

Realpolitik and the Deceptive Use of Islamist Narratives in Armed Struggles: the Case of Northern Mali Conflict

Dillon R. Smith

University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

The conflict in Northern Mali is often depicted in a radical Islamic narrative, with domestic and foreign political actors alike using this narrative to justify intervention and suppression of local insurgent forces. This further perpetuates simplistic explanations of conflicts in the region, overlooks the very prominent grievances the local populations experience at the hands of the Malian government, and exacerbates the fear-mongering techniques Western states use to further the notion of a supposed global jihadist 'movement.' Implementing a comprehensive interdisciplinary research approach, this paper has traced the continuation of ethnic tensions in Mali and the surrounding Sahel region, from their origins to the contemporary period, to examine the most accurate explanations for the recent Tuareg rebellion and the political fallout that followed.

On 6 April 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) announced the independence of Azawad, a large region of northern Mali. Traditionally, the north of Mali has been densely populated with Tuaregs, a nomadic peoples who are an ethnic kin of the ancient Berbers of North Africa (Cline 2013, 617). The MNLA, itself a national-separatist organization comprised of these Malian Tuaregs, deeply resented their forced incorporation into the state of Mali by French colonialists in the nineteenth century and had

long sought to emancipate themselves from the state.

In contemporary times, the Tuareg ethnic groups in the north have had significant grievances relating to a growing sense of marginalization within the state owing to the policies of modernization and sedentarization enforced by the Bamako-based government (Solomon 2015a, 230). Thus, on 16 November 2011, the MNLA was established and with the support of local and regionally-based Islamist groups they launched an offensive against the Malian government in an attempt to gain control of the northern region and declare their autonomy. Once the organization had successfully taken control of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, the three northern regions that they traditionally view as their rightful homeland, they halted their campaign and announced the establishment of an independent Azawad (Webb 2016, 139).

For decades, Mali had been presented as Africa's model liberal democracy, apparently "proving" that democratic institutions could prevail in the region and, perhaps more importantly, in Muslim-majority countries. So when President Amadou Toumani Traore was ousted in a military coup on 2 March 2012, this perception was turned on its head and resulted in a power vacuum all across the country. Tuareg-based Islamist group Ansar al-Dine and regionally-based al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), both of which were vital allies in the MNLA rebellion and subsequent seizure of Azawad, used this unstable situation to their advantage and quickly began to launch offensives into the southern parts of Mali (Grobbelaar and Solomon 2015, 155).

The traditional narrative from this point forth is that the impending "Islamic insurgency" forced the interim Malian government to request foreign intervention to combat this threat, and France launched a military campaign known as Operation Serval. Within a month the French forces, supported by the Malian and Chadian militaries, re-took control of the occupied southern territories and pushed further north to take command of Azawad as well (de Castelli 2014, 66). These offensives essentially removed the

significant presence of Islamist organizations and MNLA-supported groups in northern Mali. The Tuareg rebellion, military coup and the Islamist interventions into the southern region all worked to eradicate the democratic institutions that had been held in such high regard by the international community and exposed the Malian government's hollow commitment to democracy.

Popular literature and state actors have constantly framed the conflicts in Mali in a radical Islamic-driven narrative, doing so for many different social, economic and political motivations. A December 2012 article in the *New York Times* titled, "U.N. Panel Votes to Help Mali's Army Oust Islamists" was widely-distributed in the West, as was a *Reuters* piece, "Mali's Islamist Groups United by War Threat" less than a month later. These narratives ignore the underlying issues of armed struggles in Mali; the fact that Tuareg nationalists have long sought separation from a negligent government and the remnants of French colonial legacy that was rooted in Mali's democratic institutions.

Despite the undeniable presence of Islamist influence in the recent Northern Mali Conflict the movement has always remained an ethnonationalist-separatist cause based on very real grievances and entrenched in resentment over the forced creation of the state of Mali after the French colonization period. The crisis has only been framed by local and international state actors as a religiously-charged terrorist campaign to delegitimize the Tuareg cause whilst legitimizing the acts of the Malian state; both to reconcile the notion of Mali as Africa's model liberal democracy as well as to justify the self-serving intervention of France, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and their political allies.

