Chapter 4

The Sahel's ungoverned spaces and the ascent of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and MUJAO in Mali and Niger

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Introduction

On 14 March 2016 gunmen stormed the Grand Bassam beach resort in Ivory Coast, 40 km south of the capital, Abidjan. Firing outside the Hotel L'Etoile du Sud, which was full of expats and beachgoers, the armed men killed 16 people, including four foreigners, before the attack was brought under control. The attack followed hot on the heels of two similar incidents. In November 2015, armed men broke past security at the upmarket Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital, Bamako, stormed the lobby and took a number of hostages, killing a total of 21 people. In January 2016, gunmen attacked the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino Café in downtown Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, spots popular with foreigners, set off explosives and shot at customers. Over 30 people, including six members of one Canadian family, were killed.

All three attacks were claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliate Al-Mourabitoun, which in the aftermath of the Mali attack announced it was remerging with AQIM. These were the kinds of attacks that diplomats, governments and any observer of West Africa's Sahel region had been anticipating for several years. In March 2017, the threat level in the Sahel region increased further when leaders of AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar al-Din officially announced that they would be merging.

This chapter seeks to understand how it is that groups such as AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun have been able to rise to such prominence in the Sahel, move freely almost anywhere in the West African region and to drive into the heart of capital cities. Fundamental to an understanding of this is an appreciation of the implications of long-standing poor governance in Sahelian countries, most notably in Mali and Niger, but also in Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria and Chad. This has left many marginalised groups in the region without job opportunities or hope for economic advancement, and created an environment where long-standing criminal trafficking networks and militant jihadist groups can flourish. Poor governance has also resulted in the failure of governments to respond

adequately to secessionist claims from groups such as the Tuareg, as well as leaving national armies and border security forces unable to adequately defend national territories.

This chapter covers the period from 2007 onwards, when Islamist groups such as AQIM moved into the Sahel region from their bases in Algeria. While this chapter considers the circumstances in other Sahelian countries that have contributed to the rise of jihadist groups, namely Niger, Mauritania and the southern fringes of Libya and Chad, it focuses primarily on the vast deserts of northern Mali. It documents how a prolonged period of neglect and lack of effective governance in this area created a crucible of chaos in which the numerous rebel and violent jihadist groups, which now dominate the Sahel, have been able to foment.

Borders

The Sahel ('shore' in Arabic) is a vast semi-desert zone to the south of the Sahara, which stretches from Mauritania in the west to Sudan in the east. Trade routes across the Sahara Desert have existed for centuries, carrying people, goods and ideas between the Arab and Berber populations of North Africa and the black sub-Saharan populations to the south. From the 9th century onwards, Islamic pilgrims began to tread these routes, often travelling from centres of learning such as Fes in Morocco or Egypt to modern-day Mali and Niger. Before West Africa's coastal links to Europe developed, merchants exchanged gold, salt and slaves between North and West Africa, while students and scholars travelled to the prestigious university at Timbuktu in modern-day Mali. Today, traders living in the semi-desert fringes of the Sahara still use these routes, some to smuggle consumer goods, fuel, cigarettes, and a growing number of people, to and from the North African market, often with Europe as the final destination.

In the 1990s, the use of these routes by drug traffickers multiplied.[1] Reliable estimates of the quantities of drugs being trafficked across the Sahel are difficult to find. However, it has been widely documented that large quantities of hashish are grown in northern Morocco's Rif Mountains and transported across the Sahel.[2] Drug traffickers started taking circuitous routes to smuggle cocaine into Europe, picking up shipments from South America in the port of Bissau in the barely functioning nation of Guinea-Bissau, and carrying them across the Malian deserts and on to Europe. Others chose routes whereby drug shipments arrived in the Mauritanian port of Nouadhibou, before being picked up by Chadian traders who would then pass them on to their networks in Sudan and Egypt. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that in 2008, 14 per cent of the cocaine that arrived in Europe had transited

through West Africa.[3]

As drugs and contraband smuggling grew, the region also saw an explosion in the number of weapons circulating from conflicts across Africa, such as in western Sahara, Chad, Nigeria and Sudan. A devastating period of drought, which ebbed and flowed in the 1970s and 1980s, led to the displacement of Sahel populations, whose traditional livelihoods in semi-nomadic pastoralism and small-scale farming came under threat. During these years, thousands of young Tuaregs left northern Mali and Niger and travelled to Libya, where they joined other African groups in being trained and armed in Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's 'Islamic Legion', his vision for a united Africa under the patronage of Libya.[4]

Added to the mix was an increase in human trafficking as people-smuggling gangs started to multiply in the 1990s and 2000s, facilitating the passage of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants keen to reach Europe. Many of these migrants, from Ghana, Nigeria, southern Mali and elsewhere, came to congregate in remote desert towns, such as Agades in Niger, before attempting a several-day crossing of the Sahara. In the early 2000s, many of these migrants were aiming for the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta on the Moroccan coast. However, in later years, as Morocco and Spain began to clamp down, migrants began to target Libya. Some would take perilous sea journeys in small boats across the Mediterranean into Italian ports such as Lampedusa, while others sought low-paid domestic work in Algeria and Libya.

The root cause of this enduring lawlessness lies in Sahelian countries' inability to control their own borders and territorial integrity. In much of the Sahel, borders are nothing more than a line in the sand. The distances involved are vast, with most border crossings lying in inhospitable, featureless desert. Mali, for example, shares a total of 7 243 km of land boundaries with seven bordering states, including Algeria (1 376 km to the north and northeast), Niger (821 km to the east), and Burkina Faso (1 000 km to the southeast). Niger has a 951 km border with Algeria, and a 1 196 km border with Chad – most of it cutting through remote, mountainous desert. As some of the poorest countries on Earth (Niger, for example, came bottom of the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Index [UNDP-HDI] in 2015), Sahelian countries have very little means with which to train and deploy effective border forces. For example, Niger's army numbers only around 5 000 soldiers, with no dedicated border force.[5] Similarly, in Mali, while some border crossings are patrolled by (the) *gendarmerie*, the national army comprises only around 6 000 soldiers.

While it is important to underline that the drug traffickers, people smugglers, cigarette smugglers, violent jihadists and tribal rebels, who have been able to

operate in the Sahelian deserts for many years are by no means one and the same, there are clear links between the groups. In the absence of effective state control, intricate webs of relations have been able to develop to a remarkable degree using traditional systems of trading networks, family links and reciprocity. These networks are so well-developed that they prompted the United Kingdom Foreign Office to state that it would be wrong to characterise the furthest reaches of the Sahel as an 'ungoverned space', but more accurately that '[i]t is governed, just not in the conventional sense'.[6] Jihadists, traffickers and rebels often work closely to achieve their separate goals. For example, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the one-eyed leader of an AQIM off-shoot, Al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam (The Signed in Blood Battalion), which in 2013 merged with elements of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) to form Al-Mourabitoun (The Sentinels), has been dubbed 'Mr Marlborough' for his long history of involvement in cigarette smuggling. During the late 2000s, AQIM is known to have demanded protection money for guaranteeing the safe passage of drug consignments through territory that it controls, while a range of Arab drug traders supported MUJAO's occupation of Gao in 2012.[7]

