



An Assessment of the Future of the Malian State

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War, Secessions and Territorial Integrity: An Assessment of the Future of the Malian State

Abstract

This research project – motivated in large part by the author’s deployment to the country and resulting interest in Malian securities – recognises Mali as a failing state, whose national institutions are too anemic to underwrite its own securities or legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Furthermore, its government is neither wholly representative of the diverse population, nor capable of the scale and development required for institutional reforms. With the nadir of French – Malian relations, and the surprising entrance of Russia into theatre, the cleavage between people – nations – and state in Mali will have two possible outcomes: 1) Mali remains a failed state, significant as a catalyst for terrorism across the Sahel and West Africa, and for human migration northwards to Europe for the foreseeable future; or 2) Mali will become a failed state, and suffer a series of cataclysmic civil wars that will overwhelm the United Nations and further deter international stakeholders: as a result, at least two states will replace the current construct. Lastly, the over-arching theme of this paper is that the true nature of Malian insecurities is the irreconcilable nature of its territorial integrity with recent (and well-armed) political demands for secession. International stakeholders have consistently prioritised the former, fearful of the regional and international ramifications of a war of self-determination.

Figure 1: Mali and its Neighbours¹



¹ Map source: Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis,” Clingendael Institute (Conflict Research Unit), March 2015, https://clingendael.org/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict.

War, Secessions and Territorial Integrity: An Assessment of the Future of the Malian State

Orientation to the ‘New’ Mali

The Sahel

It is quite literally a line in the sand that spans the breadth of the African Continent. It begins (or ends, perhaps, on one’s viewpoint) on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Senegal and ends at the Red Sea in eastern Sudan. Defined as the ecological transition from greener Savanna grassland at the Continent’s heart to the dry desert sands of the Sahara in the north, it is also home to over a million Mauritians, Malians, Nigerians, Burkinabés and Chadians. For the people, however, these labels are sometimes more of a convenient analytical grouping. For the nomadic Fulani, it is simply home, where perennial shifts in weather patterns and hydrology drive movement across borders with little care for who placed them there. For the Songhai, it is where they have always settled, where they built a medieval-era empire, along precious waterways, in the direct path of competing, nomadic peoples. For the Tuareg – or, *Kel Tamasheq* as they call themselves – it is a storied battlefield, the legacy of a proud war against colonial soldiers. Now, though, it is an impoverished area whose conditions are the fault of a distant elite; but, it was not always so.

The climate is harsh. Resource scarcity has driven tribal conflict and intercommunal violence for centuries. Just as in any corner of the globe, conflict at the tribal or social level concretises group cohesion under local leadership. Massacres have always been common.² For those at the epicentres of these fault lines, national political leadership is too distant, too estranged. Perhaps, even within the boundaries of a single state, its leadership is too *foreign*. Despite resource scarcity amidst large swaths of seemingly inhospitable territory, the Sahel region is perennially home to skyrocketing birthrates. The average Malian woman produces between five and six children, the average Nigerien woman nearly seven,³ – a result of endemic poverty, traditional concepts of family, religion, medical care, and economic workloads.

It also plays host – especially from Mali to Niger to Burkina Faso – to an impressively varied conglomeration of violent Islamist forces, many of whom wield combat power and tactical maturity far above the levels of national militaries. Islamic terrorism in the Sahel is analytically fascinating; violent groups must strike a balance between tribal affiliations and sharia. There is a careful intersection between potential recruits, operations, and hardline violent extremism that must be respected. In some areas, jihadist leadership does not necessarily have to field campaigns of coercion to recruit, but those of development, order and monies for work. In the absence of effective government and social services, these Islamist groups succeed in no small part because they offer what states cannot: control, even the provision of services and

² The bloodiest recent chapters include the March 2019 massacre in Ogossagou, wherein over 150 Fulani people were killed in a surprise attack by a rival faction. Or that of 18-19 June 2022, where several villages in Mali’s central Bandiagara region were attacked, resulting in over 130 dead.

³ The actual values are 5.45 and 6.73, respectively. As of 2023, Mali’s birthrate is the fourth highest in the world, behind the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola and Niger. See: The World Factbook, “Country Comparisons: Total Fertility Rate,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/total-fertility-rate/country-comparison>.

(Islamic) education. Terrorism and sub-state militias in the Sahel – the sheer multitude of groups vying for control and influence and those that oppose them – is possibly the most complicated jihadist picture on the globe, so much so that even academics sometimes err in even identifying, correctly, who is who.⁴

The Sahel is a transition zone, akin to an ecological paradigm shift. At the risk of abusing the true connotation of the word, it may be thought of as such. In the realm of scientific endeavour, a paradigm shift is often catalysed by accident or surprise. Sometimes, it comes about due to the isolated insistence of one or a handful of people who reject the status quo. Former constructs, perhaps viewed as absolute truths only the day before, are upended and radically dismantled or redefined. Dismantling a paradigm is a sort of arson, a forest fire which allows new growth. New, however, is not always synonymous with progress. Fitting, then, that the Sahel is home to a state currently undergoing a paradigm shift of its own towards insecurity and maybe even fracture. Before its end, this process will almost certainly prove no less radical and surprising. Moreover, it came about because of the insistence of a small cadre of individuals – members of a new militarised government, a junta – who refuse to accept the status quo.

Mali

While its catalyst was (yet another) series of *coup d'états* in the capital city of Bamako, the year 2022 may yet prove to be the most prophetic as it regards Mali's future. It ended its partnership with France, its colonial architect and enduring security underwriter. The French ambassador was expelled. This sudden and staunch rejection of French arms and investments created a sort of stakeholder vacuum, drawing in non-traditional partners, namely Russia. Concurrent to this Paris – Bamako fissure has been a steady parade of public admonitions and ostracisations from the African Union (AU). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) likewise hammered Mali, imposing strict sanctions from the individual to institutional levels. Regarding *coups*, Mali is following a recent trend throughout sub-Saharan Africa, wherein officers are increasingly and forcefully rejecting civilian controls over both governance and the future. Since Mali's August 2020 *coup*, Guinea, Chad, Sudan and Burkina Faso have followed suit. To some, this signals that sub-Saharan Africa, for the foreseeable future, will see militaries, not politicians, decide regime trajectories during periods of acute crisis.⁵

⁴ See, for example, Jeff Gilmour, "Security Concerns in Mali – 2018," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19 no. 3 (2019): 2. Gilmour writes that the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) is synonymous with Jama'a Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). This is incorrect – antithetically so – as the two groups frequently fight for control and influence and interpret the means and ends of an Islamic Sahel very differently. JNIM is aligned with Al-Qaeda.

⁵ Sebastian Elischer, "Editor's Introduction: Reassessing Africa's New Post-Coup Landscape," *African Studies Review* 65, no. 1 (March 2022): 4.

Table 1: *Coup d'États* in Mali

Year	From	To	Assessed Causation(s)	Result
1968	Modibo Keïta	Moussa Traoré (Lieutenant)	Military rejection of political socialism	Military control
1991	Moussa Traoré (now General)	Amadou Toumani Touré (Colonel)	Military rejection of authoritarian rule	Military control
2012	Amadou Toumani Touré (now civilian)	Amadou Haya Sanogo (Captain)	Military rejection of handling of Tuareg / Islamist rebellion	Brief military control
2020	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta	Bah N'Daw (via Colonel Assimi Goïta)	Military rejection of socio-economic depressions, and national security	Brief civilian control (with military vice-president)
2021	Bah N'Daw	Colonel Assimi Goïta	Military rejection of transitional civilian government	Military control (current state)

Mali's latest military seizure has placed an awkward and incredible strain on the United Nations (UN), arguably the only international Velcro left in country, whose investment, casualties, engagements and trust are now murkier. The latest *coup* (there were two in quick succession: August 2020 and then May 2021) placed control of Mali firmly in the hands of the military. It did not become a dictatorship; in optimistic terms, it is a military-assisted transition from an (alleged) rotten governance to a new one that better reflects the Malian people. Elections

are promised, but the yardsticks continue to shift to the right. ECOWAS, the AU and the UN continue to seek clarification on when “the transition” (as UN reporting terms it) will occur.⁶

The UN arrived in force in 2013, coincident with a more pointed French counter-terror mission, to restore Bamako’s sovereignty after a devastating uprising of tribes and jihadists from the north, which managed to seize approximately two-thirds of Mali’s territory. This Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) remains one of the Blue Helmets’ and UN staff’s more sizeable deployments. It is also one of its deadliest: nearly 300 have been killed.⁷ After a decade in the field, the mission’s costing remains formidable to the UN’s constituents. Its latest budget was slightly over 1.2 billion.⁸

In some UN circles, then, there surely exists a sense of bewilderment when the new Russian guests are described by Malian officials in a sort of overdue and messianic tone. “The military success we [have] achieved in the past two years,” Mali’s interim president recently remarked, “... outweighs anything that was done in past decades. Our weapons are the pride of the entire nation.”⁹ Those weapons are increasingly Russian; by extension – given the complexity of some of the systems, like helicopters, and Mali’s pre-Russian military capacities – it is highly likely that so are the operators.¹⁰ Of course, the military’s success is not organic to a renewed Malian army. It is a Russian horse, to which Mali has recently hitched its cart. Mali’s current direction directly contrasts years of investment and attempted stability operations by some Malian leadership and organisations like the UN.

This research project is structured as follows. First, this chapter serves as an orientation to where the Malian state currently is, as well as a brief introduction to stakeholders in Malian securities. After a brief segue into the author’s comments on potential analytical pitfalls, the next section introduces the reader to Mali’s people, with a focus on ethnicities. Two themes are central in this section: Mali’s ethnic composition vis-à-vis its current borders, and the history of competition between groups which routinely produced socio-economic and political disparities between the north and south; Mali is disjointed between nation(s) and state. Next the watershed year of 2012 will be presented, as it played host to both a *coup d’état* and Tuareg and Islamist rebellion, the catalyst which sparked an international surge into the country. The following chapter – Centrifugal Forces of Gravity – picks up where the introduction left off, since the reader will have been exposed to the history that brought Mali to its current state. This chapter

⁶ At the time of this project, it will not occur until at least March 2024. Despite shifts in when elections and a new constitution would occur, Bamako has secured some alleviation from sanctions by promising this date. See UNSCR S/2022/731, “Situation in Mali: Report of the Secretary-General, October 3, 2022,” 2.

⁷ Numbers of UN personnel (including military and civilian staff) varies from year to year. Totals are normally from 12 000 – 15 000. For comparison, this is roughly equivalent to the size of a Canadian Armed Forces Division. For troop numbers and UN casualties, see United Nations Peacekeeping, “MINUSMA Factsheet,” March 26, 2023, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

⁸ UNGA A/RES/75/302 (2021), “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 30 June 2021,” <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/177/18/PDF/N2117718.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁹ Col Assimi Goïta during a military celebration in Bamako in January 2023. See Beverly Ochieng, “Lavrov in Africa: Have Wagner Mercenaries Helped Mali’s Fight Against Jihadists?” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64555169>.

¹⁰ Mali has received weapons, ammunition, and rotary wing (attack helicopters) from Russian industry. As just one example, see: Al Jazeera, “Mali Receives Helicopters and Weapons from Russia,” October 1, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/1/mali-receives-helicopters-weapons-from-russia>.

serves as a sort of litmus test of stakeholder performance and asks how their presence in the country serves (or obfuscates) the declared intent of restoring security to Mali. Lastly, the final chapter – Assessment – significantly changes format from academic narrative to a structure akin to a more concise Intelligence assessment. It presents two distinct, potential outcomes.

Mali's timing is not ideal. By suddenly rejecting France, its handlers have opted to pursue, arguably, the most extreme policy shift since independence in 1960, seemingly without performing any of the internal calculus that states normally do before course changes of this magnitude. Specifically, a quick, even cursory, scan of Mali's national institutions – the very same required to underwrite executive and legislative stability and progress – are anemic, prone to corruption and often criminal.

At the time of this paper, it is unfortunate that the most culpable is also the most well-armed: *les Forces Armées Maliennes* (FAMa).¹¹ FAMa is habitually capable of rivalling even the most notorious Islamic terror entities in terms of brutality and civilian body counts. At times, the UN acknowledges, it even leads the field.¹² Since the departure of France and the arrival of more mercenarial contractors – widely accepted to be members of the notorious Wagner Private Military Company (PMC), operating along Moscow's peripheries – the Malian army's brutality towards civilians has not only continued, but looks like a less-industrious (but no less horrific) *Einsatzgruppen* parallel. In late March 2022, as an example, Malian soldiers and “white mercenaries”¹³ helicoptered into the central town of Moura, and promptly rounded up the men before labouring over the next four days to shoot several hundred, many allegedly at the precipice of a large pit.¹⁴ Hogwash, according to the government. Human rights organisations in Mali are, of course, often enlisted by the West to chisel away at the country's new political legitimacy.¹⁵

Extrajudicial inclinations are only one symptom of institutional weakness and rot, however; insurgents, not Bamako, provide local governance and enjoy unimpeded freedom of movement within and across Mali's borders, especially via the failing Burkina Faso corridors. FAMa is too weak to address the problem on its own. As Canadian Intelligence staff would

¹¹ FAMa refers explicitly to the Malian Armed Forces. It is common to encounter the acronym MDSF (Malian Defence and Security Forces), which includes, for example, the gendarmerie. Human Rights violations are not necessarily confined to one specific service.

¹² Consider a UN press release from 29 June 2021, in which MDSF were responsible for most of the catalogued 155 human rights and legal violations of that year, in particular, the extra-judicial and/or seemingly arbitrary killing of over 40 civilians. See UN, “Malian Authorities Urged to ‘Break the Cycle of Impunity’ for Human Rights Violations,” June 29, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1094982>.

¹³ Likely Russian contractors, employed by Wagner.

¹⁴ Moura – Bamako maintains – is a key centre of gravity for Islamists. It is probably correct in that jihadist inroads are considerable in the area. Even so, the killings occurred extrajudicially and witness accounts state the targeted men have little to do with jihadist activity. See Paul Lorgerie, “Mali Massacre Survivors say White Mercenaries Involved in Killings,” *Reuters*, April 14, 2022, <https://reuters.com/world/africa/mali-massacre-survivors-say-white-mercenaries-involved-killings-2022-04-14>.

¹⁵ Derivative of recent (February 2023) remarks by Mali's Foreign Minister, Abdoulaye Diop. At a press conference with Russia's Foreign Minister, Mr. Diop said that “human rights groups must stop being instruments used by those who want to destabilise Mali... we are accused of human rights abuses often by disguised terrorists themselves.” See France 24, “Lavrov Pledges Russian Military Support on Visit to Mali amid Concern over Abuses,” last modified February 7, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230207-lavrov-says-russia-to-help-mali-improve-military-capabilities>.

frequently observe during this nation's mission in Mali,¹⁶ Malian soldiers, poorly officered and poorly trained, would routinely rout when attacked. A military that routs is less a professional fighting force than a disparate grouping of armed individuals, much less an institutional muscle that Bamako can confidently fill the void left by French soldiery to tackle insurgents. Even if FAMa miraculously developed into a professional force under Russian or other auspices, how could it recover lost legitimacy in the eyes of the populations it has repeatedly assaulted?

There can be little argument counter to the infancy of Malian institutions as the predominant Achilles' Heel for the country's future. The presence of organisations such as the UN and the kinetic muscle (among other things) of the French demonstrated that Malian securities cannot yet be underwritten nationally but require an international guarantor. Amid this reliance on the international community, new Malian leadership embarked on a sudden and dramatic change of course which – as will be discussed throughout this paper – will almost certainly have significant, negative consequences not only for the Malian people, but for the stability of the entire Sahel region. Overall, this paper asserts that Malian institutions and governance are neither wholly representative of the Malian people, nor capable of securing the state. This cleavage between people and state will have two possible outcomes: 1) Mali remains a failed state, significant as a catalyst for terrorism across the Sahel and for human migration northward to Europe; or 2) as a failed state, Mali will suffer a cataclysmic series of civil wars in which at least two states will replace the current construct.

