar conflicts in the Gao area involving Fulani and Tuareg communities, where the former gained the support of the Movement for Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). This is currently taking place in parts of the Delta, where local land-rights conflicts are appropriated by the Fulani-based Macina Liberation Front (FLM). We return to the situation in the Delta later in the report; here let it be noted that even if we see land-rights conflicts and their appropriation by

violent entrepreneurs as a major driver of violence, we take issue with how this is framed in the anti-terror framework that has become the hallmark of international operations in Mali.

After the failed attempt in early January 2013 by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to respond to the Malian crisis, France launched a military operation, Operation Serval, based on a request from the transitional authorities in Bamako. This was followed by the AU operation, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). Operation Serval succeeded in pushing the Jihadi insurgencies out of main northern cities like Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. However, reluctant to take formal 'ownership' of the international engagement in Mali, but also concerned that AFISMA would not be able to maintain Serval's military gains, France insisted on a stronger multilateral arrangement (see Thérout-Benoni 2014). France wanted AFISMA to be transposed into a UN force, like MINUSMA. That would also enable France to wield considerable influence over MINUSMA, whereas the costs and possible flaws could be more widely distributed. All this was possible because France holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, from where it was responsible for drafting resolutions on MINUSMA (see Tardy 2016); the situation did not change when Serval was replaced by Operation Berkhane in July 2014. This expanded the scope of the French

mission to include other former French colonies in the region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. Thus, even if Berkhane represents a wider geographical focus, it also reinforced the anti-terror approach to the Malian crisis, an approach that has been strongly promoted by French security and foreign politics (see Marchal 2013). We are not arguing against the need for a military approach to insurgencies such as Belmokhtar's *al-Mourabitoun*: but the fact that the Malian crisis has been framed within such a narrow focus has come to inform how the Malian state, opposition groups, contentious political actors on the ground, and other international actors approach the crisis and the issues at stake. This is particularly pertinent in the case of the government in Bamako, as having the crisis defined as caused by foreign terrorist insurgencies provides a convenient excuse for not dealing with the underlying internal causes of conflict and drivers of violence. Thus, we believe there is both room for and considerable need for an actor that can help to reframe the Malian conflict towards a solution focused on achieving peace, reconciliation and local development. This is a question to which we return in connection with possible opportunities, constraints and risks for Norwegian engagement in Mali.

However, it is impossible to make sense of the current situation without knowing the historical context, we begin with some historical background to today's Mali.

3. Understanding Mali: a narrative of people, place and space

Modern Mali is based on the legacy of ancient civilisations with vast empires (Wagadou, Mande, and Songhay) and kingdoms (the Fulani of Macina, Kenedougou, Khassonke and Kaarta). Islam arrived in Mali around the 9th century, and the great cities of ancient Mali, like Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne, became famous throughout the Islamic world for their wealth and scholarship. However, these vast empires eventually fractured into various smaller states. Not much was left of the former glory when the French colonial powers arrived in the late 19th century.

In the 1990s, Mali was portrayed as the beacon of neoliberal democratisation in West Africa. However, behind what was presented as a showcase of democracy, good governance, and peace and reconciliation there was institutional weakness, mismanagement, and collusion involving regional and national elite interests that paid scant heed to human security and development. When the current crisis started in 2012, Mali was a weak and fragile state with hardly any formal institutions or networks capable of working out sustainable compromises on the local level. It was a multiparty democracy, but as every political party was sustained by a vertical hierarchy of patronage networks, the resilience of the political system was very low, as shown by the March 2012 coup. This weakness and fragility has remained evident in the capital region, but even more predominantly in the peripheral border regions of Northern and Central Mali. There is a long way from Bamako in the southwest to Kidal in the northeast, and the implications of this centre–periphery relationship need to be recognised. Further, it is important to acknowledge that Mali shares with the other francophone

countries of West Africa a tradition of centralised government that is not easily reformed or altered. This is a tradition that tends to prevail despite the weakness of the state.

The first decades

When Mali gained independence in 1960, President Modibo Keita established a series of state corporations. However, apart from those in the cotton sector, all proved to be inefficient, money-wasting enterprises. Other ambitious efforts to create a state-centred economy also failed, and in 1968 Keita were overthrown in an army coup led by Moussa Traoré. Under his rule, Mali continued to experiment with Soviet-style socialism, but economic benefits failed to materialise – aside from the spoils that the new elite kept for themselves. Aid funding disappeared into the pockets of military officers, high-ranking civil servants and politicians, with the president himself being one of the main offenders. The country was marked by corruption and impunity for the elite and the well-connected few (see Bratton, Coulibaly and Machado 2002; Hesselting and van Dijk 2005).

When the economy fell into serious recession in the 1980s, a process of economic liberalisation was finally initiated. However, it was too late to save the old regime: it had become increasingly clear that Traoré's system of patronage could no longer be financed, and voices of political opposition in favour of deeper political reforms were heard. In 1990, a peaceful pro-democracy demonstration in Bamako attracted a crowd of about 30,000 people. This demonstration brought together various political activists and organisations, and succeeded in toppling

the Traoré regime. On 17 March, security forces opened fire on the protestors. After three days of unrest, the army, led by General Amadou Toumani Touré (henceforth: ATT) overthrew Moussa Traoré and assumed power. However, although this led to a political transformation to multi-party democracy, it failed to change the logic of neopatrimonial politics fundamentally.

One year later, General Touré resigned, in line with his pledge to arrange multiparty elections. These were held in June 1992 and were won by Alpha Oumar Konaré and his party the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA). In 1997, Konaré was re-elected for a second term, but this time the elections were marred by irregularities and the withdrawal of opposition parties from the electoral process. Voter turnout was also very low: only 21.6% in the general elections and 28.4% in the presidential election. In 2002, Konaré showed loyalty to the new constitution established during his reign and stepped down, having served as president for two periods, and Touré was duly elected president in April 2002.

These important changes were largely a process initiated and driven from the south, the capital region in particular. Even in the peace process and the integration that was supposed to follow, most the Tuareg population remained on the margins. This was evident in all three Tuareg regions – Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal – but was most explicitly felt in Kidal, due to its isolation from the rest of the country. In many ways, the state of Mali still ends where the road ends in Gao. Kidal is somewhere else – not Mali, but not another country either: it is something in-between, a hinterland in limbo between Algeria and Mali.

The Tuareg minority: a history of withdrawal, resistance and separatism as an alias

Mali is an ethnically diverse country. The majority groups belong to the Mande superstructure: these are the ethnic groups of Bambara, Malinke and Soninke that comprise about half of the population. Another 17% are Fulani (or Peul), 12% Voltaic, 6% Songhay, about 3% Tuareg, and a

further 5% are classified as ‘other’ – these include the Arab or Moorish population living in the north. All these groups have their own traditions, politics and language, but the main dividing line has historically gone between the Tuareg and Arab population living in the northernmost part of the country and the black majority groups, most of whom live south of the River Niger.

Northern Mali – the home of the country’s Tuareg minority – comprises the broad part of the Sahara that borders Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. Resisting external intervention in their traditional livelihood of nomadic pastoralism, the Tuareg have fought several wars for autonomy – during and after colonialism. Today, Northern Mali may seem like an isolated and forlorn place at the end of the universe. However, it was once an important frontier region, well integrated into the global economy; in fact, a similar process has been taking place recently – now through the economic power of the illicit world of trafficking in contraband, migrants and narcotics. Thus, to a certain extent, the current increase in informal trade and/or illicit trade can also be said to represent a revitalisation of the ancient routes of trade, commerce and pilgrimage connecting West Africa to the Mediterranean and to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf that passed through this area (see Bøås 2012).

The position of the Tuareg in the northern region was turned upside-down by French colonialism and made permanent by the post-colonial state system. The Tuareg, who had once seen themselves as the ‘masters of the desert’, now suddenly became a tiny minority ruled by the black population against whom they had previously directed their slaving raids. Of Mali’s eight regions the Tuareg today constitute a majority only in Kidal.

The Tuareg are generally seen as ‘different’ – indeed, they consider themselves distinctly different from the other groups that constitute the Malian polity, differing from them in language, lifestyle and heritage (Seely 2001). The Tuareg ‘problem’, like the Kurdish ‘issue’, is something of a Gordian knot (Bøås 2015a). Ever since Mali became an independent state, the Tuareg have

rebelled against the state, first in the early 1960s and then in the early 1990s (Berge 2002). As the National Pact of 1992 failed to produce tangible results on the ground, a new rebellion emerged in 2006 (Bøås 2012). This one was relatively small until many Tuareg returned from post-Gaddafi Libya with masses of arms. This gave new impetus to the idea of rebellion and a new movement was formed, the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).¹ Whereas Tuareg independence and nationalism had been more of an excuse for previous rebellions, the MNLA declared full independence of Azawad from Mali. At stake was no longer entering the Malian state and securing positions of power and privilege for Tuareg leaders and leading lineages, but breaking away from it.

However, the little that may have existed of Tuareg unity quickly disappeared. As MNLA fighters looted and plundered in the north and the Malian army ran away and engineered the 21 March coup in Bamako, the MNLA was effectively side-lined by other forces: the Tuareg Islamist organisation Ansar ed-Dine, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a veteran Tuareg fighter from the 1990s, and two other regional movements: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and MUJAO. The two latter are not Tuareg movements *per se*, but have been present in this area ever since around 1998, so they should not be seen solely as alien invading forces. In fact, they have achieved considerable local integration in certain places and among certain communities in the North, skilfully appropriating local grievances. Today AQIM and MUJAO have become integral parts of the conflict mosaic of northern Mali (Bøås and Torheim 2013; Bøås 2015b; Raineri and Strazzari 2015).

2012: The year of violent transformation

In early 2012, Mali was heading towards new general elections and a new president. As this was

taking place in a period of increasing domestic uncertainty and regional instability, the MNLA and other insurgents (Jihadists among them) may have viewed this as the strategic moment to start a larger and more ambitious insurgency. It started with the MNLA, but the Islamist movements soon managed to turn the initial Tuareg rebellion onto a different path, through a process that unfolded in four distinct but partly overlapping phases.

The first phase was the period from the establishment of the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) in Timbuktu in November 2010 to the MNLA's first attacks in northern Mali in mid-January 2012. Key events include the return of former rebel commander Ibrahim Ag Bahanga to northern Mali in January 2011 after two years of exile in Libya; and his death on 26 August 2011;² the Libyan civil war; the return of former Tuareg rebels from Libya to Mali; and the making of the MNLA as a merger between the MNA and Ag Bahanga's group, the National Alliance of the Tuareg of Mali.

The second phase was the period between mid-January 2012 and the MNLA's declaration of independence for northern Mali as 'Azawad', on 6 April 2012. In this period, the MNLA in collaboration with the Tuareg-led (Iyad Ag Ghaly) Islamist group Ansar ed-Dine drove the Malian army out of the northern cities. These military defeats led to protests by the families of military personnel in southern Mali in February, followed by an army mutiny that culminated in the coup of 21 March that removed President Touré from power and installed the National Committee for Recovering Democracy and Restoring the State (CNRDRE) in power. The CNRDRE was chaired by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo.