It would be wrong to assume this cauldron of problems had escaped the attention of the international community. World powers have seemed aware of the dangers inherent in such a vast, poorly controlled space since at least the early 2000s. From 2007 onwards, foreign diplomats based in Mali's capital, Bamako, were sounding the alarm about the potential for Islamist extremism in northern Mali. The United States began its focus on the region even earlier, following the September 11 terrorist attacks. In 2002, the Pan-Sahel Initiative was launched, which aimed to promote peace and security in the region.[8] This was later replaced by the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) and after that the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). While these initiatives have paid noteworthy attention to democracy and governance projects, such as supporting local media and institution-building, their primary focus has been on the military, delivering counter-insurgency training to thousands of troops from Sahelian nations since 2006. Operation Flintlock, which is managed through the Stuttgart-based United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), is an annual three-week-long training course for roughly 1 000 troops from Sahelian states, the focus of which is small-unit combat training, counterterrorism surveillance methods and medical assistance. Former West African colonial power France has also continued to have a strong military presence in the region. Despite formally decolonising the region in the 1960s, France retained a number of military advisers and intelligence personnel in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger. A 1 000-strong contingent known as Operation Epervier, with intelligence-gathering drones

and surveillance equipment, was based in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, from the late 1980s until 2013. Both France and the United States have been running intelligence-gathering drone flights across the Sahel for several years.[9]

Into the cauldron

Mali's history has been marked by a failure to adequately address the grievances and demands for greater autonomy from the northern semi-nomadic pastoralist and small-scale farming communities such as the Tuareg, Songhai and Peul, among several others. Since the creation of Mali in 1960, following a brief union with Senegal, some in these northern communities have continued to feel marginalised and excluded by Mali's southern-based central government. Social and cultural connections are sometimes weaker with people in the south who are mostly sedentary farmers in the fertile Niger River basin. The term 'Tuareg' is often used loosely and fails to sum up the complex network of ties between hundreds of generally Berber-speaking tribes across the Sahara and Sahel, which stretch up into southern Algeria and into southern Morocco. Within these communities, every shade of opinion can be found (including strong loyalty to Bamako). However, one world view which has emerged is that the historical Tuareg homeland in the cross-border regions of six countries (Mali, Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Libya) was effectively carved up by the creation of the new Malian state in 1960.

As evidence of this, the first of several Tuareg rebellions took place in 1963 as the nascent Malian state was taking steps to assert itself. The Malian army dealt with it brutally, moving en masse into Kidal and sending thousands of people fleeing as refugees, further fomenting grievances against the state, which would only build through the years.[10] Government's inadequate response to severe drought, which wracked the country through the 1970s and 1980s, led to a crisis for the traditional semi-nomadic pastoralist way of life, and further exacerbated northern communities' anger and feelings of abandonment towards the government. In the 1990s, skirmishes and attacks by armed groups in the north culminated in a full-blown rebellion in 2006/07 by the Alliance Tuareg du Nord-Mali pour le Changement (ATNMC), led by veteran rebels Ibrahim Ag Bahanga and Hassan Faggaga. At its height, the ATNMC rebellion succeeded in briefly capturing Kidal and Menaka and taking 40 Malian army soldiers hostage.

The central government's attempts to deal with this series of rebellions often involved a military approach, where rebels clashed with the national army until some kind of defeat or impasse was reached. Once both sides seemed ready to talk, there would be peace conferences, which periodically switched venue from Algeria to Libya (where they would often be hosted by

Colonel Gaddafi). Sometimes dragging on for months, these conferences would lead to a negotiated agreement (such as the 2006 and 2008 Algiers Accords) signed by both sides, which included a number of measures such as pledges to incorporate former rebels into the national army, proposals to increase regional autonomy for the north, and pledges of extra spending to develop the region. Some important steps were taken as a result of these Accords, such as increasing the number of northern officers in the national army and providing more representation for Tuaregs in national politics. In fact, in 2002, the first Tuareg prime minister was elected and northern communities began to receive more financial support from government. However, this quickly led to some in Mali's south to feel that the north was receiving too much financial support, relative to its population.

Nevertheless, as one of the poorest countries on Earth, Mali was unable to provide the level of security and development needed to bring all northern rebels into the fold. Peace deals were thus often characterised by attempts to placate some of the prominent local families, rewarding those who shouted loudest, as opposed to serious well-funded attempts to engage with entire communities and address developmental concerns. It has been argued that under the government of Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) 'relations between the centre of power in Bamako and the periphery rested on a loose network of personal, clientelistic, even mafia-style alliances with regional elites with reversible loyalties'.[11] With each subsequent rebellion, the contentious issues of how these groups were becoming more and more implicated in criminality, in smuggling and, in later years, transformed into violent jihadist groups, were largely skirted. As the renewed outbreak of rebellion in 2011 led by the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad/Mouvement Nationale pour la Liberation d'Azawad) quite clearly showed, no peace-building or reconciliation efforts over the 50 years since Mali's independence have succeeded in producing a lasting and comprehensive solution.

The Islamists

From 2006 onwards, this already deeply problematic situation was further complicated by the emergence of a number of violent jihadist groups, who must surely have realised the potential for basing themselves in a region where the central government was unable to fully assert its presence. The most prominent of these groups was Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, known by its acronym AQIM.

Long enjoying a reputation as a fearsome and brutal operation, AQIM started life in 1992 after the French-backed Algerian military cancelled a second round of parliamentary elections when it looked as if the Islamist political

party, Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), was about to win. The Groupe Islamique Armee (GIA or Armed Islamic Group), a conglomerate of militant jihadist groups, formed under the command of Abdelhak Layada. The leader of one of these groups, Hassan Hattab, broke away from the GIA to form the Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat or GSPC). Hattab was pushed aside in favour of Nabil Sahraoui, and then Abdelmalek Droukdel (also known as Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud) who became the new leader after Sahrawi was killed by Algerian security forces in 2004. For several years the GSPC held Algeria and Algiers as their primary target, but following a number of severe crackdowns by the Algerian security forces, they began to move south and eventually crossed the border into Mali's northern desert. As successive governments in Bamako – more than 1 500 km away from the Algerian border – continued to neglect the north and failed to bring trafficking, criminality and secessionist rebellions under control, the GSPC was able to consolidate its position and grow.

From 2008 onwards, the group set up bases in the Wagadou Forest area on the border between Mauritania and Mali, which allowed its lightly armed, highly mobile fighters to operate quite freely over an enormous area stretching from Mauritania in the west, into Libya to the northeast, and as far as eastern Niger. Although the group was still capable of conducting attacks in Algeria – such as a twin suicide car bomb attack in Algiers in 2007 – its focus began to shift towards the Sahel. With connections between GSPC fighters and those who had fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the GSPC formally allied itself with Al-Qaeda in 2006, and rebranded itself as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.[12] While AQIM's internal workings are largely shrouded in secrecy, there appears to have been a long power struggle at its core between Droukdel and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an almost legendary figure in the minds of some in West Africa for his ability to evade capture or attempts to kill him.