In this paper, a **failing state** is understood by the author to be a country satisfying the following criteria: 1) the legitimacy of the government (to include its mandate and nomination) is not widely accepted by the populace, or is restricted to upper tiers of a stratified social structure; 2) the effect or power of national institutions is local or (at best) regional, and services – first and foremost – select individuals in society; 3) the state is unable to secure its own borders or defend its sovereignty without international guarantors, and is, therefore, vulnerable to predation by more powerful states; and 4) the government is unable (or unwilling) to address a myriad of social issues, especially poverty, disease and economy mobility. By extension, a **failed state** is understood to be one in which the government cannot enforce or run its legislative, executive, or judicial functions, even for elite members of society. National institutions have collapsed, as have most jurisdictional functions from the national to local levels. Civil war is highly likely if not already occurring. Central to both scenarios is the degradation of Mali's territorial integrity – to borrow a phrase from the UN Charter – due to a central government that is neither capable nor situated to protect it.¹⁷

Future analyses of Mali may revolve around what has been posited here; namely, the year 2022 as a sort of watershed moment wherein Mali's new handlers leapt from the known to the

¹⁶ The Government of Canada's contribution to the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was part of the broader Op PRESENCE; from Gao, specifically, this mission's priority was aeromedical evacuation coverage for UN troopers and civilians. Canadian servicemen and women also provided a significant logistical capability to the mission. This commitment lasted from August 2018 to August 2019.

¹⁷ Article 2.4 of the UN Charter reinforces the centrality of territorial integrity for a state to be considered sovereign. Specifically, it reads: "all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner consistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." See UN, "United Nations Charter (Full Text)," accessed April 3, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

unknown. Others may focus more on the role the UN has and is yet to play, as it continues to grapple with mounting civilian casualties, millions of displaced people, a lack of social unity and upward economic mobility, a fantastic birthrate, and crippling poverty. Some analysts have already questioned how MINUSMA expects to stabilise Mali, when the organisation does not have stabilisation doctrine for combat operations.¹⁸ Why should it? The UN does not perform a combat function. Except, what happens when UN troops are deployed into a combat theatre: Mali certainly is. Some may search in their analyses for who is ultimately responsible for a failing state – perhaps, landing squarely on a sort of predatory legacy of Paris in the Sahel and its environs. Common to all, however, will almost certainly be the need for footnote after footnote that amplifies further bloodshed. There are simply too many engines of violence for Bamako to address. The country will remain locked in a downward spiral of violence.

Eurocentric Malian history revolves around its peoples as colonial possessions and then, since September 1960, as an independent people, and oft former-colonial dependents. France, present in some capacity in Africa since the seventeenth century, ultimately controlled a dogleg of the Continent roughly equivalent to the size of the United States, from Mauritania in the northwest to the Congo in the south. Paris' African appetite seems to have increased following its Bismarckian shellacking. Stunned by its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/1, the former European hegemon watched with horror as a new German state unified on its eastern flank. Explaining what came next – the so-called Scramble for Africa – has produced rifts between historical schools. What, truly, were the engines of British, French, Belgium, or German advances into Africa? Conquest for conquest's sake? Territory rent asunder simply due to the realities of European technological, economic and military overmatch? Or fear on the home front that access to markets and raw resources were the lynch pins for Continental balance of power? This paper will not answer these questions for several reasons.

Firstly, while tracing the current-day threads of colonialism and how its various systems have metastasised into current socio-political strife and inequities is common in academia, one must be properly trained in the discipline. So, a chronological scan of cause and effect(s) within Malian colonialism remains outside the scope of this paper simply as the author is not a trained historian, nor international relationist. What can be stated with confidence is that academic posterity routinely dismantles the work of predecessors, armed with the benefit of hindsight, more resources or different (sometimes competing) schools of academic training. In other words, schools of thought change and evolve over time, and writers will (perhaps subconsciously) mould their analysis to the paradigms of the time. This should not 'get them off the hook' as it regards later criticisms. Still, students and professionals alike should be careful in their approaches. Consider, as an example, that just a few decades ago it was satisfactory to explain France's participation in the African Scramble and sustained presence in its former colonies after independence as stemming, simply, from "national ego."¹⁹ Presently, qualifying and quantifying a nation's ego seems an absurd thing, much less applying it as chief animator to foreign policies.

¹⁸ See, as examples, Arthur Boutellis, "Can the UN Stabilize Mali? Towards a UN Stabilization Doctrine?" *International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015): 7-8, or John Karlsrud, "The UN at War: Examining the Consequences of Peace-Enforcement Mandates for the UN Peacekeeping Operations in the CAR, the DRC and Mali," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2015): 42-50.

¹⁹ As a good example, See Francis T. McNamara, *France in Black Africa* (Washington: National Defence University, 1989), xv.

Secondly, an ethical or morale attack on French colonialism in Mali is not done here out of the author's concern for the risk of anachronisms. In a paper that, ultimately, aims to proffer an assessment on the future of the Malian state, dedicating time towards past personalities and events seems an inefficient use of time. Moreover, such a critique of French colonialism – warranted in many cases – would not necessarily add anything new to the discussion in Mali. To do so would result in yet another catalogue of social turbulence and stratification that accompanies evolution from possession to sovereign state. Any serious practitioner or student will understand colonial systems may have negative outcomes, but equally be able to place the engineers of these systems within the contexts of their creation. France in Mali is not a unique scenario. It is hardly different than France (or any European powerhouse) elsewhere, such as in what would become Canada. Perhaps, it is simply further evidence of that greatest historical constant: regardless of where or when, human nature is an automatic search for vulnerabilities as a road to power when two or more groups collide.

Thirdly, I fully acknowledge that the earlier thesis above – that Malian institutions are too anemic to underwrite the state – almost certainly has a colonial tether. But how should we evaluate it? As clear as a fingerprint in a crime scene? Or, as a third or fourth order effect? Mali has, after all, been independent for over sixty years. At what point should analysis assign agency fully to Malian leadership vice a time-share with a colonial past? Is it indicative of a western bias to assume that such a point should exist? Commentary from Malian politicians would suggest not. The current Prime Minister, Choguel Kokalla Maïga, recently told a journalist that the “era” of French prescriptions, indicative of a previous “... time has been long gone. We [Maliens] choose and the people choose.”²⁰

There are more commonalities in the utterances of French and Malian principals shortly after arriving at the new relationship ebb. The previous Prime Minister, Abdoulaye Maïga,²¹ declared that France had long continued to punish and obfuscate Malian potential with its “... neocolonialist, condescending, paternalistic, and vengeful policies.” From the other side of the figurative table, the former Deputy Chief of Staff for the inception of French counterterrorism operations in the country shared a complementary reflection: “... we acted like big brother who would turn to his little brother and tell him what to do and not do. We've been the know-it-all trying to apply templates that weren't suited to them.”²²

Mali in 2022 was engineered by Malians. Firmly so. Analysts – academic or media – should exercise caution if asserting that these engineers are still victims of French colonial history as this approach risks enshrining in literature the precise infantilising approach that was

²⁰ Elsy Abu Assi, “Mali's PM Maïga: ‘We did not abandon cooperation with France,’” *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/8/qa-malis-prime-minister-kokalla-maiga-on>.

²¹ Repetitive surnames throughout this paper will be noticed by the reader. More than confusing events and chronology, it is indicative of a concentration of power into certain tribal affiliations – notably Bambaran.

²² Both quotations – Abdoulaye Maïga and General Didier Castres – are quoted in Isabelle King, “How France Failed Mali: the End of Operation Barkhane,” *Harvard International Review*, January 30, 2023, <https://hir.harvard.edu/how-france-failed-mali-the-end-of-operation-barkhane>. Prime Minister Maïga's lengthier quotation is a bit more theatrical. France, he cautioned the UN General Assembly, had “... disowned universal moral values and betrayed the rich history of the Lumieres philosophers and turned themselves into a junta in the service of obscurantism.” See France24, “Mali Post-Coup PM Denounces France, Salutes Russia at UN,” September 24, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220924-mali-post-coup-pm-denounces-france-salutes-russia-at-un>.

detested in Maïga's speech and believed, clearly, to have animated a national will. So, numerous questions pertaining to Mali's colonial chapter will not be answered here. For our purposes, this history is more important not in an evaluation of the system and marriage of its outcomes to current-day Mali, *but the speed with which it ended*.

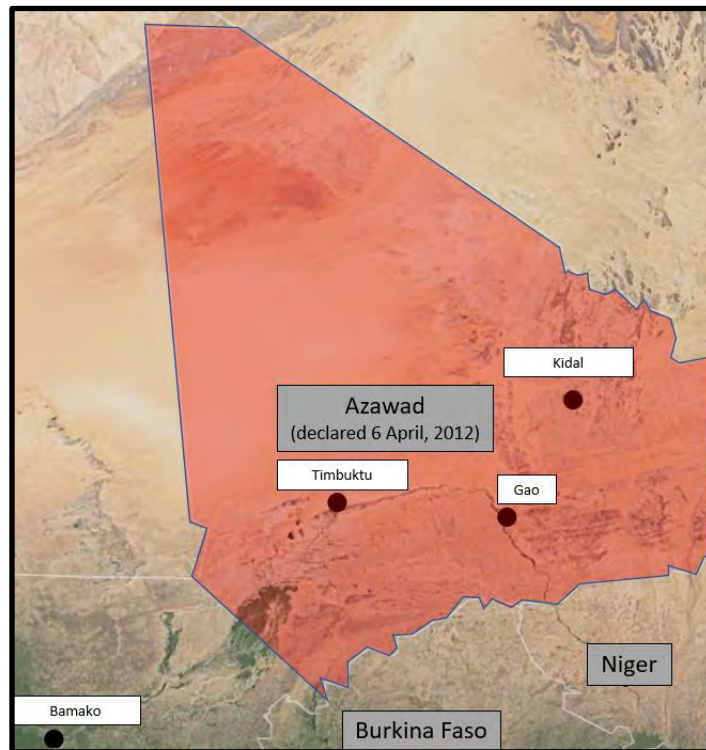
Bamako's 2022 ultimatum to France to leave terminated a 130-year relationship that, very recently, had still been defined as willing reliance. Recall that Mali nearly collapsed in 2012, or, in the best-case scenario, would have been cleaved between a Malian entity in the west, and a new Republic or Islamic State of Azawad in the north and east.²³ Redolent with combat experience from the Libyan Civil War (and flush with its weapons) Tuareg and other jihadist fighters from the north of country smashed into FAMa and, within just seven months, had seized control of areas from the Algerian border to Mali's centre. Bamako was firmly within striking distance and its government was reeling from the speed of the jihadist advance. Shielded only by the remnants of a paltry FAMa – a segment of which had already mutinied and toppled a president that had held power since 2002, interim leadership in Bamako appealed for urgent help.²⁴ The UN correctly identified the Bamako-bound tsunami as a direct threat to “international peace and security” and so welcomed its constituents to act to resolve the crisis.²⁵ France led the charge. Operation SERVAL landed in incredible force. Within two years' time, Paris restored the territorial sovereignty of the country and left thousands of terrorists (or sovereigntists, depending on viewpoint) dead. Only one small, awkward UN prescription seems to have been ignored, specifically that any *sustainable* end to the war required that it be Malian led.²⁶

²³ After routing FAMa from the country's north in 2012, Azawad was the name given by the victors to their new short-lived autonomous territory. The territory is largely synonymous with the traditional homeland of the Tuareg people.

²⁴ Mali specifically requested France intervene, and certainly preferred that nation to other options presented by ECOWAS or the AU. See Thomas G. Weiss and Martin Welz, “The UN and the African Union in Mali and Beyond: A Shotgun Wedding?” *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2014): 897.

²⁵ UNSCR S/RES/2085 (2012), “Adopted by the Security Council at its 6898 Meeting, on 20 December 2012,” www.unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2085.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Figure 2: Approximate territory of Azawad²⁷

SERVAL then morphed directly into Operation BARKHANE.²⁸ While Mali's borders were secure, terror groups still had unimpeded access to large swaths of the country. France was now at the helm of a counter-insurgency operation directly situated atop Mali, and those countries contiguous and near to it: Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. Along with the UN, this operation kept Mali's borders legitimate, prevented further Islamic terror momentum, and kept Bamako relatively stable. In a strictly military success, it cannot be disputed that SERVAL was an overwhelming tactical and operational success. BARKHANE, too, continued to carry the full weight of French arms.

However, was it a strategic success? Here, even an amateur historian armed with a bit of hindsight and research can quickly uncover evidence of a critical misalignment. One of the international community's most resounding successes was that – only one year removed from Mali's near implosion – elections were held and, in September 2013, Ibrahim (Boubacar) Keïta won easily. Yet, he was overthrown only seven years later (August 2020). It was the second *coup* in less than a decade. After seven years at the helm, the president could no longer hold the line against a myriad of coalescing social pressures. Civic intolerance for assessed corruption and criminality manifested to the same degree it had during the previous *coup*. Public demonstrations

²⁷ Map Data: Google Landsat/Copernicus Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO Mapa GISael. Note, Google Earth attribution requirements and usage can be found at this link, as does permission to add personalised country labels as has been done above and, in several instances, throughout: https://www.google.com/intl/en-GB_ALL/permissions/geoguidelines.

²⁸ Operation BARKHANE was actually the merger of SERVAL (Mali) and EPERVIER (Chad) given the relative freedom of movement jihadist groups enjoyed only a few years after the beginning of SERVAL, and the ease with which they crossed international borders.

had picked up in intensity. The people were incensed at the seemingly endless insurgency, a flatlining economy, and a lack of upward mobility. Ushering Mr. Keïta out the door was the appropriately named National Committee for the Salvation of the People. Though not the *coup* leader, its true muscle was Colonel Assimi Goïta, who found himself in the new role of Prime Minister. After further bureaucratic housekeeping in a second *coup* in 2021, Goïta seized presidential control.²⁹ Professedly interim in his duties until such time that Mali is ready for new national elections, he remains in power. Malians, evidently, are not quite ready to elect leadership, preferring it be assigned for the moment.

Goïta may be correct, however, in digging in his heels against the demands of ECOWAS,³⁰ the AU and the urgings of the UN in holding elections. Elections, themselves, can be acutely destabilising if civil society is not reinforced. As Roland Paris, former senior advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister, explained in his work on peacebuilding after conflict, democracy requires competitive elections and so catalyses conflict and competition; in a healthy system, elections serve to resolve “social conflicts.”³¹ Social conflict, however, is required for the democratic system to function. Goïta’s moving electoral yardsticks may be too quickly dismissed by the international community as a power grab. Who better than him to understand that democratic competition would only inflame the fragile country for the foreseeable future? His most immediate precedent is that of the man he was instrumental in overthrowing. Current consensus is that the military will decide Mali’s future independent of other stakeholders for the foreseeable future.³²

After Keïta was elected, there was a brief period of promise, wherein Bamako and the rebels committed to a peace agreement. Within three months, talks were suspended due to a lack of political will on *both* sides.³³ Electoral legitimacy, evidently, still does not translate well between Bamako and those beyond the centre of the country. From the lens of state sovereignty, Mali has not demonstrated that its territorial integrity is reinforced by electoral and democratic competition, regardless of who is in charge.

Precisely because of the Malian system’s frequent shifting about who is in charge and who competes for power, surely, Parisienne war rooms had budgeted for the Malian propensity for *coup d’etats*. The UN, too, although perhaps to a lesser degree. However, previous governmental avalanches had never produced a type of leader bent on whole of government

²⁹ Note that under Mali’s constitution, the president appoints the prime minister as head of government.

³⁰ ECOWAS’ aim is to coalesce partners around self-sufficiency and integration. Its members are Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Niger, Nigeria and Togo.

³¹ Roland Paris, *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156-158.

³² Elischer, “Editor’s Introduction,” 4.

³³ For more on this point, see Boutellis, “Can the UN Stabilize Mali?”⁴ The ceasefire in question was the Algiers Agreement, conducted between Bamako and major Tuareg rebel groups. It hinged on several factors, including the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of rebels into the MDSF. Notably, it did not include jihadist groups. DDR was fully backed by MINUSMA, who laboured to facilitate and oversee the process. It was never fully realised prior to Goïta’s *coup*, and DDR centres were prone to corruption and even frequent targets during intercommunal violence. Since Goïta’s seizure of power, Tuareg groups have pulled out of the talks altogether, asserting a disinterest from Mali’s new military government. For more on this, see: Tiemoko Diallo, “Mali’s Northern Armed Groups pull out of Algiers Peace Talks,” *Reuters*, December 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-northern-armed-groups-pull-out-algiers-peace-talks-2022-12-22>.

strategic reversals. A quick shift from the rather Eurocentric and UN-friendly tenure of Mr. Keïta was surprising. Flirtations with Moscow were unbelievable. The confrontational tone from Goïta's junta was no longer questioned when, in January 2022, France's Foreign Minister questioned the group's legitimacy. Mali expelled the French ambassador shortly afterwards.