With the third phase, 6 April 2012–8 January 2013, the main points to note are 1) how the Islamist coalition in northern Mali (Ansar ed-Dine, AQIM and MUJAO) politically and militarily

1 The term *Azawad* traditionally referred to the vast plain between Timbuktu and Gao, but was gradually expanded to mean the entirety of Northern Mali by the rebels fighting there in the first half of the 1990s. See Flood (2012); Bøås and Torheim (2013).

2 Ag Bahanga died in Northern Mali under unclear circumstances. Some sources claimed that he died in a car accident; others, that he was killed in a shoot-out over an argument about how to share a large deposit of arms transported out of Libya.

out-manoevred the MNLA and took control of all major cities in the north. This period ended with the advance of Islamist fighters south of the River Niger into the Mopti region and their seizure of the town of Konna, whereupon the political elite in Bamako turned to French President Hollande for military assistance.

In the fourth phase, 8 January–11 August 2013, the Islamist advance south of the River Niger triggered the French military intervention in Mali, Operation Serval. Together with troops from Chad, other neighbouring countries and some units from the Malian army, the French forces chased the Islamists out of the main towns of the north. They also attempted to gain control of the rest of the north as well, but with little success – in fact it can be argued that even today the combined French troops, UN soldiers and Malian army have only nominal day-time control

of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu; otherwise the territory of the north is hotly contested. However, the French intervention did manage to create enough stability for Mali to hold democratic presidential elections, culminating with the second round of presidential elections on 11 August 2013, won by Ibrahim Boubacar Keita – with 77.6% of the vote, as against Soumaila Cissé's 22.4%.

The elections returned Mali to a nominal form of political stability, but President Keita's public approval ratings have since dropped dramatically. The main reason can be summed up as his failure to broker a credible and sustainable peace agreement with the MNLA, and to tackle the endemic corruption that has continued unabated despite his election promise to clean up the political-administrative system.

4. Mali – the politics of a centre-peripheral state

Constitutionally Mali is a secular state under the framework of a presidential democratic republic. The President of Mali is the head of state and commander in-chief of the armed forces, with a Prime Minister appointed by the president as the head of government in a multi-party system. Executive power is exercised by the government, whereas legislative power is vested in both the government and the National Assembly; the judiciary is formally independent of the executive and the legislature. According to its constitution, Mali is a secular and unitary state. In legal terms, this means that political parties based on religious or regional affiliation are not allowed – preventing the formation of a Tuareg or Azawad party as well as the formation of any Islamic party. Whether this is wise is another issue: it prevents such interests from entering the formal system of Malian politics.

Both the President and the 160-member National Assembly are elected for five-year terms, so the next general elections are to take place in 2018. The president is eligible for maximum two terms in power. As for the National Assembly, 147 members are elected in single-seat constituencies, and 13 are elected by Malians living abroad. The current ruling party is the party of the president, The Rally for Mali (RPM); the leader of the opposition is Soumaila Cissé of ADEMA, who came second in the 2013 presidential elections. Party politics do matter in Mali, but how important the general populace considers them is another question: voter turnout has always been low in Mali, even compared to neighbouring countries. Many Malians are deeply disenfranchised by the political class and tend to believe that politicians are only there to make money. As one key informant put it: ‘if they are not corrupt

on entering office, they quickly learn how to use their new position to fill their pockets.’³ This was also evident in the most recent local elections in November 2016.

The long, winding road: Bamako and local government relations

On 20 November 2016, more than seven million Malians were to elect 12,000 city councillors (37% of them women) from 4,047 candidate lists. These were the first local elections since the crisis of 2012 – long overdue, as the mandate of the outgoing councillors had expired in 2014. Out of 703 municipalities, 688 participated in the elections. In 15 municipalities in the Ménaka, Gao and Kidal regions, no lists of candidates had been submitted, and in several other places, the elections were disrupted by violent attacks. In Kidal, local elections were prevented from taking place by the Coordination Movement for Azawad (CMA), on grounds of unfulfilled prior conditions such as the establishment of interim political authorities and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). In Gao, only some municipalities were able to organise elections, and in Timbuktu there were several cases of voter intimidation and election-related violence. The most serious incident took place in the Mopti region, where five military personnel were killed in an ambush near Douentza while transporting ballot boxes. Thus, even if formally these elections were supposed to mark the final return to constitutional order after the crisis of 2012, they became equally much a testimony to the continuation of that crisis.

3 Interview with Malian academic, Bamako, November 2016.

Voter turnout was very low, with mixed results for the governing party. The RPM was defeated in some traditional strongholds like Koulikoro and Tenenkou, and several prominent RPM members experienced losses for their preferred candidates on their home territory. That can be seen as a healthy sign of voter discontent with the party in power, and is not much to worry about. Of far greater concern is the fact that under 30% of the electorate participated; figures were lowest in the Bamako area and higher in some hinterland towns. This is low also compared to neighbouring countries; similar figures in Niger, for example, are about 46% (see SPRI 2016).

Often-cited reasons for this include a combination of structural and technical issues such as high rates of illiteracy (over 70%), lack of civic education, unreliable voter lists, poor distribution of national ID cards and information about polling stations. These are clearly contributing causes, but the authors of this report were present in Mali in the week prior to the local elections, working together on designing this analysis, and could not avoid noticing the general lack of interest in the elections. Very few people seemed to

care, and many of those who said they would vote voted out of habit or for clientelistic reasons.

For many in Mali, neither democratisation nor decentralisation has improved their lives, but instead made things more complicated through the general spread of corruption and mismanagement down to the municipal level. As one Fulani leader described the situation in the Mopti region of the Delta, ‘democracy and decentralisation killed the Malian state’,⁴ by making local government the seat of endless corruption and contribution to local conflict. We do not believe that this statement should be interpreted as being against democracy and democratisation as such – the same Fulani leader also said that, in principle, decentralised accountable government is a good idea, but only if the conditions are ripe for it. That remains the problem of Mali: what has been done is to take a very weak state and split it up into smaller pieces. How can something that is weak in the first place and plagued by corruption become any stronger and less corrupt if it is divided into smaller pieces?

4 Interview, Bamako, 19 January 2017.

5. The Malian political economy: in-between the formal and the illicit

Mali is a poor country, even for sub-Saharan Africa, facing huge development challenges. With gross national income per capita only USD 790, it is heavily dependent on foreign aid. In 2013, foreign aid was equivalent to 11% of gross national income and constituted 80% of government expenditure (World Bank 2016). For almost two decades, Mali was the West African ‘darling’ of the international community. Considered a good ‘pupil’ as regards neoliberal political and economic restructuring, Mali received considerable amounts of foreign aid (Bergamaschi 2014). And yet, despite some progress on a few indicators, it has remained near the bottom of the Human Development Index (see UNDP 2017).

The political economy of aid

In theory, the weak state capacity and general fragility of Mali might indicate that donors can impose their will there. However, that is not necessarily the case, as Mali’s weak position, combined with the Islamist rebellions, also strengthens the bargaining position of the government. It is hard to find anyone in the donor community in Bamako who is impressed or even satisfied with the current government or the political class in general. However, as few can identify any credible alternatives, most donors are reluctant to press too hard for deep structural reforms. They fear, if not outright collapse, at least further implosion and subsequent erosion of the Malian state.

The framework document for Mali’s development and relations with the donor community is the third World Bank-supported *Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (CSCR: Government of Mali 2011) that covers the period 2011–2017. This document predates the 2012

coup and the 2013 electoral victory of IBK, but the current government remains committed to it – because, although drafted with considerable international assistance, the CSCR was based on an inclusive national consultation process, unlike previous strategic papers prepared almost exclusively by the international community (see Bergamaschi, Diabaté and Paulet (2007).

However, the CSCR is not the only national plan, as the IBK government issued two additional strategic papers soon after coming to power in 2013: the short-term *The Sustainable Revival Plan 2013–2014*,⁵ and a medium-term plan, *The Government Action Plan 2013–2018*.⁶ They are all relatively solid documents, but lacking in internal coherence between them. No one seems to be sure which of them constitutes the current framework of priority for development policies and activities, leaving the donor community with a diverse set of development plans that are so comprehensive that they cover almost anything and everything. This can be seen either as a technical default on the part of the government (it simply does not know what it is doing); or as a deliberate strategy intended to open the way for almost any kind of assistance. For example, the CSCR outlines strategies for 44 different areas, from rural development to communication for development – so all donors will find something that suits their priorities. It appears more important for the government of Mali simply to receive aid than to set hard but necessary priorities, which might reduce the inflow of aid. The government wants as much funding as it can get

5 Plan pour la relance durable du Mali 2013–2014.

6 Programme d’action du gouvernement 2013–2018.

and therefore tends to accept all donor proposals. Not setting clear principles is also a way of reducing intra-government tensions, as potentially rivaling ministries are left free to compete for donor assistance without being hampered by specific government priorities. This would seem a clear strategy for regime survival in a weak state in a fragile and fractured societal environment.

That is not to say, however, that anything goes, or that everything that donors are interested in gets implemented. Take the case of family planning. Mali has the second-highest fertility rates in the world (World Bank 2016). This is widely recognised as unsustainable and thereby as a huge challenge to development. Also the CSCRIP recognises that high population growth can foil poverty-reduction efforts (see Government of Mali 2011: 39), and notes the importance of promoting family planning, as a stand-alone issue (one of 44 issue-areas) and also in combination with education, nutrition and health. However, for all practical purposes, very little has been happening on the ground, because the government is extremely reluctant to promote family planning at the local level, not least because this is politically sensitive. The issue of female genital mutilation suffers from a similar attitude on the part of the government; decentralisation is another sector where the current government seems to opt to do as little as possible, without breaking the chain of funding.

This leaves a field of politics that is both wide open and closed at the same time. The government does not set any clear priorities, leaving donors free to cherry-pick whatever sectors suit their own development agendas. However, this absence of specified priorities also leads to non-active government, with no clear chain of command and control based on a well-defined and sequenced development agenda as regards sectors deemed sensitive or difficult politically, like family planning.

Agriculture and minerals

The main source of income and employment for ordinary Malians is agriculture. Three-quarters of the country's 18.6 million people rely on agri-

culture for their food and income. Most of them live in the southern parts of the country, growing rain-fed crops on small plots of land. According to USAID (2017) the potential for agricultural growth and expansion is present, but still about 30% of the population is malnourished. The main reasons are low productivity, post-harvest crop losses, under-developed markets, vulnerability to climate-change effects, and the insecurity of Central and Northern Mali. Most farming is at subsistence level, except for cotton, which constitutes the basis of Mali's export industry.

The most productive agricultural area lies along the banks of the River Niger, between Bamako and Mopti, and extends south to the borders with Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. In this area, average rainfall varies from 500 mm per year in Mopti to 1,400 mm in the south around Sikkasso. This is where most Mali's cotton, rice, pearl millet, vegetables, tobacco and tree crops are produced. Malian farming is not only about agriculture, it is also about livestock resources – traditionally the country's second most important export commodity, with millions of cattle, sheep and goats. The largest concentration of cattle is in the areas north of Bamako and Ségou extending into the River Niger delta of the Central region. However, this is turning southward due to the combined effects of droughts and increased cattle-raiding. This also implies that, with the conflict pushing down into the Central Region, it could end up threatening this area, which is Mali's main bread basket. That would have serious consequences for human security all over the country. The Malian crisis can no longer be seen solely as a crisis of the North.

