

TRANSITIONING FROM MILITARY INTERVENTIONS TO LONG-TERM COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICY

The Case of Mali (2013- 2016)

Sergei Boeke



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands



Australian
National
University

icct

Transitioning from military interventions to long-term counter-terrorism policy

The Case of Mali (2013–2016)

Sergei Boeke

April 2016

Transitioning from military interventions to long-term counter-terrorism policy:
The case of Mali (2013-2016)

Sergei Boeke

ISSN 2452-0551
e-ISSN 2452-056X

Preferred citation: Boeke, S. “Transitioning from military interventions to long-term counter-terrorism policy: The case of Mali (2013-2016)”, *Leiden University – Institute of Security and Global Affairs* (2016).

© 2016, Sergei Boeke / Leiden University

Cover design: Oscar Langley

www.oscarlangley.com

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this report may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owners Leiden University and Australian National University and the author of the book.

Contents

Map of Mali	4
Preface	5
Policy Recommendations	6
A. Pre-intervention phase: improving decision-making by governments	6
B. Entry phase: the military intervention	8
C. Transition phase: towards local ownership	11
1 Introduction	16
2 Country and Conflict	19
2.1 Background	19
2.2 International context	20
2.3 Structural causes of conflict	25
2.4 Immediate causes of conflict	29
3 The pre-intervention phase	32
3.1 Decision-making and political context	32
3.2 International law and legality	34
3.3 Military planning and intelligence	35
3.4 Political decisiveness and flexibility	36
4 Entry and stabilisation phase	38
4.1 Actors and instruments	38
4.2 Mission objectives and strategic narrative	40
4.3 Intervention dynamics	41
4.4 Cooperation with local actors	43
4.5 Political development	44
5 Transit and exit phase	47
5.1 Introduction transition	47
5.2 The peace process	48
5.3 Actors and instruments	52
6 Conclusion	56
Acknowledgements	61

Preface

This report is part of a research project that assesses how military interventions can best prepare the ground for an effective long-term counter-terrorism policy. Three different cases have been studied, and they have each provided the input for the policy relevant recommendations that are presented in this report. The case studies concern the military intervention and transition in Afghanistan (2001), Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). The primary objectives of this research were:

- To identify key success factors and best practices to be able to transform a broad military intervention, whether using a counter-insurgency or comprehensive approach, into a more limited, both in size and scope, counter-terrorism policy.
- To identify elements for a longer-term counter-terrorism policy that would focus on alleviating the threat from terrorist groups, reinforcing host nation capacity and addressing some of the causes of radicalization and violent extremism.

This project was conducted by Leiden University, the Australian National University (ANU) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). An initial workshop was organised to help formulate the research questions and structure the reports. Subsequently, for each case study a draft report formed the setting for a one day, high-level expert meeting. A mix of around thirty policy-makers (including several serving or retired generals), politicians (including two former Ministers of Defence) and international academics from different backgrounds attended the seminars and provided extremely valuable feedback on the draft reports.

The high-level expert meetings were organised as follows:

- Initial workshop to determine the framework study, held on 4 February 2015, Brussels, Belgium
- Libya, held on 29 June 2015, The Hague, The Netherlands
- Afghanistan, held on 10 September 2015, Brussels, Belgium
- Mali, held on 7 December 2015, Lille, France

The project has been made possible by NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme.

Policy Recommendations

A. Pre-intervention phase: improving decision-making by governments

- 1. Prevention is better than intervention** A dearth of political will has notoriously thwarted attempts at preventing outbreaks of major conflict through binding decisions of the UN Security Council, but a range of other tools are available. These include measures to address factors such as the sponsorship of disruptive actors by states, looting of state resources by corrupt political leaders, and the spread of organised criminal activity.
- 2. Knowledge networks** When capacity is not in-house, a knowledge-network could ensure that relevant cultural, historical and linguistic knowledge is quickly made available and accessible when necessary. Trust, however, ‘has a face’ and networks need to be actively maintained. Furthermore, conflict situations are invariably complex, and it may be necessary to access a range of different kinds of expertise – political, economic, legal and anthropological – in order to secure a balanced picture.
- 3. Early warning and Intelligence** The world is full of potential conflicts and budding crises. There will always be surprises, but an early warning methodology can ensure that governments are not caught wholly unprepared. Good intelligence on potentially unstable regions and countries is indispensable to support decision-making during crisis-situations. While intelligence agencies naturally focus on identified and potential adversaries, a risk management approach necessitates capacity with respect to areas that may seem stable and benign, but are not. Whether within intelligence, Defence or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, knowledge centres of specific crisis prone-regions should be nurtured. Making better use of existing early-warning networks and knowledge centres may be a low-cost way of accessing relevant information.
- 4. Meaning making** Once a crisis or conflict has erupted, it is important to discern what it is about and what is at stake. Through an in depth analysis of the drivers of conflict, organisations can take stock of the potential local, regional and international implications. A thorough answer to “what is happening and why is it important?” leads to a better preparation for the question “what should we

do?” that is invariably posed by politicians and decision-makers. Meaning-making frames the situation and is vital for garnering national and international support for an active policy on the issue.

- 5. International support** Obtaining support from regional actors is very important in the pre-intervention phase, although some regions, such as Southwest Asia, lack strong regional organizations. A broad support base can translate to a strong UN mandate for action. Nonetheless, the views of neighbouring countries can also be instructive. It is important also to note that support can dwindle over time; one way to minimise this risk is to have in place mechanisms of on-going engagement with regional actors.
- 6. Mapping local partners** An intervening force will be judged at least in part by the company it chooses to keep. As a crisis develops and a military intervention becomes possible, local stakeholders and partners will need to be mapped. Some of these may prove to be reliable primary sources, possessing a situational awareness that national decision-makers and policy officers often lack. Others should best be avoided. International actors can end up inadvertently furthering the interests of unappetising local actors; this happened frequently in Afghanistan after 2001.
- 7. Legal mandate** A precise legal mandate at the outset is vital to minimise the risk of subsequent disputes over exactly what actions a mission can properly involve. This is important in maintaining support for an intervention in intervening states. Furthermore, public disputes over the purpose of an intervention risk emboldening those whose activities the intervention is designed to disrupt.
- 8. Establishing a strategic narrative** Framing and bias in the media coverage of events can affect public support for or against an intervention and can prevent decision-makers from receiving a balanced overview of the situation in theatre. This can be offset by clear and coherent strategic narratives articulated by state leaders and the spokespersons of alliances and international organizations. This was arguably lacking in Afghanistan until at least 2008-2009, in part because the invasion of Iraq in 2003 forced NATO countries to improvise in the Afghanistan theatre. It is therefore vital that any intervention be accompanied by appropriate strategies for the dissemination of information that can show how an intervention will serve the interests of the audience at home. In the host-nation state, the intervening powers will have to counter in a nuanced and sophisticated fashion the narratives being disseminated by opponents of the intervention. Too often, international actors focus simply on the spreading of images themselves

doing what they think is good, rather than identifying the concerns of locals and responding to them.

9. Contingency planning Early contingency planning by the relevant government ministries, including Foreign Affairs and Defence, is a precondition for effective eventual deployment of military assets. While this might not seem politically opportune at the time, and send an escalatory signal if made public, militaries need a minimum time-frame to mobilize technically and prepare forces for deployment. In Libya, NATO had weeks to plan and prepare for the intervention, and this proved just enough to launch the attack when the executive ordered it. The case of Mali illustrated how different planning scenarios developed by the French Ministry of Defence proved instrumental in allowing a rapid military response to a surprise jihadist attack on Southern Mali.

10. Action over inaction When the spectre of impending massacres (framed as a ‘Rwanda’ or ‘Srebrenica’) raises its head, politicians prefer action over inaction. The lack of available information, or uncertainty pertaining to the long-term consequences of intervention, are of secondary consequence, just as a fire-fighter is not concerned by water damage. The Libyan intervention was in response to what was perceived to be an impending massacre at Benghazi, and the subsequent defeat of the rebels. While it inadvertently detracted from the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, future crises could again test its underlying validity.

11. Long-term implications With fast news cycles and short term politics demanding rapid decisions, bureaucracies must reserve time and capacity to analyse the potential long-term implications of intervention or non-intervention. While ministerial departments exist to support the political course and line, a red-team construction or devil’s advocate office could offer an impartial dissenting opinion. Scenario planning would be an ideal instrument for high-level policy makers to illustrate possible outcomes or ‘end states’ of active involvement, and it is important to include non-military angles.

B. Entry phase: the military intervention

1. Clear political objective An intervention should have a clear overarching political objective. Operation Serval in Mali serves as an example of a clear objective and mission. In response to the Malian government’s cry for help, the French military intervened to stop the Salafi-Jihadist attack on the South. The objective was to restore national territorial integrity, by reconquering the north from the three ‘occupying’ terrorist groups. NATO’s intervention in Libya was

less clear-cut. It was mandated to impose a no-fly zone to protect civilians. The US, France and the UK were at pains to deny that ‘regime change’ was the objective, but emphasised that there could be no solution with Gaddafi remaining in power. This considerably complicated the military operation and the strategic narrative.

2. **Speed of decision-making** For escalating international conflict situations and crises, assuming that the intervening power works with a clear political objective and plans well, the faster an intervention is deployed, the greater its chances of success. Paradoxically, crises often have to attain a certain level of severity before enough political support in the intervening state can be mustered for active involvement. Appropriate contingency planning is essential if an intervention is to occur expeditiously.
3. **Military tactics subservient to political strategy** Once combat has started, Ministries of Defence tend to dominate policy on an intervention, often overshadowing Ministries of Foreign Affairs or the Cabinet Office. This risks an excessive focus on tactical military objectives, to the detriment of overarching strategic (political) goals. Joint planning for the transition is required from the moment the intervention starts, with appropriate input from interested parties such as police and the NGO sector.
4. **Light versus heavy footprint** A ‘light footprint’ with no boots on the ground will minimize risks of entanglement and maximize local ownership, but similarly limit the ability of the international community to provide security during the transition. A strong and decisive host nation government can compensate for this, but post-intervention Libya has illustrated how insecurity tends to be self-perpetuating, and Afghanistan suffered greatly from the failure to expand ISAF beyond Kabul in early 2002. Without a basic level of human security, attempts at state-building, basic humanitarian programmes or economic development will be stifled.
5. **End date or end state** A mission can be mandated for a fixed period of time or made conditional on certain achievements or criteria. The choice is an important one and determines the leeway for the political debate on an eventual prolongation of the mission. An ‘end-date’ mission provides a fixed timetable to exit and necessitates a renegotiation of the mandate if any kind of further involvement is deemed desirable, while an ‘end state’ mission offers more room for manoeuvre to adapt the mission to domestic or local circumstances. An ‘end-date’ model, if it proves overly-optimistic, can create real dilemmas over how properly to respond to unanticipated threats to an orderly transition.

- 6. Collateral damage** Precise targeting to avoid collateral damage and civilian casualties is *a conditio sine qua non* for military interventions. This is not only dictated by humanitarian law (*ius in bello*); it is also essential for retaining public support. While civilian infrastructure such as power stations and media centres can in certain cases form legitimate military targets, their destruction will complicate later phases. During Operation Unified Protector in Libya, the oil and gas sector were wisely spared destruction and would provide the state, when not threatened by non-state actors, with essential income.
- 7. Structuring intelligence cooperation** Sharing of intelligence is based on trust. The Five Eyes intelligence community has institutionalized sharing to a large extent, and during NATO's mission in Afghanistan much effort was devoted to changing mentalities from 'need to know' to 'need to share'. Intelligence sharing within NATO but outside the Five Eyes is often still *ad hoc*, and much can be gained by setting up a new intelligence hub at the start of the mission. While the Dutch were temporarily admitted to the Five Eyes community during their tenure as lead nation for Uruzgan (Afghanistan), French requests to accede during the Libya operation were rebuffed. Once the decision has been taken by a coalition to intervene, direct covenants and agreements between participating intelligence entities would greatly facilitate the exchange of data and information. Fusion cells and a focus that is not solely limited to 'enemy forces' would greatly increase the value of intelligence for decision-makers.
- 8. Arming rebels** Arming factions on the ground, even when part of a seemingly secular opposition to a regime in Africa/the Middle East, entails both short and long-term risks. The choice for a light footprint intervention, such as the initial American overthrow of the Taliban regime and NATO's campaign in Libya, implies that local rebel forces must do the fighting and need arms and ammunition to succeed. In Libya, different rebel factions were armed covertly in order to avoid directly contravening the international arms embargo that had been imposed at the start of the conflict. Most importantly, the weapons – whether classified as 'light' or not – can end up in the wrong hands, or be turned on the wrong people as allied rebels become Islamist opponents.
- 9. Addressing critical shortages** Since NATO's 1999 Operation Allied Force (Kosovo), several critical shortfalls in capacity, specifically on the European side, have been identified. These include Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) platforms and capacity, aerial refuelling, precision munitions and strategic transport. These shortages have still not been alleviated. France's Operation Serval illustrated how national combat capacity proved sufficient to tackle the jihadist groups in Mali; but it was

completely dependent on Allied logistical support to enable the operations. Addressing the shortages in Allied capacity will reduce the fragile foundations of intervention capacity, and allow for more efficient military operations.

- 10. Analysing regional fallout** Before the intervention and during the transition, implications for the wider region need to be analysed. This can best be done through intra-interdepartmental task forces in Ministries of Foreign Affairs, that transcend organisational divides such as the MENA and Sub-Saharan categorizations. Interconnected relationship between countries, ethnic groups/tribes and regions need to be considered. The possible responses of regional ‘spoilers’ need to be taken very seriously: the continuing availability of operating sanctuaries in Pakistan for the Afghan Taliban gravely complicated efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

C. Transition phase: towards local ownership

- 1. Maintain momentum** After the successful entry phase, high-level decision-makers can easily be distracted by other crises and lose interest in the slow process of transition. Libya provides the textbook example of a united front organising an intervention, and dissolving the moment that the military objective was met, with multiple problems left unsolved that could potentially prove very damaging to the interests of the coalition’s members.
- 2. Ensuring the provision of security** Once the main combat phase is over, the authorities are expected to facilitate a quick return to normalcy and provide a modicum of security. A state that cannot manage this risks losing legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Without assistance from intervening powers, or an international security force, this can be an insurmountable challenge for the incoming government, as the case study of Libya illustrated. The stated NATO objective of protecting civilians effectively ceased once Gaddafi was killed, and while both the intervening powers and the host-nation state were adamant in not wanting ‘foreign’ boots on the ground, the security situation nosedived as a result.
- 3. Do not hasten elections** The international community has indicated a strong preference for rapidly organising national elections in the host-nation state after the military intervention. This is to confer legitimacy on their new governmental partners, and to fulfil essential criteria allowing the transfer of aid and donor money. It is, however, folly to expect an inexperienced government, devoid of a functioning bureaucracy or a capable security force, to perform even elementary governmental functions in a complex post-conflict situation. While the newly

elected might enjoy international legitimacy, they will have none at home if they cannot provide basic security and state services to the local population. In hindsight, the elections in Libya were held too early, with the government lacking essential capacity even to have a chance of success. Elections are divisive activities that create losers as well as winners; and they are rule-governed activities that lose all credibility if the key rules on candidature, voting and scrutiny cannot be dispassionately enforced.

- 4. Whole of government approach** During the Libya intervention, the United Kingdom dispatched an “International Stabilisation Response Team” (ISRT) to the country, consisting of different experts in the fields of security, economy and justice. This concept of sending a multi-disciplinary team to take stock of the local situation, meet stakeholders and set out a transition plan deserves follow-up in future crises. Ideally the focus would not just be on the short term and there would have to be some follow-up. Integrating the approaches of diplomacy, development and defence (3D) combines the necessary skills-sets and ensures policy is aligned between the involved government departments. Such a comprehensive approach, which the Netherlands and Canada sought to follow in Afghanistan, is not a panacea, but it can improve the quality of performance on the ground.
- 5. Counter-terrorism versus counterinsurgency** It is important to distinguish between insurgents, terrorists and criminals, as the designated label channels a policy reaction that is anchored in the very different fields of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency (COIN) or law enforcement, each centred around its own principles, dogmas and common practices. The COIN approach as conducted in Afghanistan became very military-centric, and more sequential (shape, clear, hold and build) than for instance the comprehensive approach, which could see simultaneous efforts of diplomats, aid workers and the military. A counter-terrorism approach that focuses on removing the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism would ideally be civilian-led.
- 6. Focus on good governance** In the long run, good governance probably matters more than infrastructural development, although it may be much harder to deliver. To the extent that international actors have any capacity to influence the form that governance takes in the aftermath of an intervention, they will need to show their hands early. There is typically only one chance to get things right, and if the structure and functioning of government prove dysfunctional, there are likely to be plenty of beneficiaries of the dysfunctional system who will fight hard to retain it. Afghanistan after 2001 provides an unhappily clear example of this.