This paper presents three interrelated claims about the Malian conflict and the manner in which it was framed to support the above argument. First, despite the common narrative put forth by Western state and non-state actors alike, the Mali crisis has always been deeply rooted in the Tuareg ethnic groups' very real political, social and economic grievances and the desire for an autonomous state in

northern Mali, known as Azawad. Second, this paper makes no claims that the rise of Islamism did not occur in northern Mali, nor does it argue that groups seeking to establish an Islamic state in Mali were not significant actors in the conflict. Rather, it makes the claim that the motivations of these groups were also largely nationalistic in nature and the rise of radical Islam that did occur was a result of negligence and even corroboration on the part of the Malian government. Third, the French intervention, which was supported by several other state actors, was opportunistic in nature and driven by self-serving economic interests. The French government framed the crisis in a radically-religious narrative solely to justify this intervention and to legitimize the previously corrupt and inept Malian regime.

The remainder of this paper is constructed in five parts to explore the claims previously brought forth. First, the historical background of the Tuaregs and their incorporation into the Malian state will be presented to provide context to recent events. Second, a definition and description of the three most significant non-state actors in the conflict will be provided using an interpretation of Thomas Hegghammer's chapter, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism" from *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*.

Next, the contemporary struggles of the Tuareg ethnic groups, the creation of the MNLA, and the 2012 Tuareg rebellion will be explored to emphasize how crucial the separatist cause was in determining the entire crisis. Following this, the significance of Islamist groups and their relation to the Malian state will be examined to exemplify the fact that they were but one contributing factor to the conflict and not the defining force as the issue has been framed in mainstream media and traditional literature. Finally, the effects of the French intervention will be explained, as will the driving political and economic motivations behind the popular narrative of Islamist insurgency in the crisis.

Tuareg History in Mali: A Brief Account

The call for a separate Tuareg homeland is not a recent phenomenon. The desires of the Tuaregs can be traced back to the fifteenth century when the Songhai Empire, led by Mansa Musa II, dislodged them from the regions of the Sahel in which they had lived for centuries prior (Solomon 2015a, 229). The Tuareg subjugation by foreigners had continued into the Victorian Era, when French troops entered Timbuktu and claimed it as French possession in 1893. The Tuaregs greatly resented this forced invasion and fought back in several prominent rebellions until 1917 when they surrendered to the French colonizers (Solomon 2015b, 68).

Upon Mali achieving independence in 1960, the Tuareg population in the north of the country expected to be able to form an independent nation in the Sahara desert regions. They were fully intolerant of the Bamako-based Malian government which they viewed as merely being the heir to the Colonial French power that had only recently vacated (Saraceno 2015, 349). When this independence was not granted, the Tuaregs rebelled against the Malian state. There have since been four Tuareg rebellions in Mali's fifty-six year history: the first one lasting from 1962-64; the second from 1990-95; the third from 2007-09; and the fourth and final one being the Tuareg rebellion of 2012 of which this paper focuses on.

Historically, the Tuareg are a nomadic peoples who have constantly questioned the legitimacy of the states within they reside – states including Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya. As previously stated, the Tuareg ethnic groups originated from the ancient Berbers of North Africa who came to the Sahel region during the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb during the sixth century (Wing 2013, 481). They have historically perceived themselves as being different, even superior, to the Black African ethnic groups – they saw themselves as *Arab*, not African. Further, the Tuaregs had a long history of using the black population as slaves. Indeed, during the French colonial period the Tuareg believed their nomadic lifestyle was superior to the African population who lived in the southern regions.

When Mali approached independence, the Tuareg leadership sent a letter to the French government arguing that the Tuaregs should not be a part of the new country: “We, the people of the Sahara, will never accept being governed by blacks who used to be our slaves” (Cline 2013, 618). This animosity was shared by the southern population of Mali, who themselves viewed the Tuareg ethnic groups as “a bunch of... feudal, racist, pro-slavery, bellicose and savage nomadic people” (Webb 2016, 136). As this separation was not granted, tensions rose and the Tuareg rebellions were a result of these frustrations. On multiple occasions the Malian government responded to these demands for increased Tuareg autonomy with treaties and agreements.

