

# Sharia as ‘Desert Business’

## Understanding the Links between Criminal Networks and Jihadism in Northern Mali

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**D**espite efforts by the UN peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), French forces and neighbor states, the security situation in Mali remains fragile. In 2015 and 2016, militant jihadists increased attacks on government forces, humanitarians and UN peacekeepers.<sup>1</sup> Up to 31 March 2017, the MINUSMA mission had 116 fatalities. The majority of the fatalities are from Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo and Guinea.<sup>2</sup> Militant jihadists, often categorized as ‘terrorists’ by the international community and staff in MINUSMA, conduct many of these attacks.

The label ‘terrorists’ covers militant groups using terrorist methods. They all promote Sharia and strict Islamic rule, but their motivations are not linked to religious fanaticism. The jihadist militant groups are driven by a combination of local ambitions for power, internal clan disputes, economic interests in the smuggling business and regional power struggles.<sup>3</sup> During my field visits to MINUSMA, I experienced how MINUSMA personnel were struggling to understand the internal dynamics of the jihadist militant groups and their constant fragmentation.<sup>4</sup> This article contributes to the ongoing discussion on how to understand the complex dynamics between jihadist groups, crime and politics in the Gao and Kidal regions.<sup>5</sup>

The field study in MINUSMA led me to the following research question: How can we understand the social and economic dynamics that enable the operative space of the militant networks in northern Mali? The argument proposed here is to move away from analyzing jihadist militant groups as organizations and ‘closed’ entities. Rather, they are loose networks of supporters, mobilized for contextual violent attacks. The focus here is to investigate the jihadist militant groups as products of local

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power struggles and involvement in trade and crime rather than as fighters with ideological and religious motivations. Understanding these dynamics will expand the context for framing the militant groups in Mali and beyond.

The sharp distinctions drawn by the Malian government and the international community between compliant and non-compliant groups in the implementation of the peace agreement are problematic. It leaves certain groups out and undermines the possibility of creating a solution to decades of conflict. Dividing actors into these categories (compliant versus non-compliant) impedes MINUSMA's long-term stabilization effort, since lived reality is much more fluid, ad hoc and complex. The complexity of the network mechanisms and the pragmatic shift in alliances represent a challenge for MINUSMA. Military planners and analysts tend to focus on detailed information about the enemy, at the expense of understanding the political, economic and cultural environment that supports 'the enemy.'<sup>6</sup>

The argument develops around a nuanced cultural perspective encompassing the fluidity of social networks. There is an urgent need to turn away from the 'enemy-focused' approach.<sup>7</sup> The concepts 'bigmanity'<sup>8</sup> and 'shadow networks'<sup>9</sup> will be used to discuss the fragmentation of armed groups and the overlap of criminal and political networks in Mali. The author's field data pointed to an important and ongoing challenge for the MINUSMA staff: how to understand the dynamics of the jihadist militant groups in Mali. In the field study (see next section on methodology), the research focus was to review analytical practice in MINUSMA for cracks and analytical challenges. Subsequently, this article is a discussion paper, which questions some of the basic assumptions in the work of MINUSMA staff and the wider international community of consultants, advisors, military and analysts working on the peace process in Mali.

The article starts with reflections on methodology, followed by an introduction to some of the challenges to the ongoing peace process. After a discussion of the label 'terrorist armed group,' the article then moves on to a section on the concept of 'bigmanity,'<sup>10</sup> which can help the analysis of complex social dynamics in northern Mali. Later, the role of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) is discussed. The article then provides sections on economic interests and Sharia as 'desert business', looking at the relationship between formal and informal network structures. Finally, the article concludes with a short discussion on local conflicts in northern Mali, leading to a closing with reflections on implications for the peace process in Mali.

## Reflections on methodology

This article is based on my personal field experience:

- conducting fieldwork in MINUSMA in November 2014 and October 2015. In total, spending 23 days in MINUSMA, working with military officers, analysts and civil advisors;
- attending briefings, meetings and patrols;
- conducting 34 interviews. The selection criteria were nationality, age, gender, and research topic/task and mission experience;
- accessing MINUSMA through the Danish Defence and the respective Commanders of the All Source Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU);<sup>11</sup>
- working as a guest researcher in MINUSMA, trying to follow the daily working procedures of the staff as closely as possible;
- wearing a military uniform to 'blend in';
- sleeping in tents and containers in the MINUSMA camps in Bamako and Gao;
- attending briefings and meetings, reading reports, visiting MINUSMA HQ and conducting a few patrols together with military personnel in Bamako and Gao;
- working for the Danish Defense as a researcher and lecturer for more than five years, prior to this field study.