French planners misidentified the Malian theatre's strategic centre of gravity. Or they believed they had more time to achieve the multidimensional stability and social operations required to cut the Malian people off from sources of terrorism, and to restore at least the hope of upward mobility for the average citizen. Conveniently ignoring their storied history of regimental incompetency and criminality, Malian officials have not been shy or refrained from offering confident commentary about French military progress. Curious, indeed, given the power of the French military that in nine years' time, BARKHANE was not concluded. Even more curious was Bamako's realisation that some terrorists were in league with France.³⁴

Naturally, successive kinetic operations in the country – from SERVAl to BARKHANE – were not without controversy or frustration. While the success of BARKHANE still proves difficult to qualify, it should be stressed that the end-state of French investment was clear: secure borders, the legitimacy of Bamako in the eyes of the Malian people, the destruction of jihadist threats and institutional stability. Whether or not the Malian ship of state was steadily steaming towards these goals will be the subject of analyses for years to come; what one can identify at this time is that the ship was, in the very least, pointed towards them.

Now, there is another set of hands on the wheel, and they are reaching from Moscow: Mali's new trusted partner. Or, in the words of the PM, the ideal post-Paris candidate because the hand on the other end of the shake belongs to "... those who are not subject to pressure, and in a year our army managed to do what it could not do in 30 years because of the work and cooperation with Russia."³⁵ A skeptical reader at this point might counter that there surely exists a few *quid pro quos* on the horizon. Bamako's junta might – behind closed doors – be aware of a few. For the moment its leadership seems satisfied (via a careful omission of much press and UN reporting) that Russian boots means no more "... genocide and killing of whole areas."³⁶

Russian penetration into Mali is robust. From the tactical level – where its corporate soldiery aids FAMA in extrajudicial campaigns – to the strategic. For a poignant example of the latter, perhaps it is best to look to a matter thousands of kilometres away. On 23 February, 2023, during its Eleventh Emergency Special Session, the UN's General Assembly considered a resolution to demand Moscow cease hostilities and withdraw its forces from Ukraine. Given the horror of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the motion carried easily though, like many recent matters pertaining to Moscow, was largely symbolic. Yet, from Bamako came a resounding no.³⁷ Any

³⁴ This, according to the current Prime Minister, is analogous to Bamako's belief that France was sponsoring terrorism against Bamako and the Mali people. See Assi, "Mali's PM Maiga."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Mali was one of seven countries to vote directly against the cessation of hostilities. The others were Belarus, The Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Nicaragua, Syria and, of course, Russia. All countries have a significant relationship with Moscow, with Mali's relationship being newer, directly related to the draw-down of French forces (Op BARKHANE) and increasing Russian economic and military investment. For more on the General Assembly vote, see UNGA 12492, "Hours Before Ukraine Conflict Enters Second Year, General Assembly

country's international relations rolodex is, of course, varied. The key issue to bear in mind throughout this paper remains: Malian national institutions require international guarantors. The former colonial handler is gone, ushered out in the wake of a new junta. Despite the *coup*, Mali's willing reliance on outsider helpers remains, but this time a principal partner who could not be more different was chosen, and the awkward ramifications for a pensive UN more portentous. So, not only Malians, but the international community stands at a crossroads, a leap from the known to the unknown, from one security paradigm to the next. Regardless of the outcome, the catalysing factor was, is and shall remain the fact that in Mali, *power is something to seize, not something generated by the people, themselves.*

Pitfalls and Author's Notes

Exactly what is seized, however, is difficult to frame and answer. For a research project of this length, it is necessary to first present analytical pitfalls which I have attempted to bear in mind throughout. First, for a western writer to analyse and assess the future security outlook of an African state, perspectives, biases and tone will inherently affect how concepts and events are written about. The Canadian and Malian worlds are alien to one another. When describing something alien, there will necessarily be a heavy reliance on secondary source material whose theses are easy to accept without careful literature review. As an example, it is easy enough to argue that Malians, governed by *coup d'état*-prone handlers, are unlikely to benefit from effective governance for the foreseeable future, which makes the state (among other things) ripe for international predation. Explanations such as this belie the complexity of the issue and may even tend towards arrogance. There are many threads to analyse if the result is habitual ineffective governance. This is probably because nearly all those threads are about *people*, not simply places or institutions.

Secondly, the concept of state presents another pitfall if one is not careful. It is convenient – especially for academic purposes – to write about the state as an entity, an easily fingerprinted *thing* that enacts legislation at home, and interacts with global partners. The Malian state, however, is failing. As above, power is understood by Malian elites to be something that is taken, not something that stems upwards from the people. This likely explains the junta's inability to follow through on its declared temporary, transitional nature. Still, Westerners may be quick to assign the criteria for a failed or failing state. I may have done so here. Perhaps here, too, there is another arrogant danger. We may collectively agree on criterion for a failing state, but in doing so we may ignore a key factor: time.

This paper's focus on weak Malian institutions may be criticised as too myopic. It was mentioned earlier that jihadist groups – increasingly in the centre of the country but especially its north and the border region with Burkina Faso and Niger – are firmly entrenched because they become, through commerce and governance, an extremely valuable governmental alternative which state agencies cannot remove.³⁸ Many jihadist groups throughout the Muslim world are exceptional governors, and understand the intersection between business (oft illicit), social

Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation withdraw Military Forces, Adjourning Emergency Session," February 23, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12492.doc.htm>.

³⁸ A recent and brilliant work by Aisha Ahmad examines in detail the numerous intersections between smuggling, governance, violence, religion and tribalism through several theatres, including Mali. For the footnote above, see Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad & Co.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16-17, 172.

grievances and politics; in Mali's north, poor governance, violence, and open borders have created a booming illegal economy that fills the coffers of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) among others.³⁹ Some Malians, even, believe that groups like AQIM are more interested in profit than Islam, colloquially naming the leader as Mr. Marlboro.⁴⁰

So, Malian institutions, it can rightly be argued, are only half the problem: jihadist-supplied institutional competition is the other half. Nevertheless, regardless of their colonial-era assignments, it is Bamako that is charged with the territorial integrity of Mali's current borders. If governance and the provision of goods and services remains in lop-sided competition with non-state actors, the host nation cannot be argued to be wholly sovereign.

In the West, a reader is comfortable with the notion that a state mirrors the nation(s), the peoples within. If there are numerous nations within a state (consider Canada), then we expect that balance and equality is both enshrined and practiced at all levels of government. Yet, no state is unique in embarking on an evolutionary or revolutionary (but almost always bloody) process to marry a state to its nation(s). History shows this to be a lengthy process.

This paper posits that one of the potential outcomes for Mali is that the state will dissolve into new entities. On the one hand, this can be viewed as a pejorative argument. On the other, if time is considered, it can be viewed as a parallel process to what western countries have undergone: convulsions and evolutions and revolutions to match nation(s) to borders. If we ignore time, we risk asking unfair questions.

As an example, it may be an unfair critique to ask why the people simply do not take power back from the junta. Or, why the decade-long UN presence and cost has not translated into success or more measured progress. Our frame of reference may be too small. So, corruption may be understood solely as the result of greedy governors. Poverty may be chalked up to incredibly high birthrates amidst dwindling or scarce resources. Tribalism is viewed as an obstacle to education and social development. Sectarian violence, too, is simply a result of an ineffectual military to combat the problem. While individually true in the case of Mali, simply compiling arguments and research on these aspects will add nothing new to an analysis of the Malian state. It will simply continue the catalog of mismatches between the state and nations within. The real question for this research project is simple to write, but difficult to answer: where to begin? How far back in the history of the Malian peoples must an analyst go to effectively understand current and future challenges? It is difficult to determine a starting point for any story in history. In the case of Mali, however, we do not necessarily need to. We only need look for collisions, between traditions, ethnicities, borders and social stratifications.

While they are an academic necessity to make sense of a complex environment, the centrality of the tribe may be difficult for a Western reader. Most of Mali's violence and insecurity is directly tethered to tribalism. There is a risk of generalisation. For example, in this paper, successive Tuareg rebellions since independence will be at the forefront. However, not all Tuaregs rebelled, and many were equal victims in the 2012 civil war. Tuaregs are not a monolithic people. They are a confederation of indigenous North African populations, each cadre

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 191.

with a unique leadership. Yet, in Mali, tribes *do* matter, and they drive governance to a degree not observed in a country like Canada. In Mali, there are three main drivers of death: religion, disparity, and tribalism. So, with an acknowledgement of the risk of generalising, this fact is why they are so central to this discussion.

In full admission of potential bias, the motivation for this research project comes from my own service in Mali, where I served as the Air Task Force Intelligence Officer in Gao. Mali was (and will remain) the most complex of intelligence puzzles. As with any military campaign, Intelligence practitioners will be the first to declare that they are under-resourced and unheeded. The same was true in Mali. The UN does not have a well-established established Intelligence Architecture. Even if resources were to appear, the organisation does not possess the corporate knowledge or contributor competencies to effectively use them. This is not a slight against the UN. Western countries have considerable experience in apply resources to a (jihadist) Intelligence problem because of operations in areas – such as Afghanistan or Iraq – where the UN is not designed to operate. In Mali, assessing and predicting future jihadist strikes was often an exercise in cognitive leaps and prayers more than sequential analysis.

What did emerge in those long hours staring at Mali on our impressive wall map was a growing suspicion that we were interrupting something: self-determination? I will always recall debriefing a superior after one notable tribal massacre in central Mali. When pressed about indicators and warnings that might signal another extermination was on the horizon, I answered we simply had none. We did not understand tribal dynamics well. We deployed to Mali on relatively short notice. We do not come from a tribal society. *We did not understand the people in our operations area.* We did not have the tools to monitor the flow of arms and those who may use them. When pressed further, in a moment of frustration I stated that we simply cannot forecast the future locales of violence in this country, because Mali was several countries trapped in one. It was an unwieldy and awkward colonial assignment. It appeared to me to be a forced marriage of too many fault lines. On a map, Mali is French Sudan from the nineteenth century. Its borders were assigned, not organic. Social stratification, Islamic terrorism, poverty, human trafficking and migration, tribal hatreds and competition were endemic. There were too many pressure cookers.

Regardless of the reader's reaction to the bias(es) above, I would only caution a reminder that the self-determination of nations and peoples is a key tenet of internationalism, if not *the* central principle. When it was signed in 1945, it is fair to assert that that the UN Charter was catalyzed largely by equal parts humility and horror as to the potential for failed collective security to deal with "... threats to the peace."⁴¹ Hence, the centrality of all countries to "... respect [the] principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples."⁴² Yet, 1945 was still book-ended firmly in a colonial period, especially on the African Continent. As countries like Mali gained their rightful independence, they inherited cumbersome and awkward colonial borders that do not reflect the peoples living therein. *The result is that they are somewhat sandwiched between the first and second articles of the UN Charter: the first enshrines a right to self-determination, the second – Article 2.4 – enshrines the importance of "territorial integrity."*⁴³

⁴¹ UN Charter, Article 1.1, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, Article 2.4.

So, we should ask two awkward questions, as MINUSMA and other partners attempt to stabilise the country: to what degree can these two tenets be realised, and to what extent are they, perhaps, antithetical?

Historically, people have two choices in this process: evolution or revolution. While the means vary, it is my assessment that the trajectories are similar (consider Canadian and American divergences). Regardless of the means, it takes time. Regardless of the means, it is often violent. Violence is the most abhorrent aspect of human nature. However, it underwrites not simply history, but sovereignty and self-determination. Students and academics, alike, should not be too quick to divorce modernity from history and the peculiar, sometimes terrible way, that nations interact with one another, or the terrible ways in which nations divorce themselves from a state with which they either cannot or refuse to reconcile with.

In the interim, however, one can attempt to understand an isolated capital at the western edge of a realm replete with violence, insecurity, and disparity. To its east lies an incredibly diverse people, many of whom are estranged, allocated within a set of borders anachronistic and, at times, irrelevant to the history of the tribe. This capital is at a watershed moment in its history, a paradigm. It is not alone, however. Moscow's agency is new whereas France's has expired. The UN, too, will continue its labours. Mali is home, then, not just to Malians, but an intersection (or a collision) for the international community. Whatever the course of action, however, UNSCR 2085's prescription is correct.

Sustainability must be Malian led.

In this, Bamako and its international partners must deal with their first collective hurdle. This inability is the instability keystone in Mali. Designs for Malian led sustainability and security operations are not translating much beyond the boardrooms in Bamako. How come? The issue is not the new militarised government. The handcuffing of Malian agency throughout the entirety of operations in Mali has persisted since the opening stages of MINUSMA and SERVAL. To begin to understand why, analysis must turn to who, exactly, are the people Bamako is charged with governing and leading.

Mali, Its Malians, and the Colonial Kaleidoscope

The streets of Bamako were abuzz in late October 2003. There was a state visit. Clad in a dark suit despite the heat, Jacques Chirac toured the streets of Bamako in a motorcade with Mali's leader, Amadou Toumani Touré, on the 25th. Addressing the people at a press conference, the French President punctuated not only a deep affection between the two nations, but elevated Mali as a symbol of integrity and exemplary governance. "President Touré's political consensus is..." he said, "... as every international specialist states, an exemplary model of democracy... [if only] all other countries in the world [could] do the same thing."⁴⁴ Chirac's tone was high praise, indeed; France publicly viewed the trajectory of Mali above all others on the Continent. It is not easy, viewing the transcript from public statements by two world leaders in front of the cameras, to detect fault lines or fragilities. In hindsight, however, one can quickly detect that the praised

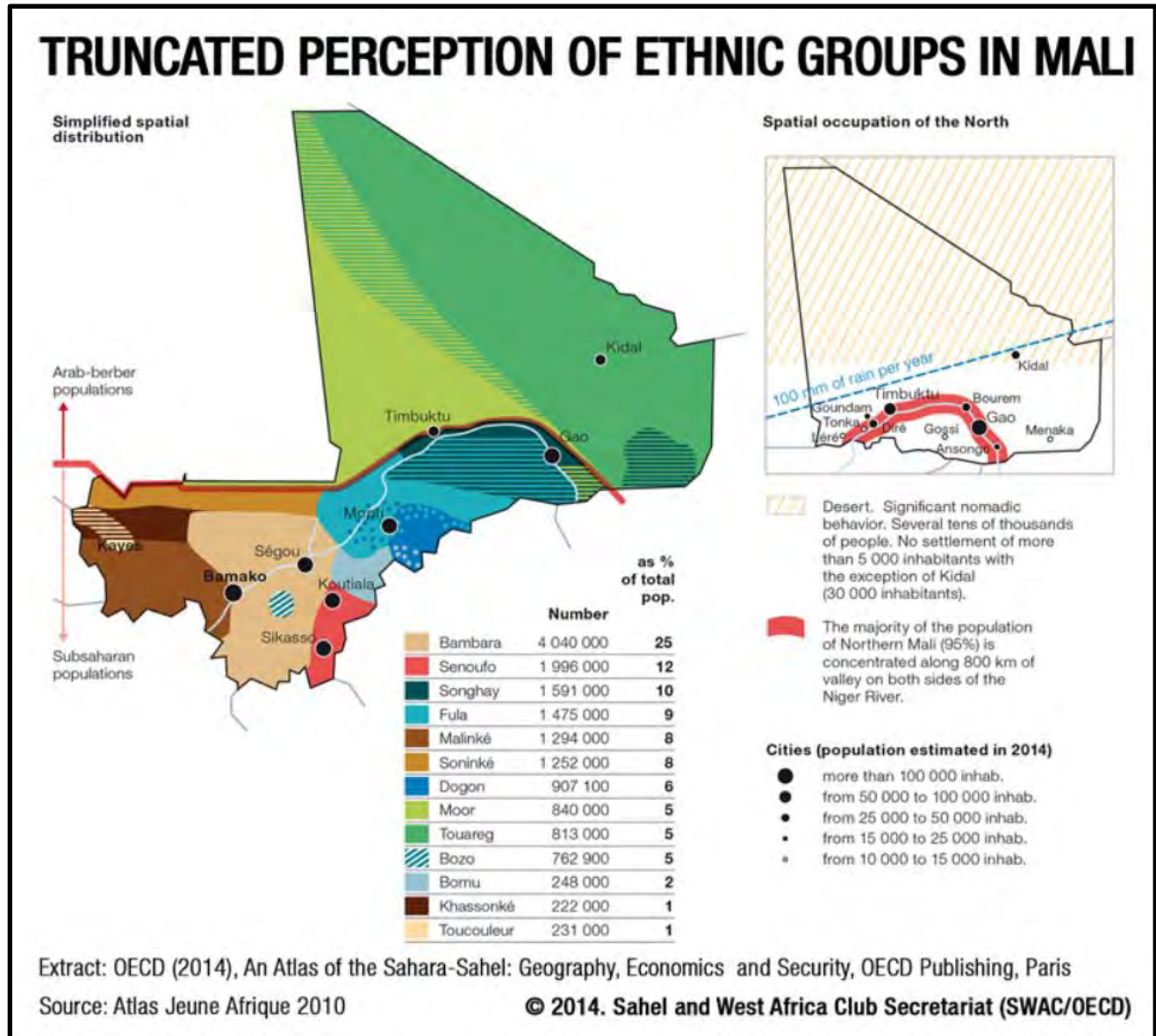
⁴⁴ Chirac as quoted in Chauzal and van Damme, "The Roots of Mali's Conflict."