Both the National Pact of 1992 as well as the Algiers Accord of 2006 were drafted to improve the conditions of the Tuareg groups as well as to recognize their grievances – however, on neither occasion was their independence granted (Wing 2013, 481). Furthermore, the lack of implementation of the promises laid out in these agreements continued to frustrate the Tuareg population and is seen as a major contributing factor to the most recent rebellion. These feigned agreements, combined with ethnic tensions, economic and social alienation as well as political corruption (factors that will be discussed in detail in the coming sections) culminated in the establishment of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad which initiated the fourth Tuareg rebellion only five months later.

Defining and Characterizing the Crisis' Non-State Actors

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was founded in October 2011 by several Malian Tuareg leaders. The group has stated that its philosophy is “firmly based on democracy, freedom, justice and human dignity on the basis of a political system clearly separating state and religion which we consider as a private matter.” (Cline 2013, 622) In keeping with the historical perceptions of Tuaregs, the MNLA has a secular-nationalist agenda with the goal

of liberating northern Mali from the Bamako-based government in the south. Due to the alienation the vast amount of young Tuaregs experienced during the beginning of the twenty-first century at the hands of the Malian government, many of them left Mali to seek employment. A significant number of young Tuaregs fled to Libya and fought with the “Islamic Legion” during the Libyan Civil War under revolutionary leader and unofficial ruler, Muammar Gaddafi (Solomon 2015b, 69).

Once the civil war ended in 2011 and Gaddafi was deposed, most of the Malian Tuaregs returned to northern Mali – this time with weapons, military training and the taste of armed civil struggle. Upon announcing the campaign to liberate Azawad, the MNLA allied itself with other organizations in order to gain access to insurgents, weapons and resources to sustain the uprising (Webb 2016, 139). Some of these groups, including AQIM and Ansar al-Dine, are Islamist groups which also had nationalistic aspirations for Azawad. However, it is because of these associations that the MNLA was cast as an Islamist organization and the liberation movement was spun into an Islamist movement.

Established in March 2012, Ansar al-Dine is a local Islamist group which is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, who himself used to be a prominent member of the earlier Tuareg rebellions. The organization is often depicted in Western media as a radical Salafist-oriented group which seeks to apply Shari'a law across all of Mali. However, the accuracy of this purported radicalization is still debated. A more comprehensive explanation is that upon being rejected for a leadership position with the MNLA, Ag Ghaly split and formed Ansar al-Dine as an alternative way to play a role in Azawad's liberation struggles (Cline 2013, 623).

To get a more accurate understanding of the group, and to move away from the common Western rhetoric, Thomas Hegghammer's classifications of Islamist groups prove more useful. Ansar al-Dine is typically described as a Jihadi-Salafi group; however, as Hegghammer argues, this descriptor and others commonly found

in the discourse of Islamist actors are inaccurate as there lacks a clear definition of the terms and there are many inconsistencies through which they are applied (2009, 245).

According to Hegghammer (2009, 258), Ansar al-Dine would be classified as a state-oriented Islamist group. Given their violent tendencies – which will be examined in the coming sections – the group should be referred to as “socio-revolutionaries”. This term describes movements which use violence to fight for state power against a Muslim regime perceived as illegitimate. Indeed, Ansar al-Dine, much like the MNLA, see the Malian state as an illegitimate organization and seek to oppose its ruling. Their movement has largely been driven by attacking illegitimate government targets. By characterizing Ansar al-Dine in this manner it becomes clear that their motivations are more closely linked to that of the MNLA. In fact, the majority of Ansar al-Dine's members derive from this same Tuareg population. It is Ansar al-Dine's Islamist orientation that has allowed outside forces such as the French government and ECOWAS to characterize it as a radical Islamist group and only serves to skew the fundamental ambitions of the ethnonationalist movement.

Similarly, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) gained a prominent role in the northern Mali crisis after the 2012 coup of President Traore. AQIM is a more regionally-based organization which commits more overtly violent acts. It is a successor group to the Algerian Arms Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), both of which were very active in the Algerian civil war (Cline 2013, 624). Similar to Ansar al-Dine and the MNLA, a large portion of AQIM's members and support base in Mali derive from the northern Tuareg population. Thomas Hegghammer would classify the organization as a morality-orientated group, which is characterized by a desire to change Muslims' social conduct in a more conservatist and literalist direction. The violent form of morality-orientated groups is termed “vigilantism”, in which violence is used to correct the moral behavior of fellow Muslims. These types of organizations direct their violence against morally

transgressing Muslims and symbols of moral corruption in Islamic societies (Hegghammer 2009, 260). Indeed, AQIM seeks to turn Mali into an Islamic state – although the severity and strictness of this planned implementation is still up for debate.