The process of enculturation into military thinking can lead to biases, where daily processes and certain analytical models are taken for granted. However, as a cultural anthropologist, critical thinking about state institutions and power relations is vital. This article challenges the basic assumptions among MINUSMA staff: that some militant groups can be labeled as 'terrorists' and therefore non-compliant in the peace agreement. In addition, can we understand these entities as 'groups' with well-defined members and the structure of an organization?

## Challenges to the peace process

*"Implementation will prove challenging in a country where there is a history of agreements not being implemented."*

—Arthur Boutellis<sup>12</sup>

Implementing the peace agreement in Mali is challenged by three main factors: lack of jobs opportunities, the presence of armed groups and the exclusion from the peace agreement of armed groups labeled terrorists. The fragile security situation is one of the UN's many challenges. Mali is ranked among the ten poorest countries on the UNDP Human Development Index.<sup>13</sup> The prices of basic food supplies are higher in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal than in the rest of the country.<sup>14</sup> The UN reached an important milestone in its stability efforts when "The Agreement on Peace and Rec-

conciliation in Mali” was adopted on 20 June 2015.<sup>15</sup> Facilitated by an international mediation team, the two major umbrella organizations, “Platform” and “Coordination”, agreed to participate in a process of disarmament and demobilization. “Platform” is a coalition of pro-government militias, supporting a unified Mali. “Coordination” is an alliance of several militant groups fighting for self-government for the Azawad region in northern Mali and neighboring countries. In addition, the two alliances agreed on the release of prisoners and reopening of schools. “Platform” and “Coordination” are considered compliant parties in the peace agreement process, whereas the UN and the Malian government consider militant groups labeled as terrorist organizations non-compliant.

The lack of job opportunities for the combatants in the north complicates the demobilization effort. The tourism industry in Mali used to be thriving, employing ethnic Tuaregs as tour operators, guides and drivers.<sup>16</sup> Both in Mali and Niger, the tourism sector is controlled by the Tuaregs.<sup>17</sup> The tourism industry has collapsed due to the kidnapping threat to western tourists,<sup>18</sup> which means that the Tuaregs’ job and food security is now threatened. In addition, there is a food crisis in the northern and eastern regions: 294,000 persons in Mali were expected to be in need of emergency food assistance in 2016, and more than 50 per cent of them live in the northern and eastern regions of Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal.<sup>19</sup> Opportunities to work as a teacher are also limited due to lack of open schools. In many smaller towns in the north, schools have been closed due to violent clashes between “Coordination,” “Platform” and other militant groups taking over the schools. The UN reports 20 cases of military use of schools, including schools occupied by compliant groups taking part in the peace process.<sup>20</sup> A second important challenge to the implementation of the peace agreement is the mobility of armed groups. Armed groups fight over control of smuggling routes. The groups block roads and secure that drugs, weapons and other goods can pass through the desert areas. Some staff in MINUSMA describes it as ‘naval warfare in the desert’. Armed groups fight over important nodes and ‘harbors’ where smuggled goods are loaded and prepared for further transport through the Sahel. The armed groups are very mobile and move around freely in the open desert areas. Occasionally, they work together on attacks or help each other with logistics. The armed groups cross the borders to neighboring countries unchecked and have networks and contacts in the wider Sahel region. AQIM and affiliated groups take advantage of the Sahelian states’ inability to control borders and the peripheral territory.<sup>21</sup>

The third important challenge is the ‘terrorist armed groups’ excluded from the agreement. Mali hosts both regional Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, who recruit their members across borders in the whole of the Sahel region (northern Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Algeria), and a locally-based group, Ansar Dine, run by Tuaregs from northern Mali.<sup>22</sup> The largest group, AQIM, is striving to become a federation of terror groups in the region but its leadership consists mainly of mem-

bers from Algeria.<sup>23</sup> In 2012, when the jihadist groups controlled the three northern cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, they tried to establish ‘emirates’ based on Sharia. Laws against music, movies, smoking and alcohol were enforced through Koran-endorsed punishments such as amputation, lashing or stoning.<sup>24</sup>

### Terrorist armed groups—a problematic term

With more than 13,000 soldiers, police and civilian staff deployed in Mali, the UN presence on the ground may at first glance seem rather large. However, scrutiny reveals that the desert areas in the north lack both soldiers and police because many countries contributing to MINUSMA are reluctant to deploy their personnel in the areas where militant armed groups are present. In October 2014, then MINUSMA Force Commander Kazura briefed the UN Security Council on the challenges facing MINUSMA. Kazura stated that “MINUSMA is in a terrorist-fighting situation without an anti-terrorist mandate or adequate training, equipment, logistics or intelligence to deal with such a situation.”<sup>25</sup> However, MINUSMA is not mandated to engage in explicit counterterrorism tasks;<sup>26</sup> these tasks are assigned to the Malian government and the French forces present in the Sahel. Despite the presence of the French and Malian forces in the north, jihadists can easily hide in the open desert areas in the northern regions. With a long-term strategy of immersion in local communities and the regional economy, AQIM is developing resilience against counter-terror efforts.<sup>27</sup> Modibo Goïta explains that one of the major problems is that the governments of Mali and Mauritania rely on conventional military means to respond to the jihadists’ small and highly mobile units.<sup>28</sup> In addition, AQIM tactically “use the desert as its fallback base.”<sup>29</sup> Olivier Guitta mentions three major reasons why AQIM has chosen to build a base in northern Mali, “First, it is a very inhospitable area with difficult terrain making it tough for nations to monitor it, even for U.S. satellites. Second, some Arab tribes are located there and finally, the Malian regime is weak.”<sup>30</sup>