- 7. Security Sector Reform** It is important to start early and commit for the long run where SSR is concerned, building partnerships with key institutions and figures. An inclusive approach through a national dialogue campaign is essential. Failure on this front is likely to blight endeavours on many others, as the case of Libya clearly illustrates. Effort should focus not just on the technical capacity of the soldier or police officer, but also the organisation behind him or her. Without a sound HR-policy, a clear command and control structure and effective administrative and logistical procedures, trained units cannot be deployed or sustained.
- 8. Strengthen human security not just state security** Much capacity building in the security sector is state-centric and focused on institutions and security organisations. In many conflict areas, including areas in Afghanistan and Mali, the police and military are the cause of insecurity and are distrusted by parts of the population. This needs to be recognised as a problem, since misbehaviour by agencies of the state will ultimately contaminate the state's reputation and legitimacy. The intervening powers will need to be aware of power structures and networks within the politico-security establishment, to prevent vested interests trumping human security in the country.
- 9. Bottom up approach** In deeply tribal societies, once institutional deadlock has occurred, a top-down approach will not resolve the problem. Local stakeholders will need to be stimulated to cooperate and contribute to conflict resolution at the micro-level. To the extent that they can, international actors should resist the temptation to see a strong central state as 'the' solution to a country's problems. In any transition, there are troubling questions to be asked about the appropriate scope, strength, and structure of the state for the future. Rather than rushing discussion of these questions, it is better if possible to address them through inclusive dialogue between many different social forces, with special attention to groups that might otherwise be marginalised, including women and ethnic minorities.
- 10. Beware of militias** Militias can provide local security where government capacity is lacking, but the solution is short term. Militias are only accountable to the local strong-man, their interests do not align with those of the national government and their *modus operandi* often entails violation of basic human rights. In Libya, the militias refused the government's instruction to disarm, and there was no capacity or political will to enforce the order. They were subsequently integrated into the security structures, initially formalising their position and strengthening their capacity, and later causing the fracturing of the security apparatus along factional lines. In Afghanistan, some similar problems

were encountered, partly because international actors were not particularly skilled at distinguishing local power holders with some degree of legitimacy from local power holders who were mainly coercive and extractive.

- 11. Provision of basic state services** A population in a conflict area does not judge the government on its counter-terrorism strategy, but on the provision of basic state services such as electricity, drinking water, health care and education. If these are non-existent or seriously lacking, government legitimacy will suffer. In the north of Mali, two years after the French intervention, the state is still struggling to deliver these basic services. As a result, certain elements of the population are developing some nostalgia for the time that the jihadists were in control, and actually managed to ensure more consistent electricity provision than the state.
- 12. Becoming a battlefield for regional powers** Weak states unwittingly invite strong neighbours to safeguard their own interests on their territory. This can take benign forms, but can also fuel local conflicts when foreign powers actively support their own proxies or allies. In Libya, both Qatar and Turkey have supported Islamist factions that oppose the elected government in Tobruk. In Afghanistan, Pakistan has played a nefarious role in consistently providing a safe-haven to the strategic leadership of the Taliban. While in the latter case, the US and NATO have deliberately chosen not to confront their ally, strong international diplomacy could have limited external involvement in Libya. Addressing this challenge can require frank and difficult conversations with close allies.
- 13. Metrics for progress** Quality data can be very useful for appraising aspects of a transition process, especially if they are gathered with sensitivity to local complexity, and can be analysed in a statistically-sophisticated fashion. At the same time, over reliance on rigidly-structured metrics, such as enemy killed in action or territory nominally under control of the government, risks neglecting important factors that may not lend themselves easily to quantification, such as patron-client relationships within elites. The best data are likely to be those gathered after careful consultation with specialists on the countries or areas under discussion. The right metrics need to be determined at the beginning of the deployment, as changing criteria will pollute databases and render comparisons difficult.
- 14. Military exit is not end of involvement** Public discourse revolves around ‘exit strategies’, ‘entanglement’ and ‘bringing the boys home’. This frame is misleading, as involvement in and engagement with the host-nation typically

does not end, but takes on a different, civilian shape. The earlier the civilian effort has been part of the intervention, the easier it will be to reduce the military element and maintain continuity. An integrated approach from the outset has more to offer than an attempt to mount a sudden ‘civilian surge’; appropriate personnel may not be available for the latter, and expectations of what can result may be unrealistically high.

15. The problem of narcotics The drug trade can play an enormous role in fuelling local conflict and increasing insecurity. Drugs, however, are not the most significant part in the revenue model of the Salafi-Jihadist groups in Mali (hostage ransoms), Afghanistan (funds from *awqaf* and wealthy donors in the Gulf) or Libya (crime and other traffic). Local governments play a more important role in the drug trade, often promoting or facilitating the traffic of drugs or preventing the prosecution of smugglers. Approaching the drug trade through the prism of counter-terrorism is therefore counterproductive, as the primary effort must be focused on reforming government institutions and cultures. The Afghanistan case suggests that at a certain point it can become very difficult to crack down on narcotics because of the risk that large numbers of small producers and labourers might be driven straight into the arms of the armed opposition.

16. Managing expectations Too often, interventions lead to unrealistically high expectations which are then disappointed. Rather than fuelling such expectations, it is better to try to create low expectations, and then exceed them. Interventions create their own momentum, and can result in unintended consequences that are greater than the envisaged ones. Avoiding rigidity, the intervening powers and host nation state will need to navigate crises while continuing to work towards a politically inclusive settlement. Both the tasks of rebuilding conflict-stricken societies and addressing the causes that contribute to terrorism are long-term efforts, requiring time, perseverance and a dose of good fortune.

1 Introduction

On 11 January 2013 French warplanes attacked jihadist convoys that were advancing on Bamako, Mali's capital. The attack came as a surprise to many, not least to the jihadists themselves. They had controlled two thirds of Malian territory for six months, after they had successfully defeated and evicted the Malian army from the north. Initially, the three jihadist groups involved, namely Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its offshoot The Movement for the Oneness of Jihad (MUJAO by its French acronym) and Ansar Dine, had supported an ethnic Tuareg uprising against the central government in Bamako. This was the fourth Tuareg revolt since independence from France in 1960, and its success against government forces was unprecedented. This was in part due to the NATO operation that ousted Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Gaddafi had employed many Tuareg fighters in his Islamic Legion, the pan-Arab paramilitary force. After the fall of the Libyan regime, these fighters found themselves without employment but (still) in the possession of an impressive armoury. As the Malian military was routed on the battlefield, a coup by the army in March overturned the government in Bamako, plunging the country into a constitutional crisis. Once the Malian government forces had been chased from the north (or had changed sides and joined the rebellion), the Tuareg separatists saw their own rebellion hijacked by their partners of convenience. These first months of 2012 would start Mali's *annus horribilis*, and the perspective remained bleak until France came to the rescue in January 2013. A territory bigger than that of France and the United Kingdom combined was thus governed by groups internationally labelled as terrorist organisations for over six months.

The Malian 2012 crisis was just as much a strategic surprise to policy makers as the French intervention that superseded it. Until 2012, Mali was seen as a 'posterboy for democracy' by the US State Department.¹ The last coup that had taken place was in 1991, and the military officer Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), who overthrew the military dictator Moussa Traoré, did something very unusual for a coup instigator. He returned to the military and let the democratic elections run their course. Ten years later he would exchange his military career for a political one, and would be elected for president twice. The political situation in Mali was in stark contrast to the neighbouring countries, with a bloody civil war raging in Algeria until the end of the 1990s, Libya's autocratic Gaddafi and recent (if not frequent) coups in Niger and Mauritania. At the

¹ Hussein Solomon, "Mali: West Africa's Afghanistan", *RUSI Journal* 158, no. 1 (2013), 12–19; Dan Hamilton, "Post of the Month: Bamako", *State Magazine* 467 (2003): 10-15. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/191590.pdf>. accessed 25 November 2015.

same time, and in part facilitated by this not wholly correct perception of an immaculate democracy based in Bamako, Mali became what many would term a ‘donor darling’. A large percentage of national revenue would depend on international aid, and many development projects took root, especially in southern Mali.

There was of course the writing on the wall, that - with hindsight - provided early warning indicators. These included the absence of any political opposition to the regime, the simmering and unresolved Tuareg conflict, and AQIM having freedom of movement in several remote areas of the country, kidnapping Westerners for ransom and frightening away tourists. On the whole, however, political risk maps classified Mali as one of the most stable countries in the region, and few recognised that ATT’s government was predominantly a brittle façade. The year 2011 was characterised by a monumental upheaval, at that time optimistically labelled the Arab Spring, and the West was preoccupied with security dilemmas in, for instance, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the Summer of 2012, Tuaregs striving for the independence of the Azawad territory were forcefully displaced from the northern cities of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal by the three jihadist groups. Through brutal violence or by financially or ideologically more attractive propositions, they wrested control of the North and installed their own version of a Sharia-based Islamic state. To great concern of the neighbouring West-African countries and the international community at large, northern Mali became a safe haven for the jihadist groups. The creation of a ‘Sahelistan’ had the potential of destabilising an already fragile region. Foreign fighters and sympathisers travelled from far to jihadist training camps, and local recruitment burgeoned in the absence of any limiting factors. In this context, by the end of December 2012, the United Nations had mandated an African-led support force, to assist the Malian army in reconquering the North. This force would not be ready before Summer 2013, but the jihadists launched their own surprise attack on southern Mali in January 2013, with columns of Toyota trucks bristling with fighters breaking through Malian defences. This provided the trigger that directly led to the French military intervention.

The French military intervention - called Operation Serval – was a counterterrorist operation seen from its primary objective. Its goals were limited to stopping the jihadist advance, and as will be explored later, Serval successfully accomplished these goals. Air power combined with Special Forces stopped the jihadist advance and probably prevented the collapse of the Malian interim-government in Bamako. A traditional military campaign subsequently re-conquered the north, with the jihadist groups holding an unsuccessful last-stand in their mountainous redoubt of the Adrar des Ifoghas by the end of March 2013. With Malian territorial integrity restored, the military phase was successfully concluded. While its success was by no means a foregone conclusion, as the transition to Malian responsibility for security and the full departure of international

troops would prove to be more complex, as with many interventions. Initially progress seemed smooth with relatively free and fair Presidential elections held in July and August 2013. Parliamentary elections, postponed by a few months, also followed without serious incidents. The EU deployed a mission (EUTM) to train the Malian army. An international peacekeeping mission, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), superseding the African-led stabilisation force, was mandated early April 2013. The envisaged personnel strength would prove difficult to meet, and the international peacekeepers became the target of sustained violence by rebels, criminals and jihadists alike.

By the Summer of 2015, MINUSMA had the highest casualty toll of any UN peacekeeping mission in history. The peace-process between the Tuaregs and the central government seemed to stall in the Autumn of 2013, but managed to lead to an accord, brokered by Algiers, signed by all parties in June 2015. The situation remains fragile, with violence having spread to southern Mali and terrorist attacks occurring in Bamako. For France and the international community the dilemma seems a classical one: the intervention was launched in response to an urgent problem – resurgent jihadism threatening local and international interests – but once the initial military victory was achieved, the complexities of transition raised their ugly head. Then intervening powers need to avoid becoming part of the problem, and disengage without undermining the precarious gains made. This all has to be done in a fashion that leaves one's (inter-)national reputation intact.

2 Country and Conflict

2.1 Background

Mali has historically played an important role in trans-Saharan African trade, in part due to its central geographical position. The Malian Empire originated as a confederation of the Kurufaba Mandinka tribes, and at its height was ruled by Mansa Musa (1312-1337), who was known for his devotion to Islam and flagrant wealth. After his reign, the Malian Empire declined. It was superseded by the Songhai Empire, with Gao – then a far bigger city than now – as the capital. At that time, tensions between different ethnic populations were already evident. The Songhai, for example, gained popular support in Timbuctu by protecting the population against the Tuareg, a nomadic northern people that had previously conquered the city. The Songhai Empire flourished through trade in gold and salt, but eventually collapsed when defeated by the Moroccan Saadi dynasty. Mali remained fragmented in several kingdoms until France colonised the region in 1892.

The French colonisation of Mali, or French Sudan as it was known at the time, occurred relatively late in ‘the scramble for Africa’. For Paris, Mali stood in the shadow of its neighbour Algeria, which was not considered a colony but part of Metropolitan France and thus fell under the Ministry of Interior rather than the Ministry of Colonies. Consequently, French Sudan was administered on the cheap by the military based in outposts and seen primarily as a resource for workers and soldiers.² The country’s decolonisation in 1960 was strongly influenced by Algeria’s bloody war of independence (1954-62), that President de Gaulle was keen to avoid in sub-Saharan Africa. While the transition to independence was bloodless, it did not lead to a post-colonial friendship, such as in Senegal and other West-African countries, where the common interests of the French and African elites embodied continuation in a different form.³ In July 1960 Senegal and the French Sudan initially formed one new country – the Mali Federation - but Senegal renegaded and declared its independence from Mali in September 1960. The Republic of Mali remained, governed by Modibo Keita. The country would be characterised by a strong position in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), but with a socialist leaning towards the Soviet Union (explaining why much of the Malian military’s equipment is of Soviet origin). During the next decades, French

² Thomas Flichy, *Opération Serval Au Mali: L'intervention Française Décryptée, Renseignement Histoire Et Géopolitique* (Panazol: Lavauzelle, 2013), 13-24.

³ Dennis Charles Galvan, “Political Turnover and Social Change in Senegal”, *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (2001): 51-62.

influence in Mali would remain limited. While France launched 37 major military interventions in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa between 1960 and 2006, Mali neither hosted a French military base nor elicited a French military intervention until 2013.⁴

2.2 International context

While much has been written on the so-called root causes of terrorism, it is often easier to discern the origins of certain terrorist groups. In the case of AQIM, these origins lie squarely in neighbouring Algeria. In the early 1990s, the military regime in Algeria found itself confronted with a situation similar to the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’. A combination of economic malaise, widespread disaffection with the corrupt elite and a resurgent Islamism led to open revolt against the regime. After brutally repressing the so-called Bread Riots in 1988, incumbent President Chadli Bendjedid called national elections. After a landslide victory for the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in the December 1990 elections, the military launched a coup and cancelled the second round to prevent an impending absolute Islamist majority in parliament. As a result, an insurgency against the state erupted, and Algeria would descend into an abyss of violence. The Islamist opposition to the regime was not united, and a plethora of groups fought the security forces both in the cities and on the countryside. Foreign fighters, returning from training camps in Afghanistan, played a significant role in the uprising. One group, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA), distinguished itself from the others through its wanton violence and extreme cruelty; its slaughter not dissimilar in practice and scale from the current Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (albeit lacking the Internet’s social media platforms to garner a worldwide audience). GIA fighters viewed the world through a Manichean lens: the partisans of jihad versus the enemies of Islam. There is, however, a considerable body of evidence showing that the military regime in Algiers not only infiltrated the GIA to attack other opposition groups, but also led it to commit more atrocities, in order to alienate it from the local population and justify a harsh state counterterrorist response.⁵ Instances of false flag operations also abound, potentially including the massacre of whole villages, where Islamists received the blame but security troops were either complicit or actually responsible for mass murder.⁶

⁴ Christopher Griffin, "French Military Interventions in Africa: Realism Vs. Ideology in French Defense Policy and Grand Strategy," (Paper prepared for the International Studies Association 2007 Annual Convention, Chicago, IL., 28 February- 3 March 2007), 3.

⁵ For inside accounts of Algerian security forces infiltrating and manipulating GIA groups, see the personal account by a Special Forces officer and a former intelligence officer. Habib Souaïda, *La Sale Guerre*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2001) and Mohammed Samraoui, *Chronique des Années de Sang* (Paris: Denoël, 2003).

⁶ See for instance: Yous Nesroullah and Salima Mellah, *Qui a tué à Benthala? Algérie: Chronique d'un massacre annoncé* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000).