As Thomas Hegghammer concludes (2009, 264), theology-based terms such as Salafists and Jihadi-Salafi are not suitable for comparative analysis of political behavior, especially involving actors who use violence to achieve their means. This section has not sought to justify the violent tactics that any of the aforementioned organizations take – rather, it has attempted to develop more strict and appropriate classifications of each of the groups to make their comparison more clear. By moving away from the traditional theology-based narratives, this section hopes to provide a means to avoid the common generalizations of Islamist groups that the discourse often falls victim to, while also laying the foundation for a more comprehensive analysis of the northern Mali crisis.

State Corruption and Ethnic Tensions: The Beginnings of the Northern Mali Conflict

Mali is unfortunately one of the poorest countries in the world, with a poverty rate of over sixty-four percent – however, this number drastically increases when looking at specific Tuareg-majority regions. In Timbuktu, the poverty rate is seventy-seven percent; in Gao, seventy-nine percent; and in Kidal, it is a remarkable ninety-two percent (Solomon 2015a, 230). These signals of economic disparity are common throughout Mali's history and the manner in which the Tuareg population has been handled by the Malian government. Since independence was granted by the French in 1960 there has been a growing sense of marginalization within the Tuareg population due to the policies of modernization and sedentarization that the Bamako-based government has pursued. Indeed, the Malian government is perceived to be just another pawn of the former colonial French powers. With a highly centralized government structure that further alienates the Tuareg's rural regions, as well as

the extensive poverty that has torn apart traditional communities, the Tuareg population has every right to resent the Malian state (Saraceno 2015, 349).

The 2012 coup of President Traore highlights the Malian peoples' realization that their government was largely failing the population. With systemic corruption, a failing judicial system, weak political parties with no real opposition and a culture of impunity that spread amongst the political class, the democratic values on which Mali was purportedly founded on appeared to be hollow structures (Wing 2013, 480). Between 1985 and 2009, in response to widespread Tuareg rebellions, the Malian government signed a number of peace deals and ceasefires with the groups.

However, none of these documents ever addressed any of the fundamental problems experienced by the Tuareg population and resulted in an intense resentment that ultimately boiled over in 2012. The recent Tuareg rebellion against the Malian government had its roots in long-term inequity and segregation by the government. As Abdi Shuriye and Dauda Ibrahim argue (2013, 509), “the fundamental grievances of Tuareg rebels are their claim of decades of discrimination and exclusion from the political and economic processes by the government.”

Jerry Z. Muller (2008, 20) provides a compelling argument for the rise of ethnic nationalism and his assertions are highly applicable when analyzing the northern Malian crisis. At the core of ethnonationalist ideas is that nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, faith, and ethnic ancestry. These types of movements draw much of their emotive power from the notions that its members are part of an extended family which is united by ties of blood. In the Malian case, these dynamics are easy to locate.

The Tuareg peoples have a long, collective history in the Sahel region and share core values. The subjugation and alienation at the hands of the Malian government further nurtured this “us versus them” attitude that resulted in the Tuareg rebellions. As Muller

further argues, modern societies are premised on the egalitarian notion that anyone can aspire to any economic position. However, in practice, everyone does not have an equal likelihood of economic mobility; and not simply because individuals have different capabilities. Muller terms this “cultural capital”, which refers to the skills and behavioral patterns that help individuals and groups succeed (2008, 22). The Tuaregs, for instance, lack strong traditions of literacy and engagement in modern practices of commerce, whereas the southern population is well-acquainted in these regards. The Tuareg population relies heavily on agriculture and traditional means which further alienate them from the formalized economic practices of modern Mali.