The Arab tribes, mainly the Fulani people, control many business networks in northern Mali and are well connected through family networks in neighboring countries.<sup>31</sup> It is important for the jihadists that the local infrastructure is suitable for their business of violent attacks and smuggling. Despite the clear signs of jihadist presence in northern Mali, we should be cautious about categorizing the conflicts in the region as terrorism. According to Morten Bøås, it is problematic to frame the conflicts as a “war on terror;”<sup>32</sup> It is therefore clearly a danger that what is essentially a local conflict in Kidal and northern Mali may be locked in a “war on terror” framework, in which the accusation of Al-Qaeda connections becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as local insurgencies have nowhere else to turn. This is particularly dangerous as connections already exist on a pragmatic business level, but thus far there is no firm or

widespread ideological attachment. Bøås warns against isolating the armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda. People in northern Mali are well connected through daily life, smuggling and business activities. The field data from a study conducted by Peter Tinti shows similar findings of working relations between traffickers and militants, “who were narco-traffickers first, ideologues second, if at all.”<sup>33</sup>

The population in Mali is a landscape of people who position themselves in networks and operate through a palette of possible alliances. The jihadist terrorist groups are very pragmatic and sensitive to the local cultural context<sup>34</sup> and the pragmatism shown by jihadist networks is important. An example is from Gao in 2012, where residents demonstrated against the banning of television, video games and soccer. The jihadists changed course and lifted the ban and even started to buy televisions for several youth organizations.<sup>35</sup> The way people pragmatically operate and position themselves according to funding possibilities points to a complex dynamic between jihadism and negotiations for peace. For this reason, it makes sense to question the distinction between the “compliant” and the “non-compliant” actors in the peace process in Mali. The fragmentation of armed groups and the fluid identities of members regularly crossing the line between “compliant” and “non-compliant” groups demand a different approach.

As one MINUSMA officer pointed out, “everybody knows everybody in Mali. People are well connected.”<sup>36</sup> People are indeed linked to each other through large and loose networks and they are easily mobilized for different purposes such as criminal activities and local politics. A study of the network connections between Islamists and rebels in Mali<sup>37</sup> reveals that efficient terrorist networks should avoid being decentralized in too many cells.<sup>38</sup> In Mali, networks composed of both Islamists and rebels (non-compliant and compliant groups, author’s note added) can be reached through relatively few intermediaries.<sup>39</sup> This point tells us that non-compliant and compliant groups can work together in practice but some groups (Ansar Dine, AQIM and Al Murabitoun) are excluded from the negotiations on the peace process. A related question is how one should understand the militant jihadists. As one MINUSMA staff explained: “Whether we should call them ‘combatants’ or ‘fighters’ is a difficult question. I think what we see in the northern parts of Mali is actually that people are ‘active supporters’ or a ‘reserve force.’”<sup>40</sup> It is very much about the context of the situation, and also about networks, whether a certain militant leader can mobilize people to fight in combat. The quote was a key inspiration for this article. Why do the majority of MINUSMA’s staff continue to discuss different militant actors as well-established organizations/groups (as I witnessed in briefings and documents during the field study in 2014 and 2015)? The interesting question is whether the success of the jihadist militants can be explained by their ability to activate a loose network of supporters, a network mobilized by key individuals.

## Buying influence and loyalty in Kidal— Big Men and people as infrastructure

“Kidal is a very special place. A town of warriors where people fight over identity. This is the town where Tuareg culture meets Arab culture,”<sup>41</sup> said a Danish military linguist when asked to describe the north-eastern city Kidal. Bøås explains that the Tuareg rebellions are related to internal clan politics in Kidal and disputes over smuggling routes and suggests that in Kidal, “it is the very ability to combine politics and crime, the legal and the illicit and the formal and the informal, which characterizes a successful Big Man in this area.”<sup>42</sup> In the introduction to his book (of which Bøås’ article is part), Mats Utas describes big men and their networks<sup>43</sup>. According to the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, “the indicative quality of big-man authority is everywhere the same: it is personal power.”<sup>44</sup> The Big Man is able to attract followers based on his ability to assist people privately.<sup>45</sup> Building power “is based on amassing wealth and redistributing it with ‘astutely calculated generosity.’”<sup>46</sup> When we study areas like northern Mali, where big men are in power, it is possible to “see people themselves as infrastructure.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, people use other people for their own purposes. People maneuver in society through other people’s networks, which is why connectivity is vital. People establish links to several big men with competing interests because they want to be able to extract wealth from many different sources. Bigmanity forms loose social webs based on reciprocity. The Big Man earns loyalty and support from his followers, and the followers enjoy what the Big Man provides: economic possibilities, protection and social security.<sup>48</sup>