‘political consensus’ was due to a small sample size, and a careful selection of Mali’s storied history both before and after colonialism.

Just three years after Chirac’s visit, the Tuaregs rebelled, their leadership eager to cleave their people away from Bamako. It was their third attempt since independence.⁴⁵ They were not successful but would try again only nine years later. As noted in a previous section, this latter uprising quickly morphed into a revolution, took on a decidedly Islamic tone, and nearly reduced Mali to about a third of its present size. Clearly, Chirac – and those international specialists he referenced – failed to identify the thin veneer of institutional strength and representative democracy in the country; or, as some analysts have phrased it: once under strain, Mali’s “institutional nudity” was almost immediately exposed to a perplexed international community.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ There are four major Tuareg uprisings in Mali’s post-colonial period: 1963, 1991, 2006, and 2012. The impetus from the last propelled Mali into its current state, as well as UN and French involvement.

⁴⁶ Chauzal and van Damme, “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict.”

Figure 3: Ethnicities and Territories⁴⁷

Perhaps, sample sizes are more carefully chosen during diplomatic visits. As a national leader, one can rightly assume that the French president was fully aware of France's history in Mali, especially before it reached its colonial zenith. When they landed in Timbuktu in 1894, French forces under Étienne Bonnier immediately gained control of the defenseless city, but then were quickly massacred by the Tuareg when they ventured a little too far into the desert sands.⁴⁸ Persistent and exploratory, this slaughter and those that followed only increased French desire to

⁴⁷ Graph and all unmodified information is from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) / Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat, 2014, *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel*, Chapter 8.8, "Truncated Perception of Ethnic Groups in Mali," <https://www.oecd.org/swac/maps>. It has been reproduced here in accordance with copyright directive(s) governing use of material from OECD. Amplifying direction can be found here: <https://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>.

⁴⁸ Martin A. Klein, "Slavery and French Rule in the Sahara," *Slavery and Abolition* 19, no. 2 (1998): 75.

tame the Sahel. Curious, some historians such as Martin Klein have noted, given that the area had no known resources (at *that* time) but, still, the French launched what he describes as "... one of the more irrational episodes in the history of colonialism."⁴⁹

As a brief aside, the Sahel is now understood to be redolent with gas and oil. Algeria and Libya developed as such giants. Mali and Mauritania, almost certainly, have comparable gas and oil fields, especially around Gao and to the far north.⁵⁰ Development and further discovery of these potential fields will remain a historical 'what if' for Bamako. If the administration had the will and institutional competency, economic development may have been a significant social glue. As it stands now, whichever the trajectory the Malian state takes, these fields may prove ripe for stakeholder predation.

It is difficult to qualify the correct word for the eventual submission of the Tuareg peoples to the French. 'Surrender' is likely too strong; 'absorbed' is too generalising given the diversity of the Tuareg peoples. Both historically and currently, the Tuareg are fantastic and fierce fighters, often leveraging their comfort with the open and hostile Sahelian environment to confound and attack the enemy. Perhaps, after years of sustained colonial campaigning, the Tuareg *accepted* the French. It took a long time, too. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century were the last Tuareg confederations beaten.⁵¹ While anachronistic, French administrators – especially as they began leveraging and educating the Bamabaran people to the west – should have recognised that they had captured an irreconcilable Sahelian people in a Westphalian sense. Or, as conveyed by one Tuareg chief decades later: "... what kind of fraternity can exist between lions, hyenas, jackals, cattle, donkeys, sheep and goats? God has created us in the same way he has created and established hierarchy among animals."⁵² French arms had awarded Paris with an intense and complex intra and intertribal system where unity was often problematic, slavery was endemic, and intercommunal violence was a way of life. It was eventually all mantled together into a single enterprise.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 174.

⁵¹ Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (2013): 425.

⁵² Unnamed chieftain of the *Kel Dinnik* (Tuareg) peoples in 1946, as quoted in Kassim Kone, "A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali," *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (April 2017): 61.

Table 2: (The Main) Four Tuareg Rebellions

Year	Head of State	Assessed Causation(s)	Result
1963	Modibo Keita	Socio-economic and political disparities, Tuareg irreconcilability with new Malian state	Military offensive action, no significant policy development
1991	Moussa Traoré	Socio-economic and political disparities	Military offensive action, establishment of (ethnic) self-defence proxies; no significant policy development
2006	Amadou Toumani Touré	Socio-economic and political disparities	Beginnings of serious political movement towards secession
2012	Amadou Toumani Touré	Political articulation of secession (MNLA), return of Tuareg fighters from Libya, socio-economic disparities, and <i>new jihadist pressures</i>	Near state collapse, international deployments, Islamic proto governments

France's administration, of course, had to frequently deal with revolt throughout the Sahel. Force was met with force, and there was never an existential threat. True, it is not only at Mali's (Chirac-assessed) pinnacle that the country was secure. Bamako has succeeded in domestically underwriting its territorial integrity for most of its post-colonial history. This is testament to the state's ability to handle an extremely complex mandate of competing regional interests, and oft conflicting ethnic domains. However, the means with which Bamako achieved this feat will be expanded upon in this section, as they proved – after 2012 – to be destabilising.

Still, before 2012 – the last Tuareg uprising whose dimensions were radically different from prior campaigns – there was little to suggest that Mali would fail. The north periodically rose in opposition but was never concreted into an existential threat. Until 2011, the Tuareg confederacies were never capable of unifying behind a fight for a single state; only half a century after Mali's independence was Bamako confronted with a firm political demand for secession.⁵³ The north was always retaken, slapped down and restored. So long as the Tuareg remained a loose collaboration of tribes versus Bamako, economic and political grievances were, indeed, persistent, but never manifested beyond the ability of the state and could normally, after some fighting, be assuaged with vapid peace and reconciliation agreements, promises for economic development and social mobility. For a capital charged with governing a territory transplanted directly from a colonial entity and within a broader array of post-colonial neighbours drawn on a

⁵³ Lecocq and Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," 424-5.

map regardless of the nations within, monopolies on violence and authority were keys to survival, and so was political creativity.

From Figure 3 above, it is clear that establishing such monopolies was exceedingly difficult. Mali's post-colonial borders clearly cut directly across an ethnic kaleidoscope. There are three significant ethnic groupings, an appreciation of which is necessary to understand the state's current conflagration. In the north are the Tuareg and the Moors, or Arabs. The awkwardness of Mali's assigned borders is significant when viewing the Tuareg given that tribal and community linkages extend into Algeria, Mauritania and Niger. All these domains saw French campaigns against the Tuareg, and the Tuaregs from within one influence those in others. In the centre, again highlighting the poor assignment of borders and framed by the Niger River basin, are the Songhai, Fulani and the Dogon peoples. From an agrarian perspective, Mali's centre can (and often is) defined by competition between free-ranging pastoralists and farmers. In the southwest, comprising the majority of Mali's ethnic groupings are the Bambaran (sometimes referred to as the Mandinka) people. None of these major groupings share a common culture or political traditions.⁵⁴ History is shared, but not communally; rather, it is defined by antagonisms and competition.

From the map, the strategic significance of sites like Timbuktu and Gao are clear, as well; both centres are the last significant urban settlements at the transition zone beyond the Niger River to the north and mark – roughly – the demarcation line between Tuareg and Arab communities and the rest of Mali. Bridging all groups is the centrality of the Niger River. It is Mali's artery, both agricultural and human survival depend upon it.

⁵⁴ Chauzal and van Damme, "The Roots of Mali's Conflict."

Figure 4: The Niger River⁵⁵

The location of the Bambaran people requires further discussion. Bamako lies in this group's predominant area. So, too, by extension do all significant levers of national governance and venues of international engagements. Many, like Salia F. Zouandé, have pointed out an obvious but significant and unbroken trend: all Malian heads of state since independence are Bambaran.⁵⁶ This trend has been maintained across *coups*, too. So, even when power and authority are contested to the point of violence, opportunity and means are historically confined to members of the same ethnic class. The power of language, moreover, should be considered. French is the official language of Mali, but less than a third of Malians are estimated to speak it.⁵⁷ Coincident to the size of the Bambaran nation, about half of Mali speaks Bamabaran, but when considering second and third languages, it may be understood by over ninety percent of the population.⁵⁸ So, the levers of national power are largely Bamabaran, as is national messaging. This concentration of government and other institutional control into the hands of one predominant ethnic group, however, was not necessarily the case prior to French arrival. Songhai, Tuareg, and Bamabaran peoples' power historically ebbed and flowed against one another.

It did shift towards the Bambarans during the colonial period, and this development is critical to understand Mali's more recent history. From a reversal of fortune in the north –

⁵⁵ Map Data: Google Landsat/Copernicus Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO Mapa GISael.

⁵⁶ Salia F. Zouandé, "The Effects of Identity Politics and Border Porosity on Governance in Mali: The Tuareg Rebellion, 1960 – 2016" (PhD diss., Howard University, 2017), 19-20.

⁵⁷ The number of spoken languages in Mali is 79. For more data on Malian language by region, see Translators Without Borders, "Language Data for Mali," accessed April 17, 2023, <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-mali>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

politically and economically – and a perceived campaign of underdevelopment there, analysts can trace a myriad of current issues to the fracturing relationship between Bamabaran and Tuareg that is synonymous with the colonial and post-colonial development of modern Mali. This includes Tuareg and Arab grievances, the 2012 civil war, anemic institutions, and, crucially, the introduction of jihadist groups. It is to this point that we will now focus upon for the remainder of this section. Even in a paper of this length, it is not possible to detail – simply because of the sheer number – intercommunal history and conflict between all of Mali’s ethnicities. Given the importance of the Tuareg’s to Mali’s overall security, the focus necessarily will be placed upon their relationship with Bamako.

It is a concise question to pose: who are the people? For any country, at any period, there will never be a single answer, and debate will rage between various disciplines. How far does an analysis need to go in Mali’s history to understand modern conflict and governance? Shaking off the modern (French Sudan) borders, it is, of course, true that Mali’s borders have ebbed and flowed throughout history. While Europe’s Church was fractured between West and East in the Great Schism, and the Renaissance was exploding outwards from Florence, territories in what would become modern Mali were already incorporated into their third iteration of empire. Founded in the seventh century, Gao had expanded outwards into empire predicated on its centrality for trade. By the thirteenth century, the Bamabaran people had absorbed the Mali Empire, noted especially for the wealth concentrated into the hands of its rulers, especially the famed Mansa Musa Keita. Its fracturing along lines of succession meant that by the fifteenth century, the Songhai Empire rose, stretching even further than its predecessor, from Niger to the Atlantic Ocean fuelled by trans-Saharan trade in salt, gold and slaves. From a European perspective, the famed city of Timbuktu was discovered in 1848, nearly five decades before Bonnier’s ill-fated expedition. French adventurer and anthropologist René Caillié became the first European to travel to (and, crucially, back from) the city, even collecting a prize from the British Royal African Society of 10, 000 *francs* for his feat.⁵⁹ A century or so later, in its post-colonial infancy, Mali was independent as a Federation, in a briefly lived joint venture wherein Senegal and Mali were one country.⁶⁰

So, Mali is certainly unremarkable in its history of changing borders, power concentrations and violence. However, when a European system was applied to this environment, administration required stability, given that this was a forced grouping of ethnicities that historically competed, enslaved and controlled one another. The best results for France – especially as the Tuaregs continued to resist and the Sahel proved a difficult campaigning ground – were garnered with a focus on the Bambara.

Given their fierce resistance to French occupation in the Sahel, the Tuareg were largely left out of the centres of gravity for colonial development. Accordingly, several analysts have observed a trend wherein the historical power and influence of northern Mali as a commercial and trade hub was diminished. Chauzal and Damme, as a prime example, have noted that this coincided with a shift of political agency given that the French... “decided to educate a ruling

⁵⁹ For a more detailed account of this expedition, see Peter Coutros, “Digging into the Myth of Timbuktu,” *Sapiens*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/Timbuktu-archaeology>.

⁶⁰ The experiment was short lived: two-months. Their post-colonial union could not survive tensions, especially as both camps quickly mobilised their military forces, ready to strike one another to determine where control and influence would lay in the independent road ahead.

class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners.”⁶¹ Their assessment – from the Clingendael Institute – accurately describes the importance of this shift towards Bambaran influence concentration during independence: “when these new ruling elites decided to free themselves from colonial rule, they had to find a way to assert political authority over the whole Malian territory, and used strategies ... that ranged from favouritism... to economic marginalisation, divide-and-rule... and military control.”⁶² There is a sort of academic chorus on this issue. Yvan Guichaoua directly tethers the “post colonial social and economic marginalisation in the post-colonial power systems privileging southern elites in Bamako...” to “blind repression” of others.⁶³

From a Tuareg perspective – which, importantly, is a confederation of tribes and not a monolithic people⁶⁴ – decades of fierce resistance to foreign control of their Sahelian homeland nonetheless resulted in the drawing of borders throughout their territory that did not reflect the historical breakdown of tribal power amongst the Tuaregs, themselves, or their neighbours. Moreover, a historical competitor had seized all the reigns of power. It was the Bambaran who pursued education within the French administration, and thereby propelled themselves up the social and political ladders.⁶⁵ In a, perhaps, continued act of resistance to French colonisers, the Tuareg forbade their children from attending schools, realising too late that such an act prevented “... their Bambara countrymen [from] dominating decision-making, economic, and political sectors in Malian society and [they soon] constituted the majority of new Malian intellectuals.”⁶⁶

The four major Tuareg rebellions – 1963, 1991, 2006, and 2012 – are correctly assessed to be reflective of the group’s reaction to economic and political marginalisation. From 1968 until 1991, Mali was under the control of a military autocrat: General Moussa Traoré, having seized power only eight years after Malian independence. Evaluations of him range from socialist to an economic libertarian, but the spectrum is irrelevant considering his administration’s proclivities towards corruption, violent suppression of dissent and tribal nepotism.⁶⁷ Under Traoré, Malian wealth was increasingly concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. In the north, by the 1980s, an estimated 300 000 Tuaregs were impoverished, with many fleeing from Mali in search of work.⁶⁸ It is easy enough to link his policies to the second Tuareg rebellion. He responded as any military man under strain might: aggression. The result was that he, himself, was overthrown in a *coup* in 1991 by Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, who would remain more or less at the forefront of Malian politics until 2012. In that year, he would be overthrown in yet another *coup* due to yet another Tuareg uprising.

⁶¹ Chauzal and van Damme, “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Yvan Guichaoua, “Tuareg Militancy and the Sahelian Shockwaves of the Libyan Revolution,” in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 325.

⁶⁴ As an example, there are some 60 sub-groups of Tuaregs in Kidal alone, each replete with its own internal caste system. Chauzal and van Damme, “The Roots of Mali’s Conflict.”

⁶⁵ Zouandé, “The Effects of Identity Politics and Border Porosity on Governance in Mali,” 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁷ For more detail, see Florina Cristiana Mateai, “Mali: the Hot and Cold Relationship between Military Intervention and Democratic Consolidation” (diss., Naval Postgraduate School: Department of National Security Affairs, 2021), 8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

From academics, the solution – or the missed opportunities of Traoré and Touré – is rather evident. As an example, consider historian Baz Lecocq and anthropologist George Klute who, in their analysis of the 2012 uprising, asserted that even if Mali's territorial integrity were to survive – it has – that Tuareg attempts to secede would continue unless "... Mali makes serious concessions to Tuareg aspirations to self-government."⁶⁹ Yet, in the immediate humility of uprising, Bamako and the north repeatedly failed to come significant accord. Instead, Mali's government opted for a more divide and punish strategy. Touré attempted to incorporate the Tuareg into the military. It failed. He attempted to address the economic disparities in the north. Attempts were no match for the illegal economy of the north, the allure of work in neighbouring Libya, or the simple ability of the state to project intent across such distance and such tribal cleavages.