Perhaps most crucially, Muller goes on to focus on the effects that colonization has on the developing world and the rise of ethnic nationalism in these regions. Essentially, he argues that decolonization has meant ethnic disaggregation through the exchange or expulsion of local minorities (2008, 30). When French colonizers vacated the Sahel they left behind a patchwork of states whose boundaries arbitrarily cut across traditional Tuareg patterns of settlement and significantly disrupted their practices. Much of the Tuareg's economic practices come in the form of trading which, due to the borders put in place across their traditional trade routes, are often perceived as smuggling by government authorities. Whereas the Tuareg population sees post-colonial borders as technicalities rather than a practical reality, authorities prevent them from trading like they had freely done prior (Cline 2013, 618). This is yet another factor that alienated the nomadic groups and led to an increased sense of ethnic nationalism.

The rise of radical Islamic notions in the Tuareg population in recent years and the alliances with groups such as Ansar al-Dine and AQIM can be viewed as a yet another result of the political corruption and distrust that the population experienced. The moderate Muslim leaders within the Tuareg population are known as Marabouts and have traditionally taught the nomadic groups on

Islamic beliefs and maintained the moderate interpretations of the Qur'an within society (Solomon 2015a, 230). Being the leaders of the Tuareg peoples, they were often the ones to communicate on their behalf with the Malian government. However, their linkage to the government greatly tarnished their reputation as resentment increased. As the state came to be seen as predatory by the Tuaregs the Marabouts began to lose considerable credibility amongst the long-suffering population.

Indeed, the rise of radical Islamism coincided with the dwindling credibility of the Marabouts. The messages of the Islamists within Ansar al-Dine and AQIM, who offered a brand of liberation theology which emphasized social justice, resonated on the streets of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. Essentially, this form of political Islam became a vehicle for popular mobilization of the marginalized Tuareg peoples (Solomon 2015a, 230). The Tuareg movement began as and largely remains an ethnic-nationalist one in nature, but the interactions with radical Islamists gave it the appearance of being religiously-charged – a perception that was all too convenient for its political opposition and foreign actors alike.

The Role of Ansar al-Dine and AQIM within the Conflict

As previously stated, this paper makes no claims that the rise of radical Islamists did not occur, nor does it try to argue that groups seeking to establish an Islamic state in Mali were not significant; these are facts that cannot be denied. Rather, the important factors to analyze are the motivations behind these Islamist organizations and exactly how they affected the liberation movement in Mali.

For years prior to the 2012 rebellion, countries surrounding Mali had struggled with Islamist groups in their territories. During the first decade of the twenty-first century the Malian government did little to prevent Islamist groups from seeking refuge in the north of the country. President Amadou Toumani Traore did not see the presence of Islamist groups in the north as a direct threat to the government's overall interests, which were largely centered around

the south of the country (de Castelli 2014, 63). Thus, state presence in the north was practically non-existent, allowing Ansar al-Dine and AQIM to establish sanctuaries in the region. These groups further consolidated their relationships with the Tuareg population through matrimonial relationships. AQIM's resources, combined with these newly-formed family bonds, made them a valuable strategic ally for the MNLA when they announced the rebellion.

Within three months of the offensive being launched the MNLA had wrestled control of Azawad from the Malian government and announced the region's independence on 6 April 2012 – but did so without making any reference to the Islamist groups who proved to be crucial allies in this separatist struggle (de Castelli 2014, 64). A few weeks after the independence announcement, the leaders of the MNLA, Ansar al-Dine and AQIM met in Gao to negotiate a merger in order to maintain the new state. These negotiations ultimately failed for very speculative reasons, and by the end of June 2012 the Islamist groups had begun armed conflicts against the MNLA.

This stage of the conflict is nearly always framed as a calculated measure by AQIM to oust the MNLA and impose strict Shari'a law on Azawad's citizens. Indeed, there is no denying that both Ansar al-Dine and AQIM conflicted with the MNLA on their secular nature and sought to implement more Islamist-based measures. However, a document written by AQIM's leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, titled *General Instructions About the Islamist Project in Azawad*, paints a slightly different picture. This document was intended for the leadership of AQIM, Ansar al-Dine and the MNLA to advise them of the group's strategy for establishing an Islamic state (de Castelli 2014, 65). Abdel Wadoud did not want a brutal state in which the people would be subjected to the strictest, most violent forms of Shari'a law; rather, he sought to create a “real” state capable of responding to all the population's needs. The plan was for a coalition to be formed, in which AQIM and Ansar al-Dine would be responsible for Azawad's army, education and Islamic

affairs, while the MNLA would be in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Public Works. He recognized that AQIM's presence in the region would not be fully accepted as they were mainly composed of foreigners. Therefore, Abdel Wadoud figured that Ansar al-Dine, who was composed of local leaders and figureheads, was thought to garner more credibility and would better legitimize the new state of Azawad to both the international and local community (de Castelli 2014, 65).

