

Azawad and the rights of passage: the role of illicit trade in the logic of armed group formation in northern Mali

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■ Executive summary

Over the past decade the displacement of narcotics supply lines has placed the remote and marginalised Sahara-Sahel region on the international drug route to the European market. Border control has become of primary importance, and an essential part of understanding the dynamics of competing political claims and armed movements.

Secessionist, jihadist and statist political projects in northern Mali must now be interpreted in the light of dynamics of protection and extraction. In particular, the customary system of the *droits de passage* (rights of passage) has been transformed by the leap in scale and nature of traditional desert contraband. New actors have arisen, while others have been sidelined as various groups contend for the protection of illicit trade.

This report explores the micro-level processes by which illicit economies have reshaped political and armed mobilisation. It explores the ways Tuareg traditions and grievances have been reconfigured under the influence of new illicit revenues. It also examines the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, a jihadist splinter group that took control of the city of Gao in 2012 when it aligned with business figures seeking to wrest control over trafficking from rival Tuareg groups. In this context, both nationalism and jihadism tend to mask acute social tensions in the region.

Introduction

At the heart of the conflict that flared up when the Malian army was attacked by Tuareg and other rebel formations in January 2012 were three distinct geopolitical visions. One was the notion of national liberation, fuelling secessionist claims for an independent state in northern Mali that would be called “Azawad”. The second was that of returning this vast semi-desert region of Mali to the control of the capital, Bamako. The third – and most widely known outside Mali – was the emergence of a jihadist project pursuing the idea of an emirate in the Sahara, the establishment of a broader Islamist system governing through sharia law, and the potential embryo of an expanding caliphate.

While these three political blueprints – separatist, statist and jihadist – would go through multiple schisms and compromises over the months following the start of the conflict,¹ each simultaneously drew on a set of concrete interests and survival needs. Above all, each objective

aligned with the opportunities for reproduction and expansion in a region where one of the main competitive advantages is that offered by extra-legal and criminal activities.

History shows that extraction and protection rackets are key dimensions of state-making (Tilly, 1985). Yet there are vast differences between the conditions of state formation in Europe and the way in which extraction and protection are carried out by armed groups operating in contemporary conflicts or in contexts of non-conventional armed violence. Evidence as to who sponsors what and who fights whom in northern Mali reveals a kaleidoscope of overlapping yet distinct armed actors, many of whom could be described as non-conventional. To understand the logic behind this proliferation process, this report explores one crucial issue, i.e. how the mobilisation of economic resources by armed actors interacts with the three “geopolitical imaginaries” described above (Dalby, 2010; Mignolo, 2000).

¹ The directives sent by the al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) supreme sultan, Droukdel, to his men in Timbuktu confirm the divisions about strategic views on how to establish an Islamic state in northern Mali and how to apply sharia (Callimachi, 2014).

A significant body of literature has already shed light on how organised crime affected stability in Mali (Briscoe, 2014; Shaw & Tinti, 2014). This report will instead focus on the nexus between trafficking and instability in the Sahel by examining the micro-political level.² It focuses on Tuareg nationalism, and on the emergence and consolidation of fighting Islamist formations, above all the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Bamako's interests, meanwhile, are addressed in less depth here, although it is important to note that smugglers and traffickers have enjoyed varying degrees of complicity with high-ranking Malian state and security officials.

The Tuaregs and the state built on sand

The Tuaregs' geopolitical aspirations are problematic and paradoxical. Tuareg nationalism aims to embed the aspiration to national independence in a specific territory. However, the claim for independent statehood is at cross purposes with the traditional self-understanding of the Tuaregs as an uprooted community, a warrior-like nomadic people with no attachment to the land they roam. As far back as Ibn Khaldun's 14th century work *Prolegomena* there is recognition of a radical opposition between the state and the organisation of nomadic peoples (Bourgeot, 1995; 1999; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980; Van der Pijl, 2007). A large part of British military historiography also rests on the distinction between the elusive, indirect warfare of nomadic armies and the path taken by war in Western civilisation (Keegan, 1993).

The Sahel's coterie of armed groups is dynamic and diverse. In Mali, the process of endless name changing among armed actors must be understood: armed factions tend to change and morph into new acronyms, leaving the observer in doubt about who is fighting or outflanking whom, and making identity itself instrumental to an extremely asymmetrical war context. One can hardly find examples of last-ditch battles between clearly identified enemies; battle avoidance is the rule.

Against this background one may even wonder what, ultimately, was the sense of the armed uprising that in the early months of 2012 mobilised a nomadic national identity in a military offensive that would lead to the proclamation of the independent state of Azawad.

The Sahara desert can be described as a space that is inherently impossible to master, and that is unfit to sustain clear-cut borders and discrete sovereign entities. In this "smooth space" – as the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1980) would call it – states are often characterised as weak, fragile and non-functioning. Across their porous borders, smuggling and trafficking have always

been less of an anomaly deserving explanation than the norm. Research on the Saharan space makes ample use of notions such as "connectivity" (Austen, 2010; Brachet et al., 2011; McDougall & Scheele, 2012). Scholars have stressed the importance of "limitless", "frictionless" cross-border relationships as the type of social relation that harsh living conditions and extreme environmental challenges impose in a sparsely populated area.