As France's earlier campaigns showed, the ability of the Tuareg to fight – far beyond the ability of Bamako's security forces – remained of principle concern. In the 1990s, as just one example, Bamako was forced to send 4 000 soldiers (about two-thirds of the army's strength at that time) to deal with only 200 Tuareg guerrillas.⁷⁰ When a ceasefire was agreed upon, Bamako was pressured to commit itself to more economic development in the north, and to integrate Tuaregs into the MDSF – none of these initiatives worked.⁷¹

It may be assessed that because Bamako was locked in decades of lower intensity conflict, punctuated by the occasional uprising with the Tuareg people, that the Bamabaran elite were either incapable or disinterested in developing the north due to the security situation inherent there, and the complexity of tribal forces confronting it. This is not necessarily a pejorative assessment: recall the relative disunity of the Tuaregs prior to 2011, as well as the borders drawn irrespective of peoples in the north. What Bamako could – and did – do, to future disastrous effects, was outsource security along tribal lines. Its active support and training to ethnically based militias occupied potential Tuareg complainants.

In the 1990s during the second Tuareg rebellion, Bamako supported the mobilisation of the Songhai people into a militia called *Ganda Koy* (or, Masters of the Land). Ostensibly, the militia was created to prevent the more nomadic Tuareg from raiding, specifically capturing animals, wealth and even the Songhai, themselves, to incorporate into servant classes within the Tuareg caste systems. From Bamako's perspective, support for the militia almost certainly derived from the need to prevent intercommunal violence between ethnicities. *Ganda Koy*, however, quickly transformed into a rather intolerant self-defence force, and went on the offensive. Tuaregs were targeted and killed based on ethnicity alone. Pogroms were common, and an estimated 100 000 Tuareg and Arab people fled Mali into neighbouring countries.⁷² Bamako also moved to support the Fulani people against predation. After the third Tuareg rebellion, the capital provided direct aid to *Ganda Iso* (Sons of the Land). Like the Songhai militia, these Fulani forces often targeted Tuareg civilians, seemingly with legal impunity.

The reliance of Bamako on ethnic security interlocuters is not confined to the Tuaregs, either. Especially given the relatively recent foothold that terrorist groups have gained in Mali –

⁶⁹ Lecocq and Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," 425.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 426.

⁷¹ Ibid., 426-7.

⁷² Ibid., 427.

especially its centre – Mali has continued to train, support and reinterpret legalities for militias who attack civilians, so long as a professed tether to jihadist presence is maintained. From March 2019 to February 2020, at least 200 Fulani civilians have been slaughtered by Dogon forces, often via surprise attacks in the early morning hours. *Da Na Ambassagou* – a Dogon self-defence group – was established in 2016 and armed to combat jihadists in the region. Until the Fulani civilian death-toll became cause for international and UN concern, Bamako supported the militia as a counter-terror force.⁷³ After the outcry, Bamako’s collaboration has been driven underground.⁷⁴

Mali’s inability to address the security, economic and political concerns of the north and centre fulfill a self-perpetuating cycle of intercommunal violence. The Dogon, on the one hand, are correct to identify that jihadists operate in Fulani territory. *Katiba Macina*, a sub-group of AQIM, is largely Fulani-populated and recruited. Its fighters join due to alienation and disenfranchisement with the state, to resist competition and aggression from Dogon, Songhai and Tuareg and for work.⁷⁵ Militia selection of targets – be they Songhai, Fulani or Dogon fighters – however, clearly suggests more at play than a rather broad selection of targets, and, instead, signals a long-running hateful intolerance of other tribal elements within the state.

Our theme of anemic Malian institutions once again requires comment. Bamako after colonialism was not able to mirror or port the economic and political opportunities from one region to the next.⁷⁶ Repeated uprisings were beyond the state’s military abilities, and so required sub-state actors – ethnic militias – to be trained and supported. This reality continues in current-day Mali: UN, first French and now Russian forces must fill the void of Bamako’s security inability. Even if the tribal or ethnic dimensions were removed, conventionally confronting an insurgent and terrorist threat is supremely difficult. FAMA simply does not possess the operational calibre and training to effect operations demanding this level of targeting and influence activity. It must come from elsewhere, because the nature of the current problem: both counterinsurgency (secular ethnic groupings) and counterterrorism (jihadists).

There is another factor to consider for the cause of uprisings and intercommunal violence, however. It is not commonly mentioned in formal UN correspondence. Given the history of conflict between Mali’s people and tribes, it is important to consider for a state that is locked in conflict not only with terrorist elements and sub-state militias but is, essentially, struggling to reconcile its own territorial integrity with demands for self-determination: slavery. For *Da Na Ambassagou*, as an example, should an analyst recall that Fulani in the nineteenth century captured and enslaved the Dogon?⁷⁷ Yes, because this narrative exists as an animator amongst the Dogon. How should this same analyst approach resource-based intercommunal violence when people – alleged to be the descendants of former slaves – are taken by a competing group

⁷³ Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, “Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *African Security* 14, no. 1 (2021): 18.

⁷⁴ Kars de Bruijne, “Self-Defence Groups, Politics and the Sahelian State,” Clingendael Institute, December 14, 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/self-defence-groups-politics-and-sahelian-state>.

⁷⁵ Benjaminsen and Ba, “Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali,” 17.

⁷⁶ Would it have been willing to, considering the presence of its historical competitor?

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

and inducted into a servile class?⁷⁸ Slavery exists within Mali. While not as industrious as when its chieftains bought and sold members of rival groups to Europeans during the Atlantic Slave Trade, the practice continues to animate intercommunal violence presently. Mali, unlike its neighbours, has never formally passed legislation outlawing the persecution of slave descendants, who are the readily identified targets for other groups.⁷⁹

Such seizures, particularly when they are perpetuated by the Tuareg, serve to reinforce Bamabaran beliefs that this group is irreconcilable with Mali. After all, no other ethnic group has risen against the government since independence, and no other group provided Islamic inroads into the country after 2012.⁸⁰ According to Kassim Kone, an associate professor of anthropology and linguistics at Cortland, “pillage through violence or the threat of violence has traditionally been a Tuareg way of life.”⁸¹ Kone even goes so far as to pose a blunt question: “is there something about Tuareg society, culture and politics... that causes an incompatibility with the Mali Republic?”⁸² He concludes by positing that Tuareg integration into Mali is unlikely given that historical chiefdoms in the south (Bamako) were dismantled by the French, but not the north; so long as the Tuaregs “... perpetuate their past lifestyle and heavily stratified social structure,” Mali cannot incorporate them.⁸³ Historically, self-identified ‘white’ Tuaregs did not see the ‘black’ peoples of central and southern Mali as equals, but as slaves and servants.

By this point, Bamako’s duty to secure its borders since independence appears rather daunting, and, arguably, one that few states could achieve an outright success for so early in their autonomous infancy. French administrators had privileged the Bambaran population of the south. The Tuaregs were subdued but not well incorporated into Mali’s political or economic systems. Successive governments encouraged militias to participate in regional security to occupy warring factions with each other (instead of Bamako). Still, we may have been too critical of Chirac’s speech at the opener. Even with its fractures, a careful country survey would surely not reveal the genesis of any forces that would significantly threaten the state. Mali’s territorial integrity remained secure, though its peoples exacted frequent extrajudicial campaigns against one another.

It has been alluded to several times that the fourth Tuareg rebellion transpired differently, nearly overrunning Mali. This is, of course, due in large part to the introduction of Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs) into the country, but another significant force had long been catalysing outside Mali: a strategic relationship for the Tuaregs with Muammar Qaddafi. Mali’s

⁷⁸ Consider, as examples, Mucahid Durmaz, “Slavery is Alive in Mali and Continues to Wreak Havoc on Lives,” *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/29/slavery-is-alive-in-mali-and-continues-to-wreak-havoc-on-lives>; Nellie Peyton, “U.N. Urges Mali to End Hereditary Slavery,” *Reuters*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-slavery-un-idUSKBN2HJ1F1>; or Office of the High Commissioner (UNHR), “Mali: UN Experts Condemn Increased Attacks on ‘Descent-Based Slaves’, Deplore Government’s Failure to Act,” July 19, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2021/07/mali-un-experts-condemn-increased-attacks-descent-based-slaves-deplore-governments>.

⁷⁹ For more on the absence of such a law, its effects, and a good summary of modern-day slavery in Mali, see Soumaila Diarra, “Mali Slaves Campaign to end West Africa Servitude Tradition,” *Associated Press*, January 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/f0ad7505cfabd6b282afa346bb7e4c54>.

⁸⁰ Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali,” 54-6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 70.

Tuaregs had a better relationship with Libya than their own national government. Qaddafi expertly recognised the socio-economic plight of the Tuaregs, especially in Mali and Niger, and was only too eager to shore up his regime's strength with the clans' unparalleled desert manoeuvre warfare.⁸⁴ In him, the Tuaregs saw a "... saviour of the poor and suppressed," and when not pressed into kinetic service, were able to find work in Libya's oil and gas industries.⁸⁵ Not only did the Tuaregs gain significant combat experience under Qaddafi – from the Islamic Legion⁸⁶ to his last staunch supporters at the end of the First Libyan Civil War – but they also inherited (or absconded with) a significant armoury. When the Qaddafi regime was destroyed and its namesake bludgeoned, shot and bayoneted to death by rebel fighters, the Malian Tuaregs began to return home. From the start, Mali was against NATO interference in Libya, preferring an AU-brokered settlement as opposed to a course of action which it feared would stir up Tuareg guerrillas once again.⁸⁷

Bamako was certainly aware of the potential problems inherent in this gunned-up migration, having reviewed the previous calculus required to keep the Tuaregs in check. The approach it had used since 1963 – while not by design but nevertheless uniform in result – did not seem well-suited to address such a well-stocked return. Moreover, these fighters were returning to an arena where Tuareg articulations were changing. Only the year before, 2010, Bamako reacted with fury to the establishment of a new actor in its Sahel region, the National Movement of Azawad (NMA), immediately arresting its senior leadership.⁸⁸ Within a year, the movement was rebranded as the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* or MNLA. Interestingly secular and tolerant of non-Tuaregs, the movement was the first significant time that Tuareg leadership articulated a political need and methodology to secede from Mali.⁸⁹ Capitalising on long-standing economic and social mobility grievances, the MNLA envisioned a state where Tuareg, Arab, Songhai and Fulani peoples governed themselves. Many returnees naturally gravitated towards the MNLA for the same reasons they been attracted to Qaddafi's dream of a Tuareg Sahel, as a direct result of Bamako's style of governance since independence. With their arrival, the MNLA now had a military wing.

Within a year of its rebranding as the MNLA, Tuareg demands for political autonomy would launch the fourth Tuareg uprising, which should more properly be categorised as a Malian civil war given the amount of territory that was seized in a dramatically short time frame (Figure 2). From this unparalleled Tuareg-led demand for political autonomy, coupled with more robust combat tools and expertise, the spark for Op SERVAl and MINUSMA deployments into Mali was provided. More importantly, Mali and its international stakeholders were confronted with the awkward friction point between territorial integrity – assigned colonial borders – and demands for the right of self-determination.

⁸⁴ Yehudit Ronen, "Libya, the Tuareg and Mali on the Eve of the 'Arab Spring' and its Aftermath: An Anatomy of Changed Relations," *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 4 (2013): 544.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 546.

⁸⁶ Created by Qaddafi in 1979, the Islamic Legion comprised some 8 000 Malians, Nigerians, Egyptians and Sudanese and saw, notably, service in Qaddafi's poorly planned war against Chad. For more, see Guichaoua, "Tuareg Militancy and the Sahelian Shockwaves of the Libyan Revolution," 327-8.

⁸⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "Ex-Qaddafi Tuareg Fighters Boost Mali Rebels," October 17, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15334088>.

⁸⁸ Lecocq and Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," 430.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Regardless, no matter how well-intentioned the secular MNLA professed to be, the lack of Bamako's muscle in the north was tempting to another series of players, as well. Jihadist groups of varying proximity to AQIM, present in Mali in increasing numbers since 9/11, entered into the fray in force, competing for recruits, resources and legitimacy. The 2012 rebellion quickly – and surprisingly, for the international community – quickly became something different altogether, and something from which Mali has not since recovered.

2012: Self-Determination, A *Coup*, and the Point of No Return for Mali's Territorial Integrity

Freedom House – a non-profit barometer for democracy and liberties around the world – has a storied history. Founded in 1941, even boasting First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as one of its first stewards, the organisation assigns metrics, country by country, to evaluate the freedoms of people and the press. In 2012, if one were to locate and read the section on Mali in *Freedom in the World 2012: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, they would not see any significant red flags, quite the opposite, in fact. Mali's press was "... considered among the freest in Africa."⁹⁰ The state was preparing for presidential elections that year with an encouraging precedent; in 2007, the former *coup* leader but now civilianised Amadou Touré was elected in an observer-endorsed process. Yes, there were several problems. Touré's administration did show an affinity for corruption. Funds to combat AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, as examples, from the international community were suspended given irrefutable evidence of government fraud; Mali ranked 118 of 183 countries on Transparency International's 2011 Corruption and Perceptions Index.⁹¹ Whatever its problems, however, there was more promise than cause for concern; while "... one of the world's least developed countries..." Mali under Touré had committed itself to major economic and political overhauls, including in the north.⁹²

There were, however, both curious omissions and statements in Freedom House's assessment of Mali. "No ethnic group," it assessed, "... predominates in the government or security forces."⁹³ In several ways, it should be evident at this point that observation is antithetical to the truth. Bamako had never succeeded in fully integrating the Tuareg into the military. Levers of governmental and civic power, especially, have clearly been illustrated to be the post-independence domain of Bambarans. Praising the country's political and economic reforms in the north, too, was rather easily done when the result – or any tangible measure of effectiveness – was not reported upon.

Freedom House was not alone in mischaracterising the strength of Malian reform and institutional robustness. In 2010, Steven Radelet, an economist with USAID, hailed the state's GDP growth, decline in infant mortality and declining poverty rate. Specifically, he reported that Mali "... has established a thriving multiparty democracy with competitive elections, a free press, and better protection of civil liberties and political rights, less corruption and stronger

⁹⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2012: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 435.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 434.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 436.

governance.”⁹⁴ These assessments – while indicative of progress – failed to consider the social impacts of Bamako’s governance. Over whom, exactly, was progress being applied and was it equitable? No. As sociologist and anthropologist Bruce Whitehouse retorted (albeit in hindsight), “... just eighteen months after [Radelet’s assessment], the country’s purportedly democratic system collapsed, its elected president fled into exile and a military junta curtailed civil liberties... Mali plummeted... to a failed state, another scene of ethnic violence and barbarism.”⁹⁵

Indeed, there was a disconnect between think-tank and academic assessments of Mali prior to the 2012 civil war. When Touré was ousted, there was a widespread sense of relief amongst the populace given the former’s association with impunity, corruption, and bureaucratic nepotism.⁹⁶ In fact, some 65 percent of Malians – cross tribes – were supportive of the *coup*, believing it to be a true departure from corruption and ineffectiveness towards democracy.⁹⁷ This sense of optimism is notable, given that the *coup* occurred only weeks from planned presidential elections.

Freedom House and Radelet’s report also mirrors the overall sense of western ministries and non-governmental organisations operating in Mali in 2012. In other words, there was little tolerance for criticism or analytical bandwidth dedicated to a host of coalescing power kegs: the return of the Tuaregs from Libya, political articulations of an Azawad movement not observed before, and the nesting of jihadist groups. From the perspective of Boeke and de Valk, “... the prevailing analysis of Mali before the 2012 crisis was a rosy one. Western Ministries of Foreign Affairs saw Mali as a ‘poster child’ for democracy in an otherwise volatile region.”⁹⁸ Amicable relations – and self-portraiting as a democratic bastion – were of the utmost importance for Bamako. Its coffers depended upon it. The state hoovered international monies at a rate far beyond its neighbours. From 1967 to 2013, international aid and other inflows represented an average of 15 percent of Mali’s GDP, compared to an average of 3.75 for the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.⁹⁹ Bluntly put, Bamako’s governance was a sort of democratic Ponzi scheme: international donors handsomely paid into Africa’s democratic prodigy, but collapse came quickly and under the slightest pressure.

Perhaps, the resistance to publicly verbalising the endemic level of corruption within Mali – when it was clearly obvious to the average Malian – was related to donors’ positions, eager to see (or believe) return on investment. There were, of course, some dissenting voices (particularly within France), warning of a coming maelstrom. French Intelligence DGSE (*Direction générale de la Sécurité extérieure*) assessments were routinely similar: Mali was

⁹⁴ Steven Radelet, “Success Stories from ‘Emerging Africa,’” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (October 2010): 88.