As AQIM consolidated its presence in northern Mali from 2008 onwards, it began a lucrative line in hostage-taking. This began with the kidnapping of a United Nations diplomat in Niger in 2008, seven employees of the French nuclear firm Areva at the Arlit uranium mine in northern Niger in September 2010, and several businessmen in the town of Hombori in northern Mali in late 2012. New criminal groups, recognising the profits to be made from kidnapping foreigners, sprang up and took hostages which they could sell to AQIM. It has been claimed that AQIM is one of the richest groups in the world thanks to this business, in addition to its control of regional drugs and weapons smuggling networks.[13] Western governments, particularly France, have been criticised for their willingness to pay large sums to secure the release

of hostages. For example, in 2013, the former US ambassador to Mali criticised France for paying more than US$11 million to secure the release of four hostages, saying it was directly contributing to the group's ability to operate.[14]

A stage set for collapse

In 2011, the Arab Spring protests broke out across North Africa. The world watched wide-eyed as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt fell under popular pressure. But it was the collapse of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya that was to have the most severe impact on the Sahel region. Gaddafi's rule had been marked by his vision for a united Africa. During his time in power, Libyan diplomats travelled to many corners of Africa, offering finance for a number of important infrastructure and development projects, while thousands of Africans travelled to the country to work in low-paid jobs. Gaddafi intervened personally in a number of internal political conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, often prolonging and complicating them. In the 1980s and 1990s, Libyan troops were sent to conflicts as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and northern Chad. Rebels from Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and others moved freely in Tripoli. Gaddafi's long association with northern Mali paid off when Tripoli and Sirte fell to the Libyan rebels during the revolution in 2011. A number of Tuareg, including a future leader of the MNLA, Mohamed ag Najem (a cousin of the last Tuareg leader Ibrahim Ag Bahanga), stayed loyal to the colonel to the end and reportedly fought alongside his presidential guard.[15]

However, when it finally became obvious that Gaddafi's days were numbered, hundreds of these Tuareg fighters fled back to the deserts and mountains of northern Mali, taking with them weapons and ammunition seized from Libyan stockpiles.[16] The birth of the most powerful Tuareg rebel group to date, the MNLA, primarily made up of rebels from previous conflicts such as Ag Najem, was announced a few days before Gaddafi's death in October 2011. Within months they had attacked and conquered the northern Malian towns of Anderamboukane, Menaka, Tessalit and Niafunke, routing the Malian army and forcing thousands of people to seek refuge in neighbouring Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso.

A decisive moment in MNLA's advance came on 17 January 2012, when over 100 Malian soldiers were executed in the remote northern town of Aguelhoc. Controversy still surrounds exactly what happened that day, but the Malian government blamed an alliance between AQIM and MNLA.[17] As the army reeled and troops began to flee, the rebels continued to advance, claiming more towns in the north. The army was in disarray and rapidly losing ground. One day in March, seemingly disillusioned at the government's failure

to protect them, a group of mutinous soldiers staged a protest, firing in the air when Mali's defence minister tried to visit them at the Kati barracks outside Bamako. On 22 March, in what has been dubbed an 'accidental coup', an angry group of relatively low-ranking soldiers made their way up Didé Koulouba hill, a cool oasis on the outskirts of Bamako.[18] When they arrived at the gates of the presidential palace, it seemed they encountered little resistance from the 'red beret' presidential guard. A few hours later, after the state broadcaster, Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision du Mali (ORTM), had shown several hours of unscheduled wildlife documentaries, a slightly stunned-looking Captain Amadou Sanogo appeared on camera with a group of soldiers to announce that President Amadou Toumani Touré had been overthrown, just weeks before he was due to step down in a national election. As infighting within army ranks continued and most of the political class seemed at a loss, the MNLA chose their moment and struck hard. By April, the rebels declared they were in control of northern Mali, effectively half the country's territory north of a line running through Mopti and Sévaré.[19] In May, the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, was beaten up by disgruntled soldiers in his own office. Attempts by African leaders to negotiate a settlement to the crisis stalled, and the international community looked on aghast.

Just as these alliances between the jihadists, smugglers and rebels in northern Mali had shifted to allow a brief period of cooperation between the MNLA and AQIM, the rules changed again. Into the mix appeared a new rebel group, Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith), formed by the veteran Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghali in early 2012. Ag Ghali is a member of the prominent Tuareg Ifoghas clan and his father was killed in the first Tuareg uprising of 1963. Throughout the 1990s, he was secular and was seen as a key leader of the Tuareg rebellions and part-time hostage release negotiator.[20] However, in the late 1990s he began to learn about the Salafi doctrines of a Pakistani missionary organisation called Tablighi Jamaat and was slowly re-incarnated as a committed Islamist. In the early days of the MNLA's takeover of northern Mali, it seems that Ag Ghali tried to position himself as the new group's leader, but his attempts were rebuffed by an organisation that has largely remained secular. In revenge, Ag Ghali created Ansar al-Din, pledged allegiance to AQIM and declared that the group's aim was to impose sharia across the whole of northern Mali. Ag Ghali's group carried much weight and influence in the region. While AQIM has often been associated with 'foreigners' because of its primarily Algerian leadership, Ansar al-Din comprised mostly Malians, with a number of Mauritanians and other foreign fighters among its ranks.

Finally, a third group known as MUJAO emerged in 2011. Also originally an AQIM offshoot, the group's first prominent act was the abduction of three

humanitarian workers from the Tindouf refugee camp for Sahrawi refugees in Algeria in 2011.[21] Led by Ahmed al-Tilemsi, the group appeared to have a number of Mauritanians and Malian Arabs among its ranks, possibly as a result of its early focus on Mauritania.[22] MUJAO's presence in Gao was first reported in early 2012, where it also tried to impose sharia law on the local population. The group was behind the abduction of seven Algerian diplomats from Gao, one of whom was later killed, but also claimed responsibility for a number of attacks inside Algerian territory.

An alliance between the broadly secular MNLA and the more ideologically driven jihadist groups was unlikely to last, and in May and June 2012, AQIM and Ansar al-Din began to turn on their erstwhile allies. Seemingly no match for the Islamists, the MNLA were forced to hastily retreat towards the traditional Tuareg homelands around Kidal. By July 2012, the map of northern Mali had been completely redrawn again, to show Ansar al-Din and AQIM largely in charge in Timbuktu, MUJAO in Gao, and the MNLA in and around Kidal. It was not long before the horror stories about life under sharia in northern Mali began to emerge. Media headlines screamed of thieves having their hands cut off, and Ansar al-Din began a systematic attack on sites of significant cultural and emotional value in Timbuktu, including a number of Sufi shrines and mosques which were considered to be un-Islamic.[23]

However, the world was forced to sit up and take notice in early January 2013, when the Islamists reached central Mali.[24] Ansar al-Din announced on 10 January that it had taken Konna, and was moving on Douentza, which had been in the hands of MUJAO since late December when they had defeated a Songhai self-defence militia, the Ganda Iso. These two towns lie on the main route south to Bamako, in a region which is seen psychologically as the dividing line between north and south in Mali. Panic struck at the heart of politics in Bamako. With the army still in disarray and little progress in establishing a UN peacekeeping force for Mali, the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, called on France for help. Within a few days, France announced the launching of Operation Serval with the objective of preventing an Islamist take-over of Mali.

Operational Serval
French troops were quickly deployed, using surveillance and transport planes which had been based in N'Djamena, Chad, since the late 1980s as part of France's 1 000-strong Operation Epervier (Sparrowhawk). The initial goal was to halt the advance of the Islamists, but it quickly shifted to an attempt to oust AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar al-Din from the north of Mali, thereby creating an opportunity for the Malian government to re-establish control.[25] Within days, France was joined by about 2 000 troops from the National Army of Chad

(ANT) who moved into northern Mali from Niger. The operation had a number of notable early successes – by 14 January 2013 they had retaken Konna and by the end of the month, French and Chadian soldiers had taken strategic locations in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. By 8 February they had reached Tessalit, near the border with Algeria. The speed of Serval's advance was credited to the French forces, which had long experience in the desert environment, supported by the ANT, which had been battling rebel groups in its own eastern desert for several years. Faced with such superior firepower, it seems the Islamists decided on a tactical withdrawal, and simply melted into the most inaccessible corners of the Sahara Desert.