The international community, fearful of an Islamist takeover in Algeria and shocked by the barbaric cruelty of the GIA, was prepared to look away as the Algerian regime quelled the revolt through mass torture, executions and indiscriminate military operations.⁷ By the end of the 1990s, various insurgent groups had been eliminated by the GIA or security forces. The GIA itself had lost much credibility and local support by massacring civilians, young and old, with *arme blanche* (knives and axes). A government reconciliation and amnesty program integrated some former terrorists. The regime remained firmly in power, saw its counterterrorist policy vindicated by hardliners at home and abroad. The exhausted Algerian population, having suffered possibly up to 200.000 dead, acquiesced. It is noteworthy that the architects of the military regime's counter-terrorism policy in the 1990s, notably the officers leading Algeria's intelligence service, the feared *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS), were still in power nearly twenty years later, when Operation Serval took place in Mali. As such, veteran general Tartag would lead Algeria's forceful and deadly response against the terrorist attack on the In Amanas gas-plant on 17 January 2013.⁸ The perpetrator of this attack, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, was his contemporary, having fought in GIA ranks against the security forces from the early nineties onwards.

The Algerian civil war led to a significant terrorist threat to France and French interests in Algeria. The GIA not only reproached France for supporting the military regime – which it did through military and economic aid – but saw the Christian former colonial oppressor as the ‘great Satan’. In 1992 the first foreign hostages were killed in Algeria, and on Christmas Eve 1994 a French passenger plane departing from Algiers to Paris was hijacked. Air France 8969 was diverted to Marseille airport, where the stand-off continued. The terrorists reportedly intended to crash the plane into the Eiffel tower. After several hostages were killed by the hijackers, the plane was stormed by the French elite counterterrorist police unit GIGN with all hostages rescued - and all terrorists killed. In London, as well as Brussels and Paris, an underground network of GIA supporters centred around several mosques and so-called hate preachers, who incited violence and collected money and arms for the GIA. In the Summer of 1995, the Paris underground was hit by a series of attacks, and many GIA agents and sympathisers were arrested in the police crackdown that followed. What most captured the imagination of the French public was, however, the sad plight of the Tibherine monks. Seven monks, who had lived in the monastery of Tibherine and tended wounded fighters from all sides in the civil war, were abducted and later found beheaded. As with the earlier mentioned

⁷ Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria 1988-2002. Studies in a Broken Polity*, (London/New York: Verso, 2003).

Salsabil Chellali, “Algérie: 5 choses à savoir sur le général Tartag, nouveau patron du renseignement,” *Jeune Afrique*, 15 September 2015, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/264670/politique/algerie-5-choses-a-savoir-general-tartag-nouveau-patron-renseignement/>.

case of AF 8969, there are indications of DRS duplicity, but conclusive evidence has not been released.⁹ Nonetheless, for France the lesson was clear: it was a primary target for Islamic terrorism, and violence could be brought to its own streets.

Over several years, the core of the GIA terrorist group transformed itself to AQIM. The first split occurred in 1998, when several members led by Hassan Hattab wanted to disassociate themselves from the GIA's bloody massacres of civilians, creating *the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC). The year of 2003 proved to be a turning point from two perspectives. On the one hand, a specific GSPC commander, El Para, took more than 30 European hostages in the Sahel.¹⁰ Their release started a trend of hostage-taking that would continue for more than ten years, the activity representing a significant financial contribution to terrorist coffers, with ransoms increasing from around \$ 200.000 per hostage up to \$ 10 million in 2013.¹¹ According to Vicky Huddleston, a former US ambassador to Mali, between 2004 and 2011 Western countries paid around \$90 million in ransom to the terrorist groups. The other development concerned the GSPC's support for Al Qaeda (AQ) in the Iraq war. Here the managing elite of the GSPC, those foreign fighters with roots in the Afghan training camps in the late eighties and early nineties, rediscovered and reinforced their ties with the AQ ideology and organisation. Their support for the budding Iraq insurgency, through fighters, weapons and training, would culminate in the GSPC not only becoming an Al Qaeda franchise, but also adapting some of the characteristic AQ tactics.¹² While an unknown phenomenon during the Algerian civil war, suicide bombings made a debut in Algeria, with several large scale attacks occurring on the eleventh day of the month (reinforcing the 9/11 symbolism) in 2007.¹³

The birth of AQIM was not a simple affair. Both parties – Bin Laden and Al Qaeda central on the one hand, and the factions of the GSPC on the other – negotiated and had their own interests to further. For Bin Laden, the GSPC seemed to offer access to a network of sympathisers in Europe, while for the GSPC affiliation with the global reputation of AQ would bring new purpose and élan to their fledgling local insurgency

⁹ Louis Aggoun and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, *Françalgérie, crimes et mensonges d'États* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

¹⁰ The case study of the hostages in 2003 can also be seen through the lens of DRS duplicity. See Jeremy Keenan, *The Dark Sahara; America's War on Terror in Africa* (London/New York: Pluto Press, 2009).

¹¹ Rukmini Callimachi, 'Paying Ransoms, Europe bankrolls Qaeda terror', *The New York Times*, 29 July 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>.

¹² Eric Ouellet, Jérôme Lacroix-Leclair and Pierre Pahlavi, "The Institutionalization of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI)," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 4 (2014), 650-665, accessed 30 November 2015, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2012.745853.

¹³ Craig S. Smith, "Blasts by Qaeda Unit Are Deadliest Attack in Algiers in Years," *New York Times*, 12 April 2007; Katrin Bennhold and Craig S. Smith, "Twin Bombs Kill Dozens in Algiers," *The New York Times*, 12 December 2007.

in Algeria. The GSPC announced its allegiance to Al Qaeda on 11 September 2006, exactly five years after 9/11. The new name, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, was only announced at the beginning of 2007. The new organisation, also encompassing jihadist splinter factions from Morocco, Libya and Tunisia, would have a new regional goal and outlook.¹⁴ The main target was no longer just the Algerian regime, but all dictatorial regimes. Western interests and nationals, and especially French ones, also became a key target for AQIM. Internal cohesion would remain a big issue, as is often the case with terrorist organisations. The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) was officially announced as an independent group in October 2011, as a reaction to the predominance of Algerians in AQIM's leadership.¹⁵ And Mokhtar Belmokhtar also split from AQIM in 2012, taking his own *katiba* (battalion) with him, but staying loyal to central AQ.¹⁶ He would join up with MUJAO to form Al Mourabitoun in August 2013.¹⁷ While appearing as a nebulous confederation of networks and sometimes conflicting interests, terrorist groups in the Sahel still display a strong Al Qaeda influence and outlook, with the Islamic State as yet making few inroads (save with Boko Haram in the south).

Terrorism has an intricate and often complex relationship with organised crime. This is certainly the case for the Sahel. During the Algerian civil war, GIA local commanders, called emirs, not only had to manage many criminals in their ranks, but often also ran a parallel economy of shady business enterprises and extortion rackets.¹⁸ As the GSPC transformed to AQIM and broadened its operating base outside Algeria to northern Mali and beyond, the link with organised crime only grew. Northern Mali has traditionally been a crossroad of trading routes, and smuggling is part of local livelihood. Most of the smuggled goods concern licit goods such as foodstuffs, petrol and cigarettes. Smugglers have always exploited the price difference between places where the goods are subsidised by the state (for instance Algeria and Libya) and where, a large stretch of

¹⁴ Mathieu Guidère, "La tentation internationale d'Al- Qaida au Maghreb", IFRI Centre des Études de Sécurité, 2008, accessed 25 November 2015, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Focus_strategique_12_Guidere.pdf.

¹⁵ William Lloyd George, "Mali's irrevocable crisis", *Al Jazeera*, 16 April 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/201241572956363410.html> accessed 25 November 2015; and "Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)." TRAC. <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/movement-unity-and-jihad-west-africa-mujao> accessed 25 November 2015.

¹⁶ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013", United States Department of State Publication, Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2013, 8.

¹⁷ "Al-Mourabitoun", Counter Extremism Project, accessed 6 November 2015, <http://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-mourabitoun>.

¹⁸ Luis Martinez, *La guerre civile en Algérie* (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 324-5.

desert down the road, this is not the case.¹⁹ This is illustrated by the reputation, warranted or not, of Mohktar Belmokhtar, also known as Mr. Marlboro as a result of his alleged secondary activities smuggling cigarettes.²⁰ As northern Mali and the city of Kidal are wholly dependent on Algerian imports anyway, trucks combine the transport of livelihood, family visits and the smuggling of licit and sometimes illicit goods. However, this matrix of networks, the respectability of smuggling and its traditional role in border communities has been disrupted significantly over the past decade.²¹ The culprit has been the arrival of a new and much more profitable good that has profited from Mali's position as an international crossroads for trade and contraband: cocaine.

The drug trade has empowered different terrorist groups, weakened an already fragile government and undermined the rule of law in Mali. By the turn of the century, the South American drug cartels were confronted by stricter port and airport controls in Europe. They subsequently decided to exploit Africa's weak underbelly: the Gulf of Guinea. These countries, ranging from Liberia to Guinea-Bissau, all had weak government institutions. These were easily corrupted, sometimes up to Presidential level, by the huge amounts of money that the cartels would offer.²² A new route for cocaine developed, nicknamed Highway 10 by law enforcement agencies, following the 10th parallel, from Brazil to the Gulf of Guinea.²³ According to the UNODC, in 2013, around 18 tons (down from 47 tons in 2007) of cocaine passed this route to Europe.²⁴ The drugs are flown in by plane, landing on one of the many abandoned airports in the myriad of islands off the coast of former Portuguese colony Guinea-Bissau. Sometimes the planes would fly further inland, with Air Cocaine as the most famous case. In 2009 a Boeing 727, capable of carrying 100 passengers or 10 tons of cargo, landed on a

¹⁹ Wolfgang Lacher, "Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2011, accessed 25 November 2015, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2011C01_lac_ks.pdf.

²⁰ Sergei Boeke, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: A loose Cannon?" ICCT Commentary, 3 December 2013.

²¹ Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²² James Traub, "Africa's Drug Problem," *New York Times*, 9 April 2010, accessed 25 November 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/magazine/11Trade-t.html?_r=0 and Adam Nossiter, "Leader Ousted, Nation Is Now a Drug Haven", *New York Times*, 1 November 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/02/world/africa/guinea-bissau-after-coup-is-drug-trafficking-haven.html> accessed 25 November 2015.

²³ Antonio L. Mazzitelli, "The New Transatlantic Bonanza: Cocaine on Highway 10," *Western Hemisphere Security Analysis Center* 22 (2011), accessed 25 November 2015, <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=whemsac>.

²⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment," UNODC, 2013, accessed 6 November 2015, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/West_Africa_TOCTA_2013_EN.pdf.

makeshift runway in the desert of north Mali, not far from Gao.²⁵ There was no need for the airplane to take off (the plane was set alight), as the real value lay in the cargo that was offloaded onto 4x4 vehicles. Symptomatic for nearly all cases involving drugs, armed groups appeared to collude with local government dignitaries. Equally exemplary, the police prosecution turned into a drawn out, opaque and inconclusive affair. The city of Gao has become a transfer hub for cocaine, and in general the north-south flow is complemented by a west to east transfer of hashish, from Morocco to the Middle East. The terrorist groups AQIM, and its offshoot MUJAO, are implicated, but so are different secular rebel groups and criminal organisations.²⁶ Thus, a complex picture emerges when combining this with elements of government, often in high places, who are also involved. In 2015 this led to MINUSMA observing the unique situation of two opposing rebel factions temporarily ceasing hostilities to escort drug convoys in the same area.²⁷ It also proves the resilience of the phenomenon: from weakening Mali in the run up to the crisis, the drug trade even manages to flourish in a post conflict situation with a large peacekeeping force present.

2.3 Structural causes of conflict

The complete collapse of the Malian state in the first months of 2012 and the loss of two thirds of its territory to a loosely organised cooperation of separatist and terrorist groups provides a clear indication of the deep and structural problems that were present. The coup of March 2012 was not so much a blow to democracy as the realisation that there was no democracy behind the façade. As the military reeled under the onslaught of better equipped and more numerous Tuareg rebels in the north, their wives and families took to the streets in the first weeks of March to protest against what they perceived as insufficient government support for the military. On 22 March 2012, Sanogo, a young army captain of the green berets regiment, supported by non-commissioned officers (NCOs), launched a mutiny.²⁸ Not only was the army on the whole poorly equipped and trained, the regular green berets felt neglected. The elite parachute regiment, the red

²⁵ There are many accounts of this episode. Worthwhile are the US Embassy cables released by WikiLeaks. US Embassy in Bamako, "AMBASSADOR AND GENERAL WARD MEET WITH MALIAN PRESIDENT AMADOU TOUMANI TOURE," WikiLeaks, 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BAMAKO776_a.html accessed 25 November 2015.

²⁶ "WikiLeaks: President of Mali Links Drug Trafficking to Terrorism," Crethiplethi, 2010, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.crethiplethi.com/wikileaks-president-of-mali-links-drug-trafficking-to-terrorism/usa/2010/>.

²⁷ "Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2227 (2015), Extends Mandate of Multidimensional Mission in Mali until 30 June 2016, Adding Military Observers to Monitor Ceasefire," United Nations, 2015, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11950.doc.htm>.

²⁸ For a good analysis of the coup, see Johanna Siméant and Laure Traoré, "Mali: Le Putsch et le Nord Vus de Bamako," Sciences Po, 2012. http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/art_jslt.pdf.

berets, enjoyed regular training by Western Special Forces (for example during the annual exercise Flintlock), and functioned as a Praetorian guard for the President who had, after all, long served in this regiment. As the munity took hold of the television and radio stations, the regime and government collapsed like a house of cards. ATT escaped from his presidential palace and fled to Senegal a few days later. Nobody mourned his departure just weeks before the planned presidential elections, and Sanogo quashed a half-hearted counter coup by the red berets several weeks later. He subsequently set up the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR). The coup was therefore not a classic one in which generals as part of the elite (or deep state) intervene to safeguard their own interests, but rather one where low ranking officers and NCOs rebelled against the elite.

During ATT's tenure, the chasm between the elite and the rest of society increased significantly. The little political opposition that existed was co-opted by the president and his network. The government apparatus was rife with nepotism and corruption , with aid money embezzled and proceeds from the drug trade supplementing the income of several of the powerful.²⁹ As a result, politics and business in Mali came to be run by a circle that comprised a few hundred families at most. Although more an anecdote than hard evidence, during a state visit to France, ATT's wife paid for expensive shopping using banknotes that had been registered as ransom payment for the release of hostages.³⁰ The phenomenon of an elite predominantly occupied with enriching itself, combined with the absence of any avenues for political opposition, undoubtedly led to frustration among economically deprived citizens. As will be explored further, popular frustration probably also contributed to the increase of Islamic radicalisation in certain segments of society. Nonetheless, indicators of these exclusionary practices could have been spotted. While Mali's elections were on the whole fair and free (with nonetheless instances of fraud recorded, apparently not to the detriment to Mali's 'poster boy' reputation), voter participation was unusually low. It averaged around 35% for Mali's presidential elections between 2000-2012, and was even lower for the parliamentary elections.³¹ This cannot be solely explained by Mali's low literacy rate, and it serves as

²⁹ Le Matinal, "Le Mali, la drogue, les otages, les rebelles et les dépenses princières de l'ex-Première Dame : Des révélations accablantes sur ATT et son épouse," *Mali Jet*, 28 January 2014, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://malijet.com/actualite-politique-au-mali/flash-info/92056-le-mali,-la-drogue,-les-otages,-les-rebelles-et-les-dépenses-pri.html>.

³⁰ Le Matinal, "Le Mali, la drogue, les otages, les rebelles et les dépenses princières de l'ex-Première Dame : Des révélations accablantes sur ATT et son épouse," *Mali Jet*, 28 January 2014, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://malijet.com/actualite-politique-au-mali/flash-info/92056-le-mali,-la-drogue,-les-otages,-les-rebelles-et-les-dépenses-pri.html>.

³¹ Mohamed Traore and Sékou Mamadou Chérif Diaby, "Les Elections Au Mali: Pourquoi le Taux de Participation Est Toujours Si Bas," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/09547.pdf>.

one of the few clear indicators that the façade of democracy was built on very flimsy foundations.