⁹⁵ Bruce Whitehouse, “Political Participation and Mobilization after Mali’s 2012 Coup,” *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (April 2017): 16. Of note, the decision to juxtapose Whitehouse and Radelet here comes from the same approach of the former in the article cited. Radelet’s work was cited from his respective publication in transparency to the reader.

⁹⁶ Sten Hagberg and Gabriella Körling, “Socio-Political Turmoil in Mali: The Public Debate Following the *Coup d’État* on 22 March 2012,” *Africa Spectrum* 47, no. 2-3 (2012): 118.

⁹⁷ Bruce Whitehouse, “The Force of Action: Legitimizing the *Coup* in Bamako, Mali,” *Africa Spectrum* 47, no. 2-3 (2012): 96.

⁹⁸ Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, “The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 44, no. 10 (2021): 836.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

actually quite weak, and its leaders' corruption had "... hollowed out the state."¹⁰⁰ The French ambassador in Bamako warned Paris that Malians were in full "... denial of the problems facing their country," and the Deputy Director of the West Africa Department within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs occupied himself writing and speaking as a harbinger of turbulent times ahead.¹⁰¹

This short chapter deals with the watershed year of 2012, wherein the coalescence of problems and frictions described in previous chapters exploded into a violent campaign initially of self-determination and then jihadist violence. Mali has not yet recovered from the events of this year. The reason that the international community was caught off guard by events in 2012 is because there was a collective need to champion some kind of progress or stability in Africa coupled with a refusal to accurately describe the beneficiary of so much investment. In other words, there was an inability to articulate the scale of problems in Mali.¹⁰² When someone did, such as the Deputy Director mentioned above, they were fired from the foreign ministry.¹⁰³ Quickly, through incredible speed, tactical and operational brilliance, and extreme violence, an aberration appeared in North Africa. It was slightly larger than the territory of France, and approximately 66 percent of Mali's territory: Azawad.

The Tuaregs rebelled once again, catalyzed by an influx of Libya experience and arms, and eager to continue open defiance of Bamako's (allegedly) intentional marginalisation of the north and its people. The point of no return began on 16 January, 2012, when guerilla fighters overtook the eastern city of Menaka. To the north, Tessalit and Aguelhok were attacked next. FAMA was outgunned, out resourced and tactically inferior to the expert Tuareg fighters who keenly navigated the Sahel with ease and laid ambushes. Derision amongst the soldiery began to grow more and more vocal. It was becoming more and more evident that Bamako had neither the resources nor the institutional reach to deal with this newly invigorated MNLA and its Tuareg leadership. Over time, perhaps it could have. Territory could have been traded for time to support and field militias, or cleavages within the Tuareg confederacy could possibly have been exploited and peace talks pursued. As in the past, promises of economic development and political representation, especially autonomy at the local level, may well have dissipated Tuareg urgency and tactical proficiency.

However, there was a new entrant to this rebellion that – while nested in northern Mali since the turn of the century (~2003) – began to feel its oats and would soon wrest control away from secular Tuareg machinations: Al-Qaeda. Together with the MNLA, jihadist entrance into

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 846.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 846-7.

¹⁰² One of the favourite episodes for RCAF Intelligence to brief various military and government staff visitors during Op PRESENCE to highlight the inability of Bamako to follow through on economic reform in the north was the so-called Air Gao incident. In November 2009, the burned-out chassis of a Boeing 727 was located in the Sahel desert, not on an airstrip, and not far from Gao. The aircraft had been flown from Venezuela, by cartels, and loaded with cocaine. Upon landing and being unloaded, it was torched. Bamako – specifically President Touré – could not interject, likely, because the strength of the north's illicit economy was simply too lucrative and entrenched. For an example report of this incident, and the lucrative drug economy in the Sahel – which almost certainly continues to this day – see, Chris Hawley, "South American Gangs flying vast Quantities of Cocaine to Europe," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/15/south-american-gangs-flying-cocaine-to-europe>.

¹⁰³ Boeke and de Valk, "The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali," 847.

Mali – because of the speed and scale of the advance made even more possible by the 2012 *coup* was, in many ways, Bamako's Princip round.¹⁰⁴ Since 9/11, a jihadist element had been operating with relative ease in the north, beyond Bamako's ability to effectively counter it. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat was renamed to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007, after its Algerian officers aligned themselves with Al-Qaeda (AQ).¹⁰⁵ Poor internal treatment of black Africans led to a splinter group, though still under the auspices of the AQ: the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO).¹⁰⁶ AQIM and MUJAO would have critical roles to play in 2012, but, perhaps, less significant than did a third one: Ansar Dine (or, Defenders of the Faith).

Sometimes, the role of a singular personality is important when evaluating the health of a state. In 2012, a career Tuareg rebel named Iyad ag Ghaly returned to the fore. He had been on Bamako's radar for some time, having led the second Tuareg rebellion in 1991 and played an integral role in the third in 2006.¹⁰⁷ During this latter episode, he positioned himself as interlocuter between Bamako and Tuareg grievances, a gesture which not only infuriated some of his clanmates, but propelled – at least initially – a rather impressive career in the public service. In gratitude for his role as mediator between Bamako and Tuareg, President Touré sent him to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia as Mali's official representative, or consul. Within a few years, he was sent back by the Saudis who found him less and less at his desk, and instead in the company of other extreme Salafists within Al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁸ *Persona non grata* in Saudi Arabia, he arrived back in northern Mali in 2011 coincident with several important developments.

First, President Touré and his administration were now appropriately concerned not only about the return of significant numbers of armed Tuaregs from Libya, but also about the political inertia of the MNLA. Furthermore, jihadist groups were recruiting and rather comfortable, preying upon (or attracting) Tuareg, Arab and Songhai youth that were disaffected with Bamako.¹⁰⁹ They were also increasingly rich: AQIM coffers prior to the rebellion are estimated to have been 70-150 million *euros* in total value.¹¹⁰

Eager to position himself at the spearhead of Tuareg anger as he had done in the past, ag Ghaly must have been taken aback when he was rejected – as too Salafist – by the MNLA outright. As a secular movement, predicated on a social and political fracturing from Bamako, the MNLA could not tolerate ag Ghaly's insistence on, for example, the need for sharia laws and customs to be imposed within Tuareg zones of control.¹¹¹ Ag Ghaly was simply too radical for the MNLA. Statehood was important. While Islam was then (as it is now) the predominate religion in Mali, an Islamic state was not the goal of the MNLA. The goal was the creation of a

¹⁰⁴ The reference here is to Gavrilo Princip of the Serbian Black Hand, who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, thereby setting in motion a chain of events that led to war in Europe in 1914.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas C. Bruneau and Florina Cristiana Matei, "The Military Coup in Mali, 22 March 2012: Reflections on the Demise of Democracy and the Importance of Civil-Military Relations," *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 5, no. 1(2014): 13.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ For a good and concise chronology of ag Ghaly, see Rudolph Atallah, "The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (2013): 5-6.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Guichaoua, "Tuareg Militancy and the Sahelian Shockwaves of the Libyan Revolution," 322, 334.

¹¹⁰ Atallah, "The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup," 6.

¹¹¹ Bruneau and Matei, "The Military Coup in Mali," 13.

state that would prioritise the people who lived there. Spurred by much of the Tuareg leadership, Ag Ghaly quickly manoeuvred to translate his radical Salafism into the proper agency. Ansar Dine was created, and quickly joined the myriad of militias, AQIM-aligned insurgencies, Malian soldiers and – most importantly – Malian civilians all caught up and reacting to the growing maelstrom.

From January 2012 until the night of 22 March, despite ideological polarisation, the MNLA and the various Islamic groups, nevertheless, united in an operational ‘the enemy of my enemy is friend.’ Differences in approach between secularists and Islamists began to appear. Horrible reporting of FAMA troopers being murdered after capture began to filter in, predominately at the hands of jihadist groups. Men had been clearly executed while captive, sometimes with hands bound. From the viewpoint of Bamako, however, this latest Tuareg problem was at least geographically confined to the northern regions. FAMA, while significantly bloodied, was still present. Once again, a reader should bear in mind the risk of generalisation. Many Tuareg civilians were killed. Many Tuaregs fought valiantly and gave their lives for FAMA, regardless of whether they were officered by a Dozon or a Bambaran, and regardless of whether or not they were on the receiving end of a Tuareg guerilla from a neighbouring tribe. To bound discussion within a recent and concise historical narrative, it is necessary to write of the Tuareg leadership elements within the MNLA and jihadist groups. Still many Tuareg soldiers were prepared to (and did) give their lives to defend Mali.

The relative anemia of FAMA compared to the rebels, too, should not necessarily focus on an assertion of a poorly led military. While probably true – but, nevertheless, difficult to qualify – it is likely more important to recognise that FAMA troopers simply did not have the materiel support from Bamako and their training for manoeuvre warfare in the desert was clearly lacking. It can further be assumed, too, that Intelligence-derived indicators and warnings about impending attacks and enemy concentrations were non-existent. Before long, even soldiers in the south near Bamako, began to articulate the various equipment dearths in the military and President Touré’s inability respond to the insurrection in the north. This juncture is critically important to stress because, more important than the quick advance of the MNLA and insurgents, was actually *Mali’s reaction to it* on the home front. It was not necessarily the Tuaregs who tore at the state’s corrupt Achilles’ Heel, it was the army’s frustration with the government. Non-Tuareg forces were the actors that plunged the country into near-existential violence and paralysed effective governance.

With the north under siege, FAMA rebelled against the government. The proclivity of the armed forces to interfere in Bamako was not novel. Actually, it is not novel throughout much of post-colonial Africa (consider the failing neighbour to Mali, Burkina Faso, as an example). In her analysis of Mali’s many *coups*, Florina Matei employs a Praetorian Guard analogy, in reference to the oft short rule of Roman Emperors as a direct result of the political designs of the military’s elite bodyguard. Of the four *coups* (1968, 1991, 2012, and 2020) Matei notes the significance of the latter three given that Malian soldiers interceded and handcuffed the democratic process of the country.¹¹² She concludes by asserting that the overall effect on Mali’s

¹¹² Matei, “Mali,” 1.

political institutions has been negatively affected as a result; they are weak, and incapable of governing notwithstanding over a decade of international money and military aid.¹¹³

Despite the insurrection in the north, Mali was still on track (ostensibly) to carry out elections in April. As above, international observers had ratified the last iteration in 2007. Mali was capable of free and open elections. To borrow Matei's analogy, Praetorian focus was elsewhere but, with little warning, it pounced on Bamako and ousted its president. A hitherto unimportant junior officer – Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo – decried Bamako's inability not only to curtail Tuareg and jihadist aggression, but simply to provide the tools to its soldiers to do so. His demands were not hyperbolic. Bamako did not reinforce the soldiers on its northern salient, not even with foodstuffs.¹¹⁴ Overnight, on the 22nd of March, he and his men ransacked the Presidential Palace, arrested politicians, and suspended the Malian Constitution.¹¹⁵

The response from ECOWAS and the AU was immediate and predictable, likely viewing further political disruption amidst a backdrop of serious Islamic insurrection in the north as having the potential to degrade the security situation of the entire Sahel, and possibly North Africa. Most Malian political elites, too, condemned Sanogo and demanded he return power to civilian control.¹¹⁶ A master communicator,¹¹⁷ Sanogo was quick to target the Malian populace and made brilliant use of television and radio to tie the corrupt rot of Touré's administration to the failing fight in the north. Some political parties on the left echoed his statements. One, the MP-22, welcomed the opportunity "... to start ridding Mali and its democracy from the gangrene of capitulating generals and a corrupt political elite that has led the country into bankruptcy and partition."¹¹⁸

Given the events that followed, it will be a historical 'what-if' as to whether or not Sanogo's seizure would have benefited the average Malian, so disaffected with Touré. He was, it soon proved, humbler than his military predecessors when staging a *coup*. In a few weeks' time, he handed power back to a civilian transitional government, under Dioncounda Traoré. By this time, however, it was too late. The destabilising effect of Sanogo's actions rapidly identified the true benefactor: the northern insurrection.

Whereas the MNLA and jihadist seizures had so far been largely been confined to the far north, the paralyzing effect of the Sanogo putsch opened a wide operational arena. Kidal fell by the end of the month. Gao, too, and Timbuktu fell on the 1st of April. The loss of these latter two strategic cities also marked the fracturing between the secular MNLA and jihadist forces. Skirmishes became commonplace after a relative calm from March to May 2012, when disagreements about how to rule what had been conquered emerged; the jihadist networks won. The switching of alliances and allegiances during this period is complex, especially given the quick turn of events between MNLA and Ansar Dine and MUJAO, in particular. In fact, the fluidity of alliances during this period has been used as a case study by Guichaoua and others in

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁵ For more detail on the coup and its effects, see Bruneau and Matei, "The Military Coup in Mali," 12-16.

¹¹⁶ Hagberg and Körling, "Socio-Political Turmoil in Mali," 118.

¹¹⁷ Whitehouse, "The Force of Action," 95.

¹¹⁸ Hagberg and Körling, "Socio-Political Turmoil in Mali," 118.

their recent work on alliance formation and de-formation of sub-state actors.¹¹⁹ Correctly assessing the operational picture now posed a direct threat to the survival of the Malian state's territory and integrity, ECOWAS, the AU and Mali hatched plans to retake the north, disperse the MNLA and rout the jihadist forces. Their plan entailed some 3 000 FAMA soldiers, in addition to another 3 000 from contributing ECOWAS nations.¹²⁰

International relationships, however, can move glacially, especially the internal bureaucracies of state's reacting to a novel problem. It is analytically fair, moreover, to draw a parallel between FAMA and the militaries of AU countries. Without proper training and oversight, it is possible that they would have been equally trounced. Konna, in the middle of Mali, and a figurative stone's throw from the approaches to Bamako, was captured by ag Ghaly's forces in January 2013. It was now clear to all parties, especially interim president Traoré, that significant outside muscle was required. France began airstrikes (Op SERVAL) on the 11th of January. Malian and Chadian soldiers from the African-Led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) entered in force. Under the auspices of an impressive combined French hammer, Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal were retaken.

By April, 2013, AFISMA transitioned via UNSCR 2100, which established MINUSMA. In the words of Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon at the time, the UN's concern was the jihadists "... could reappear, and that could affect the countries of the region."¹²¹ Mali's territorial security was reinstated. Op SERVAL soon transitioned to Op BARKHANE. MINUSMA presence was replete throughout the country. Bamako carried out elections in September 2013 and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta won comfortably.

Mali, once again, looked as it should on the map. Azawad, never recognised internationally or by some competing Islamic actors, disappeared as quickly as it had been proclaimed. With international security underwriters, however, come unique and sometimes disparate aims. While the Azawad anomaly was gone, Mali was nevertheless radically transformed by the culmination of socio-economic, ideological and religious engines that had catalysed previous three previous uprisings and denoted the fourth. Public discourse in Mali, moreover, was slow to appreciate the drastically different security picture present in 2013. Malian media – concentrated in Bamako – stuck to previous narratives and "...[made] little room" for Tuareg arguments and northern marginalisation, seeing instead only the same banditry and predation of a historical Tuareg people.¹²²

The security problem, however, was not one of banditry. Mali and its underwriters, less so the French but almost certainly the UN, may have been slow to appreciate the new problem was one of counter terrorism *and* counterinsurgency *and* civic disillusionment, all powered by socio-economic coercion from a new host of players on a scale that had never been tackled within Mali's borders before. The months spanning 2012 to 2013 are not significant because Mali and its Allies thwarted a civil war and survived an existential threat. They are significant because kinetic response only paused the war between territorial integrity and self-determination.

¹¹⁹ See Nicolas Desgrais, Yvan Guichaoua and Andrew Lebovich, "Unity is the Exception: Alliance Formation and De-Formation Among Armed Actors in Northern Mali," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29, no. 4 (2018): 654-6.

¹²⁰ Bruneau and Matei, "The Military Coup in Mali," 14.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²² Hagberg and Körling, "Socio-Political Turmoil in Mali," 121.

Of course, new jihadist entrants, soon to concretise in local governorships and economics, have an entirely different definition of self-determination.

Centrifugal Centres of Gravity (or, Pyrrhus of Mali)

Pyrrhus, the Greek King of Epirus – one of the greatest existential threats to the early Roman Republic – emerged victorious from the Battle of Asculum in the early third century BCE. Victory came at a great cost. His soldiers were significantly bloodied, and countless had died. While his exact wording is lost to antiquity, Pyrrhus allegedly remarked that one more such victory would mean losing the campaign. His enemy’s manpower pool was deep, and recruitment was proving relatively easy. The Romans were fighting on their home territory. Their consuls easily galvanised public sentiment into dedicated offensive action. Rome, too, lost a significant number of men, but with plenty in reserve, each death was a chisel into Pyrrhus’ centre of gravity, his very ability to prosecute the war. Pyrrhus – who inadvertently lent his name to the modern term Pyrrhic Victory – lost a war by winning its battles.