When I visited MINUSMA in 2014, staff working in Gao stated that local network dynamics are really difficult to grasp: “‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ are tangled up in northern Mali, and people can change identity according to their own interests.”<sup>49</sup> Again, the concept of bigmanity seems relevant when analyzing why people distribute their loyalty:

If the Big Man does not distribute enough largesse, he will eventually lose his supporters. Bigmanity is unfixed and multiple. Bigmanity is not a matter of inherited patron-client structures, but rather fluid and ever-changeable webs of relations. [...] Followers may discard Big Men when they do not deliver. At the same time, a follower is not loyal to just one Big Man, but typically enjoys different relationships with different Big Men.<sup>50</sup>

## Big men and bricolage— fragmentation dynamics of jihadist militant groups

Bøås argues that violence in northern Mali is pragmatic and ad hoc by nature.<sup>51</sup> Violence pops up occasionally; it is perceived as an opportunity. Pragmatic and ad

hoc alliances are formed around violent action to control trading/smuggling points or achieve political goals or economic gains. As seen in other parts of West Africa, conflicts can occur without ideology and ethnicity being the main drivers. Young fighters join armed groups as their way of “social navigation.”<sup>52</sup> They fight for future opportunities and to achieve the important status of being “adult” in society. Young men in Guinea-Bissau, where Henrik Vigh did his research, experience a daily struggle to survive socially. In the cities, the hardship of unemployment makes it an experience of “social death”—the “absence of the possibility of a worthy life.”<sup>53</sup> In the northern regions of Mali, where unemployment, droughts and social stagnation are rampant, jihadist armed groups can easily recruit from the pool of dissatisfied young men seeking status, money and power. There is also a general tendency towards youths becoming militarized, due to the drug culture and widespread presence of small arms in the region.<sup>54</sup>

In an analysis of the Tuareg movement in Niger, the *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (MNJ), the Tuareg rebellion is characterized by circumstantial alliances, shifting loyalties and a “hop on–hop off” rebellion loosely controlled by chiefs.<sup>55</sup> The same dynamics are seen in Mali, and these pragmatic and ad hoc alliances have several consequences for the peace process. The landscape of militant groups constantly changes; new groups are formed and other groups dissolve. “Armed groups in Mali are not static groups with stable hierarchies, but more loose groupings constantly fragmenting and adjusting themselves to the strategic situation.”<sup>56</sup> Members of “non-compliant” groups like Ansar Dine and MUJAO have left these groups and joined “compliant” groups like HCUA (High Council for the Unity of Azawad, member of the Coalition) and MAA-Sidi Mohamed (member of the “Platform” alliance).<sup>57</sup> Another example of a shift in identity, or of playing different alliances, is the former MUJAO Islamic police chief in Gao, Yoro Ould Doha (who served as police chief during the occupation of Gao in 2012). Today, Doha is commander for the ‘Platform’ alliance.<sup>58</sup> During my field study in Mali in 2015, I observed many interesting discussions between MINUSMA staff on how to understand the formation of jihadist armed groups and their frequent fragmentation. In this article, I analyse the jihadist armed groups and their splinter groups through the lens of bigmanity.<sup>59</sup> How is it then possible to explain the constant shift between groups and the formation of new armed groups? Yvan Guichaoua suggests using the concept of “bricolage” for the fragile tactics of the rebel Tuaregs.<sup>60</sup> “Bricolage” is a sort of handiwork or “do-it-yourself project.” If armed groups really work as “do-it-yourself-projects,” this could explain the way groups fragment quite often, because rebel leaders want their “own” project. The fragmentation can be seen as linked to the economic motivation of becoming a Big Man in the smuggling industry, being able to invest in the villages and establish a high-status reputation locally. The fragmentation dynamics of the armed



groups can be analyzed as a phenomenon urging fighters to splinter out of a desire to earn money and become their own “bricoleur.”