The structural causes of Mali's conflict lie much deeper than ATT's policies. As Gregory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme note in the report 'The Roots of Mali's conflict; moving beyond the 2012 crisis', these can be clustered around several themes.³² One is an unequal relationship between the north and south, having both historical origins and an economic component. Another is a fractured north, with a history of rebellion against Bamako, and many divisions between the different ethnic communities such as the Tuaregs, Arabs and Songhai. Reinforcing this fragmentation are differences even within these communities, specifically among the confederation of Tuareg tribes – still respecting traditional tribal hierarchies - accommodating many different loyalties. Finally, the authors identify Mali as a battleground for regional powers such as Algeria and Libya, with especially the former able to influence events in northern Mali through a variety of instruments and policies, in overt as well as covert ways. Algeria sees northern Mali as its strategic backyard, and continues to view local developments through a (national) security perspective. Up until the 2012 crisis, Algerian officials frequently complained that Mali was not doing enough to combat terrorism in the north, focusing instead on the separatist Tuareg rebels. Efforts to set up a regional counter-terrorism centre came to naught.³³

The structural tensions between north and south Mali can be traced back to the dominance of the South in the aftermath of decolonisation and the economic marginalisation of the north. The relationship between northern and southern Malians has historically been characterised by mutual mistrust: populations in the south used to associate the Tuareg population with slavery and insecurity, while economic deprivation nursed grievances amongst the northern populations.³⁴ The south was prioritised both during and after colonisation, with the southerners coming to dominate the ruling class and Bamako becoming the centre of gravity. When the influential southerners liberated themselves from colonial rule, they resorted to strategies such as patronage, divide-and-rule and military control in order to safeguard their political authority. As tensions between the north and the south increased, the south intentionally excluded the north from economic development and political life, with all international aid landing in southern Bamako.³⁵ As the north struggled with insecurity and a lacking infrastructure,

³² Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict," Clingendael, 2015. http://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/

³³ US Embassy in Bamako, "New Algerian ambassador to meets with ambassador", WikiLeaks, 2010, accessed 25 November 2015, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BAMAKO98_a.html.

³⁴ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict," Clingendael 2015, 17.

³⁵ Ibid. 24.

combined with some severe droughts, large numbers of the nomadic population migrated to neighbouring countries and Libya.

The fragmentation of the north of Mali was accelerated by a divide and rule policy. This was born in part as a reaction to provisions ‘demilitarising’ the north in the peace accords, but also offered Bamako a cheaper and seemingly more effective way to manage and counterbalance tensions in the north without addressing the causes. Between 1963 and 1991, two large Tuareg uprisings took place, producing a violent reaction from the government. Excesses on and off the battlefield led to new grievances among the Tuareg peoples, although Bamako and the rebellious factions did agree to mediated peace accords. The Malian government did not respect or elements of the 1992 and 2006 peace agreements, contributing to the current crisis in Mali.³⁶ Bamako set up two northern militias to fight against the newly founded opposition group North Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC)³⁷. This divide-and-rule policy resulted in the tribalisation of the conflict in the north, caused a security vacuum, paving the way for the emergence of terrorist activity of GSPC and later AQIM.³⁸

Although the central government exacerbated tensions in the north, structural differences between ethnic groups played an important role. In the north various ethnic communities are deeply divided, with leaders pursuing different political agendas. The Tuareg, Arab, Songhai and Fulani people do not all share the goal of an independent Azawad and were each supported by different national or international actors. The relationship between these four communities has historically been characterised by conflict and rivalry.³⁹ The Tuareg comprise numerous tribes, which in turn are divided in sub-groups and sub-clans. The most powerful Tuareg tribe, the ‘aristocratic’ Ifoghas, continued to wage war against other Tuareg tribes and Arab groups.⁴⁰ The charismatic Iyad Ag Ghali, son of a prominent Ifoghas leader of the previous rebellion, tried to unify the Tuareg behind the cause for an independent Azawad, but failed.⁴¹ After spending time in Saudi-Arabia, he chose a radical Islamic approach, set up Ansar Dine, and fought for the imposition of Sharia-law in the north.

³⁶ Susanna Wing, “Briefing Mali: Politics of a Crisis,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 481, doi: 10.1093/afraf/adt037.

³⁷ International Crisis Group, “Mali: Avoiding Escalation,” ICG, 2012, 5, accessed 25 November 2015, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation-english.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation-english.pdf).

³⁸ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “The roots of Mali’s conflict,” Clingendael 2015, accessed 25 November 2015.

³⁹ Karilou Sidibé, “Criminal Networks and Conflict-resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (2012): 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ International Crisis Group, “Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful reform,” ICG, 2013, 27.

Like the Tuaregs, the Arab population is also divided. The noble clans (Kounta) have lost most of their political influence, but they are the traditional allies of Ifoghas Tuaregs.⁴² The emancipated groups (Tilemsi Arabs) are thought to be involved in regional trafficking and have links to MUJAO.⁴³ The Berabiche, who predominantly reside in Timbuktu, play an important role in the shadow economy of the North.⁴⁴ Despite the divisions, there is cooperation with other factions. At least until 1991, the Arab groups participated in the ‘Tuareg’ rebellion, and AQIM managed to establish links with Arab and Tuareg tribes, in part through marriage.⁴⁵ Finally, the Songhai and the Fulani have played an important role in aggravating the divisions among the northern populations. The Songhai and Fulani have traditionally enjoyed good relations with the Malian state, and were instrumental in ATT’s divide-and-rule policy to counterbalance Tuareg power in the north. Their alliance and position can in part be explained by the repression that they have historically endured at the hand of the Tuareg and Arab peoples, and this has for example, provided fertile recruiting ground for groups such as MUJAO.⁴⁶

2.4 Immediate causes of conflict

NATO’s 2011 military operation to oust Gaddafi – or formally to protect the Libyan population from him – had a detrimental effect on the security situation in Mali. Thousands of Tuaregs that served in Gaddafi’s Islamic legion ended up without work and income. Once the regime fell in October 2011, many fighters returned to Mali, taking their weapons with them. Although accounts vary, up to 3.000 fighters returned.⁴⁷ According to some reports, Niger successfully disarmed some of the convoys that traversed its territory; on the other hand it is unlikely that many vehicles would have crossed through Algeria, given the presence and forceful disposition of its security forces. The Tuaregs that had returned from Libya united with local separatists in the North of Mali, and founded the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de*

⁴² Karilou Sidibé, “Criminal Networks and Conflict-resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (2012): 6, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/RR77.pdf>.

⁴³ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “The roots of Mali’s conflict”, 2015, 38.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Modibo Goïta, “West Africa’s Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM’s Sahelian Strategy,” *Africa Security Brief* 11 (2011): 3, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/archives/asb/ASB-11.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Jessica M. Huckabey, “Al Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections,” *Orbis* 57, no. 3 (2013), 467–484. doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2013.05.008; Andrew Lebovich, “The local face of jihadism in northern Mali”, *Combating Terrorism Center* (2013), accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali>.

⁴⁷ Jeremy Keenan, “Mali’s Tuareg rebellion: What next?” *Al Jazeera*, 20 March 2012, accessed 30 November 2015.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/03/20123208133276463.html>.

l'Azawad (MNLA), instigating the Tuareg uprising in January 2012. While this is a direct (albeit unforeseen and unintended) consequence of the NATO intervention in Libya, a counterfactual alleviates some of the blame. Had NATO not intervened, and had Gaddafi been left to his own devices, the country would probably have descended into a Syria-like civil war, whereby the Tuaregs would probably also have returned to Mali to import conflict.

What started as a secular rebellion in Mali would provide a *safe haven* for the three jihadist groups. The Tuareg nationalists initially cooperated with MUJAO, AQIM and Ansar Dine in a so-called marriage of convenience. This culminated in the eviction of the Malian army from the north and on 6 April 2012, the MLNA proclaimed the independence of Azawad (a statement that was retracted later). The victorious parties split almost immediately after, with reports of the local population turning against the MNLA after instances of executions and looting. Some fighters voluntarily switched to the Islamist groups, while others were attracted by better financial conditions. By the end of June several violent confrontations settled the matter. The MNLA were no longer in control, as the three jihadist groups took over, each governing a specific region of northern Mali.⁴⁸ According to some reports, elements of the local population in the North welcomed the jihadists, expecting a return to justice after having experienced the corruption of the state followed by the lawlessness of the MNLA. The jihadists also ensured that they kept providing essential state services, in some instances doing a better job than the government authorities they replaced. Kidal, for instance, enjoyed more electricity per day under the jihadist occupation than before.⁴⁹ This concept of para-sovereignty or para-statehood, introduced by Georg Klute, illustrates how jihadists were able to claim a certain legitimacy and support amongst the local population.⁵⁰ The harsh interpretation of the Sharia and the Huddud punishments that were meted out would, however, not prove to be popular. No cigarettes or alcohol were allowed, and music and dance were forbidden – an affront to local culture. The revered shrines at Timbuktu were destroyed by Ansar Dine, equally to the outrage of locals. This risk of overreach was nonetheless foreseen by the emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, who warned commanders not to move too fast with the implementation of the Sharia, as the population might not yet be ready for this.⁵¹ These orders, uncovered in letters found in Timbuktu after the French intervention, fell on deaf ears. As a result, when the French troops defeated the jihadists during Operation Serval, they were welcomed as liberators.

⁴⁸ Laurent de Castelli, "Mali: From Sanctuary to Islamic State," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3, 2014: 64, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2014.928016.

⁴⁹ "Islamists lure back northerners", IRIN News, 2012, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/96578/mali-islamists-lure-back-northerners>.

⁵⁰ Georg Klute, "De la chefferie administrative à la para-souveraineté nationale", in André Bourgeot, ed., *Horizons nomades en Afrique sahélienne* (Paris: Karthala, 1999), 167-181.

⁵¹ Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, Al-Qaida left behind a Manifesto," AP, 14 February 2013.

While under control of the jihadists, northern Mali attracted foreign fighters from all over Africa and even Europe. According to French intelligence sources, at least 15 foreign fighters of French nationality had joined the terrorist groups, of which two were later captured during Operation Serval and immediately extradited to France.⁵² Although the numbers are not of the same magnitude as the foreign fighters travelling to combat the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria, many young volunteers from Sudan, Tunisia and Libya came to Mali to join AQIM. Terrorist training camps and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) factories were set up, even with fighters from the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram attending training camps in Mali.⁵³ As such, the safe haven posed a serious security threat to the region, attracting jihadists and providing them with training and further propaganda. During their time in control of northern Mali, the different jihadist groups expanded enormously in size. MUJAO was, for instance, estimated to have around 40 members in the Autumn of 2012, but 400-500 at the time of the French intervention in January 2013. The expansion was equally significant for AQIM, that grew from around 350 fighters in 2011, to 1500 according to French estimates.⁵⁴ During their tenure of the north, they experienced no restrictions in their recruitment campaign, and many recruits from disaffected communities and especially child soldiers joined their ranks. Whether attracting volunteers through ideology, offering them one of the few options to earn a reasonable income (financed through drug- or ransom money), or press-ganging them into service, the groups would probably have continued to expand were it not for the intervention in January 2013. If France had waited much longer with its military operation, according to an anonymous official, France might not have had the capabilities to tackle a larger operation alone.⁵⁵

⁵² Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali. Les nouvelles menaces contre la France*, (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 44.

⁵³ David Blair, "Timbuktu: al-Qaeda's terrorist training academy in the Mali desert," *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2013, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/mali/9860822/Timbuktu-al-Qaeda-terrorist-training-academy-in-the-Mali-desert.html>.

⁵⁴ Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali. Les nouvelles menaces contre la France*, (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 43-44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

3 The pre-intervention phase

3.1 Decision-making and political context

Foresight and early planning characterised French strategic planning on Mali. The policy framework leading to the military intervention was laid during the first *conseil restreint de défense*, a select cabinet meeting on defence chaired by President Hollande, in May 2012.⁵⁶ At that moment terrorist groups in the Sahel held six French hostages and were in the process of evicting the secular Tuareg rebels who had just proclaimed the independence of Azawad. The Cabinet concluded that a new more aggressive approach was necessary to evict AQIM and its allies from North Mali. Three options were envisaged: the build-up of the Malian army, international support for the deployment of African troops and the initiation of a European mission to assist and train the Malian military.⁵⁷ Minister of Defence Jean-Yves Le Drian embarked on a tour of European capitals to garner support for the EU mission and to place the issue of terrorism in the Sahel on the political agenda. Two tracks would take shape: the African Support Mission to Mali (MISMA) and the European Union Training Mission to Mali (EUTM).

The trajectory to garner support in Europe for an EU military training mission was a long one, delayed predominantly by the institutional procedures governing decision-making in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In March 2011 the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel had been launched, and there was international consensus on the need for a regional approach to this strategic and important area for Europe. The procedure, however, of drafting a plan, creating allies and keeping momentum to set up the mission was time consuming. The European Council of Foreign Ministers in October 2012 agreed on to ‘speed up the planning’ for the training mission.⁵⁸ This was to encompass some four to five hundred European trainers to reorganise and prepare the Malian defence forces in their quest to retake the North, and all within the framework of international humanitarian law, the protection of

⁵⁶ There are no permanent members of the *Conseil restreint de défense* as the constellation of participants varies according to the agenda. Present for issues concerning the Sahel were always the *chef d'état-major des armées* (CEMA – or commander in chief), the *directeur général de la sécurité extérieure* (DGSE - the director of the foreign intelligence service) and the *directeur central du Renseignement intérieur* (DCRI - the head of the national security service).

⁵⁷ Romain Rosso, "Mali: comment Paris conduit la guerre," L'Express, 31 January 2013, accessed 25 November 2015 http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-comment-paris-conduit-la-guerre_1215453.html.

⁵⁸ European Council, "European Council 18/19 October 2012, Conclusions," 2012, 13, accessed 25 November 2015.

civilians and human rights. The jihadist attack on 9 January 2013 probably forced the issue, with EUTM only authorised by the European Council on 17 January 2013, when France had already launched Operation Serval. The view from Paris on the EU's role during the Malian crisis is succinctly described in a parliamentary report, concluding that the EU had "missed an opportunity" and the balance of EU involvement was "rather bitter", with the EU once again proving incapable of meeting its ambitions, after Libya.⁵⁹

Mali's African neighbours, with the exception of Algeria, needed little encouraging to adopt a more assertive stance. After the coup in March 2012, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspended Mali's membership and adopted a set of sanctions against the junta in Bamako.⁶⁰ These measures were revoked when Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré brokered an agreement that led to the junta stepping aside to allow interim president Dioncounda Traoré to govern.⁶¹ To aid Bamako in fighting the rebels and later terrorists in the north, ECOWAS planned to create a stabilisation force MICEMA.⁶² Internal and external disagreements, however, prevented a consensus and impeded the creation of this force. Algeria was especially cautious of military action and strongly expressed a preference for a negotiated solution. On 11 November 2012 in Abuja, Nigeria, ECOWAS agreed on the formation of a 3,300 strong African force to aid Malian forces recover northern Mali. As UN authorisation was deemed necessary, and funding essential - this could not be provided by the African Union (AU) - the process to create and mandate a mission was transferred to the UN Security Council (UNSC) via the AU.⁶³ Algeria remained hostile to any form of military intervention. A visit by President Hollande to Algerian President Bouteflika in December 2012 was meant to assuage relations, but the surprise jihadist attack on the south and the rapid French reaction would confront Algiers with an unpleasant fait accompli.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ La Comité des Affaires Européennes, "Rapport d'information sur la relance de l'Europe de la défense", 2013, 32, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/europe/rap-info/i0911.pdf>.

⁶⁰ ECOWAS consists of 15 states. Mali and all its neighbours, save Mauritania and Algeria, are members.

⁶¹ Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni, "The long path to MINUSMA: Assessing the international response to the crisis in Mali", *Peacekeeping in Africa*, ed. Thierry Tardy and Marco Wyss (London, New York: Routledge, 2014): 173.

⁶² ECOWAS, "Extraordinary Session of the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council, Recommendation MSC/RES.1/04/12 Relating to the Mandate of the ECOWAS Standby Force to Restore Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order in the Republic of Mali," 12 April 2012.

⁶³ Al "ECOWAS agrees to Mali intervention force," *Al Jazeera*, 12 November 2012, accessed 25 November 2015.