Despite these early successes, the mission's further objectives seemed to remain frustratingly out of reach. Repeated attempts by French and Chadian soldiers to flush out the remaining fighters from Adrar des Ifoghas failed. Within weeks of the fall of the main towns, suicide bombers attacked French and Chadian army targets in Timbuktu and Kidal, using tactics that many observers had predicted from the start. After successfully securing Kidal airport and forcing the Islamists to leave the town, the French and Chadian army reached an impasse with remnants of the MNLA and new Tuareg groupings such as MIA (Movement Islamique du Azawad), who refused to relinquish control of the town. The French were under no illusion as to the advantage that groups such as AQIM had in the extreme desert environment – after all, they had been moving freely around these areas for more than 10 years. As the Islamists disappeared into the sand dunes, early claims that Serval would be wound up and withdrawn within a few months proved premature.

It was not until July 2014 that France announced the end of Operation Serval, but by this time French military commanders appeared to have appreciated that a complete withdrawal would be disastrous for the region, as the Malian army had not been able to fully redeploy to the north. Serval was replaced by Operation Barkhane, a significant reorganisation of France's entire military presence in West Africa, which included 3 000 troops stationed over five Sahelian countries – Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. This followed the Security Council Resolution 2 100 in April 2013, which had authorised the deployment of just over 11 000 international troops under the United Nations Multidisciplinary Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).[26]

Although they no longer held territory, the Islamists appeared to go from strength to strength. Within days after the start of Operation Serval, Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'the uncatchable' delivered stunning proof of the group's ability to operate across almost unimaginably large areas of hostile desert, even as

his 'colleagues' in AQIM were apparently battling for survival in Mali. On 16 January 2013, Belmokhtar's group, the 'Signed in Blood Battalion', attacked the Tigantourine gas plant near In Amenas in the remote Algerian Desert. By the end of the four-day crisis, 39 foreign workers were dead, and several dozen more captured. Four months later, neighbouring Niger was hit by twin attacks. A suicide bombing at a military barracks in Agades northern Niger, which killed 18 Nigerien soldiers, was quickly followed by an attack on the Somair uranium mine near Arlit, which is operated by the French state-owned nuclear firm Areva. The attack was claimed by Belmohktar and MUJAO in retaliation for Niger's support of France's operations in Mali. A few days later, 22 people escaped from a prison in Niamey after suspected members of MUJAO staged a prison break. Among them was Cheibane Ould Hama who had been convicted of killing four Saudis and a US citizen.[27]

The ability of MUJAO and the Signed in Blood Battalion to survive, evade capture, and to move weapons, supplies and loyal followers in extreme conditions over immense distances did not appear to have been significantly impacted. In August 2013, MUJAO and the Signed in Blood Battalion finally announced that they were merging to create a new group, Al-Mourabitoun (the Sentinels) which also included some smaller armed groups loyal to Belmokhtar.[28] Reports said that Belmokhtar and Al-Tilemsi jointly agreed to leave leadership to an Egyptian, Abu Bakr al-Masri, in a bid to prevent future power struggles.[29] Al-Mourabitoun appears to have offered Belmokhtar some of the independence from AQIM that he craved, following a series of power struggles with top leadership during the occupation of Mali and tensions over the ethnic composition of the group. Belmokhtar's repeated affirmations of loyalty to Al-Qaeda Central under Ayman al-Zawahiri showed the strength of his ambitions.[30] From late 2013, the group began to post a series of audio messages and communiqués via Mauritanian media outlets signalling their determination to defend Islam across Africa, singling out France and other foreign targets as the number one enemy. Al-Mourabitoun's intentions could not have been plainer.

Why were the Islamists able to thrive?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to dismiss groups such as AQIM as 'narco-traffiquants' and 'bandits'.[31] As with all radical Islamist groups, the extent to which AQIM members wholeheartedly believe in a religious ideology has been hotly debated, with some arguing that their motivations lie in the promise of making money through kidnapping and drug smuggling, and not in defending the faith.[32] Relatively little was known about the precise nature of the group's ideology, the personal piety of its fighters, or the interpretation of sharia law they intended to impose.

Within weeks of the Islamist take-over of northern Mali in 2012, a narrative began to emerge. One of their first widely condemned acts was stoning to death a young unmarried couple in Aguelhok for having sexual relations, even though the couple had children and had been living together. Reports began to emerge of thieves having limbs sliced off using machetes, smokers and prostitutes being publicly whipped, women being beaten for walking unveiled, and the banning of Western music.[33] Across the north, from Timbuktu to Kidal, armed men went into people's houses, took their musical instruments and smashed or burnt them. This was a bitter pill to swallow in Mali, which has long prided itself on its rich musical tradition. The Islamists threatened to destroy tens of thousands of ancient Arabic manuscripts, which have been guarded by the people of Timbuktu for centuries. Fortunately, through a remarkable secret campaign, only a small number were destroyed while thousands of the most precious texts were smuggled out of the city by residents to safe houses in other parts of Mali.[34] At the same time, Ansar al-Din launched a campaign of destroying 'idolatrous' Sufi shrines and tombs in Timbuktu, the city of 333 saints, posting videos of their fighters reducing the tombs to rubble with pick axes. Media outlets wasted no time in comparing the destruction to the blowing up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001. The jihadist threat was given a pan-African dynamic – editorials and experts attempted to show that AQIM was working with Boko Haram in Nigeria and even Al-Shabaab in Somalia, reviving the hackneyed narrative of the Sahelian 'Arc of Instability'.[35]

However, it is important to note that there is a fierce debate about the extent to which the outcry against the imposition of sharia law was hyperbole, particularly when the scale of the actions of AQIM, Ansar al-Din and MUJAO are compared to the senseless violence of another Islamist-inspired group, Boko Haram, who have killed thousands in northeastern Nigeria over the last six years.[36] Part of the Malian narrative was undeniably seen through the prism of threats to Western citizens from kidnapping, and the possible damage to French business interests. Many were convinced by the rhetoric of politicians such as France's defence minister, Jean Yves Le Drian, who claimed on several occasions that the Islamists posed a credible threat on European soil.[37]

This is an important point to appreciate when attempting to evaluate how Malians experienced the brief imposition of sharia law. Mali's relationship with Islam dates back hundreds of years. Islam first arrived in the 9th century, brought to the territory we now call Mali by Berber and Tuareg traders moving across the Sahara from northwest Africa. The religion was able to adapt to the local conditions in West Africa and won a number of early converts. By the 13th century, the area covered by present-day Mali was unquestionably Muslim. The fabulously rich Mansa Moussa, the Islamic king of the Malian empire

(modern-day Ghana and southern Mali), caused a storm when he arrived laden with gold in Mecca in 1244. On his way home, accompanied by a retinue of Muslim scholars and academics, he conquered a small trading post at Timbuktu which, within a few hundred years, rose to be a centre of Islamic learning with one of the region's oldest universities. Timbuktu was to go on to become an important crossroads in the Sahara for Muslim pilgrims travelling from the north to the south.

Malian Islam is often characterised as a traditionally tolerant form of Malikite Islam. It is also heavily influenced by Sufi teachings, often described as the more 'mystical' aspect of Islam. Sufi Brotherhoods, such as the Qadriyia and the Tidjania, are also very popular in Senegal and Mali, and there is deep respect for accomplished sheikhs who have followed a Sufi education. Malian Islam is also influenced by traditional animist practices which pre-date the arrival of Islam, and a famous saying goes that Mali is 98 per cent Muslim, 2 per cent Christian and 100 per cent animist.[38] Hunters, griots (praise-singers) and blacksmiths have traditionally important roles in Malian society (as in other parts of West Africa), and these 'African' roles have created a very distinct form of Islam, which often includes syncretic practices.