Despite the recommendations of Adbel Wadoud, Ansar al-Dine used their autonomy to apply Shari'a law with brutality. There are reports of them cutting the hands off of thieves, destroying mausoleums and setting fire to ancient libraries in Timbuktu (de Castelli 2014, 66). This became the source of AQIM's real vulnerability: the lack of direct command over Ansar al-Dine represented a significant obstacle for its ambitions.

This resistance also became a strategic source for political actors. AQIM is often portrayed as the radical group that took over the nationalist campaign to impose its "Islamic state project", even though this can more effectively be seen in the actions and ambitions of the local Ansar al-Dine (de Castelli 2014, 64). The issue with this narrative, however, is it does not feed in to the Western mold of a globalized Islamist threat. Caitriona Dowd and Clionadh Raleigh (2013, 501) attest to this argument, rejecting the notion that all Islamist groups in Mali are operating toward a globally or even a regionally coordinated "jihad" and instead find that groups operate within the local and national context of their origins. By pinning these actions on the more globally-recognized AQIM, political actors were able to "other" the opposition which allowed them to delegitimize the entire separatist movement.

Hussein Solomon and other scholars have recently introduced a new perspective into the field of terrorism studies, which has been termed "critical terrorism studies". This theory argues that the study of terrorism and its association with political Islam needs to involve an interdisciplinary approach to examine the role of the state as a

producer of violence and emphasizes the motivations of the people, rather than viewing them as a collective (Solomon 2015a, 221). For example, when Malian Tuaregs were returning from Libya many of them came heavily armed and equipped with vehicles and weapons. President Traore let them back in to Mali without taking their weapons, claiming that he did not want to risk any form of confrontation that would risk his reputation given the fact that elections were just around the corner (Harmon 2014, 175). Even in Ansar al-Dine's case, with the reports of them implementing strict Shari'a law practices in Azawad, they gained popular support amongst the northern population by calling for an end to poverty.

When the new state of Azawad was formed, they demanded the right for every citizen in the region to live with dignity, and argued that economic development was crucial to that – economic development that stagnated under Traore (Solomon 2015b, 69). The issue with the popular narrative of the crisis in regards to Ansar al-Dine is that it does not acknowledge the fact that the group was deeply rooted in the Tuareg national identity first and foremost, and were Islamist in orientation second. Now, the argument could be made that as Ansar al-Dine and AQIM made their way south towards Konna, the Malian government had a very legitimate reason to feel threatened; seeing these groups as a national security threat, the government decided to request foreign support and suppress the armed campaign.

However, the fact that these Islamist groups were free to operate in the northern region of Mali for so long with little official political opposition should provide some considerable skepticism – it was still the Malian government's region to protect, after all. The reason their ventures south were prevented was simply because the government only had an interest in the prosperity and well-being of its population around the capital city of Bamako. In fact, there are several reports that the former Malian regime under Traore profited from AQIM's presence in the north, taking a cut of the money they earned from ransoms in exchange for turning a blind eye (Dowd and

Raleigh 2013, 506). Such acts of collusion, combined with the government's failure to adequately respond to the roots of the threat until it suited them, suggests that this argument is largely invalid. As Hussein Solomon argues, by adopting a historical and interdisciplinary framework the intrinsic interaction between the Tuareg ethnocentric identity and an Islamic identity in the form of Ansar al-Dine and AQIM – as well as the complicity of the Malian government – becomes apparent (Solomon 2015a, 231). It is from this perspective that the conflict should be viewed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

The Opportunistic Nature of French Intervention

In the Malian context, the legitimacy of the political elites in Bamako has never come under scrutiny in the popular narrative; rather, the focus has always been on the MNLA, AQIM and Ansar al-Dine. At no point did scholars and policy-makers, both internally and foreign, significantly consider the structural conditions that gave rise to Tuareg resentment in the first place. For in reality, the Malian state is not viewed as legitimate by its citizens; the government was long seen as yet another source of insecurity in the country (Solomon 2015a, 231). The March 2012 coup is testament to this and yet it is largely ignored when analyzing the conflict. As Lawrence E. Cline (2013, 630) argues, Western countries were more concerned about the acts of AQIM and Ansar al-Dine since they are more readily envisioned (erroneously) as components of an international terrorist threat.