Mining and gold have long been important elements of the Malian economy: in fact, Mali is Africa's third largest gold producer, after South Africa and Ghana. Officially, gold is the third largest source of export in Mali, with mines located mainly in the southern region. The largest goldfields are in the Bambouk Mountains (the Cercle of Kenieba) in Kayes, Western Mali. These goldfields were a major source of wealth as far back as the days of the ancient Ghana Empire. Gold mining, both artisanal and indus-

trial (medium and large-scale industrial mining), is important, but exactly how much it contributes to the Malian economy is hard to estimate. Different sources report different figures. For example, in 2016, Reuters reported two different figures: a) total export in 2015 – 70.2 tonnes, with artisanal gold accounting for about a third, b) total export in 2015 – industrially mined – 46.5 tonnes, while artisanal mining produced 4 tonnes (Diallo 2016). Official sources do not help to clarify this, as the web pages of the Ministry of Mines and the Chamber of Mines are blank on this matter.⁷

What is easier to observe is that after the 2012 crisis, there has been an increase in artisanal mining. Exactly how many people are involved in artisanal mining is unknown, but the Malian Chamber of Mines estimates there are more than a million (Chambre des Mines du Mali 2017). This resembles what has been seen elsewhere in Africa in conflict situations where artisanal mining is a possible livelihood. Crisis and conflict badly affect traditional livelihoods like agriculture, forcing people to their homes, so artisanal mining becomes one of the few available sources of income-generating activities (see for example Bøås 2015).

In Mali, artisanal and/or informal mining is not prohibited, but is restricted (see Mali Mining Code 2012). Artisanal mining is legal in specified geographical areas, ‘artisanal gold-mining corridors’. In theory, this is not a bad idea. The problem in Mali is that these corridors are few, and those that exist are already over-exploited and not very attractive to artisanal miners. In practice, then, most artisanal mining sites today are located outside the legal corridors. The government might have dealt with this in two ways: by cracking down on artisanal mining outside of legal corridors, or by expanding the geographical scope of the existing legal corridors. This is,

however, not how the Malian state works. It has opted to look the other way – but only partly. In practice this means that the state itself does not intervene, but local officials do. These local state officials, who usually receive little or no regular salaries, augment their own incomes by requiring fees from artisanal miners, taking a cut in the gold produced, organising mining teams to work for them or by getting involved in mining themselves. Officials higher up in the state administration are obviously aware of this, but receive a share from the lower state officials who buy their silence. In Mali, this may be less destructive than in DR Congo, but the practice is the same, and the result is a population of angry young miners and the gradual corruption of the state (see also Bøås 2015a).

As most artisanal mining takes place outside of the legal corridors, it is not a part of the formal legal value-chain of gold in Mali. This gold passes through an informal value-chain until it is exported; only when it is imported to another country may it feature in a formal legal value-chain. Most artisanal miners have no direct contact with those who export gold. Typically, gold from southern Mali is sold several times before leaving the country. First, it is sold to a local buyer at the mining site. This buyer may transport the gold directly to Bamako or sell it off someone else who transports it to Bamako. There it is sold to traders, often registered as small businesses, who melt gold from several buyers into rough bars before selling them to an exporter (see also Martin and Balzac 2017).

Each actor in this chain is usually pre-financed by an actor further up, through an arrangement that also includes the exporter, who in turn is pre-financed by an importer abroad. This secures continued extraction and a constant flow of gold for the importer. Apart from melting the gold into rough bars, the Bamako-based exporter gets the gold transported as carry-on luggage on-board commercial flights to trading houses, apparently most commonly found in the United

7 Most the industrially mined gold in Mali seems to follow due diligence and OECD compliant practices, and is controlled by a few large international mining companies: AngloGold Ashanti and RandGold (South Africa), IAMGOLD, Avion Gold and African Gold Group (Canada), Resolute Mining (Australia) and Avnel Gold Mining (UK).

Arab Emirates (UAE) and Switzerland,⁸ to a lesser degree also in Belgium.

According to informants, this informal system of export functions so efficiently that it also attracts substantial amounts of artisanal mined gold from neighbouring countries like Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as from further away in the region. Mali's porous borders, combined with favourable tax laws for small-scale export companies and geographies of scale, have contributed to making Bamako a hub for artisanal gold export. This observation is supported by calculations made by the Partnership Africa Canada (see Martin and Balzac 2017) on the amounts of gold the UAE reported having imported from Mali. These amounts exceeded some of the more conservative estimates of total gold production in Mali. For example, in 2014, the United States Geological Service and the Malian Government reported that Mali produced 45.8 tonnes of gold, whereas the UAE reported to have imported 59.9 tonnes of gold the same year. The accuracy of these figures is uncertain, but at the very least it indicates that more gold is exported out of Mali than what is officially produced there. Our argument is not that donors and partners should urge the Malian government to clamp down on impoverished artisanal miners – but that the Malian government should do much more to clean up its own involvement in artisanal gold-mining, and provide plans and institutional designs for re-formalising this value-chain, to the benefit of artisanal miners as well as the national economy in general. Here Norway might take a lead, as it would also entail a focus on areas not directly affected by the conflict.

Crime and trafficking

Cotton, livestock and gold constitute the backbone of the Malian economy, whereas subsistence agriculture is what matters for most ordinary Malians. However, for segments of the elite and parts of the population in the borderlands there

is also another informal and/or illicit economy of trafficking which is of significance. This is an economy that has increasingly been appropriated by Islamist insurgents like AQIM and various groups of narco-traffickers. For these groups, the borderland of northern Mali, where state presence is weak and dysfunctional, offers comparative advantages. Formally this is a part of Mali, but it is also a place of state uncertainty, and this very uncertainty increases its importance as a centre for informal trade and transport. These areas are informally and illicitly connected to the global economy through new economic opportunities for trans-Saharan trade.

In policy circles, the connections between smuggling and Jihadist rebels are often framed as 'narco-terrorism', thus suggesting that the Malian crisis is primarily driven and constituted by a profit-motivated illegally organised criminal economy. We believe that the term 'narco-terrorism' is misleading, for several reasons. Drug smugglers are generally not active Jihadists, though the two categories may overlap and benefit from each other's existence, political power, and access to resources and social networks. Throughout the Sahel, smuggling of various low-value goods consumed all over the region has been practised for centuries in organised networks of social and family structures (see Scheele 2012). However, the multi-dimensional flows of high-value goods like guns, cars and narcotics have put pressure on the social structures that have regulated trans-Saharan trade (see Bøås 2015). Areas that the French colonists dismissed as *Mali inutile* have rapidly increased their geopolitical value, due to the influx of these goods, consequently raising the political and economic stakes involved in controlling them. According to UNODC (2013) 60 tons of cocaine and 400 kg. of heroin are smuggled each year through West Africa, generating over USD 900 million annually. While there have been examples of Jihadists offering protection to drug convoys, this is probably only a very small part of a much longer logistical chain. Jihadist networks are alleged to have received much of their financing from ransom payments. According to a former US ambassador

8 Two smaller Geneva-based companies, the Monetary Institute and Decafin SA, were reported in 2008 to be recipients of Malian artisanal gold; see Callimachi and Klapper (2008).

to Mali, European governments have paid close to USD 90 million USD in ransom since 2004 (see Boeke 2016). Still, violent entrepreneurs like Mokhtar Belmokhtar are known for their hybrid mixing of criminality and theology, depending on the circumstances. Equally important is the involvement of Malian state officials in the illicit drug trade and in taking shares of the ransom economy in relation to negotiating the release of European hostages (see Briscoe 2014). It may be as much the intractable complicity of the Malian state, and not its administrative fragility, that has made it possible for Jihadist groups and organised crime to consolidate within its territory.

Cigarettes are the oldest contraband in northern Mali, and remain a central item in this economy. However, since around 2006, the trafficking in drugs and people has become increasingly important. Cross-border smuggling offers new economic opportunities as well as the establishment of new networks and nodal points for governance and control. The growing prominence of these ancient routes of trade and commerce is also related to recent technological advances that have made desert travel much easier. GPS, satellite phones, cell phones and four-wheel drive vehicles have become the standard equipment of desert travellers. The number of routes and means of communication also makes it possible to drive from Kidal to Tamanrasset in Algeria in about a day, running up and down dry riverbeds without ever travelling on a marked road.

Cigarettes, almost exclusively Marlboros, come mainly from Zerouate in Mauritania on trucks carrying large containers to Kidal. Here, the shipment is split into smaller lots and taken across the border to Algeria (mainly Tamanrasset) on 4WD pick-ups. Some of these cigarettes are sold in Algeria; others are sent across the Mediterranean to the European market – where they are still cheaper, even if a considerable number of middlemen have taken their cuts along the way. Parts of the AQIM structure in northern Mali and particularly Mokhtar Belmokhtar have been deeply involved in these operations, reaping considerable profits.

The trafficking of people across the Sahara has also increased. In particular, the town of Gao, located at the bend of the Niger, has become an important hub along this route for Congolese, Cameroonians, Liberians, Nigerians and others attempting to leave Africa. At Gao they are picked up, to cross the Sahara into Algeria through Kidal.⁹

Latin American drug cartels have increasingly been using West Africa as a key transit point in smuggling cocaine to markets in Western and Eastern Europe. Important transit countries in this regard are Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal and Mali, which means that narcotics are also smuggled through northern Mali and Kidal. A successful cross-border trip can earn a driver as much as €3,000. The cocaine originates from Latin America, mainly but not exclusively Colombia. From the cocaine labs, the drugs are transported to Venezuela and loaded into small single-propeller airplanes with extra fuel-tanks (some shipments also involve larger planes, as shown by the *Air Cocaine* incident in Mali)¹⁰ to enable these planes to cross the Atlantic. The cargo is either dumped in the sea for pickup, or off-loaded after these planes land on small airstrips to refuel for the return journey.¹¹

Thus, even if the Latin American drug cartels may remain in control of the wholesale and retail sale in the end-user market, cross-Sahel/Sahara trafficking operations are mainly the responsibility of African counterparts, who are paid by a combination of cash and kind. The latter obviously contributes to the establishment of local

9 Agadez in Niger is another key town in this regard.

10 The Air cocaine incident refers to a burned-out Boeing 727 that was found in the desert in Northern Mali. It is believed that it carried more than 10 tons of cocaine, had flown in from Venezuela and had been unloaded before it was torched. At least two prominent Malians were named in relation to the flight – Mohamed Ould Awainatt and Baba Ould Cheikh – but none of them has been sentenced for their involvement in this affair. The latter was also involved in the negotiation concerning the release from Jihadist captivity of UN diplomat Robert Fowler. In this regard, it is reported that then President Touré referred to Cheikh as *mon bandite*. See Lebovich (2013).