The region also has a long history of more conservative religious movements. Present-day Mali bordered the Sokoto caliphate created by the jihad of Usman dan Fodio in the early 19th century. In the mid-19th century, a jihad led by El Hadj Umar Tall conquered the Bamana Empire of southern Mali, making Segou the capital of the Toucouleur Empire. A number of villages around the northern town of Gao, particularly Fulbe villages, have seen a revival in interest in a rigorous reading of Islam dating back to the 1960s. Mali has also not escaped the Salafist influence, in particular from Wahhabist groups which advocate the use of the Qur'an and the Hadiths as the sole source of Muslim belief and practise.[39] From the 1950s onwards, preachers from Saudi Arabia began to arrive in Bamako, where they built a number of new mosques in the city – including the city's impressive Grand Mosque. These mosques and their accompanying madrassas have a reputation for following a strict form of Islam.

The take-over of groups such as AQIM in northern Mali and their application of sharia law caused something of a spiritual crisis in Mali in 2012/13, exposing the underlying fault lines in the well-manicured image of Mali's tolerant, laid-back Islam.[40] The country's spiritual authority, the High Islamic Council (HIC), is led by the Wahhabi-influenced Imam Mahmoud Dicko.[41] In 2009/10, Dicko led popular demonstrations against the attempts by former president Amadou Toumani Touré to introduce a modern Family Code which would have, among other things, increased women's

rights in inheritance: the first time in modern Mali's history that thousands took to the streets in support of a religious leader. In the early days of the jihadist take-over in 2013, Dicko gave somewhat mixed messages about the imposition of sharia law. A subtle war of words broke out between Dicko and the vice-president of the HIC, Mali's best known Sufi Sheikh Cherif Ousmane Haidara, whose movement Ansar al-Din (not to be confused with Ag Ghali's group) has thousands of followers across mostly southern Mali and beyond. Haidara has built an enormous mosque in the Djelibougou quartier of Bamako, where every day crowds of pilgrims come to seek benediction and sit patiently outside. As the Islamists swept to power, Haidara made subtle references to Dicko's lukewarm denunciations of violence. Dicko was openly criticised by more progressive groups, and the growing flow of people fleeing their homes in the north and arriving in Bamako and other southern centres, such as Mopti, further raised tensions.

Nevertheless, alternative viewpoints did begin to emerge, particularly in the months after AQIM, Ansar al-Din and MUJAO had been dislodged from the main urban centres. Serious consideration began to be given to the idea that the rise of the Islamists had to have been, to a certain extent, facilitated by the local population. Instead of the Islamists being primarily viewed as 'foreign occupiers', they had been able to easily recruit from local populations. Malians from all ethnic groups – and indeed from north and south – were indisputably an important force in Ansar al-Din, and to a lesser extent in AQIM and MUJAO. Many lower-ranking young recruits appear to have been attracted to the groups by the promise of getting powerful positions.[42]

AQIM and MUJAO had spent many years operating in the region and establishing a network of relationships with existing local elites. According to researcher Andrew Lebovich, through its almost 10-year period of relatively easy movement in the Sahel, AQIM had 'worked to establish itself within local social and economic structures in the region'.[43] Crucially, several of their leaders have married into local tribes, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar who married into the Arab Berabiche tribe.[44] Iyad ag Ghali and his Ansar al-Din network were seen as a credible authority in the north. These relationships were used to gain the cooperation of local elites, consolidate power and set up alternative governance systems.

It is undeniable that the relatively small number of violent acts in response to public order offences and the imposition of sharia law did, in fact, scare and anger many. However, it is important to appreciate that this narrative was often emerging from the south of Mali, where the syncretic, tolerant, 'Sufi' form of Islam is more prevalent, and, indeed, from international actors invoking echoes of the war on terror. Even in 2015, political figures in Bamako were still keen to

maintain the image of a secular government and continued to argue that 'Mali's Muslims will never again accept this kind of foreign jihadism'.[45] However, it is merely too simplistic to see the brief Islamist take-over as something that was universally rejected and despised by the local northern populations. To understand why some in these communities, and in particular local leaders, may have felt that religious rule under a group of rebels, with many foreigners among their ranks, was preferable to life under a government in Bamako, we need to return to the question of the role of governance.

The role of governance

To answer the question of the extent to which governance – or the lack of it – has facilitated the rise of Islamist groups in the Sahel, it is necessary to recognise two distinct areas. First, there is the question of how poor governance has created a veritable vortex of political authority in large swathes of the Sahel, a space in which non-state armed groups have been able to thrive. The second consideration is the extent to which weak state institutions have been unable to give ordinary people a strong sense of citizenship, let alone an effective education, health services or the promise of a job. Across the Sahel many communities feel locked out of power and political dialogue, elections are often a sham, and there is deep cynicism that those in power look after their own tribes and families at the expense of everyone else. Mali, Chad and Niger all featured in the 'worsening category' of the 2015 Fragile State Index, with Mali ranking 30th, Niger 19th and Chad 6th in the 'Alert' category.[46]

We have already noted how, over the course of many years, Sahelian states have consistently failed to control their own territories. No Sahelian country is able to exercise full control over those crossing their long desert border. To avoid an official border post, all that is required is to drive a few kilometres further into an otherwise featureless desert and find another route through. The rampant trafficking of goods, people and drugs through these areas has carried on unhindered, largely undetected by weak police and border agencies. This point is crucial in understanding how the Signed in Blood battalion reached In Amenas in Algeria just days after the French intervention began in Mali; how MUJAO fighters managed to kidnap aid workers in the western Sahara refugee camp in western Algeria; how hundreds of heavily armed Tuareg fighters were able to cross back into northern Mali from Libya following the 2011 revolution; and more recently, how Al-Mouribatoun were free to drive into Grand Bassam on the Gulf of Guinea coast, central Bamako and Ouagadougou, heavily armed.

Once these poorly controlled spaces were colonised by criminal trafficking networks, there was little that the weak and cash-strapped Sahelian

governments could do to reassert control. The weaknesses inherent in all of the Sahel's national armies are clear: as Mali's soldiers squabbled in their barracks in Bamako in the wake of the 'accidental' coup, directing their anger at Mali's 'old guard' political class, the MNLA captured huge swathes of territory with barely a fight. Several sources describe Malian soldiers simply running away when faced with the determination of the Islamists, something which caused a deep sense of humiliation among many in Mali.[47] In the latter years of Touré's rule, serious problems of corruption had begun to plague the higher echelons of the Malian army and many accused the president of mismanagement and nepotism.[48]

In Niger, at least two serious coup plots have been uncovered in the higher ranks of the army since President Issoufou came to power in 2011. Some efforts have been made by initiatives such as the TSCTP's Operation Flintlock to give the national armies of the Sahel specialist counterterrorism training, but the forces remain weak and divided. Only the Chadian army has the capability to fight effectively in a desert environment.