In his discussions on how to counter insurgents, David Kilcullen explains that modern insurgents “often employ diffuse, cell-based structures and ‘leaderless resistance.’”<sup>61</sup> The insurgents are often wealthier than the population.<sup>62</sup> This is also the case in Mali, so trying to isolate the jihadist militant groups will not work well, since the jihadists often invest in local trade and sponsor food and health services. In recent years, jihadist groups have acted as social security providers, fulfilling important roles for the northern population by providing medical and food aid, schooling, financial donations and fuel.<sup>63</sup> The jihadist groups are thus providing social security in places where the Malian government has failed to deliver for decades. Despite the ability to act as organizations, “modern insurgents operate more like a self-synchronizing swarm of independent, but cooperating cells, than like a formal organization.”<sup>64</sup> Overall strategic goals and ideology are less important to the jihadist groups. Jihadist militant groups in Mali act as loose frameworks for a range of different “bricolage” activities. If violence in northern Mali is a “hop on – hop off” campaign of smuggling and fighting, it changes our perceptions of loyalty and network dynamics. If we consider the armed groups in Mali as loose groupings, ad hoc and pragmatic in their nature,<sup>65</sup> how does the fragmentation of groups influence the long term peace process? One possible answer, as discussed above, could be that people use each other as infrastructure and position themselves in different networks around big men.<sup>66</sup> The dynamics of bigmanity is the first factor that influences the fragmentation of groups. In northern Mali, we see loose groupings constantly fragmenting.<sup>67</sup> Groups dissolve and new groups are formed around a “Big Man wannabe.” MINUSMA must take these dynamics into account when negotiating with actors in the peace process. New groups will be formed, and their members will shift their loyalties to achieve the most in ongoing power struggles.

Understanding bigmanity is crucial for understanding the complexity of the social, economic and political dynamics in northern Mali. The bigmanity concept provides us with an understanding of how people operate in different networks and use each other as infrastructure.<sup>68</sup> The concept of bigmanity also explains how jihadists from Algeria, Malian security officials and other people with resources can establish a bigmanity-type relation to local citizens in northern Mali. The predecessor organization to AQIM, the GSPC,<sup>69</sup> operating in northern Mali in an effort to win hearts and minds, is a good example of how local alliances are formed. The GSPC distributed antibiotics, bought goats and married women from different clans; these alliances lasted only as long as money was flowing to the locals.<sup>70</sup> A prominent Big Man in Mali is Iyad Ag Ghaly, and his influence and ability to mobilize networks will be discussed in the next section.

## The role of AQIM

Tuareg communities did not previously engage with groups like AQIM. Today, several community leaders claim that “declining economic opportunities are driving some ‘into the arms of AQIM.’”<sup>71</sup> In recent years, AQIM and affiliated jihadist groups have been exacerbating the economic situation in the Sahel through low-level terrorist attacks and criminal activities.<sup>72</sup> Guitta argues that AQIM uses this strategy deliberately to destroy the tourism industry and sabotage foreign investment in the region.<sup>73</sup> As Anderson argues, the label terrorist is a simplified categorical opposition of Good and Evil.<sup>74</sup> Terrorists are supposed to be driven by fanaticism and operate outside norms of war and peace;<sup>75</sup> however, the terrorists in northern Mali are driven by economic and political motivations rather than strict religious fanaticism. Findings indicate that AQIM have shifted their strategy from strict implementation of Sharia and regular punishment to a long-term influence campaign targeted at local populations. This strategy involves creating jobs in remote areas, marrying locals to develop lasting relations and reinvesting ransoms in the local economy.<sup>76</sup> Economic incentives are important for recruitment and AQIM established business partnerships with local elites in order to act as service providers.<sup>77</sup> A comparative study conducted by Caitriona Dowd in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria shows how “grievances regarding economic and political exclusion are typically higher than average in areas subsequently affected by Islamist violence” and perceptions of marginalization are thriving in communities affected by Islamist violence.<sup>78</sup>

An important element of the AQIM strategy also involves influencing key leaders in northern Mali and gaining popular support by publicizing negative statements about the Malian and Mauritanian government.<sup>79</sup> The group Ansar Dine is a good example of why “terrorist armed group” is a problematic term. Iyad Ag Ghali, a former soldier in Gaddafi’s army and later a diplomat for the Malian government, formed the group in 2011. The group is considered a “terrorist armed group” by MINUSMA. Ag Ghali was subject to dialogue with and influence from jihadist ideology from AQIM and Pakistani preachers in Mali for decades before he decided to form the group in 2011.<sup>80</sup> Did Ag Ghali later swear allegiance to Al-Qaeda because he was ideologically motivated to engage in jihad? Or was it a result of the election where Ag Ghali failed to be appointed as the next Amenokal (clan head) among the Ifoghas in Kidal? The answer is not clear but Ag Ghali is a key figure in understanding how networks are interconnected in Mali. Ag Ghali is a key broker between Islamist/jihadist networks and rebel networks fighting for independence in northern Mali. Studies of networks in Mali show that Ag Ghali is extremely well connected to other players in Mali, due to his past working as a diplomat and negotiator for the government of Mali.<sup>81</sup> Ag Ghali also tried to become leader of the secular movement MNLA but was defeated because people perceived him as the main creator of previous unpopular peace agreements.<sup>82</sup> Ag Ghali’s close relation to the Malian govern-

ment was one of the reasons he had become a discredited figure among the Tuaregs. Vying for power but excluded from tribal or rebel commands, he set himself up as a religious figure.<sup>83</sup> If local conflicts matter—which this article argues—it is worth paying attention to how violence is connected to crime and to local power struggles.