11 The types and quantities of narcotics smuggled are much discussed, but are less central to the arguments made in this report. For a detailed account of this debate and the various figures circulated, see Strazzari (2014).

user markets, as in the ‘hoods’ of Accra where a user-dose of crack cocaine costs slightly more than a large beer.¹²

The trans-Saharan trafficking of these kinds of contraband is undeniably profitable; for some in the Malian hinterlands it has become an integral part of their livelihood. Most of the population is not directly involved, however. For example, most Kidal residents know about it, but do not participate; they do not necessarily support it, but tend to see it as just another type of trade that has come and gone across the Sahara ever since the first traders crossed these areas.¹³ Resource scarcity, exacerbated by increased climatic variability and very few employment opportunities, has pushed people into smuggling as a livelihood. According to sources in Kidal, prior to the 2012 Islamist takeover of the area, the smugglers were organised in small gangs of 10–15 people, and these gangs were connected to local authority figures (state and non-state) who were paid to

ignore their activities. Some of the Islamist insurgents who roamed this area were also occasionally involved in these operations, whether directly or indirectly through informal taxation. It is important to stress, however, that these interactions were fluid and pragmatic, and never based on anything other than business. The challenge today is therefore not solely one of security, but is equally a question of livelihood opportunities. It is not enough simply to push insurgents and criminals out of the areas where they operate. The real challenge is to fill the void left by their disappearance, with available work, legitimate state institutions and livelihood alternatives more resilient to the effects of climate change.

The sudden influx of cash described above has weakened the traditional power configurations of society in the North, particularly, but not exclusively, among the Tuareg population, leading to competing informal regimes of power, locally and regionally. This takes the form, not of competing cartel-like mafia structures, but of ‘big men’ competing to be the nodal points in the emerging systems of informal commerce and governance, striving to control not territory or population as such, but the hubs and nodes along the routes of passage that serve as garages and service centres for this travel (see also Strazzari 2015). Such a system can be stable for a period, but it is also prone to violence, as will become evident from our analysis of the main non-state armed actors.

12 As the street value of crack cocaine is less than that of ordinary cocaine, this is the preferred in-kind payment. This closely resembles how Nigerian drug-runners in the 1980s and '90s created a local user market in Sierra Leone for ‘brown-brown’ – heroin of such low quality that it cannot be injected, only smoked. See Bøås, Hatløy and Bjørkhaug (2008).

13 See also Keenan (2007). This contrasts with the findings of Judith Scheele (2012), who, based on fieldwork in southern Algeria, argues that the people of Sahara draw a distinction between ‘lawful’ smuggling (cigarettes etc.) and ‘unlawful’ smuggling (narcotics). Perhaps how local people view this may depend on where they are and their circumstances. Kidal is in many ways very different from the Tamanrasset region of southern Algeria.

6. Non-state armed actors – who are they and what do they want?

Various actors are involved, with differing objectives, and there is a broad spectrum of projects of political and social resistance at play in Mali. Some are peaceful, others violent. Some are more secular in origin, other religious, and some are also involved in the transport and protection of illicit goods. Some of the actors involved are mainly profit-seeking; others are involved in order to fund various projects of violent resistance to the Malian state. Yet others are play various minor roles in smuggling operations and armed insurgencies, as a coping strategy. The effects of climate change and climatic variability, with few adequate responses from governments and international organisations, mean that people must carve out a livelihood wherever they can. For some, participation in smuggling operations or an armed group has become a new mode of survival. In the following, we analyse some of the main actors involved and their activities, showing the continuity between various contours of criminality, coping and armed resistance and the subsequent logic underlying these activities – a logic quite different from that to which an ‘ungoverned space’ lens directs the analysis.

It is also important to note the porous and ambiguous nature of these groups and their actors. Certain groups and main actors remain fairly constant factors, but this is also a highly dynamic field of groups emerging, establishing themselves and then either disappearing or re-arranging themselves under new names and acronyms. The latest instalment in this regard is the communication released in early March 2017, announcing that Ansar ed-Dine, al-Mourabitoun and AQIM had joined forces under a new superstructure, called Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

(roughly: Support of Islam and Muslims). In a video communication the group declared that their new leader would be Iyad Ag Ghaly. He could also reportedly be heard in the communication, declaring allegiance to al-Qaeda and praising its current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden, but also, curiously, the slain Jordanian Abu Mussab Zarqawi (whose al-Qaeda group in Iraq later became the Islamic State).

Iyad Ag Ghaly – the evolution of a Sahel Big Man

Iyad Ag Ghaly, an Ifoghas Tuareg from the Irayaken clan, has been at the forefront of violent Tuareg discontent for more than three decades. Like several other young men of Tuareg origin from his generation, Ag Ghaly left Mali for Libya in the early 1980s, because of the growing pressure on local livelihoods caused by the frequent droughts in this period. Here, he joined Muammar Gaddafi’s Islamic Legion and fought in Lebanon, among other places. When Gaddafi closed the Islamic Legion in the late 1980s, Ag Ghaly returned to northern Mali; in 1990 he launched his first attack against the Malian state, as head of the Popular Movement of Azawad (MPA). At that time, he was generally seen as a secular rebel, known for a lavish lifestyle that included womanising as well as a love of whiskey (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

Among the various Tuareg rebel leaders of that period he was the first to sign a peace deal with the Malian government (1991), and some of his men even fought alongside the Malian army against other Tuareg rebel groups. Following the National Pact of 1992 and the final peace agreement of 1996, Ag Ghaly appears to have come

under the influence of the Islamic missionary movement Jama'at Al-Tabligh, which had begun to operate in northern Mali and had a strong presence and influence on the Ifoghas of Kidal (Bøås 2015b). How did this brand of Islam manage to gain a select group of followers in this part of Mali? Some explanations point to a new religious movement among parts of the Tuareg community; others hold that the Jama'at Al-Tabligh group offered possibilities for connecting with a larger global trend. However, most observers agree that pressures on traditional livelihoods exacerbated social uncertainty and insecurity to the degree that some among the local population started to search elsewhere for ideas that could give meaning to their sufferings (Bøås 2017).

In 2003, Ag Ghaly was instrumental in negotiating the release of 32 European (mainly German) tourists who had been taken hostage by the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the predecessor to AQIM. Ag Ghaly's involvement in these negotiations gave clear indications of his growing importance as not only a local Big Man, but as an aspiring regional Big Man as well. In 2006, Ag Ghaly formed the Democratic Alliance of May 23 for Change (ADC) together with Ibrahim Ag Bahanga and Hassan Ag Fagaga. This insurgency did not last long: it was officially dissolved the same year. After ADC's attack on the Malian army garrisons in Kidal and Ménaka, the 'Algiers Agreement' was signed in Algeria on 4 July 2006, calling for the restoration of peace, security and development in the Kidal region. The Agreement provided for the establishment of an economic forum in Kidal for the development of the Northern Mali. However, little seemed to be happening on the ground in Kidal. Only a year later, the situation escalated again and a new rebellion was formed around Ag Bahanga.

By this time, however, Ag Ghaly had left for Pakistan, where he travelled to the spiritual headquarters of the Jama'at Al-Tabligh, spending some time there before the Malian government in 2007 appointed him as cultural attaché to the Malian Embassy in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This decision was probably based on the calculation that having Ag Ghaly on a state salary somewhere

else in the world would keep him from joining or organising yet another rebellion in the Kidal area. With hindsight, the wisdom of this strategy can be questioned, because in 2010 Ag Ghaly was expelled from Saudi Arabia for unspecified interactions with suspected extremists linked to al-Qaeda. He returned to Mali, and again served as an intermediary in hostage negotiations, this time with AQIM. Later events give rise to questions about what Ag Ghaly did and contributed to in these processes.

When Tuareg fighters started returning to Mali en masse after the fall of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, Ag Ghaly was once more called upon by the Malian government – this time to act as liaison between the government and the returnees. Ag Ghaly used this position to attempt to take over the leadership of the Ifoghas and the MNLA. Failing in both cases – at least partly because the leadership of the Ifoghas traditionally belongs to the noble clan, and not the warrior clan of Ag Ghaly – he ended up creating Ansar-ed Dine instead.

AQIM and MUJAO

AQIM is often viewed as a lynchpin in the 'crime-terror nexus' that has taken advantage of the 'ungoverned space' of the Mali/Sahel periphery. Considered to be an operational branch of the global al-Qaeda structure, it is seen as an organisation that preys on the instability of the region to finance its criminal terrorist activities. However, if we look beyond the global rhetoric employed by AQIM, a slightly different picture emerges. AQIM has clear strategies of integration in the Sahel, based on a sophisticated reading of the local context. Members know to combine the strength of the group's money, guns and prayers. The latter is important in an area where the local administration, to the degree that it exists, is generally perceived as corrupt, whereas AQIM operatives present themselves as honest and pious Muslims.¹⁴

¹⁴ For example, before fleeing Gao ahead of the advancing French troops in early 2013, Abou Zeid reportedly took the trouble to repay his outstanding debts to local merchants; see Radio France International (2013). On local perceptions of the Malian state, see Bleck and Michelitch (2016).

AQIM's point of origin is the civil war in Algeria that erupted after the military leadership annulled the 1992 elections results when it became clear that the Islamist party would achieve victory. This resulted in a devastating civil war between the military and the armed Islamic opposition known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Officially, the civil war in Algeria ended with the amnesty of 1999. However, some fighters were not willing to lay down their arms, and it is they who currently form the core of AQIM.

The GSPC, AQIM's predecessor organisation, was formed by Hassan Hattab as a break-away faction of the GIA, mainly in reaction to the massive and senseless violence of the GIA in the final years of the Algerian civil war. Rooted in the Salafist tradition, most GSPC commanders and rank-and-file were committed to a Qutbist form of Salafism that justifies violence. Officially, the GSPC moved into northern Mali in 2003/2004, but they had had rear bases in the area since 1998 (Bøås and Torheim 2013). The relationship between the GSPC and al-Qaeda is not easy to understand, as there is a history of statements of mutual collaboration but also of open conflict. When the GSPC was established in 1998, the organisation expressed support for al-Qaeda, only to claim that it had broken away from al-Qaeda in 2001 (ICG 2005). The GSPC reaffirmed its loyalty in 2003, received the blessing of al-Qaeda in 2006, and then finally took up the al-Qaeda banner in 2007 when the GSPC changed its name to AQIM (see Rollins 2010).

The GSPC may have done this for ideological reasons, but more pragmatic concerns also played a role. These were men who had lost the war in Algeria and were on the run in the deserts of northern Mali. Neither the Algerian government nor the international community wanted to negotiate with them – so no settlement, not even an honorary surrender, was in sight. They had little to lose and something to gain from taking up the al-Qaeda name: it would make them look more global and powerful in the eyes of local communities.

When AQIM started to materialise in northern Mali, it had more than a potent brand name.

AQIM fighters also had money, largely from hostage-taking, particularly the 2003 kidnapping of 32 German tourists who were captured when traveling through the Sahara and were held hostage for several months before being released.¹⁵ Money matters in a situation like that prevailing in northern Mali, where the traditional role of the *chef du village* was diminishing rapidly but new systems of governance had not replaced customary authority.¹⁶

The history of AQIM's mission-creep in the region of Timbuktu is instructive, showing that its ability to embed itself locally is not based solely on its ability to use force, but increasingly to create order based on a religious-ideological framework. Already in 1998, members of AQIM (then known as the GSPC) started arriving in the Timbuktu region (ICG 2005), where they presented themselves as honest and pious traders. In one instance, when they wanted to buy a goat from the local people, they paid the owner double his asking price. They bought themselves goodwill, friendship and networks by distributing money, offering medicines, treating the sick, and buying SIM cards and airtime for people. They also married locally – not into powerful families, but into poor local lineages, deliberately taking the side of the impoverished (Bøås and Torheim 2013). In many ways, AQIM was acting as an Islamic charity, except that they carried arms and did not hesitate to use them if needed. Thus, in addition to the ability to use force and generate resources, a 'big man' repertoire can also usefully include a firm religious credentials and simply being honest and pious.