Intelligence-gathering capability has also been extremely poor. Sahelian states have often relied on the French military to provide them with intelligence. For example, Chad's President Idriss Déby Itno narrowly escaped being toppled in a coup in 2008 after using satellite images provided by French surveillance jets based in N'Djamena, which showed the position of rebel columns approaching from the east. French military advisers have been present in all Sahelian countries for many years, and more recently began to step up the information provided to governments through surveillance drone flights across the Sahel. The United States has also increased its intelligence-gathering networks. Surveillance drone flights have been carried out in northern Niger near Agades since at least 2011, and in 2013 and 2014 the United States announced the opening of two drones bases in Niger to carry out intelligence gathering.[49]

Poor governance in Mali

Mali emerged as a democracy in 1991 after the regime of Moussa Traoré was overthrown in a coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT). Touré duly stepped aside to allow elections to take place, which veteran diplomat Alpha Oumar Konare won, but he returned to the political scene a decade later to contest the 2002 elections when Konaré voluntarily left office. Mali continued to hold elections every few years, busily hoisting the billboards and sending politicians into villages to hold high-profile, noisy rallies. However, these elections were not always what they seemed. Whoever lost would usually cry foul, citing irregularities, and local news reports would claim that voters had been paid to choose a particular candidate.[50] Although Mali's elections were

generally given the all clear by international observers, turnout was generally low at about 40 per cent. Furthermore, tribal loyalties also hold considerable sway with citizens. In remote rural areas, many people lack the basic civic knowledge to make an informed choice based on policy success and are more inclined to vote for someone they had at least heard of.[51]

Mali's experience again proves the maxim that democracy is not just about holding elections. As argued by International Crisis Group (ICG) in a report following the 2012 coup, 'The consolidation of democracy … did not lead to the consolidation of the state.'[52] As we have seen, the army, police and intelligence services were neglected, but the effect on schools and health care for the average Malian was acute. Mali's human development indicators are very poor: life expectancy is just 58 years, the under-five mortality rate is 122 per 1 000 live births, the adult literacy rate is just 33 per cent, and secondary school enrolment is under half of the youth population.[53] The wider Sahel region, particularly Niger, has experienced three serious food crises linked to erratic rainfall and desertification over the last 10 years, at its worst leaving over 5 million people in need of food assistance. Across the region, economic development and job creation stalled, along with ordinary people's expectations about what democracy could deliver in terms of improving their everyday lives.

The effect of all this was marked in Mali's north – in the furthest reaches from Gao to Kidal and outside of Timbuktu, where there are no paved roads. Clinics and schools are sparsely dotted across the barren Sahelian scrub, few fields are irrigated, and most homes are poorly constructed out of concrete and breezeblock or mud. It has often been argued that the best chance the north had for inclusive development was the 'The National Pact', which promised the integration of the rebels into the national army and economic development measures for the marginalised north after a Tuareg rebellion in the early 1990s. However, the plan was never given proper financing and its implementation was continuously postponed, a factor that is often cited as the reason for the resurgence of the Tuareg rebellion under Ibrahim Ag Bahanga in the 2000s. However, it is important to note here that there are many people in the south who feel that the north has received a disproportionate amount of funding and political attention, feelings which were exacerbated by the perception that it was the activities of the MNLA that had brought Mali to its knees in 2012.

During the rule of Touré, the choice was often a policy of 'hands-off' governance in the north – partly because the challenges were so huge and because resources were limited. This policy relied on the cooperation of regional elites who often had questionable loyalty to the central government. As security deteriorated, it even meant the creation of Arab self-defence militias.[54]

Efforts were made to increase the state presence in the north, but they were roundly criticised for militarising relations between north and south and not sufficiently consulting local populations. In 2011, the government launched the €50 million Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in Northern Mali (PSPSDN), which aimed to promote inclusive development for the northern communities. It envisaged the creation of 11 secure government and development centres across the north, where security forces were to be stationed as infrastructure projects were undertaken. While the project laudably identified that state presence should be reinforced in the north, it came under fire from many communities (some of which included future members of the MNLA) who rejected the notion of a 'top-down' centralised programme.[55] The project was eventually abandoned in early 2012 as the MNLA swept across the north.

Poor governance in Niger

It is interesting here to compare Mali's efforts with neighbouring Niger, which has also been beset by Tuareg rebellions and jihadist activity in its northern Sahelian zone. Many of the conditions described in the sections on Mali – lack of adequate border control, uneven development in periphery regions, and the lack of services and jobs – are just as important in creating the potential for instability in Niger.

The last major Tuareg revolt in Niger started in 2007 and was led by Aghlay ag Alambo's MNJ (Nigerien Movement for Justice), which was fighting for a greater share of the wealth created by Niger's important uranium mines – located deep in the Sahara Desert near the town of Arlit, close to the Algerian border. Northern Niger is as remote and underdeveloped as northern Mali, with towns such as Agades serving as the main embarkation points for a crossing of the Sahara Desert. The MNJ appeared to be inspired by the success of Ag Bahanga's brief rebellion in Mali, which had broken out the previous year, and there were many rumours of links between the groups. Northern Niger's Sahel region around Agades and the Air Mountains is very similar to northern Mali, with largely pastoralist communities living in the less developed fringes of semi-desert and mountains. Furthermore, Niger's Tuareg communities – as well as Tubu and Fulani – have felt similar isolation from the centre of power in Niamey, especially as southern Niger is dominated by the Hausa group, which originates in northern Nigeria. Over two years, the MNJ, which also included Tubu and Fulani, led a series of attacks against army positions in the north, killing around 45 people and taking numerous Nigerien soldiers hostage. They also targeted uranium facilities in the north, including those owned by China, and the French nuclear giant Areva.

The Nigerien government, then led by President Mamadou Tandja, initially chose to respond to the rebellion with force. A state of emergency was declared in 2007 and the military pursued a crackdown on the rebels, restricting access to the zone for journalists and humanitarian actors. The desert tourist industry in the region dried up overnight and civilians fled from their homes. In 2008, a repressive new anti-terror law was passed, which gave extended powers to the army and police. Once again, Colonel Gaddafi attempted to mediate in the crisis and a series of half-hearted peace conferences began. Eventually, however, it was splits in the rebel movement itself that served to undermine its strength, with a new faction being formed by Rhissa ag Boula. By May 2009, President Tandja was able to make a visit to Agades and the rebellion appeared to run out of steam.

In early 2012, as the MNLA rebellion was in full force in neighbouring Mali, Niger was on high alert for a rekindling of the MNJ rebellion through association with the MNLA.[56] In a story with powerful echoes of the return of the MNLA to Mali, press reports accused Ag Boula's men of helping one of Colonel Gaddafi's sons, Al-Saadi, to escape southern Libya in a heavily armed convoy, bringing him to Agades and then Niamey, where he was to live under house arrest for several years before being extradited. Thousands of Tuareg refugees and other groups began to flee over the border from Mali to the safety of camps in northern Niger. Many observers feared the worst and expected northern Niger to fall as well. Nevertheless, the expected uprising did not take place. What had Niger done that Mali had not?