At the same time security concerns have drawn attention to long-range trafficking and criminal networks in the Sahel and across Mali: the illicit trade in drugs and weapons, as well as the smuggling of human beings, cigarettes and subsidised products, has been scrutinised as part of an emerging war economy (Lacher, 2012; Lebovich, 2013a; Musilli & Smith, 2013; Scheele, 2009; 2011; 2012; Shaw & Tinti, 2014). To this context a political aspiration to secession that is articulated in terms of building new borders seems to contradict the reality of an economy of survival and exchange that requires openness, porous borders and little law enforcement.

The Tuaregs' aspiration to an independent state of Azawad thus appears to be paradoxical, to say the least. Nonetheless, this apparent contradiction may be illuminated by considering the dramatic changes in northern Mali over the past 20 years. The geopolitical value of the arid and semi-arid northern region that policymakers in Bamako used to dismiss as "*le Mali inutile*" has risen hugely, and so have the economic and political stakes in controlling it.

Borders and the sense of space

Despite the idea of nomadic rootlessness that is often employed to describe them, the Tuaregs have historically enjoyed, so-called *droits de passage* or "rights of passage" on the space they claimed as "theirs". This customary institution regulates a distinctive form of engagement with the land and its use that differs from the classical right of property and land tenure. As a former Tuareg fighter put it:

One couldn't say that Sahara is a no-man's land. We just have a different sense of space. In our culture, the land is given in common to the whole community. No one has the right to keep me out, nor deny the authorisation to graze my cattle. Nevertheless, it is my duty to ask permission to do so. It is the same with the right of passage, which is a tribute paid to the locals so that they grant you protection on their territory. Indeed, it is not a right; it is a matter of respect and recognition. It's about the acknowledgment of local leaderships.³

The varying and symbolic amount requested as a tribute suggests that the right of passage provides a flexible form of engagement with one's own land. The peculiarity of

² Fieldwork interviews were conducted in Bamako (Mali) and Niamey (Niger) between November and December 2013. Additional interviews were conducted in October–November 2014 by Luca Raineri, to whom I am grateful for sharing his field notes. Most interviews were conducted under the guarantee of anonymity. Part of the research on secondary sources was conducted in the framework of the project "Organized and/or Transnational Criminal Cartel Nexus with Illicit Radiological/Nuclear (RN) Trade, Smuggling and/or Terrorism in Europe and North, Sahelian, and West Africa" (College Park, MD: START 2014).

³ Author's interview with a former Tuareg fighter who joined the ARLA rebel movement, now integrated into the Malian administration, Bamako, November 20th 2013.

Tuareg traditions of spatial organisation is further reinforced by the lack of any exclusive property ownership: “trespassing does not exist because of the absence of land that has been divided up and legally distributed” (Lecocq, 2010: 113).

Political organisation among the Tuaregs, meanwhile, is interlinked with spatial organisation, as relatively weak forms of political allegiance correspond to weak patterns of territorial control. Whereas private land ownership and closed state borders can be viewed as parallel political institutions in the Western tradition, no right of exclusion informs the traditional notion of the right of passage.

These strong traditions, however, have not proved enough to help Tuareg spatial organisation withstand the shock produced by massive demographic imbalances, migratory flows and state-induced resettlement into so-called Saharatown (Brachet et al., 2011; Dumont, 2012; Heinrigs, 2010; Maertens, 2011). The customary system of the *droits de passage* has been upset by a further element: the intensification, followed by the leap in scale and nature of traditional desert *troc* (barter/contraband). Above all, the displacement of narcotics supply lines due to increased interdiction along other global routes has made northern Mali a part of the international drug trade heading toward the European market.

New illicit flows

This shift into the trafficking business has greatly affected the rise of new interest groups and caused the marginalisation of others who would not adapt to changing conditions. Young people from the north have been involved as drivers and convoy escorts, thereby developing a vested interest in mobility (illicit commodities produce revenue only so long as they move). Most of the cars found in Mali come from Europe after a long journey across Morocco and Mauritania (Mizokami, 2013). Four-by-fours have long been supplied with Mauritanian papers: Nouakchott earned a reputation as the main destination for trafficked cars coming from Europe via Morocco. Furthermore, many cars used for official business in the region have been attacked, as have those belonging to local non-governmental organisations. Cheap, handy on sandy tracks, and easy to maintain, Toyota 4x4 pickup trucks are the vehicle of choice for both illicit commodity transportation and military confrontations.

Illicit trading in this region has been assisted not only by hidden fuel depots along the route, but also by the advent of new technologies such as global positioning system (GPS) navigation devices and satellite phones. Commodities travel quickly in convoys, often from a given *garaj* to agreed-on GPS coordinates. Mali’s 119 border posts, for their part, lack men, computers and drug testers.

The surface of the northern territory amounts to two-thirds of the country’s territory: effective police operations in such a vast desert are virtually impossible, given the level of organisation and armed protection attained by traffickers. Meanwhile, as criminal activities became more profitable,

the collectivist logic of ethnic or tribal group cohesion was increasingly undermined. In Judith Scheele’s words

small [smuggling] networks do not explicitly rely on tribal links, but they nevertheless reproduce the major divisions to the extent that these determine everyday social ties, shared material interests and marriage alliances In contrast, drug trafficking is described as a means for an individual to get rich fast, to the detriment of wider solidarities (Scheele, 2009: 84-85).