When the coup occurred, AQIM and Ansar al-Dine used this power struggle to their advantage to gain more territory. They took control of the town of Konna on January 10, 2013 (de Castelli 2014, 66). Konna is located just outside of the traditional boundaries of Azawad in southern Mali. Although an armed struggle had been ongoing between these groups and the MNLA in the northern region for months – a land much less fertile and resource rich than the south – this latest offensive was when foreign powers decided their intervention was needed. The United Nations Security Council

immediately gave support for intervention with “Resolution 2085”, in which members of the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) soldiers were deployed into the region. French President Francois Hollande announced deployment of French troops to fight the “Islamist terrorists” in a mission known as Operation Serval, and within one month foreign troops had retaken control of Konna and all of Azawad (Webb 2016, 140).

The reason for France's intervention in the conflict is of great speculation, particularly given the fact that it was not until AQIM and Ansar al-Dine made inroads in the wealthier southern region that they felt “forced” into action. A popular perception among Malians, particularly in the north, is that a rivalry exists between the United States and France, both with their history of Saharan occupation. This competition is over the mineral and oil wealth of Mali and so when movement was made towards the south their interests were greatly threatened (Harmon 2014, 174). Officially, France claims that its intervention was due to security threats and securing stability for the Sahel region.

However, analysts argue that the real motivation for France is to protect their economic interests in Mali and neighboring Niger. Oil reserves and uranium mines in Niger and Mali are of particular interest to France, as the country generates seventy-eight percent of its electricity via nuclear energy (Shuriye and Ibrahim 2013, 511). Additionally, and perhaps most alarmingly, France has the third-largest known nuclear weapons stockpile in the world and the country still sees a strong nuclear arsenal as essential insurance against future risks (Tertrais 2007, 251). Such a critical reliance on the particular resources of the Sahel region would suggest that an opportunity to intervene in conflicts in the region is seen as a necessary part of France's foreign policy. Similar to colonial times, the resource wealth of the region is of extremely valuable interest to France who surely fears that a takeover of the region threatens their economic prosperity. Indeed, the military intervention in Mali is to protect the spill-over of the conflict in to further parts of the Sahel

(Shuriye and Ibrahim 2013, 511). It is an economic security threat, not an Islamist one.

Simply put, France's interest in the Malian crisis is yet another neo-colonialist practice disguised as a foreign security threat. It was not until non-state actors threatened to take over parts of the region that were of particular economic interest did France and ECOWAS act upon the conflict. Political figures, policy-makers and foreign actors continue to fall back on a simplistic narrative in their attempts to explain the intensification of violence in Mali. This narrative falls directly in line with what Talal Asad (2007, 13) feels defines many types of foreign intervention scenarios the world over. He argues that the United States and other former colonial powers have merely continued in the interventionist traditions of colonial states in the Middle East and Africa to benefit their own strategic and economic interests.

By framing the conflict as an Islamist security threat France was able to invoke new justifications for intervention in the present while essentially using it to achieve colonial aspirations of the past. Further, by ignoring the legitimate grievances and nationalist claims of both the MNLA and Ansar al-Dine, as well as the moderate characteristics of AQIM, France and their political allies successfully portrayed these groups as illegitimate and radical to the rest of the world. Asad has an explanation for this: acts of war, including civil wars, are not disturbing to most civilians because the danger is perceived to be localized and of a targeted nature. Characterizing this scenario as a violent Islamist act, however, creates public anxieties because it is not clear whether this danger would occur at home and whether it would become a direct threat or not (Asad 2007, 30). This in turn allowed France to justify their intervention to the outside world and gain support, which came in the form of military equipment and monetary contributions from countries such as Britain, Canada, the United States (Shuriye and Ibrahim 2013, 511).