Just six months after the MNJ rebellion ended, President Tandja provoked a national crisis in October 2009 by attempting to change the Constitution to allow him to stand again for president. In February 2016, he was overthrown by a group of disgruntled generals, who significantly stepped aside the following year to allow elections to take place, which were won by Niger's current president, Mahamadou Issoufou. Although Tandja had crushed the rebellion by force, Issoufou's initial moves indicated a more conciliatory approach, which can be credited in part for helping to prevent the outbreak of a similar Tuareg rebellion in Niger. Both Rhissa ag Boula and Aghlay ag Alambo were brought into the political fold through the creation of special positions as presidential advisers. Brigi Rafini from Iferouane, deep in Niger's Tuareg region, was made prime minister, a position he still holds in 2016. Rhissa Feltou became mayor of Agades and Mohamed Anacko, another former rebel, was made president of the Regional Council of Agades. Ag Alambo was charged with the process of bringing Tuareg fighters back from Libya and reintegrating them into the national army. In addition, credible claims have been made that the Nigerien government – well aware of the evolution of the crisis in Mali – proactively stepped up border

patrols in the north to disarm any fighters coming back from Libya.[57]

Despite these important steps, which helped the country prevent a spill-over of the crisis in Mali, Niger remains in danger of a similar state collapse if another toxic mix of circumstances, such as those seen in Mali, are allowed to develop. Niger's record on promoting democracy and state-building is poor. The country has seen four coups and a significant part of its post-independence history has been spent under military rule. Although the country was returned to civilian rule in 2011, in a widely praised election in which challenger Seyni Oumarou gracefully accepted his defeat, in recent years old political habits in the country have begun to return. Authorities claim to have uncovered at least two serious coup plots in 2011 and late 2015, and cracked down hard on members of the military believed to have been behind them. In 2013, the governing coalition broke down, and a former staunch ally of the president and leader of the opposition Moden Lumana party, Hama Amadou, fled into exile in Paris after being charged with involvement in a baby-trafficking scandal in the lead up to Niger's presidential election in 2016. When Amadou returned to Niger in late 2015 to contest the election, he was promptly arrested and found himself fighting his campaign from prison. Unable to organise his supporters, Amadou pulled out of a second round run-off, leaving Issoufou free to win the vote in February 2015. The cast of characters who stood for president – Issoufou, Amadou, Seyni Oumarou, Mahamane Ousmane – are all members of a tiny political class who have spent the best part of 20 years moving in and out of government.[58] As in Mali and also in Chad, Niger's political opposition is accused of being ineffective and unrepresentative.

Despite clear commitments in a new Constitution, passed by popular vote in 2010, to increase transparency in the country's lucrative extractive sector, the government has failed to publish new contracts it drew up with the French nuclear giant Areva. Hundreds of people were tear-gassed and arrested in demonstrations calling for greater transparency. Supporters of Hama Amadou have been arrested while calling for his release. Similar protests calling for greater democracy and denouncing Issoufou's rule broke out in 2014 and 2015, some of which were broken up by the security forces. Despite worthy commitments to free speech, journalists have also been targeted, with at least five arrested in 2015.

Niger, like Mali, has consistently failed to deliver equitable development for its people, scoring the lowest human development indicators in the world on the UN's 2015 Human Development Index. The country's infant mortality rate is 102 per 1 000 live births, while the average number of years of schooling for a Nigerien is just five. With regards to the literacy rate, 85 per cent of the adult population cannot read or write.[59] The population grew by 3.9 per cent

in 2014 and is set to double within 18 years, as the country has the world's highest fertility rate. This will undoubtedly put immense strain on services such as schools and education, lead to further degradation of grazing lands and agricultural areas, and create a rural exodus to the main urban centres. Many of these people will choose to make the perilous journey to Europe in search of a better life.

Niger has suffered from three major food crises in less than 10 years, and almost six million people were at risk of hunger in 2012 after the annual rains failed. The country is more than 50 per cent dependent on international donors for its budget, yet repeated commitments by the government to invest in health, education and development have failed to materialise, including the ambitious 'Renaissance' plan announced by President Issoufou on his election in 2011.[60] Almost half the money Niger received from donors was unspent in 2014,[61] and money that was originally earmarked for development has been diverted to increase the military budget as the twin threats of AQIM and Boko Haram have increased. The country's 2012 budget was increased by 52.7 per cent with doubled defence spending and US$60 million cuts in resources for food security, health and education.[62]

President Issoufou has worked hard in recent years to promote Niger as a reliable partner in the fight against regional terrorist groups such as AQIM, appealing directly to the international community for assistance and allowing France and the United States to increase their military presence on Nigerien soil. Niger has joined a number of regional coalitions combating terrorism, and contributed troops to fight the northern Mali rebels and the insurgency led by the Islamist group Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria. However, while the country had a lucky escape by avoiding the potential for spill-over from Mali's MNLA rebellion, it has not escaped from AQIM, which has operated in Niger since the early days of the GSPC's move from Algeria. The twin suicide attacks in 2013 and continuing hostage-taking in the north have shown how the group is still able to strike in Niger unhindered. Furthermore, Niger is now affected by the activities of the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram, which since 2014 has moved outside its traditional area of operation in Nigeria's three northeastern states. At least 50 attacks took place on Nigerien territory in 2015, mostly in the remote eastern province of Diffa. This has displaced thousands of Nigeriens along the border. The government and relief agencies have struggled to provide for them, with the increased number of people putting pressure on already poor local health and education services and food stocks.

In trying to contain these threats, Niger suffers from many of the same challenges as Mali. Governance is lacking and has failed to deliver equitable

development, and large sections of the population feel marginalised and isolated. There is a small but growing movement of religious protest groups, which appear to be developing to fill the space left by an almost invisible political opposition. 'With no alternative means of expressing discontent, citizens increasingly turn to Islamist groups to channel dissent,' argues the International Crisis Group.[63] A group known as the Yan Izala – a Salafi-oriented reform movement – were believed to have been behind some of the unrest in Niger that followed the attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris. In the days after the attack, a number of churches across Niger were attacked and burned and Christians targeted in public. In addition, as Boko Haram evolves in eastern Niger, there are fears that local young people, without jobs and who feel alienated from the centre of power, are choosing to join the group. Furthermore, as the formal national education system is increasingly under strain, a network of highly conservative Quranic schools have been able to gain traction. These schools may further change the religious and cultural landscape of the region in years to come and provide pools of potential recruits to AQIM and its affiliates.

To what extent can failures of governance be blamed for the rise in Islamist violence in the Sahel? Since independence, Sahelian governments have consistently failed to build effective state institutions such as armies and border forces, resulting in vast swathes of territory in Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania where central government presence is extremely weak. These areas have been colonised by smugglers, drugs traffickers and jihadists, who have been free to operate and create alternative economic systems and social arrangements. At the same time, the associated failure of Sahelian governments to provide economic opportunities and inclusive development to a population scraping an existence on the margins of the Sahara Desert has driven some into the arms of radical groups.

There was certainly significant local recruitment and cooperation with local elites during the Malian crisis, which allowed Islamist pseudo-governance to gain a toehold, but we have seen how the internal narratives of Malian Islam meant that reactions to the imposition of sharia law by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar al-Din were extremely complex and varied. Rather than seeing a direct link between the failure of Sahelian governments to provide hope for their people and propelling people towards the adoption of Islamist ideologies, it may be more helpful to consider how a few very committed individuals – Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Iyad ag Ghali to name but a few – were able to use the chaotic circumstances in northern Mali to their advantage and impose their ideologies on populations, some of whom were receptive to their ideas.

In a further indictment of governance in the region, it is notable how little effort seems to have been made to challenge these radical ideas. While Mauritania

has led some commendable efforts in its prisons to engage detained radical Islamists in theological debate, and even held a national social dialogue on the acceptability of violent actions in Islam, Mali's HIC has at times seemed more concerned with politics, and similar national dialogues are almost unheard of in Niger and Chad.[64] The Islamists have been dislodged but little has been done to dislodge their ideas. Recruitment continues as evidenced by several of the attackers involved in the assault on the Radisson Blu in Bamako being local Malians. As Andrew Lebovich argues: 'Despite the toll exacted on these groups by Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane … their operations have not only increased in the last year in northern Mali but also spread increasingly to central and southern Mali.'[65]

It can be tempting to see the Sahel, and in particular Mali, as an accident waiting to happen. Years of neglect in the northern regions and, indeed, political failings in Bamako meant that a group of uniquely determined individuals – both Tuareg rebels and Islamist fighters – were able to take full advantage of the political stagnation and inability of government to control territory or provide basic services to many of its citizens. The potential for chaos in the region has long been acknowledged by regional leaders and the international community alike.