This transition should be understood in terms of criminal mobility. Increasing amounts of drugs transported across North Africa since the mid-2000s – above all cocaine landing on the West African coast – have generated enormous profits (ECMDDA–EUROPOL, 2013; UNODC, 2009; 2011). As the flow of cash grew, vehicles were often given to local drivers and facilitators as a reward. Local actors implicated in the most profitable trafficking activities were able to organise their own illicit ventures. Simultaneously, increased territorial mobility and better navigation technology entailed less reliance on local actors’ knowledge and infrastructure, resulting in a stronger temptation to bypass them, ignore their territorial control or impose a new system of control through military strength. Abundant supplies of weapons, first from West Africa and then from Libya, provided a decisive boost to criminal reorganisation: facilitators and couriers were tempted to “move up” the illicit value chain from a role of simple service providers to one of entrepreneurs. This in turn resulted in greater competition, more territorial uncertainty, the upsetting of existing alliances and less political stability.

The dynamics set in motion by intensified flows of drugs, weapons, and migrants undermined existing group and intra-group hierarchies. By the late 2000s a series of episodes, such as night ambushes and the abduction of rival families’ members, signalled a violent escalation among competing groups. For example, in January 2010 in the Kidal region, Tilemsi Arabs – a vassal group – kidnapped a Kunta chief, Baba Ould Sidi El Moctar. The episode should be seen as a response to Tuareg Ifoghas and Arab Kuntas joining forces and capturing a Tilemsi drug cargo. In a clear sign of this incident’s significance for Malian stability, El Moctar was released following the direct intervention of the country’s president, Amadou Toumani Touré (Diarra, 2013).

Over the same period the kidnapping business flourished under the aegis of Salafist fighters driven out of Algeria by that country’s security forces. In order to remain elusive, al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) *khatibas* (battalions) would typically hand over money received from ransoms to drugs traffickers as a form of investment. Depending on the situation and the source, up to half of the profits generated from drug trafficking would be paid back in kind to AQIM via weapons, ammunition, 4x4 vehicles and other equipment. Traffickers would typically buy arms on

behalf of terrorist groups, who avoided exposing themselves.

By the beginning of the 2000s in southern Algerian towns such as Ouargla, Tamanrasset, El Oued and Illizi it had become easier to buy a Kalashnikov than a car (Botha, 2009). This was in many ways unprecedented, especially if one considers how difficult it had been for previous Tuareg rebellions to find weapons (Florquin & Pézard 2005). Shaw and Mangan (2014) identify three ways in which local communities are involved in trafficking. Where the *droits de passage* are consolidated and local tribal groups are in control of a tract of territory, traffickers may not need external protection, but only facilitation or a guide in exchange for paying a fee or toll. In conditions of high uncertainty where *droits de passages* are disputed and no single group is in control of the territory, traffickers arrange the deal directly with their contacts, carry arms and employ armed groups to provide extra security. To transit borders through outlying areas of control local armed groups may combine the two methods: protection on their own territory and facilitation beyond it through guidance and specialised intermediation skills.

Paradoxically, therefore, the marginalisation and remoteness of the Sahara-Sahel region shaped the emergence of new opportunities for extracting resources. The geopolitical value of the control of desert routes skyrocketed, especially in the remotest areas of northern Mali. Even so, the initial involvement of local Tuareg in the race to grab the revenues linked with rights of passage was limited. A prominent representative of the small Tuareg presence in Bamako contends that

at first local Tuareg tribesmen were simple conveyors. They sold their expertise and knowledge of the territory, without questioning what could be the content of the boxes they were requested to carry. Little by little, however, local people realised the business opportunity and progressively attempted to step in. That's how the rights of passage, in exchange for silence, have been restored.⁴

A local humanitarian worker who assisted the victims of war throughout the conflict in northern Mali provided further details of the interplay between *éclaireurs* and *coupeurs de route* (those assisting the illicit traffic and others seeking to block it):

The most sensitive freights travel by night on 4x4 vehicles with the lights off. Locally recruited scouts are deployed in strategic places to provide surveillance and assist the border crossing. Arabs are the main traffickers. Tuareg initially limited themselves to

ambushing the cargoes and seizing the transported goods; then, little by little, they entered the business. Local drivers recruited to carry out cross-border deliveries earn up to 1.5 million euros per trip and are allowed to keep the car for themselves.⁵

The profits generated by drug trafficking cannot be compared with any other income-generating activity in the north. Involvement in drug trafficking, even if only in a sporadic and temporary way, has provided an opportunity for the social redemption of young people, to whom it granted geographic and social mobility (Richards, 1996).

But there is more to this process than individual mobility and enrichment. A letter by Lieutenant Demoulin in 1928 described with a coloniser's eye the social organisation of the Tuaregs in large federations and hierarchical structures, including the social cleavage between the leading Ifoghas clan, made up of warriors disposed to raiding, and the vassal Imghad clan, which lived off trade (Demoulin, 1928). This clan structure is important in the context of illicit business, given the way in which fast money represents a form of social mobility that is especially attractive to subordinate groups.