If Bøås is right in claiming that violence is conducted by ad hoc alliances formed by people who already know each other,<sup>84</sup> it might be useful to look at the relation between trade and violence. Smuggling is the main trade in northern Mali and I discussed the link between smuggling and violence with an officer, who worked for MINUSMA in 2014. He confirmed that MINUSMA staff was interested in possible connections between smuggling routes in and through Mali and incidents of violent clashes between armed groups.<sup>85</sup> Data collected by MINUSMA showed that violent clashes often take place in areas where smugglers are fighting over access to routes and smuggling junctions. Therefore, the economic interests and motivations driving the conflicts will be investigated in the next section.

### **Economic interests and motivations— sources of income for militant groups**

The sources of income for militant groups extend beyond kidnappings. According to the UN, the groups generate income by raiding/stealing and taxing goods illegally. In some regions, there are signs of close co-operation between drug smugglers and jihadist networks like AQIM.<sup>86</sup> It is estimated that the strongest group present in Mali, Al-Qaeda in Maghreb (AQIM), has accumulated close to USD 65 million from ransoms from kidnappings conducted by themselves or by criminal groups who pass the hostages on to AQIM.<sup>87</sup> The estimated USD 65 million incomes were calculated in 2013 and the 2016 figure is probably higher. Despite lack of evidence to prove it, Malians generally believe that the hostage negotiators, who work to secure the release of the hostages, take a portion of the ransom and share it with Mali government officials.<sup>88</sup> A local militant leader argues that European states are financing the militant groups: “It is the Western countries that are financing terrorism and jihad through their ransom payments.”<sup>89</sup> Malian government officials are reportedly involved in drug trafficking and the facilitation of other criminal activities.<sup>90</sup> Criminal networks are linked to government officials in a complex web of people and transactions. According to Carolyn Nordstrom, we need to look at the relationship between formal and informal structures in society.<sup>91</sup> In war-torn societies, we may find very powerful “shadow networks” with a vast influence on how power and wealth are distributed. It is often impossible to make clear distinctions between legal and illegal, state and non-state, local and international.<sup>92</sup>

Organized crime is one of the root causes of the current conflicts in Mali but it also functions as an opportunity to combat poverty and unemployment. Organized

crime is closely linked to national and local politics as local criminals try to buy political influence through donations and food packages to villages; some even run for local or national elections.<sup>93</sup> Nordstrom is relevant to the analysis of jihadist militant groups in northern Mali because she argues that we should look at how individual key players are involved across what are normally seen as either formal or informal structures. Politics and crime are inter-connected in Mali. Local power brokers capitalize on legal networks to enhance their criminal activities because networks overlap.<sup>94</sup> Businessmen, politicians, military officers, police and local leaders are all involved in the smuggling of weapons, cocaine, cigarettes and human beings.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the Sahelian region, AQIM has established “direct collusive associations with government and security officials. [...] As a result, AQIM can not only more ably confront and resist government security services but also undermine Sahelian states from within.”<sup>96</sup> The following section will show why smuggling is vital for jihadist armed groups.

### Sharia as “desert business”

Smuggling of drugs and weapons is a growing business in West Africa. The smuggling of drugs starts at sea or through air transport from South America. In West Africa, the drugs are loaded onto land transport in three regional areas, Mali and the south-eastern part of Mauritania being two of the key locations.<sup>97</sup> Infiltration by the international drug cartels, smugglers and criminals in sections of the security forces is a threat to many West African states. This infiltration has weakened customs and border controls.<sup>98</sup> In Mali, where criminals infiltrate and operate through governmental structures, this is very much the case. The smuggling business is driven by networks of local politicians and criminals in cooperation with militant jihadists, who operate swiftly and easily in desert areas. Smugglers also use schoolchildren as drug carriers.<sup>99</sup>