Over two millennia later, in August 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron summoned the heads of his Sahelian counterparts to a meeting. The theme was certainly not a Pyrrhic admission, but if an analyst considers previous statements by French leaders about the nature of existential combat in Mali, it could be considered as much. After all, in 2013, President Holland’s foreign minister had prepared the French public for the necessity of launching Op SERVAl: “... we need to stop the terrorists, or else Mali will fall into their hands, constituting a threat for the whole of Africa *and Europe*.”¹²³ SERVAl had smashed the jihadist threat, but it did not remove them. In many respects, it matured their collective capabilities. They regrouped in less targetable rural areas; suicide bombing tactics and procedures improved in quality and frequency.¹²⁴ Hollande’s earlier declared intent was uncomfortable – if not impossible – to reconcile with the trajectory of French intervention that Macron and his peers now saw. This crisis at Europe’s doorstep had initially resulted in securing Malian frontiers and paving the way for President Keita to open peace accord dialogues with secular Tuareg groups. But, if 2013 was so existential in scale, how can one account for 2019? There were more jihadists. They had morphed into new conglomerations,¹²⁵ and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) had flowed across the border from Burkina Faso and Niger. In 2019, more people in Mali died as a direct result of the conflict, and terror groups had vastly greater freedom of movement and

¹²³ Emphasis added; French Foreign Minister Fabius as quoted in Benedikt Erforth, “Multilateralism as a tool: Exploring French Military Cooperation in the Sahel,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 569.

¹²⁴ Yvan Guichaoua, “The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 899.

¹²⁵ In 2017, Ag Ghaly publicly pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda’s emire al-Zawahiri, and oversaw the creation of a sort of terrorist umbrella entity in Mali known as Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM). Ag Ghaly’s own Ansar Dine, as well as the Macina Liberation Front (predominately Fulani and operating in Mali’s centre), Al-Mourabitoun and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. There is likely a degree of autonomy for each sub-group within JNIM’s structure, but is valuable from their perspective as it better serves resource, intelligence and freedom and maneuver. Furthermore, its establishment was strategically and optically significant as, despite years of foreign intervention, a new and more powerful jihadist entity emerged. JNIM is distinct from ISGS, whose tolerances for traditional tribal structures and authorities are normally less, and quickly dismantled under the Islamic State’s style of conquest. JNIM and ISGS likely cooperate when required but have also been reported to fight as a result of competition for resources, people and territorial access.

operational access than ever before.¹²⁶ Hundreds of soldiers and personnel from contributing nations had been killed. A critic may easily apply a Pyrrhic metaphor.

The reason for the conference, however, was not to belabour statistics. It was to demand from the Sahelian chiefs a clarification on how they viewed French operations, because a troubling public tide was swelling in the region: the lot of the average citizen had not improved, and French action was the common denominator to mounting civic frustrations.¹²⁷ Seemingly unending counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations rightly positioned publics to seek clarification on the degree to which civil liberties are at risk.¹²⁸

At this point, analysis and discussion have come full circle from where the introductory chapter finished. The keystone of Mali's territorial integrity remains largely unchanged since its independence: Bamako requires an international or external underwriter because it does not possess – now, or since independence – the institutional muscles to underwrite itself. The most active institution has been its most capable – the military. On the one hand, Mali's politicians – and frequently its Praetorian generals – accomplished a significant feat from 1960 until 2011/2. Uprisings and tensions were met – with force, promises or funding – and routinely dismantled by the state. On the other hand, in addition to external supports, the means with which Mali ensured its integrity was, clearly, divisive, and violent. This included state-supported militias – formed along ethnic cadres – and maintaining a delicate balance between promises of development and opportunity in the north (which have never manifested). During the years following the arrival of MINUSMA and SERVAL, monies poured in Mali from international donors. The result catalysed two separate Malis: a heavily militarised north and a more free-market south, where once again Bamako positioned itself as a needy recipient of funds to keep the state functioning.¹²⁹

Returning now to analyse current Mali before two possible outcomes are presented in the next chapter, two tasks remain: 1) an evaluation of stakeholders; and 2) an attempt to answer the question as to why Malian securities – despite years of considerable international funding and French kinetic muscle – have not improved. There is, certainly, no shortage of academic consensus pertaining to the necessary remedies for Mali's numerous problems, prescriptions to 'fix' the state. Consider, as a good example, Benazir Hilali's concluding remarks on the "dislocation of Malian territory:" specifically, that "... only a long-term and comprehensive strategy that tackles the root causes of local grievances and recognizes and confronts the change dynamism in the region will create a lasting peace..."¹³⁰ Or that of Roland Marchal, who asserts that military intervention, alone, is unsuitable in Mali and that the West "... can refocus its efforts in the region on the civilian realm, and put more attention and resources on youth, economy, education and infrastructure to deliver better social services."¹³¹ Outside of academia,

¹²⁶ Guichaoua, "Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel," 899.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 897.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ For more on aid development in the years following the 2012 rebellion, and its specific effects, see William G. Moseley, "The Minimalist State and Donor Landscapes: Livelihood Security in Mali during and after the 2012-2013 Coup and Rebellion," *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (April 2017): 37-51. The footnote above specifically references his thoughts on p. 37.

¹³⁰ Benazir Hilali, "The Dislocation of Malian Territory," *A Journal of Social Justice* 30, no. 4 (2018): 454.

¹³¹ Roland Marchal, "French Interventions in the Sahel," in *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, ed. Leonardo A. Villalón (London: Oxford University Press), 472-3.

however, it is difficult to view statements such as this as having any significant merit. It is near impossible to derive from such statements – which are, certainly, correct – the tactical or operational inputs required to achieve them. The historical and present state of Malian bureaucracies and political elitism have been covered thoroughly in this paper. Where are the suitable entry points for such novel socio-economic strategies? Who funds them? Who are the competent actors to oversee them? In a post-colonial state largely defined by its inability to reconcile ethnic and tribal conflict, how could they even be designed in concert with all stakeholders? There are now more burning and potential catalysts than have ever existed before – or acted in concert – in Mali.

Most importantly, prescriptions such as these obfuscate the number of international and regional stakeholders in Mali. There are many competencies and agendas at play. Even before the Russians (via a Wagner and industrial proxy) entered in force, Mali was exceptionally crowded; in 2018, no less than sixty-four countries had deployed troops to Mali in some capacity (MINUSMA, European Union Training Mission (EUTM) etc.)¹³² From a less populated arena in writings on Mali, one can find the best recent counter to assessments that Mali must not only develop but be entrusted to deliver novel government strategies. Nicolas Marsh and Øystein Rolandsen have evaluated Security Force Assistance (SFA) outcomes in Mali. Their conclusion that “... the reality of SFA in a state with a highly fragmented security sector...” has a negative effect on security cohesion, confuses objectives and, indeed, may “... exacerbate the problems that the assistance is meant to solve...” explains why the international community has been unable to develop FAMA alongside conducting stability operations.¹³³ Monies and poorly-aligned objectives have not been effectively applied to the Malian theatre of operations. Competing timelines, variance in resources and intent has likely given Mali’s newest and most serious threat – Islamic enclaves as government competitors – the breathing room required to steadily metastasize and drive further wedges, through coercion or opportunity – between the people and Bamako. On the issue of overcrowding the security space, it should also be noted that the four main SFA providers in Mali (EU, France, MINUSMA, USA) piloted and delivered at least twenty different programmes, each with unique objectives.¹³⁴

It should not be assumed by the reader that Al-Qaeda-aligned groups are constantly running roughshod through communities. In Tuareg zones, ag Ghaly, specifically, has been able to utilise intercommunal and tribal networks effectively to minimise violence against civilians.¹³⁵ With the notable exception of ISGS (see footnote 125), the measured and often restrained approach by jihadists in Mali is a unique facet of Malian terrorism. Cleverly, it directly taps into the historical grievances of Mali’s Tuaregs and Arabs, in particular: the lack of socio-economic opportunity. Moreover, it does not threaten jihadist control of criminal economies throughout the state. Rather, it pays dividends from them to participants. It was the insurgent groups that monopolised what the Tuareg created in the north, transforming smuggling operations in international, wealthy criminal enterprises.¹³⁶ Whether by calculation or affinity for his tribal

¹³² Nicolas Marsh and Øystein H. Rolandsen, “Fragmented We Fall: Security Sector Cohesion and the Impact of Foreign Security Force Assistance in Mali,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 5 (2021): 617.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 614.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 620-1.

¹³⁵ Ferdaous Bouhleb and Yvan Guichaoua, “Norms, Non-Combatants’ Agency and Restraint in Jihadi Violence in Northern Mali,” *International Interactions* 47, no. 5 (2021): 871.

¹³⁶ Harmon, “Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region,” 170-4.

brethren, as Ghaly and his lieutenants have not only concreted a jihadist threat, but – more importantly - *an entirely separate and well-funded government structure*. Kinetic actions (SERVAL, BARKHANE) or presence patrols and key leader engagements (MINUSMA) have not been well-oriented or resourced to overcome this entity. In both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations, it is unwise to remove enemy structures – especially those that employ, feed and secure the people – without first building up a domestic and internationally palatable alternative.

If we take Marsh and Rolendsen’s SFA model further, we must consider that current Malian violence is explained by the fact that jihadist groups might have the most comprehensive approach to investing in Mali’s people. The approach is relatively unidirectional, historically conscious and benefits from a strict ideological approach. Organisations like the UN are certainly willing to continue attempts to stabilise Mali, and many people have paid with their lives in an effort to do so. However, the problem set has changed dramatically since the inception of MINUSMA. This metastasizing problem set has not been accompanied by a similarly complex strategic reworking. The closing stages of this paper cannot present a narrative evaluation of all international and regional actors in Mali because of the sheer volume. This would require a monograph. What will be focused on is France, MINUSMA – specifically, concerns about the Force’s structure and preparedness for stability operations – and Russia. Intent, objectives, resources and political appetites vary significantly amongst these actors. Each attempts, or attempted in France’s case, to not only empower Bamako and FAMA, but to stabilise the state.

As this paper posited in its introduction, there is a considerable problem if a state’s territorial integrity is violently irreconcilable with the well-armed and political demands from nations within for self-determination. If the international community insists on the former, it only invites further struggle for the latter. In Mali’s present situation, the Tuareg confederacy and the Islamists that hijacked the initial MNLA dream have pushed, perhaps, a palatable version of self-determination in a direction beyond which Mali’s neighbours and the UN can tolerate. “Since the French Revolution,” observed political scientist Lars-Erik Cederman, “... nationalism – the idea that state borders should coincide with national communities – has constituted the core source of political legitimacy around the world.”¹³⁷ He further notes that in areas where a misalignment between border and peoples exist, the results are largely uniform: “... violent processes of unification or secession.”¹³⁸ International reactions to a counterinsurgent and counterterror problem, however, are less nuanced, especially in Mali. Internal struggles between nations and their host state translate differently to the rest of the world. According to Joe Gazeley, “the post-9/11 history of international statebuilding has been shaped by an understanding of the state as the organizing unit of international order. This state-centric understanding has identified weak or fragile states as a potential threat to the international system.”¹³⁹ The immediate reaction of France and the UN was to facilitate the return of former political elites in Bamako. To Gazeley, in Mali this has proven antithetical to Malian securities: “These external statebuilders prioritised restoring a failed political system and rebuilding the coercive structures of the state which had

¹³⁷ Lars-Erik Cederman, “Blood for Soil: The Fatal Temptations of Ethnic Politics,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March/April 2019): 61.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Joe Gazeley, “The Strong ‘Weak State’: French Statebuilding and Military Rule in Mali,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 3 (2022): 270.

perpetuated it.”¹⁴⁰ Again, this paper asserts that Mali is a good example of international insistence on territorial integrity applying pressure on nations within the contested state. When married to historical grievances and ethnic conflagrations, violence is guaranteed. Simply applying the bulk of resources and efforts towards stabilisation comes at the expense of more bottom-up retrofitting of the weak or corrupt institutions that created the quagmire in the first place.

Moreover, Cederman’s concept of political legitimacy is important here. It is not necessarily the prerogative of the UN or other international bodies to validate political legitimacy. Organisations and agencies will rightly condemn endeavors they evaluate as regionally or internationally destabilising and will rightly move to address human rights violations. *People* assign political legitimacy; it may be uncomfortable for a western reader to reconcile this with Mali’s endemic jihadist threats as Malians in the centre and north do not have much in the way of agency to combat these Islamic governments. A realist perspective would suggest that ‘violent processes’ beget more ‘violent processes’ from the people towards their handlers to produce new forms of political legitimacy. Mali’s current insecurity, and its latest Praetorian outbursts, are the result of international stakeholders’ insistence on restoring state structures without the recognition that these structures have consistently proven adversative to stability. Stabilisation, then, does not go far enough; according to some observers, the state, itself, must be re-founded.¹⁴¹

This prescription is quite radical and undoubtedly uncomfortable for a Western audience, allowing existing state structures to fail under the umbrella of interventionism. I would only caution the reader that the opposite (current) approach needs consideration because of two things: 1) intolerance towards the extant political structure is routinely articulated by the Malian populace;¹⁴² and 2) it almost certainly explains why Mali has continued to decline despite a decade of foreign, well-intentioned, interventions.

Upon its expulsion from the country, the legacy of France’s Malian operations has been thoroughly dissected by academics. On the one hand, historians and international relationists, alike, have chalked up the SERVVAL/BARKHANE ventures as failures because of neo-colonialist roots. Tony Chafer asserts the policies which propelled France into Mali are the same as those which animated Paris hundreds of years ago, specifically that: “... Africa has been since the colonial period, and remains to this day, the foundation stone of France’s ambition to global power.”¹⁴³ Others have tapped into tides of Malian sentiment (for which no filter of misinformation was applied) to assert that France feared losing Sahelian market resources.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 271.

¹⁴¹ Guillaume Soto-Mayor and Delina Goxho, “Strategic Missteps: Learning from a Failed EU Sahel Strategy,” *Clingendael Institute*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy>.

¹⁴² See Sebastian Elischer, “Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali,” *West African Papers* 36 (July 2022): 2.

¹⁴³ As a good example, see Tony Chafer, “France in Mali: Towards a new Africa Strategy?” *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016): 136.

¹⁴⁴ See Emma Roy-Contancin, “Operation Barkhane in Mali: The End of French Intervention Raises new Concerns,” *McGill International Review*, February 14, 2022, 2.

As it is relatively recent, Mali's expulsion of France from its security realm will continue to be a subject of debate. It is, however, highly likely that Paris was concerned about the extraterritorial effects of a collapsing Mali, colonial-tethers or not. First and foremost, Chad, Mali and Niger – territories over which BARKHANE was applied – occupy three of the top five global fertility rates; fear of this “demographic time bomb” factored into intervention, as more people in a failed state was equated to future jihadist recruits, and increased migration via human trafficking networks to Europe.¹⁴⁵

It is also true that France did seek an international chorus, and habitually placed its operations as supports to MINUSMA, rather than a separate enterprise.¹⁴⁶ France's commitment to multilateralism – as opposed to covert neo-colonialism – has been articulated elsewhere. Benedikt Erforth asserts that France has, since the 1990s, attempted to empower regional African blocs and to entice the EU to collectively confront security problems on the Continent.¹⁴⁷ However, throughout SERVAL and BARKHANE, when France determined that its peers were either not similarly invested in collective action, or that they were moving too slowly, it did not shy away from unilateralism.¹⁴⁸

As above, however, the chief security issue with multilateral approaches is two-fold: 1) there is a risk of lack of objective consensus and stakeholder competencies; and 2) stakeholder variances applied theatre over a broken, indigenous governmental system are not effective. Both these facets routinely undercut the *outcomes* of operations concurrent to French activity. The prime example is the EUTM.¹⁴⁹ While it did achieve a significant training output in terms of numbers – with thousands of Malian personnel trained – coalescing those efforts into tactical or operational outputs has not occurred vis-à-vis jihadist and other sub-state actor strengths and freedom of movements. The MDSF structure was weak prior to 2012, and it seemed sensible to attempt to train its members towards higher standards, battlefield effectiveness, and bureaucratic control. Yet, given that the MDSF was “... dysfunctional [with a] ... complete lack of adequate structures and procedures both within the higher military command and the Ministry of Defence.”¹⁵⁰ Malian soldiers and their EUTM partners “... failed to build capable institutions and mechanisms to ensure civilian control and oversight.”¹⁵¹ Ineffectiveness was almost certainly noted by all stakeholders, but never generated serious and collective discussion about strategic or operational refinement. Arguably, since SERVAL, MINUSMA and EUTM's inception, France was unimpressed with the level of international support; even UNSCR 2085 was delayed until

¹⁴⁵ Guichaoua, “Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel,” 906.