⁶⁴ During this visit, France acknowledged the Algerian suffering under French colonial rule. "François Hollande acknowledges Algerian suffering under French rule", *The Guardian*, 12

3.2 International law and legality

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France played a prominent role in facilitating the UN process for the African-led mission. Non-permanent members Morocco and Togo, both Francophone countries and the latter a member of ECOWAS, supported French initiatives and draft resolutions on the subject. The first UNSC Resolution (2056) on Mali was adopted on 5 July 2012, expressing support for the joint efforts of ECOWAS, the AU and the transitional authorities in Mali trying to establish constitutionality and territorial integrity. UNSC Resolution 2071 followed in October, expressing the Council's readiness to respond positively to Mali's request for an international military force to reclaim the North. Additionally, on 5 December 2012 MUJAO was added as a terrorist organisation on the Al Qaeda Sanctions List established and maintained by the Committee pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011).⁶⁵

The key negotiations on the authorisation of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) faced a sceptical US delegation, that denounced the French plan in unusually undiplomatic words.⁶⁶ American doubts concerned the capacity of AFISMA to carry out combat operations and the junta's dubious role in influencing the civilian (interim) government. The deployment of AFISMA did nonetheless receive a unanimous vote on 20 December 2012, when Resolution 2085 was adopted.⁶⁷ Considering the logistical challenge of deploying the multinational force and the uncertainties regarding funding, military action against the jihadists entrenched in the north was not envisaged before late Summer 2013.⁶⁸ Although the resolution did not in any way anticipate or authorise Operation Serval, it resulted in consensus on the necessity to intervene in Mali and provided the basic structures for a military mission. According to Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, the formal request by the internationally recognised Malian government for French military assistance provided the legal case for intervention. Additionally, resolution 2100, passed in April 2013 and

December 2012, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/20/francois-hollande-algerian-suffering-french>.

⁶⁵ United Nations, "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds One Entity to Its Sanctions List", 2012.

⁶⁶ Colum Lynch, "Rice: French plan for Mali intervention is 'crap'," *Foreign Policy*, 11 December 2012, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/11/rice-french-plan-for-mali-intervention-is-crap/>.

⁶⁷ Le Monde, "Le Mali appelé à faciliter l'envoi d'une force internationale contre les islamistes" 17 December 2012, accessed 25 November 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/12/17/le-mali-appelle-a-faciliter-l-envoi-d-une-force-internationale-contre-les-islamistes_1807175_3212.html.

⁶⁸ Zakia Abdennebi, Andrew Hammond and Jon Hemming, "U.N. envoy rules out international action in Mali for now," Reuters 20 November 2012, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/20/us-mali-militants-prodi-idUSBRE8AJ1FW20121120>.

authorising the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), retrospectively provided a ‘blessing’ for the French intervention.⁶⁹

3.3 Military planning and intelligence

Until January 2013, France remained publically adamant that it would not intervene in Mali. Government ministers stated on several occasions that support for an African-led solution was the only option available for the former colonial power.⁷⁰ While this public standpoint was maintained, with President Hollande stating mid-November that France would under no circumstances take the lead in intervening, the orders to plan for military action had already been given end of October. After the planning for an African-led intervention force commenced, President Hollande received several calls by African presidents expressing concern over the viability of such a force and requesting eventual French combat air support.⁷¹ As a result, the planning unit (CPCO) of the Defence ministry was ordered to plan for military (air force) assistance to the African force in the making.⁷² A second scenario was also drafted, envisaging not only air assets but also land units in case of a jihadist attack on the South. The foreign intelligence service DGSE prepared target packs of jihadist command and logistical centres in Mali, and Special Forces were deployed to conduct reconnaissance missions.⁷³ The chief of staff coordinated operational planning and secrecy was maintained, in part not to put the lives of the French hostages at risk but also because no formal decision to intervene had been taken. This planning for two scenarios would lay the foundation for Operation Serval and allow France to react quickly when the jihadist attacks came.

France has an elaborate and permanent military presence in Africa, with military bases dotting the continent. The Sahel is effectively flanked by a military base in Senegal in the west, and Djibouti in the East. In the middle of Africa, in Chad, France has stationed a dozen warplanes and helicopters that are able to operate within a broad radius of Ndjamena. The prepositioned troops are well trained, equipped and acclimatised to their

⁶⁹ Karine Bannelier and Theodore Christakis, “Under the UN Security Council’s Watchful Eyes: Military Intervention by Invitation in the Malian Conflict,” *Leiden Journal of International Law*, no. 26 (2013), 855-874, accessed 16 November 2015, doi:10.1017/S0922156513000447868-873.

⁷⁰ For one of Foreign Minister Fabius’ statements, see “Laurent Fabius sur le Nord-Mali: «par rapport au terrorisme, on ne peut pas transiger»,” *Parti Socialiste*, 2012, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.parti-socialiste.fr/articles/laurent-fabius-sur-le-nord-mali-par-rapport-au-terrorisme-ne-peut-pas-transiger>.

⁷¹ Vincent Jauvere, “Mali : histoire secrète d'une guerre surprise,” *L’Obs*, 10 February 2013. <http://globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/archive/2013/02/08/mali-histoire-secrete-d-une-guerre-surprise.html> accessed 25 November 2015.

⁷² Romain Rosso, “Mali: comment Paris conduit la guerre,” *L’Express*, 31 January 2013, accessed 25 November 2015, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/mali-comment-paris-conduit-la-guerre_1215453.html.

⁷³ Vincent Jauvere, “Mali : histoire secrète d'une guerre surprise”.

environment, and can thus be deployed at a moment's notice in crises across the continent. In 2012 this extended network of military locations throughout Africa was threatened by Defence cuts, but Operation Serval and the intervention in the Central African Republic (2013-) proved the value of prepositioned troops in Africa. After Operation Serval was terminated in 2014, a new regional counterterrorist mission called Operation Barkhane (see 4.3) was launched, covering five countries in West Africa. The 3.000 troops that were designated to this mission were, however, predominantly already deployed in the region. Barkhane established a unified headquarters and new CT-operational tasking of units present, adding specific intelligence and strike capacity.

3.4 Political decisiveness and flexibility

When the jihadist attack came, rapid political decision-making complemented contingency planning and prepositioned troops in the region. Good intelligence provided early warning to the administration, with signals intelligence (SIGINT) in the last days of December indicating that the fractious AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine were communicating again and preparing a move southwards. Negotiations trying to pry Ansar Dine from the other groups had failed and on 4 January Ansar Dine stated it would no longer abide by a ceasefire.⁷⁴ French satellite intelligence, human sources and information from Anglo-Saxon partner services confirmed the massing of jihadist pick-ups on the frontier between the North and South. Two vital pieces of intelligence were provided by SIGINT intercepts. First, the organisers of the demonstrations in Bamako protesting against the interim regime were in direct contact with Ansar Dine. The jihadists would target Sévaré, while the demonstrators would denounce the government's incapacity to prevent the fall of such an important town. This scenario implied the fall of the interim government and the loss of the strategic airport of Sévaré, both effectively derailing the AFISMA plan to recapture the north in 2013.⁷⁵ Secondly, the intercepts confirmed that the jihadists did not expect France to react to their offensive, citing French refusal to intervene militarily to aid the beleaguered President in the Central African Republic only days earlier. Jihadist groups attacked the

⁷⁴ "Mali: Ansar Dine retire son offre de cessation des hostilités," *RFI*, 4 January 2013, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130104-mali-ansar-dine-iyad-ag-ghaly-bamako-negociation-saharamedias>.

⁷⁵ The fall of the interim government would enormously complicate an international intervention as there would be no legitimate authority in Bamako, while the junta had always resisted an international intervention, fearing consequences for its own position. The loss of the airport at Sévaré would hinder the logistics behind an eventual military campaign to retake the North.

strategically positioned town of Konna, around 60 km from Sévaré, on 9 January 2013 and captured it one day later.⁷⁶

The jihadist attack on the South prompted an urgent request to France and the UN for military assistance. According to reports, the initial Malian request, that was forwarded to Paris through the French Embassy in Bamako, was returned. The French reaction was for a more precise request, stipulating only airstrikes against the attacking jihadist columns. At the same time, French diplomats in New York convened an emergency session of the Security Council, that called on all members to provide assistance to the Malian government in repelling the jihadist attack.⁷⁷ In a special Cabinet meeting held on 11 January 2013, President Hollande decided to respond to Mali's request for assistance and ordered airstrikes and Special Forces to stop the jihadist attack. Two days later the objectives were expanded to defeating the jihadists and expelling them from the north. There were probably two reasons for shifting from a small Special Forces/airstrike intervention to a full-scale land operation. First, the French strikes had stopped the jihadist advance but not defeated them, and even on 14 January the jihadists were able to launch a counterattack.⁷⁸ In parallel, African partners had pledged to accelerate the deployment of AFISMA, and the events presented an opportunity to execute a mission that the AFISMA partners planned to conduct later but would be hard pressed to achieve by themselves.

⁷⁶ Laurent Touchard, "Mali: retour sur la bataille décisive de Konna", *Jeune Afrique*, 30 January 2014, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20140130165338/>.

⁷⁷ "Mali Crisis: UN Calls for "Swift Deployment" of Troops," *BBC News*, 11 January 2013, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20981837>; "Mali - Remarks to the Press by Mr Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations", accessed 30 November 2015, www.franceonu.org/france-at-theunited-nations/press-room/speaking-to-the-media/remarks-to-the-press/article/10-january-2013-mali-remarks-to.

⁷⁸ "Mali: Attaque Des Islamistes Contre La Ville De Diabali Sur La Route De Bamako," *Jeune Afrique*, 14 January 2013, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/depeches/41959/politique/mali-attaque-des-islamistes-contre-la-ville-de-diabali-sur-la-route-de-bamako>.

4 Entry and stabilisation phase

4.1 Actors and instruments

On 11 January 2013, air strikes by French *Rafale* and *Mirage* fighter jets initiated Operation Serval, named after a desert cat. The military operation can be divided in three phases: stopping the jihadist attack, reclaiming the north from terrorist control and clearing their hideout in the Adrar des Ifoghas. By April the main combat operations were concluded, with the French military having suffered six deaths in combat and the three different jihadist groups losing an estimated 700 fighters. In addition, some 450 prisoners were taken, many of them foreign fighters and/or child soldiers, and these were all handed over to Malian authorities.⁷⁹ The military campaign was characterised by speed and by audacity, as Michael Shurkin notes in his report, 'France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army'.⁸⁰ This element of audacity, ingrained in French military culture and doctrine, ensured fast progress on the battlefield. As the French military recognise themselves, they did benefit from luck and chance, since their rapid advance, including parachuting a regiment of legionnaires into enemy-held terrain, was certainly a risky enterprise. Their success was compounded by tactical mistakes on the jihadist side, generally abandoning the cities and choosing not to fight in urban environments, but making a last stand in the caves and valleys of the Adrar des Ifoghas. The campaign proved to be an enormous logistical challenge, even considering the inherent advantage of having prepositioned troops and material available. Like the military campaigns in Libya in 2011, or even Kosovo in 1999, shortages of strategic air transport became evident.

France received considerable logistical support from various European allies. This support predominantly came in the form of C-17 and Hercules cargo aircraft and proved essential for getting supplies into theatre, even though some countries preferred to transport only non-lethal supplies. The United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and several other European countries flew many sorties with their own planes, while a considerable amount of equipment was also brought in by French cargo ships. The US was initially slow to respond to French demands for military assistance.⁸¹ It was not until 26 January

⁷⁹ Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, "Mali's Long Road Ahead," *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 5 (2014). DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2014.969942.

⁸⁰ Michael Shurkin, "France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army", *RAND*, 2014.

⁸¹ Jean Fleury, *La France En Guerre Au Mali: Les Combats D'aqmi Et La Révolte Des Touareg* (Paris: Picollec 2013): 148-149.

2013 – after the *In Amenas* hostage crisis – that Defence Secretary Leon Panetta offered to provide assistance in air-to-air refuelling capacity of planes.⁸² This was a vital force enabler, considering the enormous distances that had to be covered. For direct combat sorties from airfields in France, jets needed refuelling seven times during their flight. The distance between air assets in Chad and the battlefield in Northern Mali also required inflight refuelling, and US assets proved their worth several times a day during the first weeks.⁸³ All the Western and NATO assistance was, however, of a non-combat nature. To the disappointment of France, certain European allies contributed little and the EU again distinguished itself by the bureaucratic decision-making and slow deployment of the EU Training Force (EUTM).⁸⁴ The EUTM was authorised on 17 January 2013, when Operation Serval was already underway.

The military operation to liberate the north was officially conducted by Malian security forces, French troops and a coalition of AFISMA partners. In practice France bore the brunt of combat action. While AFISMA was planned to deploy only in the Summer of 2013, it rolled out as quickly as possible with Niger, Nigeria and Burkina Faso amongst the first countries to deploy ground troops.⁸⁵ Nigeria would pull most of its troops back not long after sending them to Mali, redeploying them against Boko Haram. These AFISMA troops would not, however, play any significant role in combat operations. France also preferred to keep the Malian troops away from combat after the initial defensive actions. They were effectively side-lined given their limited training and equipment, and the risk of revenge actions against suspect collaborators, Tuareg rebels or jihadists. The exception was Chad, which contributed 2,000 elite troops. Led by the (adopted) son of President Deby, these reputed 'desert warriors' played an important role in clearing the Adrar des Ifoghas.⁸⁶ Not accustomed to fighting suicidal AQIM units, the Chadian troops suffered many casualties, probably significantly more than officials in the Chadian capital admitted publicly. Later, when the UN MINUSMA

⁸² Ingrid Formanek and Dana Ford, "U.S. steps up involvement in Mali," *CNN*, 28 January 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/26/world/africa/mali-unrest/>.

⁸³ France was later sent the \$20 million bill for the provision of heavy transport planes, but political outcry in Paris led to its retraction. For the US contribution to Serval after In Amenas, see Jean Fleury, *La France En Guerre Au Mali: Les Combats D'aqmi Et La Révolte Des Touareg* (Paris: Picollec 2013): 148-149.

⁸⁴ Christophe Guilloteau Christophe and Philippe Nauche, "Rapport D'information Sur L'opération Serval Au Mali," (Paris: Assemblée Nationale 2013): 1-128, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-info/i1288.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Richard Valdmanis and David Lewis, "Mali Islamists suffer split as Africans prepare assault," *Reuters*, 24 January 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/24/us-mali-rebels-idUSBRE90M16T20130124>; BBC News, "Mali conflict: West African troops to arrive 'in days'," *BBC*, 15 January 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21029916>.

⁸⁶ Andrew Harding, "Mali's road ahead: Reprisal fears and desert warfare," *BBC*, 26 January 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21200668>.

mission was deployed, Chadian units would again play an important role in providing battle-hardened troops. The strategic choice of Chad's President Idriss Deby to ally with France in the 'war against terrorism' is not without consequence. The autocratic tendencies of the regime thus had to be tacitly accepted by France and the coalition, with Paris less inclined to criticise Deby when members of the opposition were arrested in another crackdown.⁸⁷

4.2 Mission objectives and strategic narrative

From the outset of the French military campaign in Mali, clear objectives were communicated to the public. On 12 January 2013, the French Ministry of Defence shared the official objectives of Operation Serval. These were 1) to stop the jihadist advance; 2) to prevent jihadist groups from endangering stability in Mali; and 3) to protect European and particularly French nationals in Mali.⁸⁸ A day later, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs added that 4) the restoration of Malian territorial integrity, was the final objective of Operation Serval.⁸⁹ The objective of safeguarding 6,000 French nationals in Bamako provided a clearly defined national interest, but does not mention that most were citizens with dual nationality, just as several current Malian cabinet ministers also hold a French passport. It is also debatable whether Bamako, a city of more than a million, was really under threat of falling to a few thousand jihadist fighters. It is clear, however, that neither France nor the Malian government could run this risk, and French assistance to repel the assault was welcomed. For French military commanders their mission was formulated in a clear and concise fashion, that gave them sufficient leeway to achieve their own tactical objective.⁹⁰ As such it was a very different operating environment for the military, compared to missions such as in Afghanistan. Waging a small war would prove to be much easier than fighting the complex and protracted insurgency in Afghanistan.

The clear objectives translated to a well-communicated strategic narrative. Lawrence Freedman, who introduced the term "strategic narrative" to the field of International

⁸⁷ "Chad: Amnesty International Regrets Failure to Prevent, Respect and Protect Fundamental Human Rights," accessed 23 November 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr20/001/2014/en/>.

⁸⁸ Ministère de la Défense, "Conférence De Presse Du Ministre De La Défense, Jean-Yves Le Drian," 12 January 2013.

⁸⁹ France Diplomatie, "Mali - Somalie - Russie - Entretien Du Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères, M. Laurent Fabius, 13 January 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=bafr2013-01-14.html#Chapitre5>.