Concluding Remarks

Framing the conflict in a radical Islamist narrative had a crucial strategic purpose which benefited France, ECOWAS and the Malian government. State war is considered a legal activity because it fulfills certain conditions that international law legitimizes. On the contrary, non-state violence – especially involving actors with Islamic ties – is stigmatized as being evil and uncivilized (Asad 2007, 38). It was in this distinction that France and their allies were able to claim that this was a fight of the civilized against the uncivilized. And it was with this exact distinction that they were able to justify their military presence. What this narrative conveniently ignores, however, is the consistent erosion of Mali's standing as Africa's model democracy and how this occurred largely due to France itself.

Malian democracy was rooted in the country's cultural heritage and heavily influenced by its French colonial legacy (Wing 2013, 476). Indeed, it was France who, upon relinquishing their colonial stranglehold on the region, established multiple building blocks of democracy which attempted to piece together a stable future for Mali. However, these democratic structures were flawed at best and unstable at worst, and clearly could not survive any significant crisis (Wing 2013, 477). So, when the Tuareg separatist insurgency shook the state and exposed the system for the hollow structure it was, the Malian government and those who had a particular interest in its prolongation sought an opportunity to gain foreign support. That came in the form of Islamist undertones within the separatist movement, which proved to be ample ammunition when framing the issue to the international community.

This in turn entirely delegitimized the nationalist campaign and the grievances, oppression and alienation they experienced over centuries – both by the French colonialists and the puppet government established in their place. Despite these fallacies, the narrative of the Northern Mali crisis is clear. As the International Crisis Group's Africa Program director Comfort Ero declared: “Corruption and poor governance are more important causes of the crisis than the terrorist threat, the Tuareg issue, or the North-South

divide” (Harmon 2014, 186). It is this explanation which should be used to frame the conflict, both for studying the instability in Mali and attempting to explain the exacerbation of violence and ethnic unrest in the region. By accepting the common Islamist narrative which has significant politically-strategic importance for France, ECOWAS and the Malian government, we only perpetuate the simplistic and detrimental explanations that scholars, political figures and policy-makers alike have all too frequently fallen back on.

References

- Asad, Talal. 2008. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cline, Lawrence E. 2013. “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26 (8): 617-34.
- de Castelli, Laurent. 2014. “Mali: From Sanctuary to Islamic State.” *The RUSI Journal* 159 (3): 62-8.
- Dowd, Caitriona and Clionadh Raleigh. 2013. “The Myth of Global Islamic Terrorism and Local Conflict in Mali and the Sahel.” *African Affairs* 112 (448): 498-509.
- Grobbelaar, Alta and Hussein Solomon. 2015. “The origins, ideology and development of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Africa Review* 7 (2): 149-61.
- Harmon, Stephen A. 2014. *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sabel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Male War of 2012-2013*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Hegghammer, Thomas. 2009. “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism.” In *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, edited by Roel Meijer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 244-65.
- Muller, Jerry Z. 2008. “Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism.” *Foreign Affairs* 87 (2): 18-35.
- Saraceno, Francesco. 2015. “Reflections on Azawad Crisis and

- Malian Democracy: The Statehood, its Deficiencies and Inclusion Failure.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 50 (3): 343-58.
- Shuriye, Abdi and Dauda Ibrahim. 2013. “The Role of Islam and Natural Resources in Current Mali Political Turmoil.” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4 (6): 507-13.
- Solomon, Hussein. 2015. “Critical Terrorism Studies and Its Implications for Africa.” *Politikon* 42 (2): 219-34.
- Solomon, Hussein. 2015. *Terrorism and Counter Insurgency in Africa: Fighting Insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tertrais, Bruno. 2007. “The Last to Disarm? The Future of France's Nuclear Weapons.” *Nonproliferation Review* 14 (2): 251-73.
- Webb, Stewart Tristan. 2016. “Mali's Rebels: Making Sense of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad Insurgency.” In *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Modern War*, edited by Scott Nicholas Romaniuk and Stewart Tristan Webb. Florida: CRC Press, 135-44.
- Wing, Susanna D. 2013. “Mali: Politics of a Crisis.” *African Affairs* 112 (448): 476-85.