AQIM's penetration of the Timbuktu area has been underway for more than a decade,

15 According to ICG (2004) the German government paid a ransom of €5 million to secure the release of the German tourists. The government has flatly denied ever paying any ransom money – but, according to local sources, the Salafists suddenly had a lot of money to spend after the tourists had been released.

16 Due to a combination of external shocks like increased climatic variability and the penetration of the modern state, the traditional systems of governance have become less useful today. However, even if the modern state is more present in people's daily lives, it is widely perceived negatively, as it has failed to respond adequately to people's needs.

but its tactics gradually changed from distributing money and small benefits to also arguing strongly for its interpretation of Islam. To achieve this, AQIM established alliances with local marabouts (religious teachers), who were told to preach the AQIM version of Islam (Bøås and Torheim 2013). AQIM utilised a pre-existing structure that had cultural importance but not much real power, and transformed it for its own purposes, empowering its local clients by providing them with cars, money, weapons and bodyguards (Bøås and Torheim 2013). Thus, far from taking advantage of an ‘ungoverned space’ to conduct crime and terrorist activities, AQIM deliberately employed existing social systems in its attempts to build an alternative system of governance. The only way we can understand how processes of crime, coping and resistance collude but also come into conflict with each other is to see this as an example of what Thomas Risse and colleagues at the Free University Berlin have called ‘governance in areas of limited statehood’ (Krasner and Risse 2014).

After the MNLA offensive, AQIM continued to make good use of this strategy by offering protection to locals. In Timbuktu, AQIM gave a ‘green’ cell-phone number which people could call if they were harassed by MNLA members or ordinary bandits (Bøås and Torheim 2013). The AQIM strategy has been a careful and gradual one of integration and penetration into local communities based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic and humanitarian means. The latter part was clearly facilitated by the money that AQIM leaders had at their disposal due to their involvement in smuggling and hostage-taking. Therefore, AQIM should not be viewed solely as an invading external force, but as an actor that has gradually managed to integrate into local communities by appropriating local grievances and emerging as a local service provider in an area characterised by dysfunctional overlapping and competing networks of governance.

This is also partially true of MUJAO, the Movement for Jihad in West Africa. The group gained local support in and around Gao by cunningly

appropriating local grievances, siding with Fulani pastoralist groups in a local land-rights conflict.

When MUJAO first emerged, some observers claimed that it was a response to the dominant position of an old guard of Algerian nationals and other Arabs in AQIM. These observers pointed to MUJAO’s West African rhetoric and reference to historical figures of black jihadism and anti-colonial struggle such as el-Haji Oumar ibn Said Tall, Ousmane Dan Fodio and Amadou Cheikhou. This analysis, however, is challenged by reports indicating that 80–90% of MUJAO’s ranks were made up of Arabs and Moors from Mauritania, Algeria and Western Sahara (Raineri 2016). Or, it could be that the rift in AQIM that led to the creation of MUJAO was based on other disagreements, but the West African rhetoric and reference to black jihadism was used to legitimate the formation of a new insurgency with a broader regional platform than AQIM. Internal disputes between AQIM and MUJAO concerned not only the role of religion, and military-societal strategy, but also money. Disagreements arose over how to share the revenues generated from kidnappings and smuggling; and some ambitious jihadists who did not belong to the GSPC-origin hard-core AQIM leadership may have craved greater autonomy and decision-making power (see Raby 2011).

It is still uncertain exactly what role Mokhtar Belmokhtar played in the divide within AQIM that led to the emergence of MUJAO. However, even prior to the establishment of MUJAO it was clear that there were internal divisions within AQIM and between Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar. They disagreed on issues concerning leadership and strategy, but also possibly money, and eventually these divisions led to the departure of Belmokhtar’s katibah unit – the *al-Moulath-amin* – from AQIM.¹⁷ What is certain is that

17 Here it is important to note that AQIM in northern Mali and the Sahel has always consisted of and hosted semi-independent groups under its banner. In addition to Belmokhtar’s group, these have included Yahya Abou al-Hamam’s *al-Furqan* squadron, *al-Ansar* (headed by Abdelkarim Le Targui, who is Iyad Ag Ghaly’s cousin), and the *Youssef Ibn Tachfin* (headed by Abdelhakimal-Kidali). See also Raineri (2016).

Belmokhtar never accepted the supreme AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel's choice of Abou Zeid as his main Sahel emir over Belmokhtar. Teaming up with MUJAO elements he already knew in Gao (such as Hamada Ould Kheirou) was an obvious choice that would give him a larger platform than what he could achieve only with his own katibah (see Jemal 2013). The later merger between MUJAO and Belmokhtar's katibah to form the *al-Mourabitoun* is therefore just another part in this process where Belmokhtar, as one of several 'big men' in the Mali/Sahel periphery, has struggled to become the nodal point of networks that, in complex processes of collusion and conflict, navigate the ambiguous borders between crime, coping and resistance.¹⁸

Macina Liberation Front – Central Mali: the new zone of war?

Most of the attention of the Malian state and its international partners has focused on the areas north of the River Niger, while the precarious situation in the Central Region has been ignored. Here, long-term injustices and corruption by state officials have resulted in the absence of law and order that accelerated the formation of armed self-defence militias, in turn fuelling inter and intra-ethnic violence. This led to increased cattle raiding, robberies and the absence of regulated access to water – the latter a major source of violent conflict in this area throughout history. Corruption and rent-seeking behaviour among local government officials have contributed to the long-term corrosion of public authority, but the crisis of 2012 set off a larger storm.

The 2012 Tuareg rebellion altered local power relations between Fulani and Tuareg groups. Historically, these groups have been rivals for access to and control over resources, and the 2012 rebellion led many Fulani herders to fear a potential Tuareg hegemony in the inner delta of the Niger River. Some young Fulani pastoralists turned to MUJAO for weapons for self-protection, but

also to secure access to water resources by violent means. Initially their concerns were almost entirely local. However, after Operation Serval forced the Jihadist groups to give up territorial control, Mali's armed forces (FAMA) returned to the area, where they carried out several arrests of Fulani herdsmen without trial, involving torture and sometimes killings. In 2016, Human Rights Watch reported the killing of ten detainees, all in central Mali, and the torture and severe mistreatment of 20 others. The Malian authorities, however, have made few efforts to investigate these violations. This abuse of state power and violations of human rights in the name of the war on terror have exacerbated feelings among many Fulani groups of being discriminated against, and have further fuelled the resentment felt towards the state and government officials.

In consequence, what were initially expressions of local discontent and conflict have been effectively appropriated by FLM. The FLM, linked to Ansar ed-Dine, has attacked local authorities and claimed responsibility for deadly attacks across Mali on Malian security forces and MINUSMA. The Central Region is a crucial area of Mali. It serves as the food basket of the nation, and is home to large Bambara, Songhay, Dougon, Fulani and Tuareg populations. It is essential to understand the drivers of violence in this region.

The current wave of violent dissident in the Central Region began just before the French military intervention against the Salafi insurgents who had taken control of the north. In early 2013, Amadou Koufa, a Fulani Islamic preacher from the Central Region, gathered his fighters to expand south beyond the areas then controlled by Salafi rebels. Koufa was already an ally of Iyad Ag Ghaly and had established bases in territory under Ansar ed-Dine control. There is still a bond of alliance between these two leaders and their respective groups, but it would be erroneous to see Koufa and the FLM as merely a Fulani branch of Ansar ed-Dine, as the FLM is deeply linked with local cleavages and conflicts. Like AQIM and Ansar ed-Dine, FLM can move between a global discourse of Jihad and highly local issues. That is what makes the situation in

18 This is quite similar to the process Strazzari and Kamphuis (2012) have termed an 'extra-legal' field – a site where informal and criminal activities are fused with varying nuances of social legitimacy.

the Central Region so dangerous for local and national stability.

Amadou Koufa is a native of this region, born in the village of Koufa, in the *cercle* of Niafunke. Prior to establishing the connection with Ag Ghaly, he travelled widely in the Central Region, preaching about the ills of the Malian state and how only a return to a religious lifestyle could redeem the Fulani and bring them peace and justice. Koufa is not an Islamic scholar himself, but is sufficiently familiar with Salafi theology and Fulani history to sound convincing. Moreover, he is a charismatic preacher – his summons and talks are widely circulated in the Central Region through cell-phones and flash pens, and, in the absence of an legitimate and trustworthy alternative, he is gaining in support. Currently, the FLM consists mainly of young Fulani herdsmen. The FLM operates in the Central Delta (in the Kareri pastoral area from Mema all the way to the Hodt, the frontier region to Mauritania), in Wuro Mody, Dialloubé, Fakala and Murari, and in several villages of Seno Mango and Seno Gondo. This also means that the FLM is just as much an armed opposition to other groups in the region as it is an armed opposition to the Malian state. The FLM has intervened in inter-ethnic violence between Fulani and Bambara communities in the Dioura area; in the east, it has fuelled ancient tensions between Dogon farmers and Fulani herders. Much to the surprise of those who see the FLM as simply a branch of Ansar ed-Dine and a creation of Ag Ghaly, this insurgency has also been involved in struggles between Fulani herders and Tuareg herdsmen along the Niger border, taking the side of the former.

All this testifies to the total absence, ever since 2012, of the state as an entity that can regulate land-rights conflict; and how, in the absence of such a state, the region has exploded in inter-communal violence over competition for land, grazing rights and access to water, combined with increasing and well-organised cattle raiding (organised mainly from Mauritania). The result has been a deep humanitarian crisis that has caused a refugee exodus towards both Burkina Faso and the Mberé refugee camp in Mauri-

tania – and, not least, a social environment where a movement like the FLM can flourish from the combination of an absent state and violent measures taken by the Malian army as it attempts to fight the FLM by arming local ‘self-defence’ ethnic militias among the Bambara, Songhay and Dogon. Unless some game-changing measures can be introduced to the Central Region, matters could easily go from bad to worse. The FLM is currently displaying its confidence and strength by moving around from village to village on motorbikes and in 4WD vehicles, in convoys of as many as 60 to 80 armed men. They express their authority by chasing away or killing local chiefs, taking control of local mosques and spreading the summons of Koufa. However, just as AQIM, Ansar ed-Dine and MUJAO did in the north, FLM has not only been unleashing terror and violence: it also ensures some sort of order. FLM provides mobile justice courts in places where judges long have been absent. It advocates a new approach to land rights that would be less advantageous to the tiny rural land aristocracy. It protects cattle herders (mainly Fulani) during seasonal migrations; and among youth the simplified marriage procedures imposed by the FLM allows young men to escape the control that elders of ruling lineages have traditionally exercised over marital engagements (see Bouhlel, Guichaoua and Jézéquel 2017).