By 2007-08 – the period considered to mark the high watermark of drug trafficking in northern Mali – the Tuaregs were well positioned in the market and could exploit the comparative advantage generated by their knowledge of the territory so as to claim a dividend in the criminal enterprise. Before Mali's collapse, much of the north, specifically Kidal, was controlled by an increasingly complex patchwork of militiamen "who sought to collect rents and levy taxes on goods passing through their territory" (Shaw & Tinti, 2014: 15). The rights of passage are key: "Kidal's role as a base for the traffickers was critical in the 2006-07 Tuareg rebellion. Although the rebels focused on political demands, competition over control of the drug routes became part of the fight" (Musilli & Smith, 2013: 5). Enhanced competition among armed groups for the extraction of resources and the protection of drug routes, coupled with the availability of conspicuous financial and military means, gave rise to an explosive admixture, ultimately resulting in the war of 2012 (Musilli & Smith, 2013).

These transformations also brought about a complete "territorialisation" of the region. In other words, the "smooth space" that characterised the Azawad lands has been converted into a mosaic of mutually exclusive intertwined tiles (Bourgeot, 1999). In Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) language, it would be legitimate to describe this process, in which land ownership, private property and secured tenure patterns emerge, in terms of "striation", i.e. sections or strips of territory with similar features.⁶

⁴ Author's interview, Bamako, November 22nd 2013.

⁵ Author's interview, Bamako, November 24th 2013. Although the source proved trustworthy and well informed, one may doubt that these figures are realistic. See also Scheele (2012).

⁶ Striated spaces are necessarily associated with the consolidation of stable communities, order and, ultimately, modern states, since they are constituted by closed linear borders and mutually exclusive sovereignties.

The control of frontiers and borderlines cross-cutting drug trade routes came to be a material resource of primary importance (Bach, 2014). This, one may argue, is crucial to understanding the conversion experienced by Tuareg rebel movements from the political claims articulated in terms of identity and non-discrimination in the 1960s and 1990s to contemporary aspirations couched in terms of territorial claims, national independence and bounded statehood. Nationalist projects and the geopolitical imaginary of a nomadic state are inextricably linked to the emerging patterns of illicit criminal economies.

Ethnic and social roots of the MUJAO

Since the outbreak of the conflict in North Mali most available studies on armed groups have focused on AQIM and the Tuareg nationalist movement, represented in particular by the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA). Iyad ag Ghali's Ansar ed-Din, both a Tuareg and an Islamist movement, is often included as well. Less attention has been devoted to the armed group that consolidated its presence in the Gao region and which has proved to be dangerous and resilient well beyond the onset of the French military intervention in January 2013: the MUJAO.

Gao's role as a major intersection of trading routes and smuggling networks makes the MUJAO particularly interesting. Competing efforts to control and govern Gao were expressive of a conflict that linked long-standing ethnic rivalries, transnational organised crime and global jihadism. It is precisely because of its diverse connections with the surrounding social world that the MUJAO should be seen, as Lebovich (2013b: 5) argues, as "a political and social object, not a pathology".

On October 23rd 2011 three European humanitarian workers (two Spanish and one Italian) were kidnapped in the refugee camps of Tindouf, the heavily militarised area of southern Algeria that is under the control of the Saharawi's Polisario army. A few weeks later, on December 12th, a video was circulated where responsibility for the act was claimed by a new armed movement: the MUJAO was officially born. Immediately afterwards Mauritania issued four arrest warrants. One was directed against the person appearing in the video, a well-known Mauritanian jihadi called Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (also known as "Abu Qumqum" for his ability to handle explosives). He is a former AQIM leader and propaganda activist, reportedly close to the emir Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Another warrant targets a different Mauritanian citizen: Mustapha Ould

Limame Chafi, a very influential Moor with close links to several presidents in the region.⁷

Why did these militants set up in the middle of the Sahara a new jihadi movement that appeared to be an AQIM splinter? Competition was certainly tough at the time, with AQIM *khatibas* fully operational and Iyad ag Ghali about to make a remarkable comeback, sweeping away MNLA formations. One may assume that these circumstances did not leave much room for manoeuvre for newcomers. Furthermore, in the previous months AQIM had proved to be relatively flexible, accommodating, absorbing and franchising semi-autonomous groups such as Yahya Abou al-Hamam's al-Furqan squadron, Belmokhtar's al-Moulathamain (alias "the Masked Ones"), Abou Zeid's Tarek Ibn Ziyad, and the Tuareg al-Ansar and Youssef Ibn Tachfin battalions, which were respectively headed by Abdelkarim Le Targui (Ghali's cousin) and Abdelhakim al-Kidali.

In search of a *raison d'être*

A fresh split in the jihadi front is thus a fact in search of an explanation. Some observers initially considered that the MUJAO's fundamental *raison d'être* was to be found in the need to stress its "black African" identity, distancing its jihadis from the geographic and cultural focus on the traditional Arab identity of other militant groups. Both the MUJAO's name and the content of its first propaganda mentioned several historical figures of local "black" Islamism and the anti-colonial struggle. Ould Kheirou himself stood out for his efforts in propaganda videos to target West Africans, for instance by deliberately appearing alongside black AQIM recruits from Senegal, Guinea, Mali and Niger. Although Ould Kheirou himself is a "white" Moor, early Western analyses assumed that the group was led by black Africans.