The relation between criminals and jihadist militants is one of common interests. The “ordinary” criminals, the smugglers, help the jihadists by buying weapons, ammunition and equipment. In return, militant jihadists facilitate free passage for smuggled goods and trafficking of people through the areas they control. The advantage for AQIM and other jihadists involved in this exchange relationship is that the smugglers help provide weapons and equipment, thus allowing a group like AQIM to avoid exposing itself.<sup>100</sup> According to Francesco Strazzari, AQIM will typically use portions of the profit from ransoms to invest in the drugs traffickers’ network.<sup>101</sup> The militant groups labeled as “terrorists” can be seen to act as local security providers and investors. Their substantial investments in the smuggling networks help the smugglers expand their business. The smuggling networks in turn act as logistical support elements for jihadist militants like AQIM and related groups, buying goods and food

at the local markets for the jihadists, who can hide from MINUSMA's presence in the city centers. The business relation between criminals and jihadist militant groups is another reason why the distinction between "compliant" and "non-compliant" groups in the peace process can be questioned. According to Boutellis, when members and financiers of jihadist groups and networks shift to "compliant" groups, they continue their business of smuggling and trafficking.<sup>102</sup> Boutellis suggests that a tacit understanding of supporting each other exists between criminal armed groups, the local population and extremist groups.<sup>103</sup> However, this understanding can take the form of the extremist groups threatening citizens and criminals to co-operate.<sup>104</sup>

In northern Mali, the implementation of Sharia is very much about creating space for the smuggling industry. In 2012–2013,

Arab based movements preached the ideology of borderless jihadism, claiming that custom duties and tariffs are illicit under Sharia law. In Timbuktu, local jihadi movements (i.e. AQIM and allies) reportedly tried to conquer the hearts and minds of local residents by launching an impressive campaign in favor of traders, traffickers and smugglers, explicitly stating that custom duties, tolls, tariffs and frontiers would no longer be enforced.<sup>105</sup>

Strazzari's data from field interviews in 2013 supports the argument presented here that jihadism is closely intertwined with smuggling and trafficking activities. In the desert areas of northern Mali, Sharia is not primarily an ideology; Sharia is a certain way of doing "desert business." An example is the former leading figure in AQIM, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who founded his network and personal fortune on the smuggling of cigarettes.<sup>106</sup> The pragmatism of jihadist militant groups is closely related to their economic interests.<sup>107</sup> Hence, in the northern regions of Mali, it seems difficult to distinguish between crime, politics and jihadism. Rather, militant networks are involved in a continuum of various activities in a crime-politics-jihadism nexus.

### Kidal as contested space

According to Bøås, the conflict in northern Mali is an internal Kidal affair.<sup>108</sup> Other sources support his point of view that Kidal played an important role as a base for traffickers, which was critical in the 2006–2007 Tuareg rebellion, and control over drug routes was crucial in the fighting.<sup>109</sup> The enhanced competition among armed groups over resources and the protection of drug routes fueled the conflict in 2012.<sup>110</sup> Another prominent voice in understanding political violence in Africa, Caitriona Dowd, argues that "Islamist violence emerges in sub-national contexts shaped by governance practices of political and economic marginalization."<sup>111</sup> Events in northern Mali in May 2014 support Dowd's argument. On 17 May 2014, Malian Prime Minister, Moussa Mara travelled to Kidal and was attacked by armed groups. Six civil servants died in the incident.<sup>112</sup> The Malian government considered this attack a

“declaration of war” and responded four days later by launching an attack on Kidal. The result was 30 casualties among Malian government forces. The governmental forces sought refuge at MINUSMA camps in Kidal and other cities in the north.<sup>113</sup> This situation changed the power balance radically. At the end of May 2015, the armed movements MNLA, HCUA and others were now in control and started to set up a parallel administration, including local security committees.<sup>114</sup> The attack by the Malian security forces paved the way for a disintegration of the governmental structure in the north. It also left MINUSMA with the dilemma of how to work with militant groups, who are now the *de facto* authorities in Kidal.<sup>115</sup> In February 2016, jihadist militant groups attacked the MINUSMA camp in Kidal, killing five MINUSMA peacekeepers and wounding 30 staff members. Since then, efforts have been made by MINUSMA to arrange meetings in Kidal—the “Forum in Kidal”—between local actors and the Malian government. However, the Malian government seems reluctant to participate and finds it unacceptable to visit Kidal when the government is not hosting the meeting. “We should not be invited to an event on our own soil,” said Malian foreign minister Abdoulaye Diop when commenting on the “Forum in Kidal” and the status of the peace process in Mali.<sup>116</sup>

As stated earlier in this article, years of marginalization and ignorance have fueled the conflict between jihadist militant networks and the Malian state. Grievances regarding economic and political exclusion are found in areas where perceptions of marginalization are very strong among local populations, “providing both a motivation and an opportunity for collective opposition.”<sup>117</sup> In areas like Kidal, militants can make use of previous experience with violence as a means for political expression and easily recruit members to act violently for a new project in a new strategic framework.<sup>118</sup> Dowd’s data from regions with high rates of violence in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria show that Islamist violence often occurs in areas where people feel marginalized and not able to benefit from national politics and economic opportunity. In these regions, historic developments have proved for local actors that violence can create positive results. “The very language and targeting of Islamist violence cannot be divorced from domestic politics and historical violence in the state.”<sup>119</sup> Not only can we find strong jihadist militant networks in northern Mali, we also find strong criminal networks operating in all corners of Mali and the Sahel. Tinti writes:

The international community will need to recognize the extent to which illicit trafficking and organized crime influences broader security and governance issues. And with this change should come the recognition that many of the people the international community consider partners in the quest to rebuild Mali—politicians, traditional leaders, the military—are themselves implicated or complicit in illicit trafficking and organized crime.<sup>120</sup>

## Perspectives for the peace process in Mali

If Kilcullen and Guichaoua are right in their descriptions of the dynamics of the Tuareg insurgency, the peace process in Mali will proceed more smoothly with their analytical points incorporated.<sup>121</sup> Today, the peace process negotiations isolate some groups outside the process as terrorists. In reality, these jihadist militant groups are networks and individuals working through existing social and family structures in Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. Replacing the label terrorist with the label “bricoleur” seems valid in the sense that these ad hoc militant groups operate through the clan structure, local politics and trade networks. The jihadist militant groups are funded by kidnappings and smuggling, and are seen as both investors and security providers by the local population, who are dependent on income from the criminal economy. Therefore, MINUSMA and the Malian government should consider militant groups as important actors. Given the pragmatic flexibility of their members, long-term negotiations for peace must include the major parts of the supporters and members of the jihadist militant groups in the region. The ad hoc nature of militant groups in northern Mali also represents a possible aid for MINUSMA's stabilization efforts. Loose loyalties make it easy for fighters to leave an armed group if they can see better options in a neighboring group or alternative opportunities. This phenomenon points to a tactic allowing MINUSMA to actually benefit from the “hop-on—hop-off” mobilization of fighters when trying to de-mobilize and disarm fighters, and create a stable environment for the people of Mali.

### Notes

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2. United Nations, MINUSMA Mission Homepage: Facts and Figures, 2013, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/facts>.

3. Morten Bøås, “Castles in the sand: Informal networks and power brokers in the northern Mali periphery” in *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, ed. Mats Utas (New York: Zed Books, 2012); Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, *The Roots of Mali's Conflict. Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, CRU Report (Oslo: Clingendael, 2015); Caitriona Dowd, “Grievances, governance and Islamist violence in sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 4 (2015): 505–531, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X15000737>; Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace paper, 13 September 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/13/organized-crime-and-conflict-in-sahel-sahara-region-pub-49360>; Francesco Strazzari, *Azawad and the rights of passage: the role of illicit trade in the logic of armed group formation in northern Mali*, NOREF Report (Oslo: Clingendael, 2015); Peter Tinti, *Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future*, Global Initiative research paper (Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2014), 1–19.

4. This author uses the term ‘jihadist militant groups’ instead of the term ‘terrorist armed groups’ used by the Malian government and most MINUSMA staff. The discussion of the concept ‘terrorist’ will appear later in the article. In addition, he does not list the different militant groups in Mali because there is a risk that half a year from now, new groups will have emerged and others disappeared. What is important here is the social and economic dynamics triggering the violence.

5. This article has benefitted greatly from comments and critique by Professor Thomas Mandrup and Assistant Professor Thomas V. Brønd at the Royal Danish Defence College, civil analyst Susanne Vedsted, Danish Army and consultant Nina Nellemann Rasmussen from the University of Copenhagen. Several Danish officers supported my fieldwork in Bamako and Gao. Thanks to all of them for their hospitality and interest in this study. A special thanks to Rasmus and Andreas, our talks were very inspirational.

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9. Carolyn Nordstrom, "Shadows and Sovereigns," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 4 (2000): 35–54.

10. Mats Utas, "Introduction."

11. At the time of my fieldwork, the ASIFU headquarters in Bamako consisted of a 70 person unit covering analysis and fusion, command and control, and logistics capacity. There was also an open sources section monitoring newspapers, TV, web-based news and social media. The ASIFU contained two intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) units in Gao (covering Gao (Sector East) and Kidal (Sector North) and Timbuktu with sensor and analysis capacity, human intelligence and drones: John Karlsrud and Adam C. Smith, "Europe's Return to Peacekeeping in Africa? Lessons from Mali," in *Providing for Peacekeeping* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2015), 11. In 2016, the UN HQ in New York decided to merge the two major units in MINUSMA working with intelligence analysis—the ASIFU and the U2—into one single unit. The merge took place in order to combine efforts of long-term analysis (the ASIFU) with daily, current analysis (U2 in MINUSMA HQ)—high ranking officer in MINUSMA HQ, interview with author, June 2016.

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27. Modibo Goïta, "West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat," 4.

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29. Olivier Guitta, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," 64.

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