In the short run, this may bring greater predictability in areas under FLM influence and control, but it also entails new challenges. For one thing, many Malians of other ethnic groups are starting to view the Fulani as Salafi insurgents. This is far from correct, but unless dealt with, it could further complicate the situation, as the Fulani are a community of cross-border alliances.

Islamic State influence in Mali and the Sahel?

While the old guard of Salafi insurgent leadership maintain their allegiance to al-Qaeda, the recent killing of four US soldiers and an unidentified number of Niger soldiers in an ambush in the Tonga Tonga area in Niger close to the Mali border has again raised the question of the extent

to which the Islamic State has managed to penetrate Mali and the Sahel. Several sources in the US Army and in Niger claim that the attack was carried out by a group under the leadership of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui that has pledged support to the Islamic State. This group calls itself the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), but its history is more closely linked to constant fracturing of Jihadist groups in Mali and to the multitude of local conflict that exploded in this area after 2012.

Its leader, al-Sahraoui, is not from Mali, but from a wealthy trading family of Laayoune in Western Sahara. In 1975 his family left Laayoune for the Polisario refugee camps in Algeria when Morocco annexed Western Sahara. Here, al-Sahraoui joined Polisario and received military training, but as the years passed without any political or military progress, he became involved in trade with Malian Arab communities. During this period, his religious views must also have become more radical, and in 2012 he emerged as the spokesman for MUJAO (Guichaoua and Lebovich 2017). After the French intervention, MUJAO splintered into various factions. Some key actors quickly formed a pro-government Arab militia and ended up signing the Algiers Agreement; others, al-Sahraoui among them, joined Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun. However,

for al-Sharaoui this relationship ended in 2015, when he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. When Belmokhtar denounced this, al-Sahraoui established his own movement: the ISGS.

In October 2016, the Islamic State officially acknowledged al-Sahraoui's pledge of support, but that has not increased his resource base or support. Apart from some support among a few Toleebe Peul (Fulani), his societal base remains small, and the ISGS has claimed only a few attacks in Burkina Faso and one in Niger. If we ignore the hype around 'Islamic State influence' that the killing of the four US soldiers has created, the main insurgents in this part of Africa have remained steadfast in their allegiance to the old al-Qaeda guard. And, with the Islamic State rapidly losing ground in Iraq and Syria, this is not very likely to change. Moreover, these pledges of allegiance and support do not mean that these insurgents have in any way become pawns in the broader global struggle. They remain rooted in local circumstances, conflicts and cleavages, and their various attachments to global Jihad discourses should be recognised a 'branding' strategy, not as attempts to become operational branches in the larger IS struggle (see Bøås 2015b)

7. ‘Ships that pass in the night’ – fracture, continuity and shifting loyalties

In line with Bøås (2015b), Raleigh and Dowd (2013) and Strazzari (2014), this report has worked from the assumption that there is no such thing as an ‘ungoverned space’ – in Mali or the rest of the Sahel for that matter. In any territory occupied by human beings there will be certain social patterns that are repeated, creating some level of order and trust. This is also the case for the territory of Mali, as shown by the informal trade (legal and illicit) that passes through the area. Mali and the Sahel – even the peripheral areas – are not without certain levels of order and governance, but they are clearly different from those presented in standard political science textbooks (Bøås 2015a). The essential point is the dense conglomeration of overlapping and competing networks of informal/illicit trade, governance, and resistance. These networks are based on personal power, as the ‘attainment of big man status is the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract him or her a coterie of loyal, lesser men or women’ (Sahlins 1963: 289). The networks vary in depth, geographical reach, and their ability to penetrate the state, but all of them are unstable, shifting and constantly adapting; and despite some common interests, their participants do not necessarily share the same goals or have similar reasons for being involved (Bøås 2015a).

The elevation to ‘big man’ status in a place like Mali does not follow one universal path. It varies in time and space, and may be based on varying combinations of power. However, as authority is almost always contested, there must be the ability to use force, to generate resources and not least to locate authority in and between the state and the informal. The three well-known Sahel ‘big men’

whose role and involvement have been analysed above illustrate this point.

Ibrahim Ag Bahanga embarked on his ‘big man’ career during the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s as a lesser rebel leader, and gained control of a *commune* (division of local government) after the rebellion ended. He was involved in trade and smuggling; he led other rebellions, but also maintained relationships with neighbouring governments in Algeria and Libya, and with segments of the Malian government and administration.

Iyad Ag Ghaly was a main Tuareg rebel commander during the rebellion in the 1990s. He later held various government positions, including a post at the Malian embassy in Saudi Arabia, but was also involved in minor rebellions together with Ag Bahanga, before he established the Tuareg jihadist insurgency Ansar Dine in 2012.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is one of the best-known jihadists of the Sahel, but prior to the attack on In Aménas in January 2013, he was better known as a smuggler and kidnapper with a vast network that must have included actors involved with the forces of transnational crime as well as operatives of state agencies.

The point regarding all three men is that their status as ‘big men’ was not based solely on one aspect of their activities, but the totality of them – and thereby their ability to, if not control, at least influence and maintain partly overlapping networks without a shared view as to long-term objectives and strategy (see also Bøås 2015b).

Some of these networks and the ‘big men’ involved have mainly involved criminality (and coping), whereas others have employed such activities to finance various projects of resistance (secular and religious). This may bring different

networks and their 'big men' into conflict with each other, but conflict at one point need not rule out collaboration and collusion under other circumstances. That indicates that a 'nexus' of international crime and terrorism does not exist as a fixed entity with permanent organisational structures. The logic of these operations and the networks involved is one of ambiguity and flexibility, and the actors involved are 'flexians' who adapt themselves and their resources to ever-changing circumstances in the terrain in which they operate (see Wedel 2009; Guichaoua 2011; Debos 2009). Such plasticity is not total, however. Certain relationships and networks are not only more likely than others – they are also more permanent. Ethnicity and kinship may matter, but so do the dangers of certain relationships, no matter how profitable they may be. One example is Mokhtar Belmokhtar. It seems reasonable to claim that most of his more secular-oriented criminal networks vanished the moment he took responsibility for the In Aménas attack. Not that it suddenly became less profitable to do business with him – only too dangerous.

The logic of the relationship between criminality, coping and resistance in the Sahel periphery might be described as 'ships that pass in the night', but certain 'ships' pass each other more frequently than others. Regardless, this leaves us with a scenario where different competing 'big men' vie for the role of nodal points in various networks of informal governance: some mainly profit-driven, others combining income-generating strategies with societal and political objectives (secular and religious), yet others merely seeking to cope (and perhaps thrive in the future). As the constellation of these networks is always changing, there is no formal or permanent organisation. This makes it possible to combine various strategies of criminality, coping and resistance without necessarily losing sight of immediate or long-term objectives. The outcome is a narrative-driven space of co-existence, collusion and conflict in which conflating the interests, ideas and actions of the different actors will only lead to confusion and misguided policies, and not analytical clarity.

**Crime and resistance:
fracture and continuity**

The following example concerning the relationship between the Arab communities of the Kunta and the Tilemsi-Lamhar in Gao and Timbuktu can further illuminate the conceptual point made above. In this relationship, the Tilemsi-Lamhar has traditionally been vassals of the Kunta. The Kunta are generally seen as a high-caste tribe, whose political and economic pre-eminence in the region derives from their proclaimed descent from the Prophet and their mastery in religious matters (see Scheele 2009). Historically, the Kunta, an Arab-Moor group originally believed to be descendants of Arabs (Uqba ibn Nafi), were instrumental in the expansion of Islam into sub-Saharan West Africa in the 15th century. They formed an urban elite in Timbuktu, the main city on the southern side of the trans-Saharan trade. In post-colonial Mali, the Kunta have at times come into violent conflict with Tuareg and Bambara populations in towns where they once held a near-monopoly on political power. This happened in 1998/1999; in 2004 there were also brief incidents of inter-communal violence between these groups in Gao and Timbuktu. Similar issues came to the fore when MUJAO took control of Gao in 2012. The Kunta have clashed both with majority groups like the Bambara and with Tuareg communities, but have also maintained a relatively solid alliance with the Ifoghas of Kidal.

Viewed from this angle, the Kunta–Tilemsi-Lamhar divide is an Arab equivalent to the situation in Kidal between the opposing Ifoghas and Imghad clans among the Tuareg. It is noteworthy that former president Touré actively pursued a policy of seeking to empower the Tilemsi-Lamhar at the expense of the Kunta. Paralleling his approach to the Imghad and the Ifoghas, he turned a blind eye to the growing involvement of the Tilemsi-Lamhar in trafficking activities and drugs smuggling. In consequence, the Kunta and the Ifoghas have often joined forces to defend the status quo in economic power relations in northern Mali.

The Kunta have enjoyed a leading economic position in this area, through their external con-

nections and family networks controlling the cross-border trading routes, particularly towards Algeria. However, as in Kidal, events in the aftermath of the second Tuareg rebellion started to undermine their position: a new generation of discontent with the prevailing social order started to emerge, and if this wave of discontent was not directly hijacked by the political elite in Bamako, attempts were certainly made at manipulating it. This eroded the balance of power and social hierarchy in the Tilemsi Valley of the Gao region, but also cemented the traditional alliance between the Kunta and the Ifoghas. These fractures and alliances became increasingly prominent as larger quantities of valuable contraband were trafficked through these areas (see also Bøås 2012). By 2006, control of smuggling routes had come to play an important role in the deepening of pre-existing cleavages. For example, Tilemsi-Lamhar traders and traffickers increasingly preferred the direct route from Gao to the Algerian border town of In-Khalil, in order to avoid the Ifoghas-dominated region of Kidal, now considered 'too expensive' and as housing too many local fraudsters. The emergence of MUJAO and their involvement with the association of Arab traders and traffickers from the Tilemsi Valley is probably also related to the re-emergence and strengthening of this cleavage. It should therefore not come as a great surprise that what has been described as the peak of MUJAO fanaticism – the destruction of a Sufi mausoleum 330 km north of Gao, on 15 September 2012 – targeted a symbol-rich place of worship and pilgrimage for the Kunta community.

Unlike other insurgencies operating in northern Mali, MUJAO never offered much political or religious justification for its actions, beyond the pragmatism of what Raineri and Strazzari (2015) call 'jihadism without borders': launching an impressive campaign in favour of traders, traffickers and smugglers, explicitly stating that customs duties, tolls, tariffs and borders were not in accordance with Islamic law and would no longer be enforced. Indeed, when customs duties and taxes were banned or simply bypassed with the support of MUJAO, living conditions in Gao

improved, initially at least. Prices on basic commodities like food and fuel imported from Algeria dropped significantly. MUJAO and its emir in Gao, Abdel Hakim, soon received the backing of Gao's *cercle des notables*, the most widely recognised local representative body. Three local notables volunteered to act as mediators between MUJAO and the local population: Ali Badi Maiga, Mohamed Baye Maiga and Mohamed Ould Mataly (the two first of Songhay origin, the third a Tilemsi Arab). All were wealthy, their fortunes allegedly linked to illicit trafficking and criminal activities, but they also needed armed protection under the new circumstances. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement.