⁹⁰ Jean-Dominique Merchet, "Général Barrera: 'Mes ordres étaient clairs: Détruisez les djihadistes!'" *L'Opinion*, 11 July 2013, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.lopinion.fr/11-juillet-2013/general-barrera-mes-ordres-etaient-clairs-detruisez-djihadistes-1942>.

Relations, understood strategic narratives to be “compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn”.⁹¹ At the same time, there was little ‘bad news’ from the frontlines, with French forces suffering limited losses and no images of collateral damage or civilian casualties undermining public support. Reporters without borders labelled the war as a ‘*guerre sans images*’, in part because journalists were not allowed access to the north and other areas where fighting took place.⁹² The military countered the argument that all media-coverage was stage-managed, stating that there was little to show with combat limited to sporadic strikes on small groups of pick-up vehicles in remote stretches of the desert. The military’s position that they could otherwise not ensure the safety of the journalist was emphasised when early February jihadists infiltrated the city centre of Gao after it had been liberated, and reporters had to be evacuated. In general, though, Operation Serval received broad cross-party endorsement in France, and was supported by favourable public opinion at home.

4.3 Intervention dynamics

The terrorist attack on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria on 17 January 2013 played an important role in galvanising the international opinion. Weeks before the attack, Mokhtar Belmokhtar had split from AQIM and left with his own *katiba*. Initially the *In Amenas* crisis took the form of a hostage situation with several executions, but a hard-handed Algerian intervention led to a bloodbath with 39 foreign workers and one Algerian security guard killed. The attackers publicised their action as revenge for the Algerian government’s support for Operation Serval, but since detailed inside-knowledge of the facilities was essential for the conduct of their attack, it had probably been planned long in advance. To the international public, the *In Amenas* crisis not only proved that terrorism in the Sahel formed a serious threat to the region, but also helped consolidate international political support for the French intervention. Most importantly, the involvement of American civilians in the hostage crisis led to more active American support for the French operation. Belmokhtar had been one of AQIM’s most important commanders in Mali, but longstanding tensions within AQIM’s leadership led to a split, coincidentally only weeks before Operation Serval.

⁹¹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2006): 22.

⁹² Amnesty International, “Mali: Premier Bilan De La Situation Des Droits Humains Après Trois Semaines De Combats”, (Amnesty International Publications, 2013, 1-13.; Reporters Without Borders, “French Military Intervention Achieves ‘Zero Image of the War Front’ Media Objective,” accessed 23 November 2015, <http://en.rsf.org/mali-french-military-intervention-16-02-2013.44084.html>.

Operation Serval managed to reconquer the northern cities relatively quickly, with speed as the determinant ordered by President Hollande.⁹³ The operations were high-risk and included several ‘pose assaults’, whereby transport planes carrying Special Forces and their vehicles landed on airstrips in enemy held terrain in the middle of the night. The recapture of the city of Gao was also a relatively quick affair, but would be the beginning, rather than the end, of combat. Gao and the region around the river Niger demonstrated the difficulty of coping with Islamist insurgents blending into the local population, and provided the first indications of what would later develop into a classic insurgency. After the city was liberated by French troops, MUJAO fighters intermingled with the local population. A few weeks later, a group of heavily armed fighters infiltrated the city and occupied key government buildings. After heavy fighting and French military assistance, the surrounded fighters were killed. Gao was also the location of Mali’s first suicide attack, executed by MUJAO on 9 February 2013. Half a dozen similar attacks followed in the subsequent weeks. MUJAO had always managed to recruit insurgents from the Songhai and Fulani tribes that had faced repression from the Tuareg, and can count on a (limited) support base within the local population.⁹⁴

In the next and final stage of the combat phase of Operation Serval, French and Chadian troops cleared the Adrar des Ifoghas massif in the north of AQIM insurgents. This area had served as a fortified hideout for AQIM during the past five years or more, and groups holding Western hostages frequently resided in the network of caves and defensive positions. French marines, para’s and legionnaires cleared the inhospitable terrain of the AQIM fighters with the assistance of Chad’s Special Forces. With air and artillery support all the caves and fortifications were systematically cleared. One of AQIM’s most important commanders, Abu Zeid, was killed by an airstrike and most members of his *katiba* died fighting. Mokhtar Belmokhtar was reported dead (as he has been many times before and since), but survived, and none of the hostages held by AQIM were found. They would be released months later, probably in return for a significant ransom.⁹⁵ It took around a thousand elite French and Chadian troops nearly three weeks of close-quarter combat to clear Adrar des Ifoghas.

⁹³ Sarah Halifa-Legrand and Vincent Jauvert, “Mali: Les Secrets D’une Guerre Éclair,” *L’Obs*, 11 June 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20130607.OBS2446/mali-les-secrets-d-une-guerre-eclair.html>.

⁹⁴ Laurent Lagneau, “Mali: Le Mujao Revendique Les Attaques De Gao Et Kidal,” *Zone Militaire / Opex360.com* 22 February 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.opex360.com/2013/02/22/mali-le-mujao-revendique-les-attaques-de-gao-et-kidal/>.

⁹⁵ Jacques Follorou, “Otages d’Arlit : les dessous de la négociation,” *Le Monde*, 30 October 2013, accessed 30 November 2015, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/10/30/otages-d-arlit-les-dessous-d-une-libera_3505240_3212.html#6eAAfmmJl1mGSAzB.99.

4.4 Cooperation with local actors

The involvement of the Malian military during the combat phase of Operation Serval was limited. The EU mission to train the Malian army, still had to start, after all. There were not only worries about the military capabilities of different units, there was also still open hostility between the red and green berets. On occasion, this even led to firefights between these army units, with several casualties as a result.⁹⁶ The animosity between both regiments would subside in the course of 2014, and both are now apparently cooperating again. The role of the army in politics was also controversial. Although captain Sanogo had officially relinquished power to the interim presidency, he remained very influential behind the scenes. Initially he was honoured by interim President Traoré and royally rewarded as head of a special committee. He would later be arrested, and is in prison on treason charges. The role of the army in providing security in the north is also disputed. Several ethnic groups either perceive the Malian army as incapable of ensuring their protection, or have been the victim of revenge actions and oppression. This may be traced back to the alleged collusion of the Malian army with self-defence militias attacking civilians in the 1990s.⁹⁷ Moreover, Human Rights Watch reported grave abuses by the Malian military, including extra-judicial executions and sexual violence.⁹⁸

Related to the challenges of cooperating with the Mali army, French troops received assistance and especially intelligence from another problematic ally: the MNLA. These Tuareg fighters grasped the opportunity to take revenge on the jihadists, who had been their allies in the first months of 2012 but had then turned on them. In several cases MNLA fighters captured jihadists commanders and fighters, and turned them over to French troops. France had little choice in accepting their alliance, but the MNLA Tuareg remained diametrically opposed to the objective of restoring Malian government authority in the north. They profited from the security vacuum that emerged in certain northern districts after the liberation, and their fighters took control of the city of Kidal. Malian authorities were informed that they, and especially the country's security forces,

⁹⁶ Vincent Duhem, " Mali : au moins deux morts dans des combats au camp militaire de Djicoroni, à Bamako," *Jeune Afrique*, 8 February 2013, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/172296/politique/mali-au-moins-deux-morts-dans-des-combats-au-camp-militaire-de-djicoroni-bamako/>.

⁹⁷ The Malian army has allegedly colluded with self-defense militias in the 1990s, attacking Arab and Tuareg civilians. Jean Sebastian Lecocq, *That Desert Is Our Country: Tuareg Rebellions and Competing Nationalisms in Contemporary Mali (1946–1996)*, (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2002): 272.

⁹⁸ "Mali: Ensure Justice for Grave Abuses," Human Rights Watch, 2014, accessed 23 November 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/21/mali-ensure-justice-grave-abuses>.

were not welcome in this city. This stand-off would erupt into open violence in May 2014, when the government chose to force the issue.⁹⁹

4.5 Political development

The UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA that took over from AFISMA was established after a long period of deliberations. In the process leading up to the mandating of AFISMA in December 2012, the UN Secretariat initially emphasised the complicated structural conditions that were part of the Malian crisis and expressed strong hesitations towards a possible military role of the UN.¹⁰⁰ Once France had launched the military intervention, parties in New York worked on formalising Operation Serval as a parallel force that would support MINUSMA when required. It was considered important to keep a clear distinction “between the core peacekeeping tasks of an envisaged United Nations stabilisation mission and the peace enforcement and counter-terrorism activities of the parallel force”.¹⁰¹ In April 2013 Resolution 2100 was passed, transferring authority from AFISMA to MINUSMA as of 1 July 2013.¹⁰² While the mandate of MINUSMA is robust, the UN force has sometimes struggled to combine the two potentially conflicting roles it has to fulfil. On the one hand MINUSMA is tasked with assisting the Malian state in re-establishing its sovereignty over all its territory, while on the other hand the international stabilisation force is a mediator between the government and armed groups. Several of these factions wish, as a primary objective, to prevent the Malian state from reasserting its power in the north. This clash of roles has led to one or the other side sporadically accusing MINUSMA of not being impartial. This was exacerbated by incidents where Apache helicopters killed Tuareg rebels (that posed a threat to the force), and also when UN troops fired into a crowd, killing protestors.¹⁰³

The priority of Operation Serval and MINUSMA was to ensure a transfer of power to a new legitimate government. The need for elections was not only based on the idea of promoting democracy, but also to replace the interim government in charge after the coup. Free and fair elections would again allow Western donors to send development aid and funds to the new government. The first election round was held on 28 July 2013 and the second round run-off took place on 11 August 2013. Despite pressure to delay

⁹⁹ “Tuareg rebels 'defeat government army in Kidal””, *BBC News*, 22 May 2014, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27511448>.

¹⁰⁰ UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali”, s/2012/894.

¹⁰¹ UN Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali”, s/2013/189, 19.

¹⁰² UN Security Council, Resolution 2100 (2013), s/res/2100.

¹⁰³ “Mali: UN mission wards off rebel attack; urges armed groups to respect ceasefire,” *UN News Centre*, 21 January 2015; “Mali: UN Mission to investigate deadly protests against compound,” *UN News Centre*, 28 January 2015.

the elections, as concerns over security mounted and not all of the population able to vote, France insisted that the elections proceed on the planned dates.¹⁰⁴ One day before the first round, MUJAO threatened to hit polling stations and warned Malians not to vote.¹⁰⁵ Despite this intimidation, no violence occurred during the elections, probably an indication that the different terrorist groups were still recovering from their losses sustained during Serval. Important was the relatively high voter turn-out. Compared to previously low levels of voter participation, the Presidential elections attracted just under 50% of the electorate to the ballot box, giving winner Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) a strong mandate.¹⁰⁶ The Parliamentary elections were postponed for logistical reasons, and the turn-out was substantially lower at 37%.¹⁰⁷

The restoration of a democratically elected regime in Mali was an important precondition for the resumption of donor aid. On 15 May 2013 a large donor conference for development was organised in Brussels, by the EU, France and Mali. Thirteen heads of state or government, many foreign ministers and more than a hundred national delegations took part. According to the joint declaration, the conference was built on the principle that there is no development without security, but also no security without development.¹⁰⁸ On the basis of 12 priorities listed in the Sustainable Recovery Plan, the donors had “undertaken to donate €3,25 billion in the next two years”. Although no independent figures are available, it is probable that a relatively small amount will have trickled down to the local communities in Mali. Coordination between donors is also limited. This is aptly illustrated by the fact that there are 17 differing ‘Sahel strategies’, with international organisations and countries each emphasising different elements in their own approach. Divergent interests may lie at the foundation of this, but better alignment would best serve Malian interests. While on a micro-level several donor countries profess a comprehensive approach (combining Defence, Diplomacy and Development in a whole of government policy), this is ineffective if there is no internationally coordinated approach on a macro-level.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Louise Arbour and Gilles Yabi, “Mali: Election Threatens to Exchange One Crisis for Another,” *International Crisis Group*, 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/west-africa/mali/op-eds/arbours-yabi-mali-election-threatensto-exchange-one-crisis-for-another.aspx>.

¹⁰⁵ “Le Mujao menace de “frapper” les bureaux de vote”, *Malijet*, 27 July 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, http://www.malijet.com/a_la_une_du_mali/77823-presidentielle-le-mujao-menace-de-frapper-les-bureaux-de-vote.html.

¹⁰⁶ Voter turnout data for Mali,” IDEA, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=145>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ “International donor conference: €3.25 billion mobilised by international community to rebuild Mali,” European Commission, 2013, accessed 23 November 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/pressrelease_IP-13-429_en.htm.

¹⁰⁹ Damien Helly, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni, Greta Galeazzi, Ibrahim Maïga and Fatimata Ouédraogo, “Sahel strategies: why coordination is imperative”, *Institute for Security Studies*

(2013), 1-12, accessed 26 November 2015, http://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/ECDPM_ISS_EN_SAHEL_STRATEGIES_2015_HELLY_GALEAZZI.pdf.

5 Transit and exit phase

5.1 Introduction transition

With Operation Serval an impressive tactical success, the challenge turned to the transition.¹¹⁰ From a political perspective, the successful presidential elections heralded a return to normalcy, with IBK winning a strong majority and finally replacing the interim presidency of Dioncounda Traoré. Normalcy was however not the preferred objective, as the causes of the crisis in 2012 had to be addressed. This could not be done by French military means. From a practical perspective however, in the Summer of 2013, it seemed that all the necessary elements to assist Mali in rebuilding were present, and optimism was not unjustified. IBK was elected on a mandate to reform, and had made the fight against corruption a central tenet of his election promise. The international community was strongly implicated, with a considerable amount of financial assistance pledged and the stabilisation force MINUSMA starting to roll out. The north was relatively quiet, although Tuareg nationalists were implanted in the northern city of Kidal and were still hindering the return of state authorities to the region. The different jihadist groups had suffered significant losses, and those that survived had either sought safety abroad (predominantly in the lawless south of Libya), or had dissolved into the population. According to the French military, a third of the jihadists in the north had been neutralised, killed or captured by October 2013.¹¹¹ The complex problems and fractures plaguing Malian society soon resurfaced, however. Two years later the country has seen a steady deterioration of the security situation, and much of the optimism of the Summer of 2013 has evaporated.

For France the military exit strategy was a political and financial priority. Some 5.000 troops had been involved in Operation Serval, and pressing budgetary problems and crises occurring elsewhere necessitated a rapid drawdown. But as with many military interventions, the publicly announced withdrawal dates did not prove realistic, and had to be adjusted to the reality on the ground. In March 2013 President Hollande announced that the troop numbers would be cut to 2.000 after the Presidential elections

¹¹⁰ Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, "Operation 'Serval': A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38, no. 6, 2015, DOI:10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494.

¹¹¹ Romain Mielcarek, "Où sont passés les jihadistes qui ont combattu au Mali?," *RFI*, 23 October 2013, accessed 26 November 2015, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20131023-aqmi-passes-jihadistes-ont-combattu-mali>.

in July 2013, and to 1.000 by the end of 2013.¹¹² However, security concerns for the elections necessitated a larger troop presence on the ground than foreseen. In September 2013, one month after the elections, Operation Serval still consisted of 3.200 French troops, and in January 2014 there were still more than 2.500 troops on the ground.¹¹³ Troops would be reduced further, but when Serval was terminated in August 2014, and Barkhane launched, the new regional mission covered 3.000 men. These would, however, be spread over the five countries of Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Mauritania; a huge area. While a significant deviation from the original planning, the extended troop presence in Mali did not lead to political problems at home; the mission still enjoyed broad cross-party and public support.

5.2 The peace process

The most important actor in securing a successful transition is IBK's new government. Addressing the causes of instability and conflict cannot be the primary responsibility of France or the international community, but is a task that must be fulfilled by the elected government. After military interventions, the partnership with the intervening powers always remains a delicate one. For France, its history as a former colonial power further complicated this relationship, and even though it would not be accepted by Bamako, any perception of France imposing its will on affairs would be detrimental to all parties involved. The relationship with France took a turn for the worse when in December 2013 IBK openly criticised the French government in the newspaper *Le Monde*, railing against French and international insistence that he negotiate with the MNLA.¹¹⁴ The key question is whether the new government would be willing and able to address the root causes of instability, and whether its efforts would not be sabotaged by external parties on which it has little influence. The effort to root out corruption was subsequently marred by a scandal concerning the presidential plane. In April 2014, IBK spent \$41 million purchasing a presidential plane. The Malian government, largely dependent on IMF loans and international community donor money, faced heavy criticism of misusing public money.¹¹⁵ Other cases of corruption and nepotism abound, and it seems that old habits, considering that the same elite is still running Mali, do not change easily.