¹⁴⁶ Author comment: while deployed as the Air Task Force Intelligence Officer, meetings with BARKHANE intelligence staff were frequent and productive. Each side of the table understood limits on the releasability of information, but the result was, nevertheless, a common effort to support the safety of all parties and the security of personnel in theatre.

¹⁴⁷ Erforth, “Multilateralism as a Tool,” 561.

¹⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 561-75. Erforth provides an excellent narrative sequence of France's evaluation of the “lack of responsiveness from the rest of Europe.”

¹⁴⁹ Twenty-two EU member states along with four non-members (Serbia, Georgia, Moldova and Montenegro) sent soldiers to train FAMA and other MDSF personnel since 2013.

¹⁵⁰ Unnamed source within EUTM as quoted in Marsh and Rolandsen, “Fragmented we Fall,” 618.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

just prior to Christmas 2012, with little more than a basic idea about stability absent timelines or formal commitment.¹⁵²

While France undoubtedly had the resources to conduct counterinsurgent and counterterror operations, but not necessarily the requisite (international-backed) comprehensive strategy or foundation (fractured Malian state) over which to apply them, an evaluation of MINUSMA reveals more acute stressors. The first, and most obvious, is doctrinal and corporate competency to conduct stability operations in the Malian theatre. Karlsrud and Boutellis have both cautioned that MINUSMA has fundamentally changed expectations for the UN from within and without. Karlsrud goes so far as to assert that MINUSMA has amounted to a sort of doctrinal shift within UN peacekeeping, identifying a curious and relatively sudden shift towards placing Blue Helmets directly into areas with both terrorist and insurgent threats.¹⁵³ MINUSMA, specifically its Western contributors, “went green”; nations refused to paint aircraft white, and brought significant Intelligence apparatuses from home to supplement UN activities.¹⁵⁴ UN ‘kit’ is markedly different than its previous deployments. Boutellis is somewhat more blunt, inquiring as to whether or not the UN has misconstrued stability operations, obfuscating the reality of its deployed personnel that they are, in fact, not facing a stability task, but a counterterror one.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, he correctly points out the UN lacks a comprehensive stabilisation doctrine, from the political to tactical levels.¹⁵⁶ MINUSMA, like France, deployed to re-establish the extant Malian state’s structures. To Boutellis, its state-centric approach has confused the necessary mandate, “... [because] the weak and contested state authority is often part of the problem rather than the solution.”¹⁵⁷

The UN and partner agencies have, of course, invested considerable aid and development programmes into Mali. Personnel have often exposed themselves to great risk and hardship in their attempts to ameliorate the situation of the Malian people. MINUSMA, however, is first and foremost an operation – an extremely well-armed one – that is directed towards stabilising Mali within its frontiers. It cannot, as an example, expect its local approach to compete with the international reach of weapon, drug and human trafficking (via Niger, Chad, Algeria, Mauritania) that result in increased Islamist power. It has a more acute problem, too: constituent interest. Perhaps the easiest way to evaluate MINUSMA’s operational effectiveness is to scan the tone of the bi-annual Secretary General updates to the security council.

September 2022 was a busy month for staffers within the office of the UN Secretary-General. MINUSMA’s impending renewal was still nine months away, but the office was

¹⁵² Marchal, “French Interventions in the Sahel,” 472. Erforth asserts the same, that France “... regretted the lack of responsiveness from the rest of Europe.” See Erforth, “Multilateralism as a Tool,” 575. It should be noted that not all authors are so dismissive of training efforts in Mali. Regarding Special Operations Force (SF) training – notably the French-led Task Force TAKUBA – Čábelka and Štěpánek assert these efforts softened Malian reaction to neo-colonial suspicions and “... laid strong foundation for increased autonomy...” of FAMA. France’s since ousting from Mali seems to betray this assertion, however. See Ondřej Čábelka and Stanislav Štěpánek, “French Counterinsurgency in Mali before and after the Coup d’État of 2020,” *Obrana A Strategie 2* (2021): 63-4.

¹⁵³ Karlsrud, “The UN at War,” 42, 46.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 47. It should be noted that Canadian aircraft were not painted white, either, but were affixed with UN signage.

¹⁵⁵ Boutellis, “Can the UN Stabilize Mali?” 2-6.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

quickly approaching its quarterly report deadline for the UNSCR. There was good news to report. Over the summer months, MINUSMA continued to figure prominently in dialogue with Mali's leadership and the country's nervous West African neighbours; finally, ECOWAS had agreed to alleviate some of its sanctions against Bamako after President Goïta's promise to hold elections and transition to civilian leadership within 24 months. There were some curious omissions. The absence of counter-terror BARKHANE, having terminated only the month before, is barely mentioned – curious in a document replete with grave concern about the significant uptick in terrorist operational tempo amidst a worsening humanitarian situation throughout the centre and north of the country.¹⁵⁸

Most important for the discussion here, however, were the Secretary-General's concluding remarks:

... as experience has repeatedly shown, sustainable peace can be achieved only if security operations are accompanied by equally resolute efforts to establish State presence, including a justice system... the delivery of basic services, the promotion of intracommunal and intercommunal reconciliation and human rights.¹⁵⁹

Not only were state institutions still unable to project themselves into Mali's most contested, but the UN's unarticulated assertion here is that the extant Malian state should. Again, what is argued here is that international efforts to stabilise Mali cannot succeed so long the objective(s) insist on restoring the historical state. Pessimistically, a quick scan of Secretary-General reporting from MINUSMA's inception to the current day reveals this same frustration as a sort of stasis, a quarterly re-wording of the office's concerns and frustrations. In 2013, for example, the UNSCR was warned that the country's integrity was threatened by "... overlapping political, security and humanitarian challenges that pose threats to the population and social cohesion. Social polarization, intercommunal tensions and antagonisms... could escalate into further conflict if unresolved."¹⁶⁰

On 30 March, 2023, the most recent Secretary-General report was released. Unsurprisingly, Malian securities were described as volatile.¹⁶¹ Dynamic competition between JNIM and ISGS from Gao to Menaka were directly harming and killing civilians and displacing thousands. Admirably, MINUSMA's response to this threat remains the training of MDSF personnel, although a comparatively paltry number: just fifty-six non-commissioned officers during one period.¹⁶² FAMA, and Bamako-supported militias, were still occupying second place to the jihadists in terms of human rights abuses.¹⁶³ Infrastructure, an inability to patrol, a dearth of logistical support nodes, the non-mobility of several contributing nations, denial of flight

¹⁵⁸ UNSCR S/2022/791, 2.

¹⁵⁹ UNSCR S/2022/731, 16.

¹⁶⁰ UNSCR S/2013/338, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali, 10 June, 2013," 1.

¹⁶¹ UNSCR S/2023/236, 6.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10. Bamako, once again, fiercely contests this allegation, decrying the UN for reporting it without offering what it deems to be acceptable evidence. See UNSC S/2023/264 (Letter dated 11 April from the Permanent Representative of Mali to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council.)

permits and lack of heavy lift capability appear – once again – in the reporting as considerable MINUSMA shortfalls.¹⁶⁴

Over time, it is highly likely that MINUSMA will have considerable difficulty in securing the resources from constituents it requires to effectively patrol and deter aggression in the country. Monetary investment, bloodshed, seemingly ineffective progress, and the new Praetorian tone from Bamako are difficult to reconcile with effective usage of resources and time. Perhaps, just as in 2012, another radical development in Mali will be the shock required to attract renewed international interest, something akin to what France publicly asserted in 2012 and 2013, namely that the Malian crisis was a North African *and* a European crisis. The status quo of violence, humanitarian decline and junta intolerance of civic leadership will continue in Mali, simply because there are no actors with the muscle, political will or concise objective to address these endemic issues. The lack of a concrete stabilisation doctrine within the UN has been referenced already, especially at the political level. Even if it were to exist, however, much like France’s Achilles’ Heel, over what framework could it be applied apart from support to previous Malian institutions who are, undeniably, at the heart of Mali’s historical cleavages?

Lastly, a shock to the international system to renew multilateral investment in Mali and in MINUSMA should not be construed as having occurred via the appearance of Russian contractors in theatre. Wagner does not – at the time of this paper’s submission nor for the foreseeable future – constitute an existential threat to Mali, nor does it represent a scenario wherein Bamako’s junta has been taken hostage by Moscow, albeit at the peripheries of legality.¹⁶⁵ Wagner’s presence does offer Goïta a more diversified underwriter network. Bamako has never acknowledged Wagner’s presence in theatre, but it is widely accepted that their deployment came at Goïta’s invitation in December 2021, for a monthly fee of nearly 11 million dollars and concessions to mining activities,¹⁶⁶ Wagner was likely brought in by Bamako to assist FAMA in combating jihadists.¹⁶⁷

Still, Wagner’s presence has not been accompanied by a massive Russian investment in theatre, and its troops deploy alongside FAMA, presumably subordinate to Bamako’s operational objectives. Recall, too, that Wagner – as a finite corporation – is under incredible strain in the Ukrainian War. Russian contractor (or mercenarial) presence is, nonetheless, important because it directly aggravates the humanitarian and legal collapse in the country. Wagner and FAMA are prioritising combatting the jihadist threat in country, but neither appear capable nor interested in

¹⁶⁴ UNSCR S/2023/236, 11-17.

¹⁶⁵ Russian law outlaws mercenarial activities, so Wagner operates via a distance both geographically and politically. PMCs are not unique to Russia. Many countries, such as the United States and Canada, employ PMCs within their defence industries. However, the number of countries who employ PMCs as war fighters is much smaller and does not include Canada.

¹⁶⁶ Wagner has been leveraged as a vehicle by Moscow for similar concessions in other theatres, such as CAR. For more on Russian foreign policy in Africa and PMC-secured economic considerations, see Aivaras Giedraitis, “Private Military Companies in the Foreign and Security Policy of the Russian Federation in 2014-2019,” *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 18 (2020): 123-62.

¹⁶⁷ Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel*, November/December, 2022, 24.

legal targeting. In core JNIM areas (Mopti, Segou, Timbuktu, Koulikoro) some estimates place nearly five hundred civilian casualties at the foot of these joint FAMA – Wagner operations.¹⁶⁸

Russian presence in force in Mali is significant for two reasons: 1) it marks a significant departure from Bamako’s historic relationship with French security; and 2) it is aggravating the humanitarian situation throughout the country. What is more important than Wagner in this respect is FAMA and the overall MDSF. In response to national fracture, military authorities, once again, have prioritised broad offensive action against assessed threats instead of the concurrent development of inclusive socio-economic policies. While the main threat actor has changed (jihadists), the reaction is not novel in post-colonial Mali. As it has in the past, this time with MINUSMA on the sidelines and unable to induce necessary reforms in Bamako, the result will likely be the same: episodic explosions of violence and humanitarian strife beyond the ability of the state to address, or even consider the root cause as a priority for governance.

Assessment

Instead of a narrative conclusion, this paper ends with two assessments.¹⁶⁹ Stepping back from narrative details, what has emerged in the pages above is the recent history of a state – carved awkwardly into vibrant, diverse and competing ethnic areas – that was unable to develop either the policies or the means to coalesce its peoples around shared territorial aims. Until 2012, the state’s handlers succeeded, for the most part, in maintaining Mali as we understand it on the map. With the introduction of VEOs into theatre, however, a unique challenge has emerged which presently borders on the insurmountable, a challenge for which Mali’s domestic institutions and governance – from independence onwards – have not developed to face.

Self-determination remains one of internationalism’s most precious tenets. Evolutionary, diplomatic progress is the ideal, but violent struggle remains the historical precedent (a reality for which many analysts seem eager to compartmentalise). Tuareg, Arab, Songhai, or Fulani grievances and struggles are not unique. History has countless parallels; so, too, will the future. As Malian insecurities persist, it is *people* that will pay the price, though it remains tempting (or academically sensible) to fixate on *Mali* paying the price. Malians will decide what Mali looks like in the years to come. Interlocutors and other security stakeholders, however, may not be easing the transition, if the strategy remains directly tethered to borders, for which no effective agent has governed in the past, or is likely to in the future. Mali in 2023 is engineered by Malians. But its friends – intentioned or yet to undergo a strategic paradigm of their own – may be obfuscating the state, sandwiching its people between Chartered demands for territorial integrity and self-determination. One group of stakeholders, however, perhaps understands it best, and so – year by year – emerges stronger: jihadist entrepreneurs.

¹⁶⁸ Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, Vincenzo Carbone, and Timothy Lay, “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” *ACLEDA*, August 30, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/#s6>.

¹⁶⁹ I have opted for this approach to relate the project to my own trade as an Intelligence Officer, wherein formal writings are generally structured into a more compact “so-what” assessment for a senior commander.

Most Likely Scenario: Stasis and Violence (Mali continues as a Failing State)

Executive Summary:

- As in each of the previous Praetorian examples, Mali will almost certainly remain under a military authority;
- Desire to move forward with elections is not possible given critical security and humanitarian crisis;
- North will remain alienated from Bamako; and
- MINUSMA and other actors will be unable to secure Mali and restore Bamako's institutional strength as no player possesses the will (or scale of resources) to combat jihadist proto governments.

Trigger(s):

- Military junta's refusal to transition back to civilian control.

Amplifications:

- JNIM and ISGS concretise areas of self-government from Mali's centre to the north;
- MINUSMA remains under-resourced;
- Russian presence remains strategically limited, but tactically important as a direct catalyst for humanitarian issues; and
- Malian migration northwards to Algeria, Libya and, ultimately, Europe will swell considerably.

Assessment:

Citing ongoing socio-political challenges, the Malian military will almost certainly retain control of governance for the short to medium term (2-5 years). Focus for Bamako (with Russian proxy aid) will remain on direct and brutal offensive action against terrorists – and those it loosely defines as supporting them. Bamako will remain unable to either interject or dismantle separate economies within the centre or north of the country. Most importantly, Bamako's focus on its war on terror will preclude development of the very socio-economic and political developments required to cleave vulnerable Malian peoples away from the opportunities or security available within sub-state and/or terror groups. In the remote scenario wherein MINUSMA, the AU and ECOWAS can bring about a civilian government transition, success will be temporary and further civil strife is almost certain since stability operations are territory and extant government focused, vice the rebuilding of more inclusive Malian institutions.

Most Dangerous Scenario: War of Self-Determination (Mali as a Failed State)

Executive Summary:

- Within the next 3-5 years, steady recruitment, area access and (illicit) economic controls result in both JNIM and ISGS declaring separate Islamic enclaves. While both groups will undoubtedly vie for territorial control, the loss of territory will be akin to the previous Azawad precedent in terms of scale;
- FAMa will be effectively destroyed by jihadist forces, and under-reinforced / supplied by Bamako; and
- Massive human migration towards North Africa and Europe.

Trigger(s):

- Inability of Bamako to develop socio-economic and political policies that can compete with Islamic inroads into the country; and
- Sustained defeat of FAMa and MDSF at the hands of tactically superior and operationally patient jihadist forces.

Amplifications:

- It is highly likely that more focused and sustained jihadist pressure will incite another *coup* in Mali. As in 2012, this would paralyse the regional (albeit national) government in Bamako, allowing for an operational surge by sub-state actors;
- MINUSMA presence in such a scenario would be costly, as its personnel would be a target for asymmetric attacks; and
- The collapse of state authority and institutions would compel millions of Malian civilians to flee to neighbouring states and, ultimately, Europe.

Assessment:

In this scenario, the overall lack of strategic coherency by the international community to address endemic issues within Malian institutions and governance (essentially, a return to previous territorial securities without an accompanied and partnered change in the type of governance that caused such initial insecurity) fails to keep pace with jihadist political and economic development. Furthermore, attempts by Bamako to dislodge or combat jihadist groups only serves to elicit further public remonstrations. Over time, public sentiment and jihadist power will reduce the MDSF to a non-effective status, at which point the most capable institution within Mali will fail. Further *coups* are likely, coincident with the declaration of at least two (JNIM, ISGS) entities. The scale of these declarations – as in the past – will possibly reduce Mali's territory by two-thirds. Civil war between a myriad of sub-state (including secular) entities is highly likely, thereby triggering a massive human migration northward. JNIM and ISGS proto states will require international action as they generate and export terrorism across North African and beyond.

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