The wealth that MUJAO accumulated through its alliance with Gao businessmen assisted in the insurgency's recruitment campaign. MUJAO monthly salaries for young recruits ranged from USD 100 to, in exceptional cases, as much as USD 700: an amount of money that most locals would struggle to earn in a year. 'Easy money' became an important reason for joining the ranks of MUJAO, especially for orphans and the *Tal-ibé* – boys left to the education and care (mostly through begging) of a local marabout.

This offered MUJAO a sizeable local cohort of young recruits; moreover, because of the underlying religious aspect, it also gave the organisation the reputation as a guardian of morality and legality in social and economic life. This may seem strange, but when compared to the abuse, raids and thefts perpetrated by the MNLA, MUJAO justice seemed preferable to most people in the town. The eventual harshness of MUJAO's sharia was initially seen as nothing compared to the random violence that had reigned in Gao during the nominal rule of the MNLA. Economic activities were especially hurt by the uncertainty created by the random violence of the MNLA, and many businessmen, not only Arab merchants, concluded that MUJAO's uncompromising mode of law enforcement, including corporal punishment, would at least restore a modicum of order and security to allow their businesses to operate.

MUJAO also found significant support among some members of Gao's Fulani commu-

nity. Two competing interpretations have been indicated to explain this collusion. One has focused on longstanding grievances over access to water and pasture land, pitting the Fulani against local Tuareg communities. Fulani collaboration with MUJAO can therefore be interpreted as a form of collective resistance against perceived Tuareg dominance. There are good reasons to believe that this was part of the picture, as the area around the city of Gao has long been plagued by local land-rights conflicts. However, also other economic issues may have been at stake. Gao is the Fulani transport hub for northern Mali and beyond. One way of securing these rights under the new circumstances would be to enter a security arrangement with MUJAO. In this regard, MUJAO spokesperson Hamadou Ould Kherou's rhetorical turn to such leading figures of the Fulani pantheon as El-Hadji Oumar ibn Said Tall, Ousmane dan Fogo and Cheikhou Amadou can be seen as a means to construct a discursive bond between the two groups. Once again, these arrangements were to the mutual benefit of both groups, irrespective of the challenges to local peace and stability after MUJAO was chased out of Gao by the French forces.

Beyond the situation in Gao itself, the areas around the town and the Tilemsi Valley, what this shows is the complex and fractured local nature

of the conflict in Mali. There is not just one conflict, but many conflicts that are used, manipulated and conflated by several actors. There is no easy answer to the question of 'who is pulling the strings'. What can be said for certain is that this is not only a game of 'puppet masters': also the local 'puppets' have interests and sufficient agency to influence outcomes. Power and authority in Mali is full of local complexities that cannot be broken down into neat categories of formal vs informal. The important point is how real authority is located in-between the formal and the informal –that those who matter are those who combine positions in the formal and informal structure of the Malian political economy, so that they as 'big men' become nodal points in 'complex networks of informal governance'. This creates a particular political and social landscape of adaptation and fractures, but also continuity. Certain alliances are ad hoc, in flux and can change rapidly, because they are based on short-term opportunism (as between MUJAO and the *Cercle des notables* in Gao or between MUJAO and parts of the Fulani community in Gao). Others are based on historical alliances of power and economic privilege – like the Kunta-Ifoghas alliances seeking to protect the historical control of valuable trade routes.

8. Security and state stability in the Sahel

The security situation in the Sahel is deteriorating. All the states in this region suffer from varying levels of fragility and weak state capacity. Individually, none can respond adequately to the livelihood challenges facing their populations. The increasingly evident effects of climate change are putting traditional livelihoods under immense pressure; some areas of the Sahel are becoming dysfunctional.

With resources becoming even scarcer, new as well as old cleavages over access to natural resources are increasingly militarised, as people battle to control what matters in their lives. This has opened new spaces for violent Islamic insurgencies and transnational organised crime. In peripheral areas like northern and central Mali, there has emerged a void that neither the Malian state nor international responses have been able to deal with (Bøås 2015b).

The situation in Mali is not improving at all. Insurgencies have become a fact of life in most other Sahel states as well. The precarious security situation is further exacerbated by the almost total absence of any functional regional arrangement. In contrast to the regional warzone that developed in the Mano River Basin in the late 1990s, there is in the Sahel no regional arrangement like ECOWAS, or an obvious regional hegemon like Nigeria.

The international community can find no regional arrangement or regional hegemon on which to anchor efforts aimed at building international peace and stabilisation. The few regional arrangements existing in the Sahel today are either dysfunctional or severely hampered in their ability to execute policy by the old rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, the two strongest states in the region. That cause of regional ten-

sion is not likely to change anytime soon, and there is not much that a small external stakeholder like Norway can do, apart from taking it into consideration when national and regional policies are developed.

Also the EU has recognised this. Indeed, it is a major reason why the EU is currently putting considerable emphasis on the new regional institutional arrangement, the G5 Sahel, where Mauritania has emerged as a lead country. Mauritania is important in this regard as it has been much less affected by the rising insecurity in the Sahel than its neighbours. The last major terrorist attack in Mauritania dates back to 2011. This testifies to strength and resilience in the Mauritanian state, and Mauritania has become a key ally in the fight against terrorism and insurgents in the Sahel. However, this may prove to be a doubled-edged sword for Mauritania: it can help the country to gain much-needed assistance, but may also make it a tempting target for insurgent groups in the Sahel.

Mauritania may be less under threat from the forces of violent Islamic insurgencies than are many other Sahel countries, but it is not immune. The situation in neighbouring Mali has been going from bad to worse, with rebellions spreading also to the central regions of Gourma and Mopti. An even further implosion of the Malian state would have significant repercussions for Mauritania as well. This, in combination with the deteriorating Mauritanian economy, the frustrations of an unfinished transition to democracy and the persistent issue of slavery, could emerge as a call to arms for Mauritanian Jihadists who are currently fighting outside their country of origin but would ideally like to bring their struggle back home.

Due not least to the lack of feasible regional arrangements in the Sahel, the G5 Sahel is of

interest. This new regional body, created by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, will work to strengthen regional cooperation on security and development. Mauritania is to host the headquarters of the group, with President Aziz as its first chair. The chief aim of the G5 Sahel is to work together to identify common projects focusing on infrastructure, food security, agriculture and pastoralism – all of these being issues and sectors hosting root causes of conflict in the region. External stakeholders in search of a regional framework have greeted his initiative with considerable interest. This might well become a new functional framework of security and development integration in the Sahel.

The danger is that also G5 Sahel efforts will be framed in the same narrow ‘war on terror’ approach as other ongoing international initiatives. It remains to be seen what the outcome will be, but at least on 21 June 2017 the UN Security Council welcomed the deployment of a 5000-strong joint G5 Sahel force to tackle the threat of terrorism and the challenges posed by

transnational organised crime. This decision ended a lengthy standoff between France and the USA in the Council, with France promoting the G5 force, whereas the USA had objected to authorising the force to ‘use all necessary means’ – the most robust form of Security Council authorisation. The US argued that the mandate was too broad and that this was not legally necessary (see also *New York Times* 21 June 2017). In the final text, that language was dropped. The G5 countries will put forward 5000 troops, but somebody else will have to pay for all this. Right now, it seems highly unlikely that the money will come for the UN peacekeeping budget, as it is the USA that pays the largest share and has been pushing to reduce it. So, the USA itself will probably not pay for the G5 Sahel, and France is unlikely to be able to afford to pay the sums needed. This means that, as welcome as this initiative is in many European capitals, it is doubtful that the G5 Sahel can be much of a game changer, in the short term at least.

9. Implementing the Algiers Agreement – DDR and SSR in limbo?

Finding a negotiated settlement to the conflict between the Malian government and the MNLA has proven difficult. One main reason is that the official peace negotiating process entails outlining which of the armed actors are to benefit from the peace agreement through participation in the anticipated democratic decentralisation process as well as the DDR process aimed at integrating rebel groups into the Malian state security apparatus. This was done by distinguishing between ‘terrorist’ and ‘non-terrorist’ groups.

That may have been deemed strategically important by the external sponsors of the process and by the government in Bamako. However, the result was that all the parties involved in the Algiers Peace Talks initiated in April 2014 have negotiated not on the basis of strength and coherence, but of weakness and continuous fractures, and the most important groups in military terms have not been involved in the talks. Not only have they been defined as terrorist insurgencies: there are also limitations as to what can be negotiated with Ansar ed-Dine, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun, as these groups reject the whole concept of a modern state and the modern system of statehood.

Another main reason why the talks have been so challenging is that, as the conflict in northern Mali evolved, the MNLA gradually began to splinter along ethnic and cultural lines, leading to armed clashes between new insurgent groups in the North. When the Algiers Peace Talks began, there were more than two parties at the table. The talks between the rebels and the government were organised as two separate platforms of non-state armed groups: the CMA, and the Platform of Armed groups. Generally, the CMA

is pro-independence/pro-autonomy, whereas the Platform consists of pro-government/pro-unitary state groups. The CMA includes MNLA, *Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA), *Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA), a faction of *Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad* (CPA) and *Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II* (CMFPR II). The Platform consists of CMFPR I, splinter groups of the CPA and the MAA, and *Groupe d'autodéfense Touareg Imghad et allies* (GAITA).

Due to the lack of intra-group as well as inter-group coherence, the Algiers Talks became highly complex and challenging. There was simply no common agenda on important issues regarding autonomy, federalism and decentralisation. In the end, a peace agreement was signed on 20 June 2015, calling for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of insurgent groups to designated areas. From the outset, external observers and many Malians saw the 2015 Algiers Accord an elite affair forced through by Mali's many international partners. The process was criticised for reinforcing perceptions of the conflict as a north/south divide, and for excluding several groups, including youth, women and various marginalised ethnic groups (among others the Fulani) from the negotiations (see ICG 2015; Guichaoua and Ba-Konaré 2016).

Almost a year later, in February 2016, the signatory parties announced a timeline for the implementation of interim authorities and cantonment. In the spring of 2016, interim administrations were established in the regions of Gao, Méneka, Taoudenni and Timbuktu, with governors also taking their chairs in Mékeka and Taoudenni. Otherwise, however, not much has happened, and the slow progress of restructuring

the security sector has contributed to the significant deterioration of security during the past year. The security situation in Mali is going the wrong way, as shown by the case of FLM and the Central region.

In 2014 the Malian government, with support from key partners, framed a national security sector reform vision. Since then, the whole process has been plagued by delays.¹⁹ In January 2017, it was finally decided to start with joint patrolling in the North, consisting of a combination of Malian soldiers and militiamen belonging to the Co-ordination and the Platform. That

was the reason for establishing the camp in Gao that was attacked by *al-Mourabitoun* – clearly an attempt to create another significant setback for security sector reform and the Algiers Agreement. Whether the insurgents have managed to destroy the whole agreement remains to be seen; but their ability to keep creating new hurdles to peace in Mali is not only a testimony to their insurgent capabilities, as well as demonstrating the continued weakness of the Malian state and the ineffectiveness of the UN in Mali.

¹⁹ See Government Action Programme (PAG 2013-2018).