¹¹² Sergei Boeke, "Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy", ICCT Research Paper, August 2014.

¹¹³ Laurent Lagneau, "Le retrait des forces françaises retardé?", *Zone Militaire / Opex360*, accessed 23 November 2015, <http://www.opex360.com/2013/09/18/mali-le-retrait-des-forces-francaises-retarde>.

¹¹⁴ Charlotte Bozonnet & Yves-Michel Riols, "Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta : « La communauté internationale oblige le Mali à négocier avec un groupe armé », " *Le Monde*, 4 December 2013.

¹¹⁵ Alex Duval Smith, "Mali flies into international storm over purchase of \$40m presidential jet," *The Guardian*, 16 May 2015, accessed 26 November 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/may/16/mali-president-boubacar-keita-private-plane-international-aid-donors>.

Precious time was wasted in securing peace with the different Tuareg factions in late 2013 and early 2014. There was little enthusiasm in the political establishment in Bamako for any concessions to the ‘instigators of the 2012 crisis’ and the country’s media have a strong, albeit understandable, anti-Tuareg bias. Consequently, there was no pressure from IBK’s electorate for a negotiated deal, and he did not push for one. Central was the re-establishment of state authority in Kidal, the (only) major city in the North where the Tuareg are a majority. The Ouagadougou ceasefire between the Malian government and the armed groups, agreed on 23 May 2013, stipulated the return of government authorities and security forces to Kidal. On 28 November 2013, a delegation of the Malian government, including the Prime Minister, planned to visit Kidal. Prior to his arrival, the Malian army cracked down on civilian protesters attempting to block his visit.¹¹⁶ As a result, the brittle relationship between government representatives and the population of Kidal was further damaged. In May 2014, gunfire between the MNLA and the Malian army erupted when the Prime Minister attempted to visit Kidal again. The army intervened forcefully, striving to solve the conflict militarily and capture Kidal by force. The Elou battalion tasked to do so – the only one to have completed EUTM training at that moment – was driven back by MNLA fighters and forced to retreat.¹¹⁷

The peace process had been severely complicated by the fractured landscape of all armed parties involved. The Algerian and international mediators had to contend with three major parties: the Malian government; ‘the Platform’, a loose group of armed factions affiliated with the Malian government; and ‘the Coordination’, a group of armed Tuareg factions that strive for more autonomy in the north. The Platform now consists of four groups of different ethnic backgrounds, and there are reports that government soldiers serve in some of the groups and that they have been provided weapons by Bamako.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, the Coordination also consists of five armed factions, each claiming to represent certain Tuareg groups.¹¹⁹ It is of course difficult to verify whether the groups actually represent the communities they claim to represent,

¹¹⁶ Adama Diarra, “Malian army and protesters clash in northern rebel stronghold,” *Reuters*, 28 November 2013, accessed 24 November 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/28/us-mali-protest-idUSBRE9AR0S120131128#7BAvkzb4GRT280Q0.99>.

¹¹⁷ “Tuareg rebels 'defeat government army in Kidal'”, *BBC News*, 22 May 2014, accessed 24 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27511448>.

¹¹⁸ The Platform coalition consists of the Coordination des Mouvements et Fronts Patriotiques de Résistance (CM-FPR, which bring together Ganda Koy, Ganda Izo and les Forces de libération des régions Nord du Mali (FLN)), the Coalition du Peuple pour l’Azawad (CPA, which brings together former members of the Mouvement National de Libération de L’Azawad (MNLA), the Mouvement arabe de l’Azawad (MAA) and the Haut conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad (HCUA)) and another faction of the Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (MAA).

¹¹⁹ The Coordination coalition consists of the Mouvement National de Libération de L’Azawad (MNLA), the Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad (HCUA), consisting of many former members of Ansar Dine) and another faction of the Mouvement Arabe de l’Azawad (MAA).

and whether they really can mobilise the number of fighters that form the so-called powerbase for their negotiating position. Deciding who to include in the peace process was therefore not easy, as armed groups that were predominantly occupied with lucrative activities also had an interest in being legitimised as an official party in the peace process. The mediators recognised factions that joined either the Platform or the Coordination, but not those that remained unaffiliated and wanted to join the process as an autonomous group. As a result, these unaffiliated factions, in cooperation with some platform and coordination sympathisers, set up another group, called the *Coordination des Mouvements Prônant l'Inclusivité et Signataires de l'Accord du 15 Mai* (COMPIS 15), in September 2015.¹²⁰ This group consists of both Platform and Coordination parties, and aims to open the peace process to several groups and militias, such as the Ganda Koy, that are not officially part of the process. They have not been recognised by the body that implements the peace process, and this could potentially formalise even more militias and armed factions.

The peace accord, signed by the Platform and government of Mali on 15 May 2015, and on 20 June also by the Coordination, is a significant step in the right direction. Like the earlier peace accords in Mali's history – all also brokered by Algeria – it offers new powers to regional authorities, without mentioning federalism or autonomy. The most important difference with earlier accords, however, is that now, there is pressure from the international community on all parties to implement what has been promised. A 'comité de suivie de l'accord' (CSA) was set up to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the agreements.¹²¹ While in June the platform's (illegal) occupation of the city of Ménaka nearly scuppered the peace agreement, by November the CSA had met six times and the Platform and Coordination were united in their condemnation of the government of Mali, deploring the lack of peace dividend and results. In the difficult months leading up to the peace agreement, the opposing Platform and Coordination factions had refused to meet in the same room, forcing the Algerian mediators to alternate between both delegations and serve as messenger. Now they were at least communicating directly and their leaders have met each other personally, even though trust between parties is limited and still very fragile. Considering the many different

¹²⁰ "Mohamed Attaib Sidibé, porte-parole Compis 15 : « Nous n'avons pas le droit de nous constituer en obstacle à la paix »,“ AFRIBONE, 2015, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.afribonemali.net/spip.php?article68026>.

¹²¹ As is outlined in the peace accord, the CSA is chaired by Algeria. Other members are the Malian government, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, ECOWAS, United Nations (UN, particularly MINUSMA) African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Additionally, relevant actors and institutions may be invited to join the work of the committee. "Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali", 2014, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/mali/328671/peace-accord-translations/1-accord-paix-et-reconciliation-francais.pdf>.

groups involved and their demanding constituencies, little would be needed to derail the process. But the fact that there *is* a peace process is certainly a positive development.

Initially weakened by Serval, AQIM has recovered and is responsible for an upsurge in violence in Mali and beyond. In November 2015 Mokhtar Belmokhtar re-joined the fold, significantly increasing the group's capability. Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group was responsible for the attack on café la Terrasse (5 killed) in March 2015 and the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in November 2015 (21 Killed). The latter was announced as the first operation of a re-enforced AQIM.¹²² This was followed on 15 January 2016 by an attack on Splendid hotel and Cappuccino Café (30 killed) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and on 13 March by a shooting at Grand Bassam (16 killed), in Ivory Coast. It is probable that the strategy of attacking locations where westerners reside will continue, and Senegal and Mauritania are at risk. Mokhtar Belmokhtar has been responsible for attacks in Algeria, Mauritania and a complex suicide attack in Niger, on army barracks in Agadez and a uranium mine in Arlit, an object of strategic interest to France, in May 2013. In August of that year, MUJAO and Mokhtar Belmokhtar formally joined forces to create a new group called Al –Mourabitoun.¹²³ There was a brief indication of a split and potential affiliation with IS, but it was quickly denied and the group continued to organise and execute attacks in Mali until it re-joined AQIM end 2015.¹²⁴

AQIM is not the only terrorist organisation in the Sahel, and cooperates or competes with several other groups. It faces competition from the Islamic State (IS), and in September 2014 a small faction in Algeria calling itself Jund Al Khalifa swore allegiance to IS and attracted international media attention by beheading French hostage Hervé Gourdel. The group was subsequently decimated by Algerian army operations and had its emir killed.¹²⁵ The competition with IS was possibly one of the factors that drove Belmokhtar, fiercely loyal to Al Qaeda's Al-Zawahri, to reunite with AQIM. Another new Salafist jihadi group called *Front de Libération du Macina* (FLM) recently appeared and claimed responsibility for various attacks.¹²⁶ This group is reportedly

¹²² SITE Intelligence Group, "AQIM leader Announces joining of Al Muribatoun, Radisson Blu as First Joint Act." 4 December 2015.

¹²³ Sergei Boeke, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: A Loose Cannon?," ICCT, 2013, <http://icct.nl/publication/mokhtar-belmokhtar-a-loose-cannon/>.

¹²⁴ After a MUJAO spokesman apparently swore allegiance to the Islamic State, this was retracted by Mokhtar Belmokhtar who reaffirmed his loyalty to Al Qaeda leader Al Zawahiri (note, not to AQIM leader Droukdel). Caleb Weiss, "Alleged statement from Mokhtar Belmokhtar denies his group swore allegiance to the Islamic State," 2015, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/alleged-statement-from-mokhtar-belmokhtar-denies-his-group-swore-allegiance-to-the-islamic-state.php>.

¹²⁵ Nathaniel Barr, "If at First You Don't Succeed, Try Deception: The Islamic State's Expansion Efforts in Algeria," The Jamestown Foundation, 2015.

¹²⁶ Rémi Carayol, "Mali : le Front de libération du Macina, un nouveau Boko Haram?," *Jeune Afrique*, 31 August 2015, accessed 30 November 2015,

close to Iyad ag Ghali, whose own terrorist group Ansar Dine has also become more active, recently threatening France with attacks. At the same time, fighters from the HCUA, one of the Coordination parties involved in the peace process, also have close links to Iyad ag Ghali. Whether pressuring parties not to sign or participate in the peace process, or conducting attacks to spread insecurity and fear, the terrorist groups are again becoming more and more active. Rather than just focusing on the north, now the whole of Mali is a target.

In Malian society, but also in neighbouring countries like Niger, the traditional mild Malékite version of Islam is rapidly losing ground to more the radical Wahhabi and Salafi ideology. This has multiple causes, some of which predate the recent crises. Continued socio-economic deprivation in large parts of society are combined with disappointment in the so-called Western model of democracy. For many people this 'model' only serves to further enrich the elite and allow the West to exploit Malian resources. In the north there is widespread disillusionment regarding the lack of basic government services such as electricity and water, with even a certain nostalgia developing towards the time when the jihadists were in control and actually did provide these services. As for education, the state has difficulty in providing schools of sufficient quality and quantity, but Koran schools are free and well financed by Gulf sponsors. From an institutional perspective, the Wahhabi or Salafi have managed to gain control of important media and public bodies. As such, Wahhabi preachers now dominate the Haut Conseil Islamique (a national council for religious affairs), and its leader Imam Dicko has close ties to IBK. Radio stations – the most effective way to reach the population – are also predominantly in Salafi hands, with these organisations benefiting from extensive financial support from the Gulf States. As a result, many of the youth now orient their view to the Middle East, preferring an internship there to the traditional Francophone or European locations (which are in parallel significantly raising the bar, financially and otherwise, for students from Africa). The spread of a more radical form of Islam thus appears to contribute to creating a new generation that does not share some of the traditional values that underpin the Malian state, and offers jihadist factions a large pool of potential recruits.¹²⁷

5.3 Actors and instruments

Despite successes, MINUSMA faces an uphill struggle in fulfilling its mandate. The UN faced traditional problems of finding troop contributors, with the result that MINUSMA

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/258720/politique/mali-le-front-de-liberation-du-macina-un-nouveau-boko-haram/>.

¹²⁷ Gregory Chauzal, "A snapshot of Mali three years after the 2012 crisis," Clingendael, 2015, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/commentary-snapshot-mali-three-years-after-2012-crisis>.

has still not reached its authorised strength.¹²⁸ At the core of the African contribution lie the Chadian units; troops that venture out of base and patrol aggressively. Chad has, however, been forced to redeploy some of its Special Forces, with the fight against Boko Haram in the south now a priority. Other African units are not without valour, however, and all infantry units in the north run significant risks, being frequently hit by improvised explosive devices, rocket attacks or ambushes. As such, MINUSMA is the most dangerous UN peacekeeping mission to date, having suffered more than 60 deaths between its deployment in July 2013 and September 2015.¹²⁹ The Netherlands and several Scandinavian countries have set up a special intelligence unit: the All Source Information Fusion Cell (ASIFU). This is a novel concept for UN missions and serves to provide the political and military headquarters in Bamako, but also the UN commanders in the field, with better information to aid decision-making.¹³⁰ Good intelligence is undoubtedly appreciated by MINUSMA, but it is probable that the Dutch Chinook transport helicopters, Apache attack helicopters and nearly 100 Special Forces (in the form of reconnaissance troops) have become equally if not more important to the mission. The Netherlands have prolonged their two year mission with one year (until the end of 2016), and finding replacement for the teeth and flying wheels of MINUSMA could prove to be very difficult. In this respect, peacekeeping is similar to a regular military operation: one can fail as a result of bad intelligence, but good intelligence does not in any way guarantee success.

Operation Barkhane provides the military element of counter-terrorism policy in the region. A successor to Operation Serval, it is named after a large rolling Saharan dune: symbolic for the blocking effect it is intended to achieve. One of the regions where it is meant to 'block' jihadists from accessing the G-5 countries is the Libyan frontier. Already in April 2014, France's Defense minister called Libya a 'vipers nest of terrorists', and the security situation there has progressively deteriorated since. French Barkhane forces have interdicted and destroyed several jihadist convoys entering Niger from Libya, and some high-ranking jihadist commanders have been targeted successfully, including important Al Mourabitoun commander Al-Tilemsi in December 2014.¹³¹ Just like Operation Serval was tasked with providing 'in extremis' assistance to

¹²⁸ MINUSMA Facts and Figures," MINUSMA, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/facts.shtml>.

¹²⁹ Jaïr van der Lijn and Timo Smit, "Peacekeepers Under Threat? Fatality Trends in UN peace Operations," *SIPRI Policy Brief*, 2015, accessed 24 November 2015, <http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRIPB1509.pdf>.

¹³⁰ J.A. van Dalen, "ASIFU: Baanbrekend inlichtingenexperiment in Mali," *Militaire Spectator* 2015, accessed 30 November 2015, <http://www.militairespectator.nl/thema/operaties/artikel/asifu>.

¹³¹ "Mali : la mort d'Ahmed el-Tilemsi, un coup dur pour le Mujao et Belmokhtar," *Jeune Afrique*, 12 December 2014, accessed 30 November 2015,

MINUSMA, Barkhane not only supports UN troops with heavy firepower and intelligence when necessary, but also tries to keep the jihadists ‘on the back foot’ by aggressively pursuing them. While reports of targeted commanders and intercepted convoys were regular in late 2014 and early 2015, they have become sporadic. This signals the capacity problem that Barkhane faces: not only is 3.000 troops a small number for such a large area, the growing menace of Boko Haram in the south is putting a strain on available resources.

In 2012-2013 Mali was the most important front in the ‘war on terror’, now it is one of many, and military resources are more urgently needed elsewhere. Barkhane does elicit some legitimate concerns about a ‘militarisation’ of counter-terrorism in the region. The G-5 partners are not all beacons of democracy and human rights, with Mauritania and Chad examples where terrorism as well as anything resembling political opposition are repressed with equal vigour and force. In Burkina Faso autocrat Blaise Compaoré was deposed by popular uprising after a failed bid to extend his 27-year rule, only two months after Barkhane was launched. Nonetheless, in September 2015 a military coup in Burkina Faso to oust the interim government was derailed through a coordinated intervention of neighbouring states. There are also worries about drones in Niger, with both France and the US operating them from Niamey. While these drones are unarmed, they are unpopular with the local population, and the military alliance with France is increasingly questioned in several communities in the G5 countries. It is generally accepted that counter-terrorism should not solely consist of a military and repressive approach, but should also focus on prevention.