However, this analysis misses the significant impact of a series of extraordinary events. The collapse of Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Libya pushed a band of heavily armed and determined MNLA fighters back into Mali. This crisis could have been mitigated and turned into yet another brief skirmish with Tuareg rebels if the Malian army had been fit for purpose. Instead, Mali was hit by an unstoppable domino effect sparked by the 'accidental coup' of Amadou Sanogo on 22 March 2012.[66] The MNLA's weakness was easily exposed by the Islamists who defeated them and overran their territory in a matter of weeks. With President Touré gone, political paralysis set in and the army was unable to stop the Islamists claiming huge swathes of territory.

Thus, lack of governance did not so much create the ideologies themselves or even propel large numbers of people towards radical ideas. Rather, it created an environment in which a toxic mix of rebel groups, drugs smugglers, criminals and jihadists could thrive. Once the weak Malian state institutions were swept aside, the Islamist groups were able to claim territory, gain recruits and weapons, and carry out a social experiment in applying sharia law for nearly nine months. And while this experiment with controlling territory was quite easily uprooted by the vastly superior military capabilities of the French and Chadian armies, the Malian state has been unable to fully reassert itself since Operation Serval formally ended. Today, disillusionment with the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), a prominent member of Mali's old French-

leaning political class, is widespread. Anecdotal evidence from Bamako suggests that many people believe the status quo has returned.[67] In a recent survey of 5 000 Malians, poor governance and the failure of the state to deliver equitable development in the south and north, as well as urban and rural areas, was recently cited as one of the main obstacles to peace.[68]

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako in November 2015 and the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou in early 2016, it was reported that Al-Mourabitoun had been reabsorbed into AQIM.[69] Andrew Lebovich argues that the reconciliation and merger of the two groups appears to have been the result of 'competition from a growing Islamic State presence in north Africa and the Sahara/Sahel region'.[70] The growing influence of ISIS in Africa, most markedly in the chaotic east of Libya, where there may be as many as 3 000 ISIS fighters, appears to have pushed AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun to put their differences aside and to attempt to reassert their pre-eminence in the Sahel region. AQIM has also recently been challenged for dominance in eastern Niger by the activities of Boko Haram, which also pledged allegiance to ISIS. The recent merger between Ansar al-Din, AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) should be seen as a way of maintaining supremacy in the region in the face of increased competition by the ISIS.

The focus for AQIM continues to be France and its activities in West Africa, and the scale and audacity of the Ouagadougou, Ivory Coast and Bamako attacks can only be seen as continuing proof of what the newly reunited group is capable of. In addition, militancy has spread to southern and central Mali in the aftermath of the French realignment under Operation Barkhane, with new groups emerging, such as the Macina Liberation Front led by radical preacher Amadou Kouffa, which claimed responsibility for several attacks across southern Mali during 2015.

Although some progress has been made to restore order in Mali, such as the largely peaceful 2013 elections which returned the former prime minister, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, as president, there are still considerable obstacles in the way to the re-establishment of Mali's full territorial integrity and political systems. A locally unpopular UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, continues to carry out much of the day-to-day patrols and security measures in the north, albeit under the constant threat of attack. In the first few months of 2016 alone, at least 15 UN soldiers were killed in ambushes on the UN camps in Kidal.[71] The status of Kidal, which has predominantly been under the control of a shifting alliance between Tuareg rebel groups, became a serious question mark. Efforts by the Malian government to reassert control

were repeatedly rebuffed, including the humiliating visit of the former prime minister, Moussa Mara, to Kidal in May 2014, which sparked deadly clashes between the MNLA and government forces.[72] Although the Algiers Accord, a peace deal signed between the rebel CMA (Coordination of Movements of Azawad) and the Malian government in June 2015 was greeted with optimism by some in Bamako, when Algeria's foreign minister visited Bamako a year later it seemed that little concrete progress had been made.[73] This slow progress and lack of implementation is reminiscent of most of the peace accords signed with northern rebels over the last decade.

This pattern is repeated across the wider Sahel, where little progress has been seen in attempts to consolidate democracy and improve governance. Niger's elections in early 2016 took place in an environment of intense hostility between the government and opposition. Establishment figures have been largely discredited in the eyes of the opposition and ordinary citizens. In April 2016, the incumbent president, Idriss Déby Itno, successfully ran for a fifth term. Amid post-election recriminations, it was claimed by opposition figures that 60 military personnel disappeared without trace after failing to vote for Déby Itno. With a prolonged slump in the world oil price, Chad's public finances were severely impacted during 2015 and it was forced to seek a bail out from the IMF. In 2014, Burkina Faso's longstanding president, Blaise Compaore, was toppled in a coup, which was followed in 2015 by a violent botched counter coup by his supporters, who briefly arrested the country's transitional president and prime minister. It has been argued that this prolonged political crisis was a factor in Al-Mourabitoun's decision to attack Ouagadougou in early 2016. Perhaps of most concern is the ongoing crisis in Libya, where all attention is focused on the failing attempts to create a unity government in Tripoli. This has left the entire south of the country – the Sahelian hinterlands – as yet another enormous space where state institutions are weak and free for armed groups to exploit. Chad's President Déby Itno, in particular, has repeatedly warned about the dangers posed by this region.

Although there have been some attempts to create regional groupings to share intelligence and resources to combat terrorism and instability across the Sahel, such as the CEMOC (Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) and the Sahel G5 (Chad, Niger, Mauritania, Mali and Burkina Faso), in reality regional rivalries have tended to complicate these efforts. Chad and Niger have contributed troops to peacekeeping forces in Mali and in northeastern Nigeria against Boko Haram, but despite early gains in both conflicts, comprehensive peace solutions are lacking and resentment has built towards Nigeria's government for its own inability to deal with the crisis.

Looking at the region as a whole, it is clear that while the short-lived attempt

of groups such as AQIM and Ansar al-Din to conquer and administer significant territory in northern Mali was easily defeated by the superior firepower of a Western army, tanks and guns have done little to change the fundamental political economy of all Sahelian states. France, with its 3 000-strong military presence in West Africa, is keen to push all those who remain obstacles to peace in northern Mali to accept the 2015 Algiers Accord, even if its provisions do not appear to represent a game-changing solution to the long-standing problems of the north. Islamist groups can and almost certainly will continue to move unhindered across huge swathes of desert, striking predominantly foreign targets at will.

If this continued instability is ever to be addressed, all the countries of the Sahel, and most importantly Mali and Niger, need to improve governance structures and offer their populations the realistic prospect of inclusive economic development. Particular attention needs to be paid to improving the region's security forces, including border patrols, intelligence and national armies, in order to help each country control the territory. At the same time, ordinary people in marginalised areas need to be given better access to schools, health care and employment opportunities. They need to feel that the state is 'investing' in them, as a way to counteract the narratives of rebellion and radicalism which have proved so popular. Failing to make these changes will undoubtedly see the region continue to suffer waves of instability and violence.

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