10. Human rights in Mali

Human rights in Mali are at risk, but we should also note that the regime in Bamako has not been actively seeking to undermine the political and human rights of its opponents. What it is guilty of is *neglect*. It not only turns a blind eye to the documented human rights abuses that include extra-judicial killings by the Malian Army in the central region (see Human Rights Watch 2016); it is also guilty of not dealing seriously with the real causes of conflict. Unfortunately, the Bamako elite seems quite content to have external partners take care of security, leaving the elite to continue their lives of ease where access to political position also opens spaces for lucrative business deals of a legal as well as illicit nature.

The Jihadist insurgents are indeed a threat to human rights. However, whereas most media accounts depict an unequivocal reign of terror under Islamist rule, serious research reveals a

more ambiguous situation where brutal violence co-exists with a non-violent governance agenda and the willingness to deliver services (see Bøås 2014; Bouhlel, Guichaoua and Jézéquel 2017). This is not to deny the appalling violence these groups have carried out against civilians, especially women. Even if most people killed by Jihadist insurgents are males, gender-based violence – including abductions and the forced marriages in Gao in 2012 – should not be underestimated. However, it is also important to note that women have successfully resisted parts of the Jihadist agenda. In Kidal, in 2012, for example, women protested the decision by Ansar ed-Dine to impose a strict embargo on their travel. What this means is that the relationship between Sahel women and Jihadi insurgents cannot be completely encapsulated in a singular narrative of dominance and violence.

11. Conclusions: risks and opportunities for Norway

The Malian crisis is not a case of an externally imposed shock. The crisis has deep historical roots, and unless these are properly acknowledged and taken into consideration, external stakeholders will stand few chances of helping Mali onto a more peaceful and stable trajectory. The crisis of 2012 is simply the most recent manifestation of a very long crisis. However, it is also the worst crisis that post-colonial Mali has faced, because of the combination of different groups of insurgents, with not only Tuareg rebels claiming greater autonomy for the north, but also a range of Salafi-inspired rebels with politico-religious agendas incompatible with international peace and reconciliation mandates.

This has made the room for a negotiated settlement very narrow from the beginning, further reduced by the tendency of the dominant external actor, France, to subsume all ongoing international efforts into a 'war on terror' discourse. That is quite convenient for the government of Bamako as it not only allows the current regime in power to run state security as an outsourced franchise operation, but is also a handy way of avoiding having to deal with the underlying internal causes of conflict and the drivers of violence. Thus, there is room and need for a new external actor with a clearly defined agenda of peace, reconciliation and local development that can contribute to reframing the Malian crisis. This is an issue that Norway should be well-placed to tackle.

Indeed it will be challenging, not least because wholehearted interest on the part of the Bamako government cannot be taken for granted. However, it is important to bear in mind that what characterises the current regime is not necessar-

ily opposition to such initiatives, but neglect in setting clear priorities. The government simply wants as much funding as it can get, and therefore tends to accept almost all donor proposals. That approach helps to reduce tensions within the government, as potentially rivalling ministries are left free to compete for donor assistance. This is not because Malian politicians do not understand the need to set priorities, but because they have other priorities: the priorities of regime survival in a weak state that exists in a fragile and fractured social environment.

The Malian state is therefore part of the problem, but it is also an integral element in any solution to the crisis in this part of the Sahel. Any external stakeholder must find credible ways of dealing with the state and the regime in power. In theory, it might be assumed that, with state capacity so weak and the country so fragile, donors should have ample opportunities to set agendas for implementation. That is not the case, because the very weakness of the state, in combination with the presence of armed Jihadist rebels, clearly strengthens the position of the government. Yes, there is much frustration, but as few see any credible alternatives, this increase the manoeuvrability of the government and makes most donors extremely reluctant to press too hard for desperately needed deep structural reforms.

This is a difficult issue that Norway cannot tackle alone, but Norway should be relatively well-placed to start asking some important questions. After all, Norway is still remembered in Mali as a relatively neutral 'friend', dating back to the Norwegian SSE initiative in the mid-1980s. Largely forgotten in Norway, it is still warmly remembered by important stakeholders in Mali.

Building on this and avoiding the pitfalls of being too biased towards the North could enable a kick-start to Norwegian programming in Mali. One way of avoiding accusations in Mali of a Northern bias would be an approach to programming that also factors in issues of interest to partners in the southernmost parts of the country. In this report, we have highlighted the mineral sector and the mining areas in the south as one possible area where Norwegian competence in administrative planning of such sectors could provide a point of joint interest.

Operating actively in a context like that of Mali will always involve risks. The security situation is precarious and even attacks in Bamako must be expected – but they are still within the range of what could be handled through well-established security protocols combined with sound

local knowledge. Another risk relates to how the conflict is framed. Any actor that chooses to promote a peace and reconciliation agenda must take measures to remain neutral with respect to the various dimensions of the conflict. Treating these tension points with care and always carefully considering the political terrain should at least minimise the potential for damage.

Therefore, we conclude that in Mali there are risks, but also opportunities for an actor with well-established policies and frameworks for peace and reconciliation work. The situation in the Sahel has become so serious that Norway does not have much choice than to contribute what it can to what seems set to remain an area of considerable concern for the EU and other European countries for the foreseeable future.

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Annex I: Insurgency groups active/ still relevant in Mali

NAMES	ETHNICITY	FOUNDED	AREA OF OPERATION	LEADERSHIP	GOAL(s)	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Mixed: Algerian, Malian (Tuareg and Berabiche), Moroccans, Mauritians etc. Core leadership of Algerian origin	2007	Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and taken responsibility for high-profile attacks in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire	Abdelmalek Droukdel (based in Algeria), is overall AQIM <i>emir</i>	Rid the Sahel of Western influence; establish sharia in a borderless Ummah in the Sahel; overthrow the Algerian government and establish an Islamic state	Funds its insurgency activities partly by taking hostages for ransom, and involvement in certain trafficking activities as a collaborating partner Took control of the major cities of Northern Mali, together with MUJAO and Ansar ed-Dine in 2012/13 Formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, established in 1998). AQIM originated with the Algerian civil war. On 2 March 2017, AQIM's Sahara/Sahel branch merged with Ansar ed-Dine, the Macina Liberation Front and al-Mourabitoun to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)	Tuareg	2011	Northern Mali	Secretary-general Bilal Ag Acherif; Spokesperson of the political wing Hama Ag Mahmoud	An independent Azawad in Northern Mali; or increased regional autonomy	Established as a merger between the National Movement of Azawad (MNA) and the National Alliance of the Tuareg of Mali. In this merger, there was no place for Iyad Ag Ghaly, who then went on to establish Ansar ed-Dine
Ansar ed-Dine (Defenders of the Faith)	Tuareg	2011	Northern Mali, the province and city of Kidal in particular	Iyad Ag Ghaly	To impose a strict Salafi-inspired version of Sharia in the whole of Mali	On 2 March 2017, Ansar ed-Dine merged with AQIM's Sahara/Sahel branch, the Macina Liberation Front and al-Mourabitoun to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)	Mixed – Arabs, Moors and some Fulani from the district of Gao	2011	Northern Mali, Southern Algeria, and Mauritania	Founded by the Mauritanian Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou	Impose Sharia and the establishment of a borderless Ummah in the Sahel	MUJAO broke away from AQIM in 2011; controlled Gao in 2012/13; in August 2013 MUJAO merged with Belmokhtar's Masked Men Brigade to form al-Mourabitoun
al-Mourabitoun	Mixed – Arab, Tuareg, but also Algerians, Tunisians and other nationalities	2013	Northern Mali, near towns as Tessalit and Ansongo	Founded by Mokhtar Belmokhtar	Impose Sharia and the establishment of a borderless ummah in the Sahel; overthrow the Algerian government	Formed as merger with MUJAO after Belmokhtar's Masked Men Brigade had attacked In Aménas in Algeria; Joined AQIM in 2015; on 2 March 2017, al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM's Sahara/Sahel branch, and the Macina Liberation Front to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

Annex I: Insurgency groups active/still relevant in Mali | Boubacar Ba and Morten Bøås

NAMES	ETHNICITY	FOUNDED	AREA OF OPERATION	LEADERSHIP	GOAL(s)	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
Macina Liberation Front (FLM) AKA. Katibat Macina	Fulani (almost exclusively)	2015	Central region of Mali	Amadou Koufa	Restoration of an ancient Fulani kingdom and impose Sharia; local grievances important for recruitment; sporadically radicalised (?)	Initially a connection to Iyad Ag Ghaly and Ansar ed-Dine, but unclear how strong this is/was; on 2 March 2017, FLM merged with AQIM's Sahara/Sahel branch, Ansar ed-Dine and al-Mourabitoun to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (The Group in Support of Islam and Muslims)	Multi-ethnic as this is an attempt to create a new Salafi superstructure in the Sahel	2017	Mainly Mali, but aims to create much larger regional insurgency	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Impose Sharia and the establishment of a borderless ummah in the Sahel	Merger involving AQIM, MLF, al-Mourabitoun and Ansar ed-Dine; declared allegiance to al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahir and AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdel. He officially approved the new group on 16 March 2017 and accepted their oath of allegiance

Annex II: Main donor support for governance, security and development (Mali/Sahel)

Donors	Interventions	Partners	Intervention area
United Nations	Recovery and stabilisation; Governance; Security; Humanitarian aid	MINUSMA; UN Offices/Agencies	Mali
European Union	Governance; Security; Development	Civilian missions; EUCAP-SAHEL; EUTM; Malian state	Mali and Niger
African Union	Governance; Security; Development	Malian state; Civil society	Mali
ECOWAS	Security; Peace; Governance	Malian state; Civil society	Mali
G5 Sahel	Security; Governance; Infrastructure; Populations' resilience	EU; Malian state; Civil society	Mali Niger Mauritania Chad Burkina Faso
African Development Bank	Food and nutrition	Malian state; Civil society; Local communities	Kayes, Koulikoro, Segou, Sikasso and Mopti
World Bank	Women empowerment and demographic dividends; Pastoralism in the Sahel region; Irrigation of the Sahel	Malian state; Civil society; Private sector; Local communities	Mali Burkina Niger Chad Niger

Donors	Interventions	Partners	Intervention area
France	Water and sanitation; Security and development; Youth employment; Fight against radicalisation	French Agency for Development (AFD); Association of the local administrative areas of Mali; Malian State; Civil society; Private sector; Local communities	Mali – all regions
Denmark Sweden	Democracy, peace and reconciliation; Access to water and sanitation; Promotion of the private sector Governance Community security Environment	Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD); Malian state Civil society Private sector International NGOs (AEN, Diakonia, Helvetas); Malian state; Civil society; Local communities	Mali (Mopti, Segou, Timbuktu, Gao) Mali – all regions
Netherlands	Governance Justice State of right Development Health Education	International NGOs (AEN, NEE, SNV, OXFAM); Malian state; Local communities; Civil society (Clinic DEME-SO)	Mali – all regions
Canada	Justice; Peace and Reconciliation; Fight against corruption	Malian state; Local communities; Civil society	Mali (Bamako, Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu)
Germany	Development; Peace and Reconciliation; Justice	International organisations (GIZ, PACT); Malian state; Local collectives	Mali (Gao, Timbuktu, Mopti)
USA	Security; Governance; Peace and reconciliation	State; Civil society; Local communities	Mali
USAID	Development; Education; Health	Malian state; Civil society; Local communities	Mali (Bamako Kayes, Sikasso, Mopti, Timbuktu)



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