Subsequent communications and statements from the MUJAO, however, did little to help clarify the movement's leadership and structure. Observers in Gao affirmed that "80 to 90 percent of MUJAO's membership was composed of Arabs and Moors coming from Mauritania, Algeria, and the Saharawi Polisario ranks".⁸ Arabs and Moors from the Tilemsi region north of Gao were also reportedly prevalent in the MUJAO's ranks (Daniel, 2012). Local sources also consistently named a handful of Tilemsi businessmen "with known involvement in drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom as the MUJAO's real masters and financiers, including Cherif Ould Taher and Mohamed Ould Ahmed 'Rouji'" (Lacher, 2012: 12). The former was implicated in the notorious "Air Cocaine" affair,⁹ while the liberation of

7 Mustapha Ould Limame Chafi was rumoured to be very close to Burkina Faso's then-president, Blaise Compaoré, Niger's President Mamadou Issoufou, Guinea's former president, Dadis Camara, and Ivory Coast prime minister Guillaume Soro. In different circumstances he was reported to have visited the two most wanted AQIM emirs in the Sahel at that time, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. He was also a close collaborator of media agency Agence Nouackchott d'Information, a private Mauritanian network that has achieved a global audience by circulating AQIM's public statements and videos. He also negotiated the liberation of the European and Canadian hostages kidnapped in Niger in 2008-09, as well as the liberation of Oumar Ould Hamaha and Mohamed Ould Ahmed Deya "Rouji" (one of the MUJAO's main sponsors in Gao; see Lacher, 2012) in the framework of the negotiated release of three Spanish humanitarian workers kidnapped in Mauritania in 2009.

8 Author's interviews with Gao residents, Bamako, November 21st and 25th 2013.

9 In early November 2009 the fuselage of a Boeing 727 believed to have been transporting up to ten tons of cocaine was found in the desert north of Gao in an area traditionally controlled by the Tilemsi Arabs. The case came to be known as "Air Cocaine".

the latter was negotiated in exchange for the release of the Spanish hostages referred to above.

Interviewees from Gao added to this list two other prominent Tilemsi Arabs, who more or less directly backed the MUJAO's hold over Gao; one of these was Baba Ould Cheick, mayor of Tarkint and personal adviser to the former president, Amadou Toumani Touré. Ould Cheick is another name reportedly implicated in the "Air Cocaine" affair. Together with him one often finds the name of Mohamed Ould Mataly, a rich Tilemsi businessman who had been a representative of the Bourem constituency in Mali's National Assembly between 2002 and 2007, before being defeated in 2007 by Ibrahim Mohamed Ag Assaleh, a prominent Imghad Tuareg.¹⁰ According to Wikileaks cables, Ould Mataly offered to act as intermediary for the liberation of European hostages held by AQIM in spring 2008 and early 2009, claiming to be in contact with the kidnapers.¹¹

Moor solidarity stretches far beyond the Tilemsi valley north of Gao and also includes the Lamhar and Bérabiche groups, among the Arab minorities of the Timbuktu region. It also goes as far as to include the Saharawi people and some groups in Mauritania, whose closeness with the Bérabiches is often claimed.

However, in the Malian Arab community a major political cleavage – with great significance for understanding the character of the MUJAO – runs between the Kunta tribe and their traditional vassals, the Tilemsi-Lamhar. The Kuntas are generally described as a high-caste tribe whose political and economic pre-eminence in the region derives from their alleged descent from the Prophet (Scheele, 2012). From this point of view the Kunta-Tilemsi divide is to a significant extent an Arab equivalent to the one opposing Ifoghas and Imghad clans among the Tuaregs. It is worth noting in this regard that former Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré pursued a policy that tried to empower the Lamhar-Tilemsi tribes so as to offset the Kuntas, in a way that parallels his approach to the Imghad and Ifoghas: i.e. he turned a blind eye to the former's growing involvement in trafficking activities and drug smuggling. Unsurprisingly, Kuntas and Ifoghas often joined forces in defence of the status quo among northern Mali's "white" communities.

The Kuntas have enjoyed a leading economic position in the area since the start of the 20th century (Scheele, 2009; 2012). Due to their links and family networks, they controlled the trading routes across the borders, especially towards

Algeria. Kunta *grand patrons* often employed other Arabs from vassal tribes, from whom they demanded tributes. Together with the second Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali during the 1990s, the conflict between the Arabs and Kuntas eroded the balance of power and social hierarchy in the Tilemsi region. According to Scheele (2009: 87):

since 2000, economic success in the Lahda fraud¹² first, then in the smuggling of cigarettes and weapons (during the rebellion), empowers the Lamhar and encourages them to challenge the order of things. ... When, in 2002, one of them decides to run for local elections, and others, encouraged by this example, refuse to pay the traditional toll, war is declared: as a result, several personalities on both sides get killed. Some Kunta then seek refuge with the Tuareg tribes from Kel Adagh who remained "faithful" to them.

The traditional alliance between the Kuntas and the Ifoghas was thus reinforced. By 2006 control of smuggling routes played an important role in the deepening of existing divisions. Arab traders and traffickers preferred to go via the direct road from Gao to the Algerian border town of in-Khalil to avoid the Kidal region, which was considered "too expensive" and home to "local fraudsters" – i.e. Tuaregs (Scheele, 2009). It is only against this background that the emergence of the MUJAO in late 2011 becomes fully intelligible.¹³

Even the corporal punishment and other applications of sharia law in Gao by MUJAO militants can be seen – to a certain extent, at least – as ethnically biased: "the high-profile punishments were little more than a public brandishing of Islamist credentials. In actuality, they say, the application of sharia was haphazard, arbitrary, and often personal" (Tinti, 2013).¹⁴ It comes as no surprise that the peak in the MUJAO's fanaticism – the destruction of a Sufi mausoleum 330 km north of Gao on September 15th 2012 – was in fact an act of desecration targeting a symbolic place of worship of the Kunta community.

Jihadism without borders: interests and ideology

The fact that ideology and doctrine play a limited role in these events is confirmed by a report issued by the Malian authorities in 2010, in which Souldan Ould Bady, once of the MUJAO's first leaders, was identified as a "top drug trafficker with ties with a gang whose members were arrested in neighbouring Mauritania and suspected of trafficking drugs to Europe" (Raby, 2011). If one considers the most widely circulated public statements by the MUJAO, France stands out as the group's prime enemy.

10 Reportedly, in 2012-13 Ibrahim Mohamed Ag Assaleh was a member of the executive commission of the MNLA. During the post-conflict parliamentary elections in Mali, held in November 2013, Ould Mataly was re-elected for the constituency of Bourem as a candidate for the RPM, the party of Mali's newly elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

11 See Wikileaks: <<http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/02/09BAMAKO71.html>>. Further evidence is provided by recent reports that consider the two individuals to be in close contact (Musilli & Smith, 2013).

12 The "Lahda fraud" refers to the trafficking of subsidised products from Algeria to Mali.

13 According to Lebovich (2013b: 13), "local conflicts, such as the one between ... Lamhar and Kunta Arabs, may have played a significant role in influencing MUJAO actions and recruitment in Gao".

14 Throughout the whole period in which northern Mali was under the control of jihadist groups, AQIM was responsible for a single case of amputation, whereas the MUJAO performed approximately 15, with increasing brutality, in Gao and its surroundings (Armstrong, 2013).

Already in late 2011 high-profile MUJAO exponents were issuing threats against France: this trend intensified in videos dating from early 2012 and 2013, when Paris launched its military intervention in Mali known as Operation Serval. But beyond the smokescreen of rhetorical virulence the MUJAO's initial operations did not target specifically France or French interests. On the contrary, most of its attacks have focused on Algeria.¹⁵

On March 3rd 2012 the MUJAO attacked the headquarters of the gendarmerie in the southern Algerian city of Tamanrasset, injuring 23 people (Cristiani, 2012). Tamanrasset is a highly militarised city, home to the Algerian army's 6th Division. By that date the MUJAO already possessed remarkable logistical and military capacity. On April 5th 2012 the group attacked the Algerian consulate in Gao, kidnapping the consul and six other diplomats. A few weeks later, on April 29th, the MUJAO attacked a convoy of oil trucks at Tin Zaouatine in southern Algeria; the assault was repelled by Algerian attack helicopters. These episodes can be read as evidence that the MUJAO had by then managed to cut out the Tuareg MNLA from control of the north-south route connecting Mali to Algeria.

On June 29th 2012 the MUJAO claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing against the Ourgala police station that left one dead and three injured. Ourgala lies in the heart of Algerian territory (800 km from Algiers) and can be described as Algeria's gas capital. The attack on the Algerian gas plant in In Amenas in January 2013, resulting in 69 deaths, was thus neither an isolated nor an exceptional episode. The al-Muwaqqi'un bi-d-Dimā' (i.e. Those Who Sign with Blood) – the armed group that carried out the attack – was made up of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's former al-Moulathamin fighters and some MUJAO militiamen. It should come as no surprise that on August 8th the MUJAO announced that it had fused with Belmokhtar's *khatiba* to form a united organisation called Al-Mourabitoune, "the Almoravides" (an explicit reference to the Moor dynasty that ruled over western Sahara in the 11th and 12th centuries).

Unlike other armed groups operating in northern Mali, the MUJAO never seemed to consider the state of Mali the target of its public statements. Tellingly, local sources report that during the popular uprising that swept Gao in late June 2012, which chased out the MNLA and allowed the MUJAO to establish its grip over the city, the crowd that gathered in the symbolic Place des Martyrs (in memory of those who died for Mali's independence) shouted "Mali!

Mali!" and waved Malian national flags.¹⁶ Indeed, as local sources confirmed to us, the MUJAO proposed "no dis-course of liberation or emancipation whatsoever, nor did they ever put forward the formation of their own state. As a matter of fact, they do not want a state at all."¹⁷

Against the Tuareg ethno-nationalism of the MNLA, Arab-based movements preached the ideology of borderless jihadism, claiming that custom duties and tariffs are illicit under sharia law. In Timbuktu local jihadi movements (i.e. AQIM and allies) reportedly tried to conquer the hearts and minds of local residents by launching an impressive campaign in favour of traders, traffickers and smugglers, explicitly stating that customs duties, tolls, tariffs and frontiers would no longer be enforced.¹⁸ Similarly, a propaganda video produced by the MUJAO and screened on Gao's local television during the summer of 2012 explicitly set out the message the MUJAO wanted to be identified with: against the background of an Islamic police vehicle painted in the MUJAO colours, a bearded Arab man said the following words: "we started prohibiting what Allah the almighty has forbidden, including tolls, customs, taxation and fining people. Trading has returned to normal; more goods are available than before, and at lower prices."¹⁹

Indeed, living conditions in the city seemed to improve, at least initially. As custom duties and taxes were banned, or were simply bypassed with the backing of the jihadist authorities, the prices of food and petrol dropped, especially those of commodities imported from Algeria. According to the instructions of the MUJAO's emir in Gao, Abdel Hakim, sharia law was enforced gradually and progressively. Pragmatism was displayed in various ways: "when residents demonstrated against an edict banning television, video games, and soccer, Abdel Hakim backed down and even bought televisions for several youth associations" (Armstrong, 2013).²⁰ Soon the MUJAO gained the backing of Gao's *cercle des notables*, the most widely recognised local representative body. This institution's membership is slightly but significantly different from the traditional leadership, inasmuch as it is entirely informal and open to non-aristocratic members of civil society, i.e. wealthy merchants.

Three notables volunteered to act as mediators between the MUJAO and the local population throughout the period of Islamist control over the city. They were Ali Badi Maiga, Mohamed Baye Maiga and (once again) Mohamed Ould Mataly, i.e. two local Songhais and one Tilemsi Arab. The three men are all prosperous, with fortunes allegedly linked to illicit trafficking and criminal activities, and in

15 This weakens the idea that the MUJAO, supposedly like other jihadist movements in the region such as Ansar ed-Din and AQIM, is controlled by a "deep state" structure in Algeria [see Gèze, 2013; Keenan, 2013].

16 Author's interviews with Gao residents, Bamako, November 21st and 25th 2013. Local interviewees say that Belmokhtar's ten-year-old son joined the clashes, handling a Kalashnikov against MNLA fighters in Gao and thereby showing Belmokhtar's closeness to the MUJAO.

17 Author's interviews with Gao residents, Bamako, November 28th 2013.

18 Author's interviews with Arab leaders from the region of Timbuktu, Bamako, November 29th 2013.

19 Video available at <<http://jihadology.net/2012/08/page/8/>>, quote from min. 10.02.

20 However, as sharia law enforcement grew harsher and interference with private life more unbearable, including the seizure of cell phones by "security agents", the destruction of video games and the public beating of individuals with cigarettes, local youth protested more vehemently. In some cases mass protests forced the MUJAO to change course.

need of armed protection. Gao's residents recognised them as legitimate representatives, de facto sidelining more traditional leaders. Eroded by modernity and discredited by decades of bad governance, the traditional leaders eventually capitulated. The symbiotic relation between the above-mentioned mediating notables and the MUJAO's leadership raised much speculation: the notables have been seen as conniving with the MUJAO (Takiou, 2012).

There is little doubt that, beyond religious zeal, merchants, smugglers and traders from among northern Mali's Arab population benefitted from this approach. Local sources confirm that the MUJAO's sponsors and supporters included drug and cigarette dealers from Gao, whose true aim was to "keep the frontiers open", since reportedly they were

the very same persons involved in large-scale trafficking of human beings across Malian borders. They took advantage of the war in order to take away this major business from the hands of the Algerians, who until then enjoyed the largest stake.²¹

Likewise, the wealth accumulated by the MUJAO via its alliance with Gao's businessmen was of paramount importance in attracting and recruiting local youth. Reportedly, the group's salaries for young recruits ranged from \$100 to – in some exceptional cases – \$400 per month,²² an amount that in normal times marginalised local youth would struggle to earn in a year of hard work. Of course, the prospect of easy money became a fundamental reason to join the MUJAO.²³ Orphans and *talibé* – i.e. youths abandoned to the education and care of a marabout preacher – were recruited even more easily.

This approach to recruitment, based on religious propaganda, gave the MUJAO the reputation of being the guardian of morality and legality, particularly when contrasted with the abuse, raids and theft perpetrated by the MNLA. Regardless of existing ethnic cleavages, the MNLA had proved to be incapable of protecting local business: any trust it might have enjoyed among local residents quickly evaporated. The eventual harshness of the MUJAO's sharia law was initially believed to be nothing compared to the generalised violence that reigned in Gao during the MNLA's nominal domination. Economic activities were particularly affected by uncertainty. Many business owners, including Arab merchants, came to the conclusion that an uncompromising mode of law enforcement, including corporal punishment, might restore a modicum of order and security.

Considering all these elements, we can start to make sense of the kaleidoscope of groups and movements in northern Mali. The MUJAO's targeting of Algerian gendarmerie and police units was aimed at those tasked with enforcing border control and custom duties. This is consistent with the ideology of borderless free trade that the MUJAO and its closest allies propagated in the territories under their control. Furthermore, the MUJAO was structurally linked to ethnic and social groups involved in trading, trafficking and smuggling. Abdel Hakim, the city's new emir, used to parade in the streets of Gao, ostentatiously sitting in the glitzy car that had belonged to the Algerian consul. "Residents saw him visit Baba Ould Cheikh's Gao villa often, and say he supplied them with money and fighters" (Armstrong, 2013). It is hard to find a better image to illustrate the shift of power relations in Gao under MUJAO domination.

21 Author's interviews with Gao residents, Bamako, November 25th 2013. For further discussion of the MUJAO's social constituency and its link with local organised crime, see Lacher (2013); Lebovich (2013a); Tinti (2013).

22 Author's interviews with Gao residents: Bamako, 25th and 28th November 2013.

23 For instance, this was the case of Alioune Touré, a local Songhai from Gao, whom Western media described as the "leader of Islamic police and responsible for the overall security of the city". In fact, as our interviewees indicated, Touré was none other than the owner of a small restaurant: well into his forties, he rode the wave of the moment, abandoned his family and enlisted in the MUJAO. Apparently he had a hard time persuading his friends of the sincerity of his conversion.

The Peul-Fulani community and conflict in northern Mali – by Luca Raineri²⁴

One last actor to be considered in the analysis of the MUJAO is the Peul community (or Fulani in English), whose participation in the MUJAO's war enterprise has attracted relatively little attention.²⁵ The Peuls' involvement in the conflict in northern Mali should be interpreted against the background of the clashes that have taken place since the 1990s between Tuareg and Peul herders and cattle farmers, in a context of growing environmental degradation. Peul-Tuareg hostility has also degenerated into violent clashes in "post-conflict" Mali, when some 30 Tuaregs were killed 80 km from Gao in February 2014 by armed Peuls, apparently in revenge for the kidnapping and killing of a member of their community. This prompted the Malian government to talk about an al-Qa'ida-linked terror attack (Ahmed, 2014).

Some Peuls enthusiastically joined the MUJAO, seeking revenge against the Tuaregs. While only a few dozen Peuls are estimated to have rallied for the MUJAO in March 2012, their number increased significantly as soon as a pattern of antagonism towards the Tuaregs became clear. Local sources indicated that the Peuls in the MUJAO's ranks numbered at least 500 by mid-2012. Many of them joined the movement from afar, including from western and southern Niger, northern Nigeria,

Guinea, and other West African countries. The MUJAO's "borderless" ideology might have sounded quite attractive to the Peuls, whose nomadic life style is arguably more rooted than among the Tuaregs (Carayol, 2013). Moreover, jihadism and extreme political Islamism are far from alien to Peul culture. A large part of the cultural references to "black jihadism" set forth by Kheirou's propaganda at the outset of the MUJAO referred to heroic figures from Peul history.

The Peul-Fulani live throughout West Africa. Two very important Peul communities are settled in Guinea Conakry and northern Nigeria – two hotspots of illicit trade and trafficking. The anti-narcotics department of the national police in Bamako indicates that the largest share of drugs transiting across Mali enters through either Guinea-Bissau or Guinea Conakry. In both cases the road to Bamako and Gao goes through the Guinean city of Labé, often described as the capital of the Peuls. The Peuls today control almost 90% of Guinean import-export, monopolising trade routes and owning the infrastructure for the management and transport of goods. According to local sources, a distinguished Guinean Peul was present in Gao from the very first days of the MUJAO's penetration of the city.

Conclusion

On May 2nd 2014 – more than a year after the end of the military offensive that swept away the MUJAO and other jihadists from northern Mali – press agencies reported news of a violent clash between an MNLA patrol and an MUJAO convoy near Bourem in the Gao region. While the Malian army declared that it had no details about the incident, military sources from the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) added that other clashes involving suspected drug traffickers were reported in the Tessalit area near Kidal. More news regarding clashes between different armed groups followed in the second half of 2014, following a pattern that confirms how different political ambitions draw deeply on underlying socioeconomic structures and needs. Meanwhile, the political and security situation in Mali has deteriorated. Attacks on international troops by regrouping Islamist fighters have multiplied, leading to open battles with repositioned French special forces (Guibert, 2014).

The control of borders cutting across drug trade routes has come to represent a material resource of primary importance and an essential part of interpreting the dynamics of competing political claims in northern Mali. The capture of border (non-)control can be pointed at as one of the

elements that spurred historical trajectories such as the conversion of Tuareg rebel movements from claims for autonomy to demands for an independent nation state. If one connects the increasing "striation" of space to the disproportionate revenues that can be extracted from the protection of drug trade routes and other trafficking, then the seemingly paradoxical way in which nomadic, stateless Tuaregs now demand a nation state is considerably mitigated.

This perspective can also help us to understand the tensions among various rebel groups in northern Mali. The emergence of a newly proclaimed state of Azawad in April 2012 replaced Mali's formal sovereignty at the heart of international smuggling routes and thereby upset the existing equilibrium among powerful local interests. Bamako had sought to manage the situation in the north in the years preceding 2012 through betting on local rivalries and manipulating "loyal elements", with the primary goal being to contain the Tuaregs. This strategic bet assumed that illicit economies crossing the north that were tolerated and even selectively encouraged by the centre would help structure a stable clientelist system oiled by the extraction of wealth from drug smuggling.

²⁴ Luca Raineri is a PhD candidate at the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Pisa, where he specialises in the Sahel; he is also a member of the Oslo Research School on Peace and Conflict.

²⁵ With the exception of Lebovich (2013a).

Local elites linked to drug cartels, many of them Arabs, feared the prospect of border control enforced by the Tuaregs in a new state. In other words, they appeared to fear the state of Azawad altogether. As a result, they decided to wage war against it, or at least to support implicitly those who opposed its establishment. The ideologies of free trade and global, borderless jihadism went hand in hand against a backdrop of religious zeal.

Beneath the proliferation of criminalised armed actors in northern Mali we can thus discern two key constitutive aspects: on the one hand, the salience of border control as both a state and a criminal function; and, on the other, the acute social tensions and power struggles permeating northern Mali's society, which both nationalism and jihadism tend to mask.

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