Focusing on prevention strategies is, however, easier said than done. The field of terrorism research is enormous, and certainly not lacking in funds, but academia has not yet managed to answer the ‘simple’ question: why do people turn to political violence?¹³² One body of research focuses on radicalisation, and de- or counter-radicalization, and another subset concentrates on countering violent extremism (CVE). There is no empirical evidence that radicalisation or violent extremism is a linear process, and many factors, including ideology and identity, can play a role. There have been poor terrorists, but also rich ones; uneducated, but also highly qualified and educated terrorists. All seem to have grievances, and most are young and male. The number of young males with grievances that do *not* turn to political violence is, however, larger by many orders of magnitude. One of the reasons why science has had problems understanding why people turn to terrorism, is the lack of primary sources,

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/37761/politique/mali-la-mort-d-ahmed-el-tilemsi-un-coup-dur-pour-le-mujao-et-belmokhtar/>.

¹³² Marc Sageman, “The Stagnation in Terrorism Research”. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 0:1–16 (2014) DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2014.895649

leading to much theorizing on a very narrow empirical basis.¹³³ Terrorists, after all, do not always lend themselves to academic scrutiny and much police and intelligence data remains stored in archives, stamped confidential or secret. This fundamental lack of understanding applies equally to counter-terrorism: it remains extremely difficult to gauge whether programs are effective at all. While it might be impossible to measure the number of attacks that have been prevented by a program, all terrorist campaigns, as Audrey Kurth Cronin contends, do end.¹³⁴

¹³³ Bart Schuurman & Quirine Eijkman, “Moving Terrorism Research Forward: The Crucial Role of Primary Sources”, ICCT Background Note, June 2013

¹³⁴ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends; Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups*, Princeton University Press 2009

6 Conclusion

Were the mission objectives met?

Unique amongst recent major military interventions, Operation Serval was conducted upon the invitation of the host-nation and had a clear counterterrorist mission. Elements of the intervention were planned in advance, and a sudden and unexpected jihadist attack on southern Mali led to the modification of contingency plans and the rapid mobilisation of military force. Initial planning foresaw no boots on ground, but the realisation that air strikes and Special Forces operations would only temporarily halt the jihadist attack, led to a change of heart. By incorporating French ground troops in the operation, the UN-mandated African-led stabilisation force that was envisaged later that same year, was effectively kick-started. The participating African countries managed to quickly mobilize their forces, and France also enjoyed the fruits of having many acclimatized and well-trained and equipped troops pre-deployed in neighbouring countries. Once the intervention started, objectives were clearly laid out and communicated to the military and the broader public: to protect nationals and reconquer the north. President Hollande gave much leeway to the military command, and accepted the risks of moving fast before supporting elements were in place. In the end, far fewer French casualties were sustained than the political leadership was prepared to accept, and much was due to good fortune on and off the battlefield. While Serval achieved its military objectives, it was clear from outset that this was a short-term solution. Military planning served to enable the fast intervention, but civilian planning for transition lagged behind and would, like in many other interventions, be eclipsed by the military. It is clear that political goals cannot be built into a military plan, but rather that the military must form a small subset of many civilian initiatives to assist the host nation.

Was there a clear vision to transition to a long term CT-policy?

Serval was a stop-gap solution to the jihadist attack, and once the initial objectives were met, several more durable pathways were opened. The African-led support mission was quickly succeeded by MINUSMA. Although this mission has a strong mandate to act, there is some contradiction in its objectives. On the one hand, MINUSMA should ensure stability and mediate between the conflicting parties, and on the other it must assist the government (of the parties in the conflict) in regaining authority over its own territory. The UN-mission was understaffed for the first year, and found it difficult to reconcile the two differing objectives. Serval became an official parallel force to MINUSMA, offering intelligence and armed assistance if and when needed. While its legacy could still be called successful, Operation Serval was terminated in July 2014

and replaced by Operation Barkhane, that institutionalized CT-cooperation with the G-5 Sahel countries and forms a logical first step in the transition to a broader, long-term CT-policy. Barkhane also serves as a back-up to MINUSMA, and was in part conceived in response to Libya becoming a ‘viper’s nest’ of terrorists. Paradoxically, the crisis in Mali was an unintended consequence of the removal of Gaddafi, and the French intervention pushed terrorist elements back into Libya to recuperate.

Was there cooperation with local security forces before the exit?

Before Mali’s collapse in 2012, Malian security forces had received training and equipment from various Western states. Different French, American and other Western programmes had been active since the mid-2000s, training and equipping local Special Forces to combat terrorism. The effectiveness of these programmes, however, was not borne out by events in 2012. Not only did the Malian troops fare badly in the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, but to the embarrassment of the US, captain Sanogo, the instigator of the 22 March coup, had actually followed an extensive training in the US. The various SSR-programs failed to prevent the collapse of the Malian state in 2012, although it must be said that the Malian army was significantly outnumbered and outgunned by the Tuareg rebels and their allies of convenience, the three Salafi-Jihadist groups. Parallel to Serval, a proper training mission was set up by the EU, focussing not just on the technical capacity to fight, but also values such as human rights and rule of law. This important element should prevent the Malian army from committing abuses and threatening democracy in future. The events in Kidal 2014 illustrated that even the simple part – learning the soldier or the unit to conduct combat operations – is challenging enough by itself. The one battalion that had fully completed EUTM training was deployed to Kidal and suffered a painful tactical defeat at the hands of MNLA rebels. More complex is what the Malian government chose to do with its security forces. In the past, the fight against Tuareg separatism has been a much higher priority for the government than counter-terrorism, and there is concern that the newly trained security forces will again be used in this role. When rolling out SSR programs, the expectations and desires of the host nation often clash with those of the trainers and SSR-providers. The Malian government does not just want an army that is capable of a counter-insurgency or counterterrorist role, but also one that can be used in border conflicts with neighbouring states.

In contrast to Libya and Afghanistan, SSR in Mali was implemented from the very beginning, in part because the EUTM-mission was planned before Operation Serval was deployed. Timely planning, boots on the ground and a significant international effort to train and reform the Malian security forces have certainly achieved positive results. The animosity between the red and green berets has largely been resolved, captain Sanogo is in prison and there is no more army interference in politics. Overall, the professionalism of Malian soldiers has been greatly improved. There is, however, still room for

improvement in some areas. One such area is the reform of the institutions that field and support the security services. Without clear lines of command, adequate salary payments, a good human resource policy or efficient logistical systems, the effective deployment of trained soldiers will remain difficult. The infantryman might now be able to fire his Kalashnikov properly, but the organisation will not be able to keep him motivated and get him to the right place when needed. Another element that deserves more attention is the role and reform of the police force or the gendarmerie. These units often play a much larger role in providing local security than the military, and for the local population they are often the visible face of the government. They would potentially be able to play a large role in counter-terrorism, but the possibilities of police reform in Mali are under-researched and underdeveloped.

What were main obstacles to successful transition?

The transition in Mali, like many transitions after military interventions, was in part dictated by the intentions and actions of the host government. France pushed for quick presidential elections to have an official partner, and got them. While in Libya the elections were arguably held too early, with nothing in place to enable the incoming government to shoulder its responsibilities, it is doubtful that postponing the elections in Mali would have led to a different outcome. IBK won a strong mandate to reform, but was at the same time a product of the very elite that had governed Mali for the past 20 years. This elite, that had co-opted any opposition and fused business interests with political ones, was seen as one of main factors that had led to the collapse of the state in 2012. With IBK's election, there would be no rupture in this regard, and old habits of corruption and nepotism would prove equally resistant to reform and change. France did manage to minimize the perception of colonial interference by keeping its distance from politics in Bamako. The international donor conference in May 2013 was organised in Brussels and not Paris, and was co-chaired by the Malian government. Problems of coordination on the side of the international community remain, however, with several countries and international organisations implementing more than a dozen different Sahel strategies. France and the United States, the two primary foreign powers that can shape events in West Africa, are cooperating and aligning policies, but differences in national interests and approaches will remain.

The government in Bamako has made life difficult for itself on several issues, but is at the same time facing problems that it is barely equipped to handle. On the one hand, Bamako's procrastination in starting the peace process lost it valuable time and goodwill, and its attempt to force a military solution backfired in Kidal. While there have been three earlier peace accords between Tuareg separatists and the government, all not co-incidentally brokered by Algeria, this one has a larger chance of success. For the first time, the international community has played an important role its establishment, and monitors progress and whether parties implement what they have

agreed to do. Nonetheless, the peace is fragile with many grievances on both sides, and terrorist groups are keen to sabotage the delicate development of trust between parties and stability on the ground. Another obstacle is that the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the population is faltering because the state is not providing the services that are expected of it. From ordinary security – crime is a much greater concern for most than the risk of terrorist attack – to the provision of electricity to remote towns and villages, the government is perceived as not doing enough. The lack of security means that local communities will revert to militias and their own security providers, often exacerbating ethnic tensions and favouring one group over another. This also presents an opportunity to insurgents, that offer protection to the population and install themselves as the governing authority in the process. The general absence of employment opportunities in many parts of Mali means that any armed group with financial means is able to easily recruit new members.

Mali was characterized by a fractured jihadist and rebel landscape, and it remains difficult to differentiate between rebels – or insurgents – and terrorists. At one time nine different armed groups were involved in peace talks, with four differing terrorist groups purposefully excluded from the dialogue and negotiations. Complicating matters further, all parties, including the government, include elements that in one way or another are involved in the drug trade; partly as a result of Mali's geographical position as an international trade and smuggling hub. It would be a mistake, however, to approach this problem from a counter-terrorist angle, to try and disrupt the financing of the terrorist groups. These groups are predominantly financed by Western countries paying ransoms for the release of their hostages, and not drug money. In any case, elements within the government probably play a more nefarious role in the drug trade than the terrorists, by condoning or facilitating the transport of narcotics and preventing the prosecution of suspects. Corruption within the government needs to be addressed and should be the focus of international attention, rather than partnering with this government in attempts to disrupt drug money reaching terrorist groups.

To what extent can the transition called successful?

As military interventions go, Operation Serval managed to get the crucial elements right. There was a request from the host nation, broad international support with a blessing from the UN, clear and concise political objectives, and a resounding military victory against the terrorist forces that occupied northern Mali. The subsequent transition also includes elements that are seen as conditional for success: free and fair elections, a UN mission with a strong mandate, the EUTM mission to build-up and reform Malian security forces, a peace accord between Tuareg separatists and the government, and an international donor conference that raised € 3,25 billion. Considering these efforts and achievements, it is therefore unfortunate to have to conclude that the security situation in Mali is continuing to deteriorate. Not only has

MINUSMA already suffered more casualties than any other peace-keeping mission, more and more capacity is needed just to protect the convoys that supply the mission, detracting from its overall effectiveness. AQIM has recovered from the losses it sustained during Serval, and has recently struck out at soft targets in neighbouring Niger, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. Their new tactic of hitting tourist or civilian targets in countries that are directly or indirectly aligned with France is difficult to parry, considering the abundance of targets and AQIM's extensive freedom of movement. Operation Barkhane is indeed a logical successor to Operation Serval, using a regional approach to keep the pressure on different terrorist groups and deny them unhindered freedom of action. It is, however, an unsatisfactory solution, from a military as well as civilian perspective. From a military view, hunting terrorist commanders and their cells is but a temporary solution, and capacity to do this properly in an area the size of Western Europe is lacking. On the other hand, Operation Barkhane lacks a parallel civilian effort that identifies and addresses some of the causes of terrorism. The fact that scholars are still failing to understand the reasons why people turn to political violence, does not absolve policy makers from making a (civilian) effort to address the fractures that plague Malian society.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants at the high-level expert meetings for their great presentations, frank discussions and valuable input. Their expertise and insights have been incorporated in all the reports. The project was supervised by Edwin Bakker, the director of Leiden University's Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Mark Singleton, director of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, and William Maley from the Australian National University. We are grateful to General Philippe Bras of the French Army for hosting the high-level expert meeting in Lille. Marjolein Jegerings provided valuable assistance in drafting the Mali report, and Thomas Brzezinski was instrumental in helping to proofread and format the three reports. The cover was designed by Oscar Langley.

We are grateful to Juliette Bird and Michael Switkes that NATO has made this research possible.

About the authors

Sergei Boeke is a researcher at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University and Research Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. His research interests include terrorism in the Sahel and the governance of cyber security. (*Mali, Libya*)

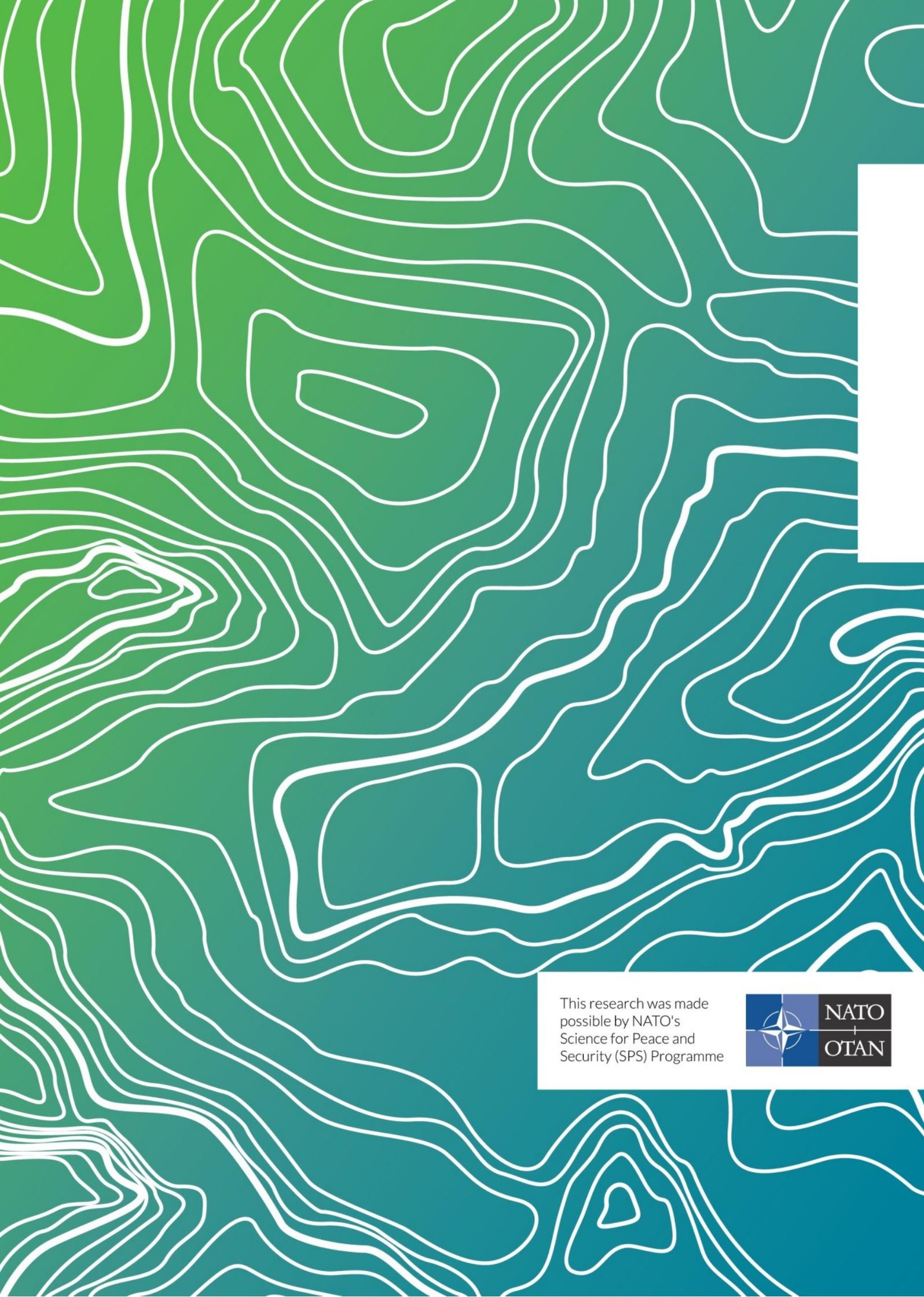
William Maley is Professor of Diplomacy at the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, where he served as Foundation Director from 1 July 2003 to 31 December 2014. His research interests are modern diplomacy, Afghan politics and refugees, and he has published extensively on Afghanistan. (*Afghanistan*)

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn is a researcher at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University and Research Fellow of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. Her research interests include foreign fighters, threat assessments and military interventions. (*Libya*)

Leiden University: The Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University is a multidisciplinary research institute that focuses on four main themes: terrorism and political violence, security and cyberspace, governance of crises and diplomacy and global affairs.

Australian National University: The Australian National University (ANU) is a research-intensive university of global standing specializing in discovery and public policy. ANU's research priorities address the challenges facing Australia and the world.

ICCT- The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.



This research was made possible by NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme

