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Crime after Jihad: armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali

Ivan Briscoe

CRU Report

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Conflict Research Unit, the Clingendael Institute

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Executive summary

Mali's descent into a war of secession at the start of 2012 was a conflict foretold. Yet what followed proved radically distinct from the country's three previous episodes of insurgency in its vast, impoverished and arid north. Radical Islamists seized control of the main urban centres of northern Mali, displacing the Tuareg rebels with whom they had struck a working relationship. In the capital, Bamako, a military coup led by an unknown and low-ranking army captain overthrew a president who had been in power for a decade. An uneasy stand-off came into being: Mali's debilitated military guarded the frontiers to the south, while Islamist hardliners and criminals meted out their own version of sharia justice across the north.

As is well known, the decomposition of Malian state authority was finally halted early in 2013. Faced with an Islamist advance to the south, French military forces embarked on a lightning intervention that scattered the extremists and reasserted control over the north. Since then, **the pace of Mali's post-conflict recovery and stabilization has been astonishing**: a UN peacekeeping mission and a host of bilateral and EU programmes have been put into place; a new president and a new National Assembly have been elected; peace talks with the more moderate armed groups, though stuttering, are under way.

But as the national government and the international community leave behind the heat of the crisis, it is now incumbent on them to understand what caused such a perilous tailspin to start in Mali, so as to prevent it from reoccurring. As in other countries of West Africa and the Sahel, **transnational organized crime has played a prominent role in the affairs of Mali over the past two decades**, above all in the north. Drug trafficking, including large consignments of high-value cocaine from Latin America, as well as kidnapping rackets led by Islamist terror groups operating freely across the borders of the Sahel, are both widely regarded as playing key roles in fomenting the instability, unrest and violence that climaxed in 2012.

However, the depiction of a crime-terror nexus in Mali, whereby criminal profits feed insurgent arms and recruitment, does not do justice to the multi-faceted role played by illicit activity across the country. This paper is an attempt to marshal all the available evidence, along with the insights provided by experts in Mali, so as to understand **the relations that were forged prior to 2012 between criminal enterprises, communities, political and social elites, armed groups, the Malian state and neighbouring countries**. On the basis of recent developments, the paper seeks to outline the likely adaptations that the main illicit networks will now make, and to draw out some recommendations as to how best to temper the criminality and violence that menace Mali's post-conflict transition.

At the heart of this analysis is an account of how Mali was both the victim of the displacement of drug-trafficking routes and armed jihadist activity from other countries, and a deeply complicit partner in profiting from the incoming wave of illicit trade and Islamist terror. Behind this willing complicity lay the particular vulnerabilities of Malian state and society. Government in Bamako, the country's capital, had by 2006 replaced direct authority over the north with sporadic, ham-fisted interference. Chronic competition between the north's many ethnic, caste and clan groups offered numerous possibilities for the political elite in Bamako to find useful allies to do its bidding. However, these social fissures were

also fodder for the designs of other, newer parties: nearby states such as Algeria and Libya, criminal organizations seeking to traffic drugs, and radical armed groups. **The resulting transactions between supranational forces and local ethnic or tribal factions** were to set Mali on the way to the fourth, and arguably the most threatening, insurgency of its post-colonial history.

But Mali's war was not merely the product of radicalized and internationalized disaffection in the north. The conflict also threw a harsh light on the degradation of the state itself. A model for democratic virtue in Africa, half of whose budget was financed by foreign donors, **Mali re-emerged after its coup as a state that had been afflicted by multiple vices**. Illicit practices had become rampant across the public sector, corroding popular faith in politicians; Mali's celebrated elections had in fact received some of the lowest turnouts in the democratic world. Moreover, the day-to-day corruption, patronage and nepotism formed a permissive soil on which an all-powerful presidency could nurture the construction of a shadow state. The greatest drug trafficking scandal of Malian history, the Air Cocaine case of 2009, suggests that official complicity in the criminal business had penetrated the highest echelons of power.

Mali has now set the course for a recovery of legitimate and accountable state authority. Its new president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, has backed a clean sweep of the judicial system and a Truth Commission on violence in the north. Captain Sanogo, the coup leader, is in jail, along with his accomplices. Key Islamist leaders and narco-traffickers have been scattered or neutered, as have the masterminds of the shadow state. From the information available, it would seem that major illicit trafficking across the north has also diminished in scale.

However, it is far too soon to proclaim an end to the crisis. Occasional terrorist attacks and ethnic skirmishes remain a constant headache for local people and UN peacekeepers. At the same time, the pre-war illicit networks are never far away: clearing corruption from the public sector is set to be a long and arduous haul, while **illicit networks in political life are destined to regroup and reconfigure**, as they have in many other criminalized environments, notably in Latin America. Nearby countries such as Niger and Libya have quickly emerged as staging posts in the Saharan and Sahelian criminal economy.

As Mali negotiates its post-conflict recovery, **the focus must be directed at ways to reduce the systemic threat from criminal business** while avoiding the sorts of blind repressive policies that have engineered insurgencies in Afghanistan, or terrible bloodshed in Mexico. This paper outlines a number of approaches that should lie at the heart of such a balanced, conflict-sensitive strategy towards crime. A robust and inclusive political settlement for the north is critical, though for this to work attention must now focus on how decentralized or autonomous regional authorities can be supervised without the risk of meddling from Bamako. Provision of security and security reform must be imbued with realism as to what can be achieved with the institutions available, and should be shaped by an emphasis on intelligence-led policing that seeks to sever the most dangerous criminal linkages to power-brokers. Counter-terrorism must also be wise to the intermediation of criminal figures, and to the armed networks that illicit businessmen have cultivated. And lastly, it remains imperative that nascent Mali attacks the roots of the shadow state, and is backed by an international community willing to abandon its hunger for fixers in the state and short-term solutions.

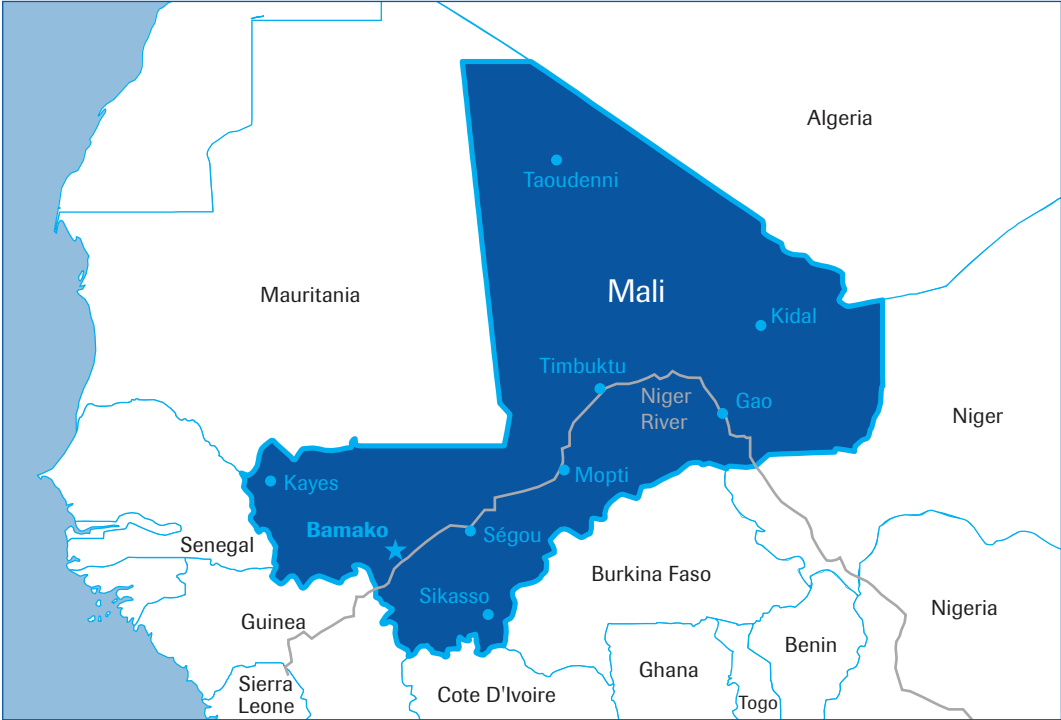
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Abbreviations

AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ATS	Amphetamine-type substances
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
CFA	African Financial Community
DGSE	General Directorate of State Security
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HCUA	High Council for Unity in Azawad
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta
MAA	Arab Movement of Azawad
MINUSMA	United Nations Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RPM	Rally for Mali
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Map of Mali



Mali timeline: 2006–2014*

May 23, 2006: Start of third Tuareg rebellion in Mali

July 4, 2006: Signature of Algiers Accord

January 2007: Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) renamed as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

April 29, 2007: Re-election of Amadou Toumani Touré as president of Mali

August 2007: Tuareg rebel fighting resumes in north-eastern Mali

July 18, 2008: Peace deal brokered by Algiers between Tuareg rebels and Malian state

December 14, 2008: Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay are kidnapped in Niger and transported to northern Mali. (They are released on April 21, 2009)

April 26, 2009: Local elections held in Mali

October 16, 2009: "Air Cocaine" leaves Panama on its way to Mali

July–October 2010: Mauritanian, Malian and French forces attack AQIM camps in Mali

September 6, 2010: Six employees of French nuclear company Areva are kidnapped in Arlit, Niger, and transferred to northern Mali

August 21, 2011: Rebels seize control of Tripoli; Colonel Qadhafi goes into hiding

October 16, 2011: Creation of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) is announced

October 22, 2011: First reported armed action by the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)

December 20, 2011: Creation of Ansar Dine is reported

January 17, 2012: MNLA attacks Ménaka

March 22, 2012: President Amadou Toumani Touré overthrown in a coup. Malian army Captain Amadou Sanogo takes power

April 6, 2012: MNLA declares the independence of Azawad

April 12, 2012: Dioncounda Traoré appointed interim president of Mali

June 27, 2012: MUJAO seizes control of Gao after fighting with MNLA

December 20, 2012: UN Security Council passes resolution 2085, authorizing deployment of a peacekeeping force to Mali

January 10, 2013: Ansar Dine advances south, capturing the town of Konna

January 11, 2013: French air strikes mark beginning of *Opération Serval*

January 16, 2013: AQIM terrorists begin four-day siege of the In Amenas gas facility in southern Algeria

January 30, 2013: Following Timbuktu and Gao, Kidal is recaptured

February 7, 2013: Arrest warrants issued against 28 suspected rebel leaders and criminals in northern Mali by the Bamako High Court

April 25, 2013: UN Security Council passes resolution 2100, establishing UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA)

June 18, 2013: Malian government and Tuareg separatists sign preliminary accord on future peace talks in Ougadougou

August 11, 2013: Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta wins second round of presidential elections

September 8, 2013: New president announces 34-member Cabinet

October 30, 2013: Four French hostages held since September 2010 are released

November 2, 2013: Two journalists from Radio France International are killed in Kidal

November 27, 2013: Coup leader Amadou Sanogo, now a general, is arrested on charges related to kidnappings and disappearances within the Malian armed forces

December 15, 2013: Second round of voting in parliamentary elections. New president's party, Rally for Mali, wins 115 out of 147 seats in the National Assembly

February 6, 2014: 31 Tuaregs murdered in Tamkoutat, near Gao

March 8, 2014: French special forces kill leading AQIM militant, Oumar Ould Hamaha

March 11, 2014: A new split in the MNLA. Ibrahim ag Assaleh forms the Coalition for the People of Azawad

*Information from author and Thurston and Lebovich 2013

1. Introduction

A little over a year ago, the state of Mali confronted both an existential challenge and a direct military threat from a coterie of radical Islamist groups. Its collapse from an exemplary sub-Saharan democracy to the ragged condition of late 2012, when the country was run by an interim president with an army rendered impotent by infighting and coup-mongering, can be attributed to a host of causes. In fact, the complexity of the latest Malian conflict is perhaps one issue on which all commentators can agree.¹

Its origins can be traced to the disputed nature of the new state once it achieved independence from France in 1960, giving rise to three uprisings by Tuareg rebels over the course of the country's first 46 years. Long-standing ethnic divisions, the crushing poverty of the northern areas, and the regional spread of extremist groups whose birth was located not in Mali, but in the civil war that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, are all crucial components of the story. As a result, it is possible to argue that the country's *annus horribilis* should not be attributed to any particular vices of Malian state or society, but to what historian Fernand Braudel regarded as the long run of history – and above all the role played by decolonization, and by processes of religious radicalization taking place across a huge basin of African territory.

One element of the Malian conflagration, however, draws attention much more closely to the deeds of the country's political leaders, and the survival mechanisms of people in the north. For-profit organized criminal activity, whether this means involvement in corruption, smuggling, kidnapping, or illicit trafficking of cigarettes, arms or narcotics, appears and reappears insistently throughout any overview of the conflict's origins. There is a chronic lack of reliable statistics and hard judicial evidence relating to the most lucrative crimes, such as trafficking of cocaine from Latin America or taking of foreign hostages. Nevertheless, there is now enough circumstantial and documentary evidence as well as witness testimony to indicate that these activities had become, by late 2011, an intrinsic part of the way businesses, politicians and armed groups in north Mali operated, and a channel through which the central state in Bamako managed its relations with the north. Criminalization of Mali, it would appear, predated both rebel annexation and the military coup.

Yet the evident connections in time and space between crime, terrorism and state crisis in Mali do not always reveal exactly how these influences were exerted or mediated. They do not show how strong the chain of causes may have been, or the direction in which it moved. On one side, as this report will reiterate, there is no doubt that the formation of trafficking and hostage-taking networks linked to state officials corroded state institutions, undermined government policies, and accentuated armed rivalries between ethnic groups. Importantly, the emergence of a transnational criminal economy in northern Mali provided opportunities for the accumulation of influence by Islamist armed groups. It is important to note that crime

1 See Lecocq, Baz et al. 2013. "One Hippopotamus and Eight Blind Analysts: A multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali: Extended Editors' Cut". <http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/lecocq-mann-et-al---one-hippo-8-blind-analysts-editors-cut.pdf>. This article offers one of the most succinct and illuminating overviews of the many causes that contributed to the crisis.

did *not* generate terrorism. But the swift subordination of the secular Tuareg separatists by Islamists in 2012 showed that alignment with illicit revenues served the expansionist goals of the extremists in numerous ways.

However, this analysis of events, which is supported by field reports and echoed in growing international concern as to the toxic effects of organized crime on conflict and state-building,² does not square with all of what we know of illicit activity in Mali. For a start, the legalistic concept of crime is a blunt instrument to capture the intricacies of illicit activity in the country. Cross-border smuggling has long been a tolerated and essential source of livelihood in Mali: as the British Foreign Office has recently observed, “there is a big qualitative difference between basic supplies needed for survival and the drugs business”.³ In places where borders are unpatrolled or unmarked, or they arbitrarily bisect integrated and seamless communities, then it is hard for traders even to conceive of their work as prohibited. Likewise, corruption in public office is notorious in Mali, and appears to have played a major role in undermining the reputation of the state and the president ousted in early 2012, Amadou Toumani Touré (or ATT for short). Yet it is difficult to say with any precision how grand corruption, influence-trafficking (such as through overpriced public contracts), nepotism and petty acts of everyday larceny are connected with one another. Nor it is always easy for individuals to disown practices that have become embedded in society and the workings of institutions.

International engagement, stability and crime

These differences in seriousness, and the general lack of self-perception of ‘crime’, generates a number of considerations that are relevant to future international engagement in Mali. The French military intervention that began in January 2013 under the aegis of Opération Serval, as well as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) for Malian armed forces, the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) and numerous bilateral programmes and non-governmental organization (NGO) activities, are now being geared towards reducing the risk of future conflict and stabilizing northern Mali. In so doing, the emphasis so far has been placed on counter-terrorism and the return of state services and institutions as against undermining trafficking networks in northern Mali. Given the delicate phase of post-conflict development, the constant frictions in peace talks between government and armed groups, and the initial steps taken by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (also known as IBK) to clean up the justice system, this would appear to be an understandable choice in sequencing the post-conflict recovery. Anecdotal evidence suggesting that high-value trafficking flows have in any case been disrupted and displaced seem to support this approach.

However, if the basic goals of stabilization are to be met within the coming years, the international community, neighbouring states and the Malian government will eventually have to make some hard choices in relation to security and justice policy. While it is patently desirable for Mali that crime be fought, choices must be made on which crimes are the most

2 This is reflected in many recent documents from international organizations and research institutes. See, for example, Miraglia, Paula, Ochoa, Rolando and Briscoe, Ivan. 2012. *Transnational Organised Crime and Fragile States*. Paris: OECD-DAC working paper, and Kavanagh, Camino (ed.). 2013. *Getting Smart and Scaling Up: Responding to the Impact of Organized Crime on Governance in Developing Countries*. New York: Center on International Cooperation, NYU.

3 Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2013. *Traffickers and Terrorists: drugs and violent jihad in Mali and the wider Sahel*. London: FCO.

serious, and where progress is possible. And in adopting such a selective stance, it will be vital to note a fundamental aspect of contemporary transnational organized crime,⁴ familiar from heavily criminalized contexts in Afghanistan, Colombia, Mexico, Central America and Myanmar. Illegal profit-making activity *per se* does not threaten civil peace or governance. It is rather the connections that are generated between political leaders, rebel groups and criminal activity, or the defensive and adaptive actions taken by criminal groups targeted by poorly handled persecution and repression, that are responsible for the most pernicious manifestations of crime, and its strongest connections to armed insurgency.

What is known about the illicit networks of the past and present is pivotal in orienting decision-makers as to the risks that lie ahead. Crime in fragile states is not a sealed entity, restricted to an 'underworld' or a social sub-class, but an economic activity that plugs into multiple domains of public life, and can thus generate compound institutional and political effects far beyond simple profit-making. Understanding the make-up of these various levels or 'rings' of crime in Mali before and after the crisis of 2012 is the overarching goal of this paper.

In so doing, the report seeks to disentangle possible policy responses, separating the desirable from the counter-productive, and the unworkable from the possible. Establishing a functioning and efficient police and justice system is of course the sole sure means to curb criminal activity, or at least to shield public and political office from its influence. Yet a rush to build up operational security services in urban hubs and border areas without taking account of the preconditions for their functioning, or the broader networks surrounding illicit activity, could incur violent backlashes. Basic recognition of the state, improved inter-ethnic relations, wider economic opportunities and broad understanding of certain activities as criminal are all crucial preconditions that would prevent 'normal' security operations from being interpreted as arbitrary, politicized gestures of social control. If these conditions are not achieved, law enforcement can become a pretext for ethnic mobilization and rebellion. And although opium production is certainly different from its illicit trafficking, Afghanistan's experience with counter-narcotic policies, in the words of terrorism expert Ekaterina Stepanova, shows that "at the earlier stages of transition from conflict to peace the tasks of securing peace and fighting drugs cannot be solved at once".⁵

In short, without certain basic elements of state legitimacy and social cohesion in place, it would be far better to adopt a nuanced approach to crime, with the aim of understanding the principal circuits of illicit activity, the precise risks to governance that each of these circuits poses, and the possibilities for curbing these practices or severing the most damaging linkages without endangering people's livelihoods.

Methodology and structure of the paper

This paper is intended as a contribution to a nuanced, realistic and conflict-sensitive approach to crime in Mali. It draws on reviews of existing academic, media and policy-based literature on Mali, consultation with noted scholars, and previous unpublished work

4 Throughout this paper, organized crime will be understood on a basis of three basic elements: the existence of a durable structure, the goal of making a profit, and the use or threat of violence. Although other elements are often invoked to define organized crime, these are by far the most commonly identified features.

5 Stepanova, Ekaterina. 2010. "Illicit Drug Business and Armed Conflicts: the Scope and Limits of the Links". In Tokatlián, Juan Gabriel (ed.) *Drugs and Prohibition: An Old War, a New Debate*. Buenos Aires: Libros del Zorzal.

on the subject prepared by the Conflict Research Unit. Both of the main sources of hard documentary evidence on issues relating to criminal and armed networks in Mali – the Wikileaks cables from the US Embassy in Bamako and the Al Qaeda documents discovered in Timbuktu by journalists after the expulsion of the rebels – proved to be useful resources. Furthermore, the paper draws extensively on a period of eight days' fieldwork in Bamako in September 2013, at the time the new president, IBK, was announcing the formation of his government. During this visit, the issues of political-criminal ties and their evolution were discussed in 20 extended interviews with experts on the subject from the police, army, judiciary, the legal profession, politics, civil society, the media and international organizations. Given the nature of the subject, all these interviews were carried out under strict conditions of anonymity.

Chapters 2 and 3 fill in the historical background, first in terms of the causal chains whereby crime established its connections with numerous interest groups and official bodies, and second, through a portrait of the three main illicit networks that arose as a result. The next two chapters lead up to the present day. In Chapter 4, a brief summary of the international intervention is followed by a survey of the state of low-intensity conflict in northern Mali. Chapter 5 tracks back to the pre-crisis networks described in Chapter 3, and seek to examine in what ways they have survived or mutated. A last chapter seeks to draw out conclusions with an eye to recommendations for future policy towards crime in Mali.

Lastly, it should be emphasized at the outset that this paper uses two basic approaches to understanding the patterns of illicit activity in Mali. The first is rooted in the political economy of crime, and the benefits and uses to which it is put by politicians, state officials, insurgents and Islamists; this analysis draws primarily on evidence from the Malian crisis concerning the connections between crime and predatory governance, unsettled northern grievances, ethnic tensions and jihadist expansionism.

A second strand of analysis, however, assumes that not everything related to crime in Mali is *sui generis*. Transnational crime, and above all drug trafficking, is a profit-seeking economic activity that conforms to a number of structural characteristics deriving from the high value of the goods involved, the constraints of illegality, the key role of border crossings, the patterns in which violence and corruption are used, and the need to reach a rich final market (such as Europe or the Middle East). These patterns can be found in Mali as much as in other contexts, and although the grassroots details are distinct, the economic determinants that shape criminal activities and the coalitions around them in the Sahel remain far from unique.

2. Mali's vulnerability to crime, and the road to the 2012 crisis

Introduction: transforming a smuggling economy

Transnational criminal networks are present as buyers, traders or suppliers in almost all countries of the world, and contribute to a global flow of criminal proceeds that a recent estimate from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) puts at US\$870 billion.⁶ Yet even though transnational crime is ubiquitous, its centres of production (above all of drugs) remain heavily concentrated in a few countries. Moreover, the main illicit business groups prove surprisingly resilient despite the death and capture of many of their members. Contemplating the evident fact that the centres of criminal activity are not nearly as mobile and dispersed as they might be in a globalized economy, the Colombian expert on the drug trade, Francisco Thoumi, has argued that the gap in a given society between formal rules and informal behaviour is the necessary condition for large-scale illicit business to arise and prosper. Crime, in other words, proliferates where “the state has not been able to impose the rule of law, contraband and other illegal activities have become socially legitimate, while many formal laws and rule have become de facto illegitimate”.⁷

Mali's incorporation in the global criminal economy over the past two decades has hinged on exactly these domestic conditions. Strong and established smuggling networks in the north of the country are rooted in tribal and ethnic fraternities with enough knowledge of the desert terrain and alliances with partners in southern Algeria, or other neighbouring countries, to generate a stable flow of contraband. The urban centres of the north, above all Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, as well as border towns such as In-Khalil and Ménaka, became the sites for a trade that was rooted in traditional trans-Saharan commerce, but which shifted in the 1970s to the illegal import of subsidized foodstuffs and other goods from Algeria and Libya.

Mali: some basic facts

Population: 14.9 million

Annual income per capita: US\$660

Poverty rate: 44%

Life expectancy: 51.3 years

Religion: 90% Islamic, 9% animist,

1% Christian

Northern Mali

Population: 1.3 million

Territory: 827,000 square kilometres
(66% of Mali)

Average annual temperature: >30°C

Sources: World Bank, WHO, OECD, French Foreign Ministry

6 The figure is derived from a study by Global Financial Integrity, and stands at the more conservative side of the spectrum of value estimates for global crime (UNODC. 2011. *Estimating Illicit Financial Flows Resulting from Drug Trafficking and Other Transnational Organized Crimes*. Vienna: UN, p. 38). However, it is important to note that there continues to be serious scholarly criticism of the accuracy of all of these figures.

7 Thoumi, Francisco. 2009. “Necessary, sufficient and contributory factors generating illegal economic activity and specially drug related activity, in Colombia”. *Iberoamericana* 35, 105-126.

Rapidly this trade became a lifeline for a region whose social structures and revenues were devastated by the drought of 1972–74, which killed an estimated 200,000 people across the Sahel, and whose consequences included a mass exodus from Mali. “To outside observers”, writes Akbar Ahmed in his major work on tribal grievances across the world, “the Mali government’s actions regarding the Tuareg constituted a deliberate policy of starvation.”⁸ A second drought, from 1982–85, prompted an improved humanitarian response, but did lasting damage to the livelihoods of many nomad pastoralists, forcing large numbers to move to urban centres and to life in the informal economy.⁹ These were the origins of an entirely new form of uprooted existence that Tuaregs call *Teshumara* – derived from the French *chômage*, or unemployment.¹⁰

As a result, smuggling, above all of cheap foodstuffs, became closely associated with meeting basic human need. “In the north of Mali, whoever says trade means fraud”, argues anthropologist Judith Scheele, reflecting on the significance of prohibited commerce with Algeria. “At Kidal or among the Arabs of Gao, people eat Algerian pastry, Algerian couscous... This trade is well organized, in a way that is semi-official and known to everybody.”¹¹

The optimization for illicit purposes of these entrenched smuggling networks – a process not without its tensions and grievances between the different sorts of traders¹² – helps to explain the ease with which Mali became a partner in transnational criminal trafficking. A similar process of incorporating new territories into illicit networks has occurred across the Sahel and West Africa in much the same way that it previously took place in Central Asia and Central America, with each of these regions serving to accommodate the displacement of more direct routes for trading in arms, cannabis, cocaine or heroin, as well as cultivating their own capital and logistical capacity to carry out new trades, for instance in cigarettes or illegal migrants.¹³ As a result, Mali’s incorporation into global crime can be regarded as the transformation of a smuggling economy under conditions of forced criminal displacement from elsewhere. It is one more example of criminal mobility that conforms to a mixture of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ influences, in which, as mafia expert Federico Varese has written, “what might appear the product of globalization is in fact the consequence of state repression exporting the problem to other countries”.¹⁴

Incorporation into transnational crime: kidnapping and cocaine

Mali’s recruitment into transnational crime has been manifested primarily in two sets of activities. The first, kidnapping for ransom since 2003, has been almost entirely the preserve of Islamist extremists operating with local accomplices: the crime has been subordinate to

8 Ahmed, Akbar. 2013. *The Thistle and the Drone*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution, p. 192.

9 Grémont, Charles et al. 2004. *Les liens sociaux au Nord-Mali. Entre fleuve et dunes*. Paris: Karthala-IRAM, especially Chapter 4.

10 Lecocq, Baz. 2009. *Disputed Desert. Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*. Leiden: Brill-African Studies Centre, p. 194.

11 Scheele, Judith. 2009. “Tribus, États et Fraude: la Région Frontalière Algéro-Malienne”. *Études rurales*, June/December, 184: p. 81.

12 Ibid.

13 For the effects of criminal displacement in the Americas, see Bagley, Bruce. 2012. *Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center.

14 Varese, Federico. 2011. *Mafias on the Move*. Princeton University Press, p. 8.

a broader armed strategy across the Sahara and Sahel.¹⁵ But the second crime of note, drug trafficking, heralded the incorporation of the country into illicit global business through a logic rooted in shared profit.

Sources in northern Mali note that new commercial elites with drug ties had begun to emerge in the main urban centres by the late 1990s.¹⁶ By the time coastal West Africa had become a significant drop point for Andean cocaine, in 2007–08 – with an estimated 14 per cent of Europe’s total cocaine consumption passing through the region¹⁷ – Mali was one of the main routes for overland trafficking.¹⁸ Trajectories through the country varied according to the coastal hub at which the drugs arrived, but the most favoured appear to have connected Burkina Faso in the south to Niger and Libya in the east, and Mauritania and southern Algeria to the same destinations.¹⁹ Bamako airport was also deployed as a means to get cocaine directly to Europe.

Recent reports suggest this pan-African route has lost much of its lustre as a cocaine-trafficking route, with possible reasons including increased maritime interception, political instability and the simple theft of consignments.²⁰ Cocaine volumes trafficked through West Africa are reportedly down to 18 tonnes a year (from 47 in 2007). As Chapter 5 notes, Mali would appear to have become residual player on the cocaine market, with only very small quantities heading through Bamako airport. In all probability, Moroccan hashish and possibly other synthetic drugs produced in West Africa still form part of the remaining smuggling flows through the country, en route to Europe, the Middle East and Gulf states. At the same time, these goods lack the political and social linkages demanded by cocaine trafficking: the financial value of these substances per kilogramme is considerably lower, making theft less attractive (bulky goods must still be transported across desert terrain to an eventual buyer), corruption less expensive, and exclusive territorial control less imperative.

Criminal influences on Mali

These last features of criminal influence are crucial. Concern as to the harm done to the weak states and impoverished societies of West Africa and the Sahel by global criminal activity has become acute.²¹ Illicit, high-value trafficking not only captures and converts smuggling networks that already exist, but also corrupts government and security officials and

15 Kidnapping in Mali is discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

16 Interviews in Bamako, September 2013.

17 Lacher, Wolfram. 2012. *Organized crime and conflict in the Sahel-Sahara region*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 6. Other reports detailing the dimensions and routes of the transnational drug trade involving Mali are: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. 2014. *Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future*. Geneva: Global Initiative; UNODC. 2013a. *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*. Vienna: UN; Kühne, Winrich. 2013. *West Africa and the Sahel in the Grip of Organized Crime*. John Hopkins University; ECOWAS Peace and Security Report. 2013. *The political economy of conflicts in northern Mali*. Dakar: ISS; Antil, Alain. 2012. “Trafic de Cocaïne au Sahel”. *Études* volume 417, pp 307-316.

18 The upsurge in drug seizures in Mali was clear by 2007. See US Embassy cable. 2007. “Surge in Malian Drug Busts”. 07BAMAKO1404.

19 A much shorter trajectory out of northern Mali would head via southern Algeria to the coast. However, this requires bribing Algerian military and intelligence officials, and requires high-level contacts. Global Initiative, op. cit., p. 8.

20 UNODC. 2013, op. cit., pp 10-11.

21 USAID. 2013. *The Development Response to Drug Trafficking in Africa*. Washington DC: USAID.

accentuates fragmentation across political elites, as rival groups seek to lever new resources to gain power.

Yet the scale of the socio-political disintegration that Mali underwent before and during 2012 far exceeds the generally corrosive effects of organized crime on institutional integrity and public insecurity. Very few countries have experienced an armed insurgency so strongly rooted in criminal networks, no more so than in the case of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which seized control of Gao in June 2012.²² It is likewise rare to find crises in which illicit revenues serve to weaken and delegitimise so many critical areas of state authority, including the armed forces, intelligence services and the offices of the presidency. In fact, contrary to the Malian experience, it is often the case that deeply criminalized environments enjoy high rates of political stability, and even provide for a *pax mafiosa* in communities so as to generate broad social consent for illicit business.

The business reason for using Mali to traffic drugs or other illicit goods derives fundamentally from the processes mentioned above, namely criminal displacement and the existence of established smuggling networks. Yet the intensity of the criminal influences on Mali stems not from the volume of the illicit flows and revenues accruing to the country, as if it were simply the African market leader in criminal activity: on the contrary, a recent UNODC survey suggests coastal states such as Nigeria, from where transnational mafia groups operate, have been better placed to profit from the illicit flows.²³ Instead, it is the nature of governance and the multiple strategic uses to which trafficking was put, by government, local elites, ethnic communities and armed groups, that marks Mali out from its neighbours. And above all, it is the way in which a high-value, hyper-modern and globalized form of business activity was put in the service of traditional forms of political and social organization that helps account for its destructive legacy.

The next chapter analyses the character and composition of the main networks that have connected politics, society and crime, with a particular focus on the crucial facilitating role played by the central state in Bamako, and the notorious case of “Air Cocaine”. Beforehand, the remainder of this chapter aims to explore in greater depth the question of how transnational crime established a home for itself in northern Mali. To do so, it looks at the way the region became a crossroads for numerous foreign groups and actors, before considering how illicit revenue streams fed into the social grievances and tensions leading to the attempted Tuareg secession of 2012. It concludes by looking at who and what link together the different forces competing for a share of power in the north.

Low costs of entry

A number of African states have become deeply enmeshed in transnational criminal networks over the past decade as a result of several trends, such as global economic integration, the communications revolution and a demographic shift to big urban centres. Few states, if any,

22 “Several sources close to the events confirmed that traffickers were able to establish working relationships with the elements of Mujao who were narco-traffickers first, ideologues second, if at all. Traffickers from Gao region agreed to pay Mujao tribute in exchange for protection, passage of convoys through areas held by Mujao, and assistance facilitating transit through areas held by AQIM and Ansar Dine.” See Global Initiative, op. cit., p. 15. The one armed Islamist group whose proximity to narco-trafficking comes close to that of Mujao is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. See Cornell, S. 2005. “Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan”. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 17 (4): 619-39.

23 UNODC. 2013, op. cit.

have displayed great capacities for resistance. In fact, according to a recent analysis, one hallmark of organized crime in Africa has been “the extraordinary level of state penetration and high-level corruption across the continent”, above all in cases of narco-trafficking through the principle nodes of the continent’s west coast.²⁴

Weak state structures, many of them undergoing processes of democratic transition, have proved inviting to illicit networks, providing these with access to emergent political actors and to established security and military forces. A readiness among key political and security players in African states to exploit illicit earnings for their own strategic and competitive motives illustrates the ways barriers to criminal entry have been systematically lowered. Technological advances, in turn, have further lowered the costs of entry for illicit networks by easing co-ordination and communication between foreign countries, urban centres and activities in remote and peripheral areas. In all these respects, Mali and the Malian state have formed part of a general African trend.

However, Mali’s openness to new entrants has been exceptional, and no more so than in its northern territory. Thinly populated, highly inaccessible in most parts and largely bereft of state services outside its three urban centres, northern Mali has traditionally relied on informal structures of governance, rooted in the tribal and caste arrangements of its four main ethnic groups – Tuaregs, Arabs, Fulani and Songhai – each of which is spread over several countries aside from Mali. While these structures may appear inhospitable to outsiders, the past decade provides ample evidence of a deepening presence among them of external actors, criminal, jihadist or state-based.

The trafficking network that sustained Air Cocaine (described in detail in the next chapter) brought Andean narcotics to the region of Gao with the alleged help of a Bamako-based Spanish intermediary. The main Islamist fighting group, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), derives from a faction that emerged in the latter part of the Algerian civil war, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, in its French initials). One of AQIM’s main *katiba*²⁵ leaders, the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, has reportedly married four Malian women, and integrated himself profoundly into various streams of Malian trafficking – thereby following official AQIM strategy for assimilating Salafist fighters within local communities.²⁶ And AQIM’s proclivity for using northern Mali as a site for storing hostages seized in other countries, above all from Algeria, Mauritania and Niger, illustrates the degree to which the country appeared the most hospitable in the region for an insurgent rearguard.²⁷

However, the use of northern Mali by transnational criminal and jihadist groups should not lead us to characterize the region simple as a stateless, ‘ungoverned’ zone. Foreign states have also staked out their interests in a territory that has historically been a sphere of influence for other countries (Timbuktu and Gao were part of the Kingdom of Morocco in the 16th century, and from 1892 came under French control) as well as a crucial commercial intersection for Saharan lands. Yet the Algiers Accord of 2006 represented a watershed.

24 Shaw, Mark and Reitano, Tuesday. 2013. *The evolution of organised crime in Africa. Towards a new response*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, p. 15.

25 The word refers to a unit of fighters.

26 *Jeune Afrique*. 2012. “AQMI: Mokhtar Belmokhtar, le trafiquant”. 03/10/12. It should be noted that according to a senior politician from Timbuktu, Iyad ag Ghali, leader of Ansar Dine, is connected to Mokhtar Belmokhtar by marriage.

27 ECOWAS Peace and Security Report, op. cit., p. 7.

Crafted in some secrecy in response to a Tuareg uprising earlier in the year, one of the defining elements of the accord was the stipulation that the Malian armed forces be confined to urban barracks, while “special security units... mainly composed of elements from nomad regions”²⁸ were to assume much broader responsibilities across the territory.

Far from ensuring autonomy for the peoples of the north, as had been intended, the accord instead ushered in a period of the most profound foreign state penetration. Both Algeria and Libya oversaw the extended negotiation and peace process that continued until 2008,²⁹ and both were quick to intensify their involvement in the north – with major repercussions. Colonel Qadhafi of Libya made himself an imam of Timbuktu in 2006 in an ostentatious display of amity, deepening a long relationship with the north that would conclude with the pivotal return to Mali of Tuareg fighters in late 2011, once the Libyan leader’s regime had fallen. Algeria, meanwhile, reinforced its already significant footprint.³⁰ Its involvement in the region, which has been interpreted by some experts as a deliberate ploy to export and manipulate terrorism in the Sahel for political purposes,³¹ eventually brought Algiers into a close alliance with the leader of one of the main Islamist factions of the 2012 crisis. Iyad ag Ghali, a Tuareg notable and from late 2011 head of the group Ansar Dine, was cultivated, supported and flattered by the Algerian authorities as a force for stability, right until his decision to lead a militant offensive into southern Mali in January 2013, thereby provoking the eventual French military riposte.³²

The extent of foreign engagement in what had become a semi-demilitarized desert zone was not restricted to Mali’s near neighbours in North Africa. Both France and the United States dedicated considerable resources to supporting counter-terrorist initiatives in Mali’s north as well across the Sahel and Sahara region.³³ On the other side, the Gulf state of Qatar is widely rumoured to have been supportive of Islamist rebels.³⁴ Mauritania and Niger, meanwhile, had become intensely distrustful of Malian readiness to fight terrorist groups on its own land, especially after Mauritanian forces engaged in combat with an AQIM unit in September 2010 in Raz-El-Ma, in northern Mali. This firefight occurred just days after seven people (five of them French) has been taken hostage by the same insurgent group in Niger. The loss of eight Mauritanian troops in the incident was later blamed on an alleged leak to the Islamist militia about the operation from a Malian army officer.³⁵

28 For an English translation of the accord, see Thurston, Alexander and Lebovich, Andrew. 2013. *A Handbook on Mali’s 2012-2013 Crisis*. Working paper of the Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, pp 43-49.

29 Reignited by the entry of Tuareg rebels from Niger in 2007, the rebellion that first flared in 2006 continued via an increasingly opaque series of internal Tuareg divisions and military defections until the end of 2008.

30 According to one former Malian minister with extensive experience in the north, over 80 per cent of the residents of Kidal also possess Algerian ID cards. Interview in Bamako, 24 September 2013.

31 See, in particular, book by Keenan, Jeremy. 2012. *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa*. London: Pluto Press.

32 A fascinating account of Iyad ag Ghali’s intimate relationship with the Algerian authorities is provided by Nossiter, Adam and MacFarquhar, Neil. 2013. “Algeria Sowed Seeds of Hostage Crisis as it Nurtured Warlord”. *New York Times* 01/02/13.

33 For details on French military co-operation, see Sidibé, Kalilou. 2012. *Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms*. Institute of Development Studies, research report no. 77, p. 65. In 2002, the US State Department launched the Pan Sahel Initiative, which evolved into the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership in 2005. For details, see Stewart, Dona. 2013. *What is Next for Mali? The Roots of Conflict and Challenges to Stability*. US Army War College, pp 46-67.

34 Abrams, Elliot. 2013. “Qatar in Mali: Which Side Are They On?” Council on Foreign Relations blog. <http://blogs.cfr.org/abrams/2013/01/22/qatar-in-mali-which-side-are-they-on/>

35 Lacher 2012, op. cit., p. 14.

Even in its most summary version, the intense internationalization of political and combat activity in the north, whereby countries were seeking via their engagement to buttress their security, national interests or merely the hope of future leverage in the territory, shows the extent to which northern Mali as a zone of sovereign state control had become thoroughly hollowed out by 2011. In its place, a complex pattern of intersections between sub-national micro-forces of tribal or ethnic organizations at the local level, and sponsorship or strategic support from abroad for a select few of those forces, delineated the structure of competition on the ground. In this respect, the strategies of foreign states and those of transnational illicit or terrorist forces differed hardly at all, and indeed, as the support network for Ag Ghali's Ansar Dine group showed, could easily overlap.

The Malian state in effect became one more of these foreign actors, albeit the most interventionist one. Yet it did so in a manner that prefigured the secessionist demand for an independent Azawad in early 2012, in that Bamako effectively acknowledged its own limited control over the territory, and its inability to prevent outside influence. One lucid and expert opinion on this lowering of barriers to entry to northern Mali was provided by the president himself, ATT, according to a leaked US Embassy cable, when he stated before a meeting of diplomats that Mauritania, Algeria and Niger "have all been given authorization to pursue terrorist or criminal elements crossing their borders into Mali 'all the way to Bamako'... The problems of terrorism are not Malian problems."³⁶

Ethnic rivalry and informal strategic control

ATT's remarks should nevertheless be viewed with a dose of scepticism. If we restrict ourselves exclusively to the genesis of transnational criminal and jihadist presence in the north of Mali, then of course it appears that the country suffered largely from its absorption of problems from elsewhere: Salafism displaced from Algeria after its civil war ended in 2002; cocaine trafficking relocated from the direct Atlantic sea or air route from Latin America to Europe; or the 2,000 to 4,000 Tuareg separatists³⁷ expelled from Libya after Qadhafi's fall. These different external influences suggest the Malian state should not be criticized for anything but its incapacity to exert authority in a contested territory with a long history of rebellion.

Yet the non-state groups and foreign states that sought allies or proxies in Mali were able to strike up partnerships with speed and fluidity. Their ability to do so suggests two conditions were in place, both of which reflect on deep flaws in governance within the country. First, they were able to buy support, given the cheapness of loyalties in a region where only eight per cent of the population are urban residents, and where per capita income averages around US\$600 a year.³⁸ Second, they found an especially willing and receptive audience among local elites, who recognized the competitive advantages that external resources and alliances might provide in a context of intensifying group rivalry, marked by efforts to revert or entrench traditional hierarchies. It bears repeating that far from being invaded or seized by foreigners, northern Malian individuals and social groups were wittingly complicit.³⁹

36 US Embassy cable. 2010. "Malian President Addresses Diplomatic Corps on Northern Mali". 10BAMAKO11. 07/01/10.

37 Figures from Stewart, op. cit., p. 38.

38 OECD Sahel and West Africa Club. "Northern Mali at a glance". http://www.oecd.org/swac/northern_maliataglace.htm

39 Analysis of the spread of transnational organized crime across fragile states indicated that this dynamic is normal in the infiltration by trafficking networks. See Miraglia et al, op. cit.

Political conditions in northern Mali, and the response of the state in Bamako, shaped the contours of group competition in a way that made partnerships of this sort increasingly easy to initiate, above all in the years following 2006. This aspect of northern Mali's trajectory towards crisis is possibly the one issue on which close observers of the territory agree. "The basic problem has been the management of power in the north", explained one very well-known political figure from Timbuktu in an interview. In effect, he continued, the ethno-sectarian drift of governance affected the core of people's perceptions of their environment, and poisoned their inter-personal relations – thus setting the conditions for the rapid amplification of conflict witnessed in 2012. "We all live together. But if from one day to the next I doubt what my neighbours think, that destroys the social fabric. There has been terrible mistrust. There has been ignorance, greed and misuse of religious conviction."⁴⁰

'Divide and rule' is one of the most traditional motifs of colonial control, especially over peripheral territories where the ruling power has a limited presence. Mali, and its north, has long been ripe for such a style of governance: its communal composition, in which the four main ethnicities can themselves be sub-divided into smaller castes and clans with traditionally hierarchical, feudal relations determining relations between them, offered a useful grip for outsiders seeking local allies.⁴¹ The French colonial power is thus widely credited with crafting the modern conception of the Tuareg sub-group known as the Ifoghas – an aristocratic collective rooted in Kidal, whose leader for several decades following Mali's independence, Intallah ag Attaher, professed undying loyalty to the retiring colonial overlord.⁴² Likewise, the Malian state, operating out of Bamako, has cultivated its favourites in the northern region, above all those who oppose the separatist inclinations of the Tuaregs and appear most loyal to the post-colonial state. It is in these circumstances that Bamako sponsored the rise of the Songhai militia in the 1990s, before cultivating in recent years two sets of aspirational but subordinate social groups: the Imghad and Idnan Tuareg, traditionally regarded as vassal tribes within the Tuareg order; and Arabs such as those from the Lamhar tribe (also known as the Tilemsi, after the valley in which many of this tribe live), who rank below their Kounta Arab chieftains.

As in all caste systems, these stratifications served on one hand as a division of labour, yet also as a means to ensure a stable set of duties and responsibilities between different parts of society in what was, and remains, a forbiddingly hostile territory. However, the erosion of the clearly differentiated social and economic activities that grounded these organic inter-communal ties has been a hallmark of post-colonial Malian history. The work of oral historians indicates that the process was spurred by the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, which caused unprecedented displacement of people, and altered the traditional, reciprocal balance between sedentary farmers and nomad pastoralists. These latent tensions proceeded to climax in the 1990s, when the second Tuareg rebellion gave way to a spate of theft and banditry, the rise of ethnic self-defence militia and a period of virulent inter-communal violence.⁴³ It is against this background of embittered relations and rising crime within the north that tribal and caste networks began to form the bases for new business activities:

40 Interview, Bamako, September 2013.

41 An excellent overview of these sub-divisions can be found in Sidibé, *op. cit.*, pp 19-25. For more detail and nuance, see Grémont, *op. cit.*, pp 25-31, and on the Tuareg, Lecocq, *op. cit.*

42 A list of Tuareg Ifoghas leaders can be found here:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_des_chefs_touaregs_de_l'Adrar_des_Ifoghas. The current leader, Alghabass ag Intallah, is the son of Intallah ag Attaher.

43 Grémont *at al.*, *op. cit.*, Chapters 1 and 4.

smuggling in the 1980s, followed by new trafficking networks from the 1990s. These groups in effect mutated into opportunity-seeking rivals.

The inner cohesion of trafficking groups still derives from ethnic or sectarian links; but the purposes to which these organizations are put no longer fit within the schemes of structured co-operation that characterize northern Malian tribal society. Instead, the economic logic of smuggling and trafficking draws on the core loyalties and relations between ethnic groups and tribes, while also constantly threatening any collectivist logic. The results are ambiguous, according to the anthropologist Scheele: “Small [smuggling] networks do not explicitly rely on tribal links, but they nevertheless reproduce the major divisions to the extent that these determine everyday social ties, shared material interests and marriage alliances... In contrast, drug trafficking is described as a means for an individual to get rich fast, to the detriment of wider solidarities.”⁴⁴

This friction between ethnic affinities and individual or factional economic gain has become a constant in recent years. It has marked a decline in observance of basic inter-tribal values, no more so than when the Kounta chieftain was kidnapped by Tilemsi Arab smugglers in 2010 in reprisal for the theft of a drug convoy.⁴⁵ More significantly, it has provided the necessary social backdrop to the political interventions made by Bamako to further its own interests – a policy in the wake of the Algiers Accord that has been described as “remote control”.⁴⁶ Part of these efforts continued the strategy of the 1990s by arming ethnic militia that opposed the unsettled Ifoghas Tuaregs, such as the Imghad force created under Colonel Alaji ag Gamou in 2008, or a similar force of Tilemsi Arabs under Colonel Abderamane Ould Meydou. Yet this quest for military leverage was accompanied by a policy that drew inspiration from nearby Libya, where for many years Colonel Qadhafi had rewarded favoured tribes or communities with a relatively easy method of payment: access to illicit markets.⁴⁷

Not only was the state absent as a fair arbiter between rival groups, but its actions exacerbated the already corrosive effects of illicit economic activity on northern Malian communal co-existence. By establishing a preference for certain groups, and by tolerating or enabling access to illicit business as a reward (with methods to be explored later in this chapter and in the next), the state in effect mandated an escalatory response from other factions, because of the lack of any other recourse or means of defence. Indeed, it is the extraordinary propagation of group rivalry through the competitive use of illicit connections, informal foreign allies and institutional status that stands out as one of the characteristic features of the years preceding full-blown conflict in the north. Within this escalatory dynamic, the threat of systemic exclusion was acutely felt by some groups.

Some of the most traumatic points in this process were observed during the local elections of April 2009.⁴⁸ The dramatic loss of Ifoghas authority in the poll in Kidal is directly blamed

44 Scheele, op. cit., pp 84-85.

45 US Embassy cable. 2010. “Kidnapping and Liberation of Kounta Leader”. 09BAMAKO280.

46 International Crisis Group. 2012. *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*. Crisis Group Africa Report no. 189, p. 7.

47 Shaw, Mark and Mangan, Fiona. 2014. *Illicit Trafficking and Libya's Transition: Profits and Losses*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace.

48 Local elections in Mali's communes had been introduced for the first time in 1999. For more on the impact of decentralization in Mali, see the next chapter.

by one local politician for a hardening of ethnic and intra-Tuareg tensions,⁴⁹ and seemingly it buttressed the indifference of certain Tuareg leaders towards the activities of AQIM, which was then busy building up support and influence in the mountains between Kidal and Tessalit.⁵⁰ The fact that this and other election results at the time could be attributed to illicit revenues from drug trafficking and hostage-taking only served to make the perceived connections between ethnic self-protection, criminal activity and selective state intervention all the more compelling.

Local elections in the same year in Tarkint, in the Gao region, were among the most representative of this trend, and are worth recounting in order to appreciate the multiple, interweaved and mutually reinforcing sources of violent group antagonism. Two Canadian diplomats had been released from captivity with the help of intermediaries from Tarkint only a week before the poll. Recent news reports, based on internal Al Qaeda correspondence, indicate that one million dollars was handed to the terrorists to achieve this liberation.⁵¹ A number of the politicians believed to have benefited from this payment were seen in Tarkint on election day, “bullying the local population, intimidating poll workers, and corrupting the electoral process”.⁵² Their actions, in a context where three ethnic groups were competing against one another, ended up provoking the indignation of the ‘losing’ groups. One of the Tuaregs commented that he had called on an exiled rebel leader based in Libya for emergency assistance.

Although an extreme case, what happened in Tarkint was repeated elsewhere. In an interview for this research, a renowned military commander from the north observed that in Timbuktu, “each election has been a war between people”.⁵³ One instance of this came in June 2009, shortly after the events in Tarkint. Nine elected officials in Timbuktu, most of them Tuareg, were taken hostage by a group of Malian Arabs. The kidnapping operation was seemingly carried out by a local Arab businessman and a militia leader with excellent links to drug traffickers.⁵⁴

In short, these and other cases point to the three-step way in which crime and ethnic rivalry combined in northern Mali. In the first place, the criminal economy was largely rooted in ethnic or tribal identity networks, even though it is clear that high-value illicit activities often undermined the basis of such group solidarity. This fact, that tribal groups have resorted to inappropriate or unholy acts (notably drug smuggling) to defend their ethnic identity or

49 Interview, Bamako, September 2013.

50 These opinions, and the belief that the fight against AQIM was primarily the responsibility of the Malian government, are manifest in US Embassy cable. 2009. “Kidal Tuaregs Discuss Their Role in Changing Northern Mali Environment”. 09BAMAKO567.

51 *National Post*. 2013. “Kidnapped Canadian diplomat freed for \$1-million ransom in 2009, al-Qaeda letter suggests”. 29/05/13. In the letter, Al Qaeda leaders accuse Mokhtar Belmokhtar of acting without permission and in too much haste, thereby gaining too little money for the high-value hostages: UN special envoy to Niger, Robert Fowler, and colleague Louis Guay.

52 US Embassy cable. 2009. “Electoral Tensions in Tarkint: Where AQIM, Arab Militias and Tuaregs Meet”. 09BAMAKO280. 09/05/09.

53 Interview Bamako, September 2013.

54 US Embassy cable. 2009. “Northern Malian Arabs Take Democracy Hostage for the Weekend”. 09BAMAKO399. 16/06/09.

Islamic traditions, is one of the curiosities of northern Mali,⁵⁵ and is perhaps comparable in some ways to the forms of extreme “retaliatory violence” adopted in other tribal peripheries.⁵⁶

Second, the Malian state exacerbated rivalries by operating an arm’s length policy that selected favourites, rewarded them with illicit revenues, and did nothing to control losers’ grievances over exclusion from local circuits of power. It is in this restless context that northern Mali began to witness the rapprochement between certain ethnic groups and the extremist fringe represented by AQIM – terrorist violence increased notably following the electoral process of 2009 – or to closer relationships with neighbouring state patrons, such as Algeria and Libya. Emile Simpson’s diagnosis of the construction of the Afghan Taliban in the wake of the US/NATO intervention is apposite in this regard: “Insurgency is a franchise movement that comprehends many factions and interests, including some who are close to, or part of, the government ‘franchise’.”⁵⁷

Third, these processes of ethnic-based criminalization and intensifying, zero-sum group rivalry brought with it disenchantment with the sort of cultural influences that were perceived to be causing such a disintegration of the social fabric. These influences, notably state policy in Bamako, drug trafficking and electoral competition, could of course be treated as the work of infidels and apostates, and thus contribute to the popular appeal of jihadist groups. Although it is common to regard support for AQIM solely as the result of its illicit financial and military clout,⁵⁸ the Salafism propounded, for instance, by Ansar Dine, holds that the Tuaregs and Mali can be united and cleansed of corruption and vice only on the basis of such a radical philosophy.⁵⁹ Curiously, then, criminal activity both served to fuel ethnic tensions and offer, via its Islamist allies, a very dubious means to their solution.

Hybridity, intermediaries and the state

The sheer fragmentation of politics and society in northern Mali has been one of the main features of its conflict. Ethnic groups, clan or caste sub-groups, smuggling and criminal mafia, semi-official ethnic militia, separatists, Islamists and Salafists coalesced and fissured in the years leading up to 2012. The war of that year, initiated by the Tuareg separatists of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and then harnessed and captured by three separate Islamist forces (AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO), ended with the French military intervention. But this has not halted the penchant for recombination in Mali’s factionalized landscape.⁶⁰ Days after the French offensive, a Tuareg notable, Alghabass ag Intallah,⁶¹ split from Ansar Dine, allegedly taking 80 per cent of that movement with him into a

55 Scheele, op. cit., and Scheele, Judith. 2011. “Circulations marchandes au Sahara: entre licite et illicite”. *Hérodote* 142.

56 Ahmed, op. cit., p. 15.

57 Simpson, Emile. 2013. *War From the Ground Up. Twenty First Century Combat as Politics*. London: Hurst, p. 229.

58 This argument is clearly made in ECOWAS, op. cit.

59 Lecocq et al. 2013, op. cit., p. 8.

60 This is not a novelty in northern Mali, it must be added. According to a US Embassy cable, “Mali’s 1990-1996 rebellion was characterized by an alphabet soup of Tuareg, Arab and Songhai rebel groups”. 08BAMAKO366. 14/04/08. What is distinctive in the recent crisis, however, is the variegation of objectives, whether in scale (local, national, supranational) or character (material, territorial, ideological).

61 Son of Intallah ag Attaher, mentioned in the previous section.

new moderate force.⁶² The successor to this group is now one of three to four armed factions engaged in on-off peace negotiations with the Malian state.⁶³

This multiplicity of groups reflects an extreme diversity of objectives, as well as the tactics of Islamist rebels seeking to exploit this fragmentation.⁶⁴ But the fact that these different forces have been combined in shifting coalitions underlines the hybridity of the conflict: factions and groups have chiefly sought to defend themselves from peril and exclusion by hitching on to other organizations offering complementary skills and strengths, without necessarily sharing all of their strategic objectives. The shift in affiliation among Tuaregs in Kidal from fighting AQIM to tolerating them is one such example.⁶⁵ Formation of the MUJAO Islamist militia by Tilemsi Arab drug traffickers shortly before the 2012 conflict also revealed a keen desire to protect their illicit business from the homecoming Tuaregs of the MNLA, who were later expelled from Gao,⁶⁶ even if the supposedly 'narco' militia of the MUJAO often acted in ways that did not serve the traffickers' primary interest.⁶⁷ According to one leading politician from Kidal, narco-traffickers were also keen to enlist in Iyad ag Ghali's new force in early 2012 as a means to camouflage and protect their activities.⁶⁸

Yet for hybrid conflict to function in practice, it is essential that bonds of trust and co-operation be forged between groups working outside any umbrella of state law or regulation. Here, as in organized criminal activity more generally, non-state armed groups and factions rely on the services provided by intermediaries. These go-betweens accumulate even more value when they are able to triangulate with grassroots factions and the Malian state, as a number of them did with some degree of renown.

Numerous interviews in Bamako with experts and politicians from the south and north emphasized the powers accumulated by those figures who, under the rule of ATT, were

62 First named the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA) upon its creation on 24 January 2013, then renamed the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA). The claim regarding the success of the split from Ansar Dine is made by Alghabass ag Intallah in this interview: <http://www.andymorganwrites.com/interview-with-alghabass-ag-intalla-head-of-the-islamic-movement-of-azawad-mia/>

63 Aside from the HCUA and the MNLA, the third group is the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA). There has been talk of bringing these three groups together, but little progress appears to have been made so far. Indeed, in March 2014, a new group led by Ibrahim ag Mohamed Assaleh split from the MNLA to form the Coalition for the People of Azawad.

64 A prominent Timbuktu politician put it thus: AQIM is waging an economic rebellion (based on its trafficking activities); the MNLA a territorial rebellion; and Ansar Dine an ideological rebellion. Interestingly, the correspondence that was discovered in Timbuktu between AQIM's Shura Council and Mokhtar Belmokhtar makes very clear that the sub-division of the group was a deliberate ploy aimed at gathering as much grassroots support as possible: "As for the variety of groups in the Sahara region, in our estimation it is a healthy situation, a correct decision, a continuous benefit, increasing blessing and a natural extension for the waves of sons of the Islamic Nations entering Jihad." See Associated Press. 2013. "Al-Qaida Papers". http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf

65 For evidence of the uneasy relations between AQIM and the Tuareg (including clashes between AQIM and the Tuareg rebels led by Ibrahim ag Bahanga, see US Embassy cable. 2008. "Berabiche and AQIM in Northern Mali". 08 BAMAQ0371.

66 ECOWAS, op. cit.

67 See the interesting discussion of the issue of MUJAO's diverse objectives in Lacher, Wolfram. 2013. "Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel". West Africa Commission on Drugs background paper, p. 6. The author expresses wonder at why a group that was supposedly founded to defend drug traffickers should carry out a suicide attack on Algerian security forces.

68 Interview Bamako, September 2013.

assiduous visitors to the presidency as well as to their contacts in the north.⁶⁹ No official records or judicial investigations as to their movements are so far available, yet circumstantial reports and anecdote do throw up some insights. The case of Lamana Ould Bou, a Berabiche Arab officer in the Malian army, is one that has been documented in US Embassy cables. Well-connected both to drug traffickers in the north and to the powerful head of the Malian state intelligence service *Direction générale de la sécurité d'État* (DGSE), Mamy Coulibaly, Lamana was eventually killed in his home in Timbuktu in June 2009, apparently in a reprisal carried out by AQIM. A similar ability to pivot between the north and centre in order to deliver tactical benefits to both sides, even at the costs of gross corruption and the loss of fundamental state legitimacy, can be detected in the career path of Deity Ag Sidimou, an Idran Tuareg deputy from Tessalit with alleged links to drug trafficking. Tarkint Mayor Baba Ould Cheick, who is linked to the 2009 Air Cocaine incident (see next chapter) and to the negotiations that led to the release of the two Canadian diplomats in 2009, is another figure with this ability. ATT is said to have referred to Cheick as “my bandit”.⁷⁰

On a purely anecdotal level, an interview carried out for this research with an army colonel with excellent connections among one ethnic group in the north illustrated exactly what this sort of extra-institutional intermediation can involve. Throughout much of an interview lasting an hour and a half, the colonel’s mobile phone was ringing; he received more phone calls in that time than any other interviewee, including several prominent officials and political figures. And although he was based in the Malian Defence Ministry, he was also brutally critical of the national armed forces.

In effect, hybrid combinations between, on one side, non-state groups and, on the other, the reliance of the central state on informal channels of communication and influence with the north, empowered and enriched an elite class of fixers who remain to this day as important (if somewhat diminished) actors in the region. It is curious to note in this respect that French troops arrested Baba Ould Cheick in February 2013, only for him to be released shortly afterwards following the intervention of local military commanders; he was re-arrested, however, in April of last year by Malian forces.⁷¹ The current circumstances of a number of other star intermediaries, including Iyad ag Ghali, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The corollary of this dependence on intermediaries, whose solutions to tensions in the north tended towards improvisation and pay-offs – whether via ransoms or cash settlements for drug disputes, as reportedly undertaken by the late Colonel Lamana⁷² – was the asphyxiation of conventional state institutions. Under the terms of the Algiers Accord, Malian armed forces were garrisoned in the main urban centres, while Bamako and Algiers pledged to lead the creation of “mixed military units” that would patrol the northern territory. These units, which were intended to combine conventional parts of the Malian military with recruited former rebels, had several precedents in the post-colonial period as means of pacifying rebel Tuaregs – above all in the period following the revolt of the early 1990s.

69 According to one northern politician, “These intermediaries went into the palace when they wanted, they called the president when they wanted.” Interview Bamako, September 2013.

70 Lebovich, Andrew. 2013. “Mali’s Bad Trip”. *Foreign Policy*, March edition.

71 *Jeune Afrique*. 2013. “Mali: le maire de Tarkint, Baba Ould Cheikh, a été arête”. 11/04/13.

72 US Embassy cable. 2007. “Tuaregs and Arabs Clash Over Drugs and Cash in Northern Mali”. 07BAMAKO960. 01/09/07.

However, as before, the success of the initiative was decidedly muted: according to one former government minister, “It has always been the case that security forces from the north that were sent to the north formed their own rebellions.”⁷³ In the case of the mixed units created by the accord, they were from the start imperilled by the continuation, albeit on a relatively small scale, of the 2006 uprising, which has been reignited in 2007 by a spillover of Tuareg unrest from Niger. Moreover, internal Tuareg disputes, notably between the Idnan and Ifoghas castes around Kidal, fused with tensions between the conventional and former rebel military. The very public display in 2008 of two murdered Tuareg commanders, trussed up with their throats cut, outside the Kidal military base, was widely attributed to army infighting, and seriously undermined the initiative of mixed units.⁷⁴

At the same time, the emphasis of the Malian state on fighting terrorist incursions was corroded from the inside by weak implementation and bad faith. The suspicions surrounding connections between the armed forces and AQIM, including the leaking of military information, have already been mentioned; Colonel Lamana, the intermediary favoured by state intelligence who was murdered in 2009, was suspected of being one such mole.⁷⁵ Yet the failure to take robust action against jihadists in northern Mali did not merely signify a misuse of resources from foreign governments, above all those of the USA and France. It also served to further distance potential allies on the ground in the north from the state in Bamako. According to the northern military commander cited above, the population soon perceived that any collaboration with the state in the conflict with AQIM or other terrorist factions generated remarkably few results, and that the best solution to the Islamist intruders’ presence was ambivalence. “Our people’s obligation was to transfer information on jihadists to the state. But one week later the jihadists were liberated and came to kill you. So we don’t judge.”⁷⁶

73 This was exactly the case for the 2006 Tuareg rebellion, one of whose leaders was Tuareg army officer Hassan ag Fagaga.

74 US Embassy cable. 2008. “Execution of Two Tuaregs in Kidal Sets Mali on Edge”. 08BAMAKO366, 14/04/08.

75 US Embassy cable. 2009. “Armed Assailants Assassinate Col. Lamana Ould Bou in Timbuktu”. 09BAMAKO383. 11/06/09.

76 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

3. Networks of illicit activity before and during the 2012 crisis

Illicit activity in northern Mali was empowered in the period to 2012 by the overlapping set of causes detailed in the last chapter, involving displacement of trafficking routes and Islamist groups, intensifying rivalry between ethnic factions in an unremittingly poor territory, and the ham-fisted efforts of the central state to co-opt and counteract groups in the north.

At the same time, it is apparent that ‘crime’ is not a phenomenon that can be surgically separated from other concurrent phenomena. Criminal activity was, and is, a part of everyday life in northern Mali, particularly in the form of smuggling. It was one of several levers of influence and status used by competing groups, and an informal channel for the central state to achieve its goals. And although it would be fallacious to single out the opportunistic links between diverse illicit groups and armed factions as a ‘crime-terror nexus’ – instead of, for instance, a crime-tribal, crime-state, or a crime-military nexus – there is no doubt that the circumstances that gave rise to the spread of various illicit rackets in the north were also causes behind the expansion of jihadist groups. Criminal groups and insurgents emerged from the same root causes, and both were ready to pool their efforts if the nature of competition in the local context encouraged such a strategy.

However, when seeking to understand what might become of these illicit linkages now that Mali is in the midst of a post-conflict transition, it is essential to identify not just the processes that have led to widespread criminalization. The rackets that emerged in Mali brought together highly diverse sectors, bridging state and non-state, as well as legitimate business and entrepreneurs of organized violence. Yet not all these constituent elements of the illicit marketplace were involved in all crimes, nor were the criteria upon which they acted the same: a Bamako-based transnational criminal intermediary would have very different priorities from those of an ethnic leader in Kidal. And both of these, in turn, would be acting according to a logic quite distinct from that of the state security and justice services, which in their own ways were also parties to the spread of illicit activity, whether because of lack of capacity, omission, tacit complicity or shared profit.

Different interlocking networks, each of which derived from distinct political and economic bases and incentives, sustained a system in which it became increasingly advantageous or profitable to circumvent the law or the reach of the state. And although these networks were connected, and greatly influenced one another, they remained distinct in many ways. Their methods and their use of violence were dissimilar. Some exploited the state from within, others subverted the state from outside. Some were deeply integrated into global flows, others not at all. Where they were all in agreement, however, was on the aim of extracting material benefits from wherever the Malian state proved weak and vulnerable.

This chapter used multiple sources in order to depict the make-up and motives of three of the main networks that can be identified in pre-crisis Mali: the corruption of the public sector (above all nepotism); the rise of a shadow state in Bamako; and the spread of criminal and radical influence across the north. Although these do not constitute the entirety of the illicit economy in the country, the three networks – or, in the case of public sector corruption, a

broad system of illicit practice – emerge repeatedly in analyses of the conflict, as well as in the observations of numerous Malian experts. Indeed, one reason for their prominence is the role they played in the escalation of conflict. Government and military corruption, for instance, can be held at least partly responsible for the ease of rebel victory in the north, as well as Captain Amadou Sanogo's effortless coup in Bamako. Trafficking and kidnapping revenue sustained and emboldened certain armed factions. Certain civilians in the north were bought off with criminal revenue.

Yet the second effect of these networks may be considered even more significant. In the years leading up to the crisis, the entrenchment of criminal practice in various domains served to weaken the state and sub-divide its powers between various private interests, some of which opted to profit from armed challenges to government authority. Furthermore, these practices stripped the state of public legitimacy in the country as a whole, and of its role as a neutral arbiter in the north. As a result, the resilience of these networks, and their ability to reproduce themselves in altered circumstances, should now be among the main concerns of the international community and the new authorities in Bamako.

Nepotism and corruption in the state

Governance in Mali has been marked by the rise to dominance of a predatory political elite, which has shaped a system in which access to state resources and the accumulation of wealth has been monopolized through informal channels of patronage.⁷⁷ Although the restoration of democracy in Mali was widely celebrated in 1992, and gave way to a series of peaceful handovers of power following regular elections, democratic practice appears in retrospect to have been markedly shallow.

However, it would be unfair to dismiss Malian democracy outright as the product of institutional capture by established elites. The first elected president, Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992–2002), appeared committed to democracy and development.⁷⁸ In order to maintain control over the territory of a fragile and under-resourced democracy, and mindful of ongoing Tuareg unrest in the north, Konaré grounded his governance strategy in decentralizing administration to outlying regions, thereby enacting a constitutional commitment to devolved power dating from 1960.⁷⁹ Despite outstanding commitment to this process from successive governments, culminating in the first-ever local elections of 1999 and the devolution of a number of powers to the country's 703 communes (particularly those regarding health, education, water management and natural resources), the process has been the target of much criticism. In particular, it has been argued that instead of empowering grassroots communities, the reforms have institutionalized fierce competition between rival local

77 Bergamaschi, Isaline. 2008. "Mali: patterns and limits of donor-driven ownership". In Whitfield, L. (ed.), *The politics of aid. African strategies for dealing with donors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 221.

78 Bergamaschi, op. cit. p. 219.

79 For a detailed overview of the structures of decentralized governance in Mali, see SNV-CEDELO. 2004. *Decentralisation in Mali: putting policy into practice*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute Press; Hetland, Oivind. 2008. "Decentralisation and territorial reorganisation in Mali: Power and the institutionalization of local politics". *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, Vol. 62, No. 1, p. 32. For the political connotations of the 1990s decentralization drive, see Seely, Jennifer. 2001. "A political analysis of decentralisation: coopting the Tuareg threat in Mali". *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39:3, pp 499-524.

elites, while marginalizing groups that have traditionally lacked influence.⁸⁰ According to one scholar, “there are signs that [the commune] has become an arena for local struggles over authority that are based on non-democratic principles such as clientelism [...] and the fragmentation of local political relations”.⁸¹

Extreme examples of patronage and embittered local rivalry were to be found surrounding the local elections of northern Mali in 2009, as described in the previous chapter. But the spread of these practices should not be attributed solely to age-old local rivalries and the design of decentralized administration. When Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) was elected president in 2002, patronage and elite control of state resources became the leitmotifs of the Malian political system as a whole. Instead of representing a single party, ATT built a grand alliance including representatives of all political affiliations: a total of 43 political formations supported his re-election in 2007.⁸²

This so-called consensus system, also termed “unanimism”, in effect eliminated the processes of political opposition and debate as parties and deputies clambered on board the ruling coalition in order to gain access to the state spoils that were needed to ensure their own re-election.⁸³ Membership of ATT’s alliance provided exactly these resources, above all in terms of public sector jobs for deputies’ financial backers. Parliamentarians, states the scholar Martin Van Vliet, “invested much time and energy in lobbying the executive to provide (relatives of) these strategic supporters with jobs in the state bureaucracy”.⁸⁴ Good relations with the executive were also critical to secure the money needed for local development and social services. Dissidence, on the other hand, made political survival extraordinarily difficult. One parliamentarian cited by Van Vliet indicated the risks attendant on making any public criticism: “I go and see the minister in person. Questioning him in public will frustrate him. He will get angry with you and then he is not going to assist you any more.”⁸⁵

As a result, day-to-day practice across the Malian public sector was moulded by the patronage, co-optation and corruption exercised by the political elite. Manifestations of these abuses are too numerous to recount, and vary enormously in scale. Yet to judge from a number of sources and interviews – as well as the confessions of parliamentarians – the most ubiquitous racket of all proved to be nepotism.

Jobs were not merely political favours; they were also money-makers. A European expert with extensive knowledge of the Malian security and justice sector reported that the market price to acquire public jobs has been relatively stable: 500,000 Central African Francs (€60) for a modest post in the public sector, CFA 2 million (€0,40) for a post in customs, and CFA 4 million (€0,80) to gain entry to *L’École de la Magistrature* (school for the judiciary). The source also underlined that all high-ranking Malian officials are perfectly aware of

80 On the question of marginalization after decentralization, see Nijenhuis, Karen. 2003. “Does Decentralisation Serve Everyone? The Struggle for Power in a Malian Village”. *The European Journal for Development Research* 15:2, pp 67-92.

81 Hetland, op. cit., p 33.

82 Bergamaschi, op. cit.; Delcroze, J. 2012. “The Malian model falls apart”. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, English edition, 09/12.

83 Van Vliet, Martin. 2014. “Weak Legislatures, Failing MPs, and the Collapse of Democracy in Mali”. *African Affairs* 113/450, pp 45-66.

84 Ibid., p. 59.

85 Ibid., p. 6.

these practices, and stressed that the practice had become the norm over the past decade, accounting for 80 per cent of new recruits to the security forces.⁸⁶

A senior officer in the Malian police force, the *Police Nationale*, confirmed these numbers in an interview, and expressed exasperation over the quality of recruits incorporated in the years preceding the crisis. “We fixed the criteria for new recruits, but when they were finally employed, they turned out to be short-sighted or have a limp. Yet even if the doctor says they are no good, the minister still approved them.”⁸⁷ Indeed, the chronic, politically embedded problem of nepotism and fraud in recruitment to the public sector was reiterated by one former minister, who for many years held a senior position in charge of institutional reform.⁸⁸ Although the reforms carried out under ATT were, in his opinion, at the very vanguard of efforts in Africa to ensure meritocracy, internal oversight and technological advancement in the state, the progress made on paper was constantly let down by practice. In particular, he pointed to the abuse of a special rubric for public sector employees, the *catégorie A*, which had been devised for short-term employment of skilled specialists, but ended up becoming the main form the entry into the civil service for close family, friends and political support networks: tens of thousands of people are believed to have entered public employment outside proper controls. “These people are everywhere. But the policy of recruitment to the police and the army was really scandalous,” he added.

Frustration within military circles eventually resulted in the coup of March 2012 led by Captain Sanogo, who has described state neglect of the military as “the main reason for our intervention”.⁸⁹ This resentment derived from various causes, including delayed or inadequate payment of wages and allowances, as well as from the half-hearted attempt to deal with the Tuareg insurgency and radical elements in the north – epitomized by the massacre in Aguelhok in January 2012, in which 97 soldiers were executed – in spite of years of financial and technical support from Western countries.⁹⁰ Crucially, ATT and senior military figures were perceived to have unjustifiably promoted 104 officers of the president’s own generation to the rank of general:⁹¹ as a result, the number of generals doubled in the space of two years.⁹² These appointees were allowed to indulge “in an unprecedented degree of corruption, wheeling and dealing”,⁹³ in return for their loyalty to the regime.

According to a former justice minister with excellent contacts inside the army, the manner in which a low-ranking captain such as Sanogo was handed leadership of the coup, and briefly of the state of Mali, reflected the anger over these abuses carried out by senior officers. These rackets included numerous forms of corruption, as well as a grossly distorted pay structure.⁹⁴ But nepotism stood out among the grievances, at least according to this source: “The very strong pressure on the back of the army chiefs from the palace, all the way through

86 Interview with European expert on Mali’s security and justice systems, Bamako, September 2013.

87 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

88 Interview in Bamako September 2013.

89 *Time*. 2012. “Mali’s Coup: Interview with an Improbable Strongman”. March 28.

90 Marchal, Roland. 2012. “The coup in Mali: the result of a long-term crisis or spillover from the Libyan civil war?” Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), p.3.

91 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

92 International Crisis Group 2012, op. cit., p. 18, footnote 139.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

94 For instance, according to a former minister a typical foot soldier receives CFA15,000 a month (€3), whereas top army generals are paid CFA500,000 (€70). Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

the executive, aimed without exception at placing a son, a nephew, a cousin or a niece in the armed and security forces.”⁹⁵

Other corruption rackets and patronage networks in the state without doubt involved far larger sums of money. The already minimal delivery of core services to the people, such as education, security and rule of law, deteriorated markedly under the presidency of ATT as a result of fraud.⁹⁶ Allegations of corrupt officials skimming aid funds, which represented 50 per cent of the government’s annual budget, have also been numerous. In 2010, for instance, the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria suspended aid to Mali, after US\$4 million of its grants were found to have disappeared into state officials’ pockets.⁹⁷ To keep the aid money flowing, the Malian leadership invented several creative ways to bypass donor conditionality.⁹⁸

Yet it was nepotism in recruitment across swathes of the public sector that was crucial to the propagation of illicit activities in Mali in two crucial ways. First, this practice was seemingly the most widely perceived and experienced misuse of Malian state powers, leading to rising disaffection with the political establishment that stretched far beyond the rebel confines of the north. One clear indication is that until 2013, average voter turnout in presidential and parliamentary elections since its transition to democracy stood at 29 per cent, one of the lowest rates in the world,⁹⁹ while popular opinion of the political class was overwhelmingly negative.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the Malian population has responded to these institutional deficits and entrenched corruption through a phenomenon known as *incivisme* (lack of public spirit). In 2002, for example, only 39 per cent of urban residents paid their taxes.¹⁰¹

Second, the recruitment of patently unfit and unqualified people in key positions in the army, security forces and judiciary undermined any expectation that the state might respond in the appropriate fashion to challenges to the law. This spread of “managed incompetence” across the police and courts, to use the expression offered by a senior prosecutor in Mali,¹⁰² appears to have been instrumental in the rise of the second major illicit network that emerged in the pre-conflict period, and which would play a pivotal role in Mali’s incorporation into global criminal networks.

95 This comment is extracted from the (unpublished) memoirs written by the former justice minister cited above, and consulted by the author.

96 Leininger, Julia. 2010. “Bringing the outside in: Illustrations from Haiti and Mali for the reconceptualization of democracy promotion”. *Contemporary Politics*, 16:1, p. 67.

97 See statement from the Global Fund, dated 7 December 2010: http://www.theglobalfund.org/en/mediacenter/newsreleases/2010-12-07_Global_Fund_suspends_two_malaria_grants_terminates_TB_grant_to_Mali/

98 For an overview of methods used to bypass donor conditions, see: Bergamaschi, op. cit., pp 238, 239. For more on the mistakes made by foreign donors, see Balt, Marije and Lankhorst, Marco. 2013. *Assisting Peacebuilding in Mali: Avoiding the Mistakes of the Past*. Policy brief, The Hague Institute for Global Justice, p. 7.

99 International IDEA. “Voter turnout data for Mali”. <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=ML>.

100 Van de Walle, Nicolas. 2012. *Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places. The donors and Mali’s democracy*. UNU-WIDER working paper, p. 12.

101 Pringle, Robert. 2006. “Democracy in Mali, Putting history to work”. Peaceworks no. 58. Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, pp 25-26.

102 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

The shadow state, and the case of Air Cocaine

The patronage networks that could be exploited by the government, and the consequent extinction of much of the democratic opposition in the country, provided the ideal context for the rise of unaccountable and clandestine powers in the executive branch. This tendency towards secretive activity within the state, however, was to reach its zenith only when it was combined with the new approach developed towards governing the north of Mali that followed the 2006 Algiers Accord. By seeking out preferred ethnic or militia factions, or bargaining over access to illicit markets or ransom payments for hostages, the central state established linkages which it was then able to exploit on a much wider scale. In effect, the executive in Bamako used its discretionary levers of power in the poorly governed north not just to achieve tactical objectives, but also to establish enormously lucrative trafficking routes by offering itself as an intermediary to interested foreign parties.

Hard evidence in this area is extremely hard to come by. Although legal actions are seemingly now being undertaken against ATT, it is uncertain whether the investigations will penetrate far into this murky domain. At the same time, it would seem logical to assume that for Mali to have become a key staging post in the trafficking of a compact and high-value product such as cocaine, it would have had to rely on trusted intermediaries linked to major Latin American cartels. In light of these criminal organizations' extensive dependence on state officials for conducting major transactions,¹⁰³ it is also natural to presume that the initiative to extend business into the Sahel would have required certain guarantees of state-based co-operation and facilitation. Furthermore, the most important drug trafficking case of all in Mali has left in its wake a major batch of evidence that would appear to prove the implication of numerous allied groups, including leading state officials.

The so-called Air Cocaine case of 2009 is the most significant known instance of drug trafficking in Mali. Investigations by the UNODC indicate that up to 10 tonnes of cocaine – a vast quantity, roughly equivalent to one per cent of the entire yearly global production of cocaine, or over one-third of Britain's entire yearly consumption¹⁰⁴ – were being carried on the Boeing 727 that was found to have landed in the desert near Tarkint, in the region of Gao in northern Mali. The drugs were unloaded, and appear to have then been moved across Morocco and other countries towards the European market.

Despite the flaws in judicial and police investigations, enough is now known of the case to be able to trace core responsibilities and levels of collusion. In so doing, the scale and extent of the network that brought about this feat of narco-trafficking become apparent. In Tarkint, it would seem that the local mayor, Baba Ould Cheick, himself a veteran of kidnapping negotiations with strong links to Islamist militants,¹⁰⁵ was involved in giving clearance to the plane so it could land and unload. Trafficking across the border would then have relied in all probability on local groups, possibly including armed protection provided by AQIM or other Islamist militia.

103 See, for example, O'Keefe, Patrick. 2012. "Cocaine Incorporated". *New York Times*, 15/06/12.

104 Figures from European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. 2012. *Annual report 2012. The state of the drugs problem in Europe*. Lisbon: EMCDDA, Chapter 5. It should be said that this figure does appear somewhat exaggerated, given that Colombia's largest-ever drug seizure, made in 2007 on the Pacific coast, was 25 tonnes.

105 See also the previous chapter for more details.

On the state side, the initial seizure of the investigation by the intelligence service DGSE, which excluded Malian aviation authorities as well as specialist counter-narcotic police from inspecting the plane for three to four weeks, has raised suspicions of collusion with traffickers at the highest levels of the state.¹⁰⁶ A senior police officer interviewed during this research reported that his forces knew the firm that had bulldozed the runway used by the plane, and had quickly established details of the company that had asked for permission to fly over Mali. Investigations, however, were delayed and blocked by “the president’s people”.¹⁰⁷

These suspicions over high-level collusion are not allayed by the ways in which the investigation proceeded after 2009. The most important breakthrough in the case followed the revelation by Moroccan authorities in October 2010 that 34 people had been arrested close to Rabat on charges of forming part of a narco-trafficking network responsible for carrying drugs across the Algerian and Mauritanian borders into the country, and from Morocco into Europe. On the basis of interrogations with the detained suspects, it emerged that the suspected head of the cartel was a former Spanish police officer with business interests in Bamako, called Miguel Ángel Devesa.

Devesa, it is now known, had been dismissed from the Spanish police force on charges relating to dereliction of duty, and had re-established himself in Bamako as a vendor of all-terrain vehicles, with an office in the same building as the country’s EU delegation. He had also sponsored a football team in Mopti, ATT’s home town, and was reputed to have excellent ties to leading lights in the then president’s government. At the time of the Moroccan revelations, he was nevertheless in jail after police had found the dismembered body of a Colombian drug trafficker on his business premises.¹⁰⁸

Investigations by various intelligence services in other countries proceeded to establish that the Boeing jet in question had left Panama, before landing in the Venezuelan city of Maracaibo – close to the Colombian border, and the site at which the cocaine was presumably loaded on to the plane. It had then headed for Africa, before cutting off radio contact once over Mali.¹⁰⁹ In June 2011, Malian prosecutor Sombé Théra announced that indictments had been served against a dozen suspects, and that three were under arrest: Devesa; his French business colleague and aviation expert Éric Vernet; and the Malian travel agent Mohamed Ben Hacko. Other arrests appear to have followed shortly after, although details were not made public in every case.

However, the prosecution fell apart following the start of the Malian crisis in a manner that reveals the extent of criminal collusion with the state, as well as illicit connections to the power politics of the north. First, in January 2012, the government reportedly agreed to release two arrested suspects on condition that they joined the Arab militia fighting the Tuareg rebellion stirring in the north, even promising to make one of the two, Mohamed Ould Awainat, a parliamentarian with full legal immunity once the combat was over.¹¹⁰ A few months later, Ben Hacko was also released: according to prosecutor Théra, this was because

106 US Embassy cable. 2010. “New Information on Crashed Drug Plane”. 10BAMAKO54. 01/02/10.

107 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

108 *El País*. 2011. “El ‘Air Cocaine’ tenía jefe español”. 26/06/11.

109 *Le Journal de Dimanche*. 2011. “Un Français dans la tourmente d’Air Cocaine.” 24/07/11.

110 *Toumastpress*. 2012. “Le Mali cherche une immunité parlementaire au baron de la drogue Ould Awainat”. 23/02/12; International Crisis Group 2012, op. cit., pp 4-5.

of a lack of evidence against him.¹¹¹ Finally, in August, it was revealed that the two last suspects, Devesa and Vernet, had also been released without charge. A few months before, an official at the Justice Ministry had admitted to a journalist that “there has been pressure to release the principal suspects”.¹¹² Meanwhile, one of Devesa’s legal representatives said during an interview carried out for this research that the case fell apart because proper procedures had not been observed by the DGSE in their presentation of evidence.¹¹³

As a result, no one is now facing charges for crimes relating to Air Cocaine. Moreover, there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that the powerful circuits guaranteeing impunity for the main participants in this racket have withstood the crisis of 2012. Sources in the prosecution service indicated that in April 2013, an arrest warrant was issued for a suspected Colombian drug trafficker in relation to the Air Cocaine case. Andrés José Solano Gaete¹¹⁴ was detained in Panama City airport, only to be released three months later because the Malian Ministry of Justice had failed to send the corresponding extradition documents.¹¹⁵

Criminal and radical optimization of the north

The previous chapter discussed in some depth the entry and penetration of armed and criminal groups into the interstices of north Malian society, above all in their role as agitators and accomplices in the competition between rival ethnic factions. The ability of these groups both to threaten local security and to generate substantial illicit revenues also meant they were of unusual, multi-faceted significance to the central state – as threats to the national interest, criminal partners, and potentially as a means to exploit Western counter-terrorist resources.¹¹⁶ It is exactly these double standards in the way armed and criminal groups were treated by the state that made the north so deeply vulnerable to insurgency.

Yet it is the sustained effort over a number of years to co-opt elites and local populations in the north that stands out as the core of armed and criminal groups’ strategy. Islamist groups such as AQIM and illicit networks were not the same, and did not hold identical objectives. But there is no doubting their shared aptitude in establishing broad support networks with the aim of optimizing their power in the under-governed and impoverished north. A mayor from a small city in the Gao region, for instance, revealed that drug traffickers would pay single men a monthly salary of CFA150,000 (€230), and married men CFA250,000 (€380) to secure smuggling routes, as well as generate some additional criminal income by cattle

111 *Le Prétoire*. 2012. “Affaire dite de ‘Boeing de la drogue’: Le Procureur Sombé Théra interjette appel contre la décision de juge d’instruction”. See http://www.malijet.com/a_la_une_du_mali/46592-affaire-dite-du-%E2%80%98boeing-de-la-drogue%E2%80%99-%3A-le-procureur-somb%C3%A9-th%C3%A9.html

112 *El Faro de Vigo*. 2012. “El policía vigués imputado por el avión de droga en Mali, en libertad al anularse el proceso”. 19/08/12.

113 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

114 The Interpol arrest warrant against this suspect can be found here: <http://www.interpol.int/notice/search/wanted/2013-21752>

115 The prosecution source in question added that many of the key figures in the DGSE intelligence service had not been moved from their posts.

116 Both Mauritania (particularly after its coup in 2008) and Algeria have been accused of exploiting and possibly even directing the activities of terrorist groups in the Sahel and the Sahara as a means to exert power and attract support from major Western allies (see Galy, Michel (ed.). 2013. *La Guerre au Mali*. Paris: La Découverte, pp 43-57).

rustling.¹¹⁷ For one veteran of northern Malian politics, public admiration for narco-traffickers in the Gao region is unmistakable: “People are jealous of narco-traffickers... They don’t have the choice. They don’t have any other activity.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, the distinction between this criminal activity and other brands of smuggling, which are essential to the region’s economic survival, are often blurred in practice.¹¹⁹

In spite of a dire reputation outside the north as proponents of sharia law and destroyers of Sufi shrines, the Islamist armed groups also took extraordinary care to cultivate and nurture local support. No better statement of the efforts to co-opt divided elites and publics in the north can be found than in the internal AQIM correspondence retrieved after the liberation of Timbuktu, in early 2013. A general strategic analysis, written by the emir of AQIM, Abdel-malek Droukdel, insists on the need to attend to local needs and incorporate as much of the population as possible within the “Islamic Jihadi project in Azawad”: “you should limit the circle of confrontation and of your enemies to the maximum... You are walking in a minefield full of tribalism, conspiracy, and revenge, corruption and arrogance.”¹²⁰

Although this advice was not always heeded by Islamist foot-soldiers, it confirms the intense efforts made by insurgents to capitalize on the grievances generated by poor state provision, poverty and splintered local interests. Recruitment of young assistants and helpers also gave these armed groups an immediate and undeniable cachet, and a considerable advantage over organizations like the MNLA that could not boast of such liquid resources. Figures offered by a variety of sources suggest that relatively small cash payments were highly effective. A UN official reported during the crisis that Islamists were paying families a fee of approximately US\$600 to enlist their children as drivers and fighters.¹²¹ Popular support during this period for armed groups such as AQIM – whose total number of fighters was estimated at less than 1,000 – also required extensive co-option of wary local people, either by offering salaries for new recruits, or by making payments for food, fuel and medical supplies, or even by financing the dowries of brides-to-be.¹²² Detailed accounts from AQIM authorities in Timbuktu tracked spending on a number of such items, including US\$4 “for a Shiite with a sick child”, and US\$100 for a man’s wedding.¹²³

It is of course untrue to say that all parts of northern Mali society approved of Islamist rebels, or brokered alliances with violent factions in the crisis of 2012. Secular Tuaregs in the MNLA, various Muslim groups, women’s organizations and Songhai community groups were all active in opposing the occupation.¹²⁴ In this regard, it is illustrative that UN estimates from the end of 2012 showed that over 400,000 people had been internally displaced or forced abroad

117 Interview by Conflict Research Unit, Bamako November 2013.

118 Interview, Bamako, September 2013.

119 “Most commercial families do a bit of everything.” See Scheele, 2011, op. cit. Moreover, the revenues generated by drug trafficking serves the purpose of financing a respectable, independent, Islamic lifestyle (Scheele. 2009, op. cit.).

120 See Associated Press. 2013. “Mali Al-Qaida’s Sahara Playbook”.

http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf

121 Lewis, David and Diarra, Adama. 2012. “Special Report: In the land of the ‘Gangster-jihadists’”. Reuters, 25/10/12.

122 Lecocq et al., op. cit., p. 9.

123 Callimachi, Rukmini. 2013. “\$0.60 for Cake. Al Qaeda Records Every Expense”. Associated Press 30/12/13. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/060-cake-al-qaida-records-every-expense>

124 For an excellent summary of the different sources of resistance in the north, see Lecocq, Baz et al., op. cit.

as a result of the fighting in the north.¹²⁵ Yet at the same time, there is broad agreement that the activities of armed groups, and their ability to generate large illegal profits, contributed to the general co-option of a much wider spectrum of society than ideological converts alone.

Ready cash, in short, was a key means to win over local people. It was also a vital way for all armed groups to gain rapid access to the cache of Libyan weapons made available upon Colonel Qadhafi's downfall in Libya.¹²⁶ But in arguing that illicit financial resources were instrumental in the success of insurgency in the north – as the evidence appears to support – the precise nature of the ties between different sorts of illicit activity, criminal groups and Islamist fighting units remains elusive, and vulnerable to over-simplification.

Two concerns in particular stand out. The first is the exact source of the money used by the rebels, and whether the profits of high-value drug trafficking were later deployed by the Tuareg and Islamist insurgencies. And the second, related issue is the nature of the understanding between criminal groups and the protagonists of the Islamist groups, in view of the fact that the occupation of the north would seem to have represented a limited gain and a very real threat to the formers' economic interests.

A number of experts argue that AQIM has played an important role in providing armed protection for drug convoys across the north.¹²⁷ But the evidence in this regard is far from overwhelming, and may merely indicate that 'taxes' had to be paid to cross the territory of any given armed faction.¹²⁸ Recovered Al Qaeda correspondence, in this case from AQIM's Shura Council, instead places wholehearted emphasis on kidnapping as the group's main source of revenue: "Kidnappings are at the top of military action in the Sahara region. The region has seen many of them, and they had important political, financial and media ramifications on the political and military front, as well as on the local, regional and international levels. We don't know of a single case that the Emirate [name for the collective of AQIM rulers] did not oversee."

A more explicit acknowledgement of the central role played by kidnapping of foreigners is hard to find. Assessments of the total revenue gained by this group and its offshoot MUJAO from the kidnapping business from 2003 to 2012 varies from US\$55 million to US\$120 million,¹²⁹ with a total of 72 hostages seized in the region – of whom 10 were executed.¹³⁰ This influx of cash not only financed recruits, allies and weapons. It also generated tacit support in certain government offices that received a cut from the ransom payments,¹³¹ as well as plentiful opportunities for enrichment for local criminals, who could reportedly be

125 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2012. "Mali: Appel global 2013". 13/12/12. <http://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-appel-global-2013>

126 Mokhtar Belmokhtar acknowledged AQIM receipt of Libyan weapons as early as November 2011, according to an interview with Mauritania's ANI news agency. See <http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=15829>

127 See, for instance, Antil, op. cit., p. 312.

128 This is indeed suggested by a US Embassy cable: "Northern Mali is divided into zones similar to those used by taxis in Washington DC. The more zones crossed, the higher the fare... AQIM likely pays taxes to cross some zones, and receives payments from others crossing AQIM territory." See "Berabiche and AQIM in Northern Mali". 08BAMAKO371. 17/04/08.

129 See Foreign Office, op. cit., for the lower estimate, and Galy (ed.), op. cit., p. 46 for the upper estimate (this latter figure is drawn from US government sources).

130 Galy (ed.), op. cit., p. 66.

131 See US Embassy cable. 2008, 08BAMAKO371.

paid US\$86,000 for handing over a Frenchman in 2011.¹³² Furthermore, it might arguably have provided the liquid assets needed to spur deeper involvement of northern Malian groups in high-value drug trafficking, for which the payment to international drug cartels of certain cash guarantees and advances is common practice.

However, there is as yet limited evidence to suggest that AQIM acted in any consistent fashion in support of drug trafficking, and no evidence that it took sides in the disputes over drug convoys that plagued the region from 2007 to 2010. Where ties between drug traffickers and Islamist factions are detected, in the case of both Ansar Dine and above all MUJAO, they mostly appear to have been ‘alliances of convenience’,¹³³ or the work of renegade Islamists with strained relations with their groups’ central command. This is most notably the case for Mokhtar Belmokhtar, whose soubriquet ‘Mr Marlboro’ derived from his early career in cigarette smuggling.¹³⁴

This arm’s-length relationship between drug trafficking and radical Islam may help to explain the seemingly self-destructive behaviour of traffickers in the events of 2012. Whereas successful criminal enterprises tend to seek greater levels of inconspicuousness and collusion with government bodies, the illicit networks that partnered the three Islamist factions would appear to have exposed themselves to much greater risks from an eventual security crackdown. No doubt there were certain improvised, tactical calculations made by trafficking groups, as a number of interviewees for this research suggested. However, it may also have been the case that the key criminal actors were confident that the range of their contacts in state and non-state bodies, as well as their local networks of patronage and dependence, would provide them with a certain level of protection during any eventual offensive against the Islamist insurgency.¹³⁵

132 ECOWAS Peace and Security Report, op. cit., p. 4.

133 Lacher 2013, op. cit., provides a much fuller analysis of this issue.

134 ECOWAS Peace and Security Report, op. cit., p. 3.

135 Relations between AQIM and criminal groups were “almost wholly based on economic interest. Many local officials swiftly changed alignments as the political climate changed.” See Musilli, Pietro and Smith, Patrick. 2013. “The lawless roads: an overview of turbulence across the Sahel”. Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF).

4. The international intervention and tensions in the north

Following several months of discussion, the UN Security Council in October and December 2012 approved two resolutions aimed at establishing an African-led military force to support Mali in liberating the country's north from the grip of Islamist rebels. However, events outpaced the timetable for UN planning: a sudden and unexpected advance south by combatants from Ansar Dine and AQIM generated an urgent plea for assistance from the Malian president to France. On 11 January 2013, the French responded with an aerial assault under the aegis of Opération Serval, whose success in halting the advance, as well as clearing the main urban centres of the north of their rebel authorities over the following weeks, with the help of troops from Chad, provided the catalyst for a rapid succession of major national and international initiatives.

In the wake of Serval, the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali, MINUSMA, was established in April 2013, with the primary goal of “stabilization” of northern Mali.¹³⁶ This was complemented by a flurry of inter-connected international commitments: an EU Training Mission for the Malian armed forces (launched in February 2013), a donors' conference which in May 2013 pledged €2.5 billion in aid,¹³⁷ and a series of new or disinterred bilateral aid schemes aimed at supporting the transitional process.

In turn, Mali's internal transition, whose details and phases had been laid out in a road map published by the prime minister's office early in 2013,¹³⁸ forged ahead at surprising speed. By July, the first round of presidential elections were held, with the aim of sealing the return to legitimate democratic governance whose very foundations had been challenged by the coup of March 2012 and the troubled civil-military relations in Bamako that followed. A second round of polling, held in August, confirmed Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), a veteran politician with excellent international ties who had competed against ATT in the 2007 elections, as the new president.¹³⁹ Legislative elections followed in November and December.

Lastly, a third and crucial element to the reconstruction process was initiated in the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou. A preliminary agreement was signed in June between the Malian state and three armed groups, in which the bases for future UN-supported peace talks and eventual demobilization were established. To some surprise, the separatist MNLA

136 A total of 12,640 military and police personnel were envisaged as part of this mission. As of the end of 2013, a total of 6,439 had been recruited. See “MINUSMA facts and figures”: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/facts.shtml>

137 Agence France-Presse. 2013. “Mali donor conference raises 3.25bn euros”. 15/05/13. See <http://reliefweb.int/report/mali/mali-donor-conference-raises-325-bn-euros>

138 See République du Mali. 2013. *Feuille de Route Pour la Transition*. http://donor-conference-mali.eu/sites/default/files/generated/pdf/page/2_Feuille%20de%20Route%20Mali%20version%20finale%2026%20janvier%202013.pdf

139 An excellent overview of IBK's career can be found in Whitehouse, Bruce. 2013. “IBK the Shapeshifter: A Portrait of Mali's Probable Next President”. 02/08/12, Think Africa Press. <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/ibk-shapeshifter-portrait-malis-next-president>

agreed to recognize the territorial integrity of Mali. However, grounds for optimism were to be tempered after the presidential elections by fractures between the groups, and series of ruptures in the talks as events in the north unfolded.

Stresses in the north

It is precisely these tensions and uncertainties in the north than continue to bedevil the pacification of Mali. The next chapter will address in more depth what we know of the current conditions of the three illicit and criminal networks that existed prior to the 2012 crisis, and how these are likely to evolve. Yet the more immediate concern has proved, understandably, to be the prospect of a regression to warfare or mass violence, albeit this time with a much deeper engagement of foreign troops. On this basis, the progress in the transition summarized above must be gauged against the principal sources of conflict risk. These include a resurgence of violence and armed attacks by rebel forces, whether in Mali or nearby; the threat to peaceful relations between the ethnic and tribal components in the north; and the actions of the state institutions of Mali that are now being re-established.

On current evidence, northern Mali remains at a clear risk from insurgent armed activity. Indeed, by late 2013 and early 2014, French troops had embarked on intense counter-terrorist operations around Timbuktu and other sites, with dozens of reported fatalities among the insurgents.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, key leaders of the Islamist occupation, including Abdelmalek Droukdel (author of the AQIM strategy documents noted in the previous chapter), Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Iyad ag Ghali, remain at large.¹⁴¹ Belmokhtar's rogue AQIM unit has seemingly united with the remnants of MUJAO to form a new brigade, Al-Murabitoun. Having already led several terrorist operations in the first half of 2013, notably the attacks against the In-Amenas gas refinery in Algeria and the Arlit Uranium mine in Niger, Belmokhtar's appears to have refocused his attention on the Gao region, where a stepping up in rebel operations has been noted. These include rocket fusillades against the city, and the kidnapping in February of four Red Cross workers and an employee of another relief organization.¹⁴²

According to one leading Kidal politician interviewed for this report,¹⁴³ Ag Ghali has retreated with his forces to the forbidding mountain range Adrar des Ifoghas on the Malian border with Algeria. From this site, he has proved able to operate with a small and mobile military force of 50 men, influence hostage and ransom negotiations – possibly including that which led to release of four French hostages in October 2013,¹⁴⁴ with estimated revenues for the Islamist

140 French President François Hollande confirmed at the end of October 2013 that 1,500 of the remaining 2,500 Serval troops would be engaged in counter-terrorist operations. The deaths of 19 jihadists was reported in December 2013, and of a further 11 in January 2014. Precise details of these operations have not been made public. See *Libération*. 2013. "Paris mène une vaste opération contre le terrorisme au Mali". 25/10/13; *Jeune Afrique*. 2013. "Nord Mali: éradiquer AQMI, la nouvelle priorité de l'opération Serval". 20/12/13; Agence France-Presse. 2014. "Mali: onze jihadistes tués dans une opération de 'contre-terrorisme'". 24/01/14.

141 On the other hand, one of AQIM's top three military commanders, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, was killed in early 2013.

142 France 24. 2014. "Le MUJAO revendique l'enlèvement d'une équipe de la Croix Rouge au Mali". 11/02/14. http://www.france24.com/fr/20140211-mali-mujao-revendication-enlevement-cicr-mali-croix-rouge-ong-al-qaida/#./?&_suid=139281503728609906125568014159

143 Interview Bamako, September 2013.

144 These hostages were part of a group of seven seized in September 2011. Three members of that group had already been released in February 2011.

kidnappers of at least €20 million¹⁴⁵ – and bring his influence to bear on his former allies. Foremost among these are the Ansar Dine's offshoot, the High Council for Unity in Azawad (HCUA), which is represented in the peace talks with the Malian state, and whose chief was previously a noted member of Ag Ghali's force.

The delicate and porous membrane separating groups seeking peace and armed extremist spoilers, as well as the tense relations between MNLA combatants¹⁴⁶ and any representatives of the Malian state or security forces, shapes the complexity and turbulence of politics in the town of Kidal, and helps account for the continuing episodes of violence in and around that city. A clear indication of the inter-penetration between armed factions, even in spite of a considerable MINUSMA presence in the city, can be found in the murder of two Radio France International journalists at the start of November 2013. Reports indicate that the two were victims of an attempted kidnapping carried out by a certain Baye ag Bakabo, who was linked to a local AQIM commander as well as to the MNLA and to the HCUA, with whom he had been based in a local cantonment in the weeks prior to the assault.

In keeping with the recent history of northern Mali, these manoeuvres, rebrandings and reshuffles in the Islamist and Tuareg insurgent domain overlap with complex conflict dynamics at the broader, regional level, as well as with more local antagonisms. AQIM is widely thought to have regrouped in southern Libya, and to be seeking influence over that country's violent transition. There is abundant, although fragmentary evidence of this shift.¹⁴⁷ It is particularly worth noting that the culprit behind the first suicide bombing in Libya since the end of the war, carried out in December 2013, was reportedly a Malian.¹⁴⁸

For many in northern Mali, meanwhile, the more pressing concern is the re-emergence of ethnic and tribal cleavages of the sort that have proved so damaging to community relations over the past 25 years, and which previously gave criminal and armed groups the opportunities to cultivate numerous local alliances. The shock waves of the international intervention, and its dampening effect on trafficking circuits and business activity, appear to have been acutely felt among well-armed rival ethnic groups. Immediately following the French intervention, a number of reprisals against Tuaregs and Arabs accused of collaborating with the Islamists were recorded.

Since then, Arabs and Tuaregs in Mali, and just across the frontier with Algeria, have engaged in sporadic clashes, with tensions running high in the town of Ber close to Timbuktu, and in the Algerian border town of Bordj Badji Mokhtar, where at least 15 deaths were reported in August 2013.¹⁴⁹ These skirmishes are themselves refracted through the competition between armed militia such as the MNLA and MAA, which seek to offer their weapons and services to their preferred ethnic faction. However, the most lethal sectarian violence seen so far appears

145 This figure was provided to *Le Monde* by a French source with apparent knowledge of the release operation, and was allegedly paid from the funds of the French secret services (although other accounts suggest that the uranium mining company for which the men worked, Areva, paid the bill). See Follorou, Jacques. 2013. "Otages d'Arli: les dessous de la négociation". *Le Monde*, 30/10/13.

146 The MNLA fighters are supposedly cantoned in two sites in Kidal, but there is reportedly little control over their movements.

147 See Smits, Rosan, Janssen, Floor and Briscoe, Ivan. 2013. *Revolution and its Discontents: State, Factions and Violence in the New Libya*. The Hague: Conflict Research Unit-Clingendael Institute.

148 Dettmer, Jamie. 2013. "Benghazi Suicide Bomber: Is Libya al Qaeda's New Hotbed?" *The Daily Beast*, 22/12/13.

149 Information from internal UN reports.

to have occurred in February 2014 between the pastoral Fulani ethnic group and Tuaregs in Tamkoutat, in the Gao region. A total of 31 Tuaregs were killed in a massacre that has been attributed by one government minister to inter-communal tensions over the theft of livestock belonging to the Fulani – the sort of rustling that has long been associated with ethnic skirmishes across northern Mali.¹⁵⁰ Unconfirmed claims from certain government ministers, including the interior minister, indicate that MUJAO combatants may have been involved.¹⁵¹

Within this context of ubiquitous armed factions and ongoing ethnic tensions, the Malian state has struggled to reassert itself in the north; indeed, it may even have contributed to some of these tensions through its eagerness to resume a normal presence. Ministers and officials visiting Kidal have regularly been treated to violent demonstrations, while the MNLA and Malian soldiers have clashed on several occasions.¹⁵² Police have returned to the three main cities of the north and judges to two of them (but not Kidal), and their return has been welcomed in many communities. However, their authority remains tenuous and contested. According to one senior police officer in Bamako, late last year the force was still unable to patrol outside city limits, while most of the policemen were unarmed and had “fear in their belly”.¹⁵³ In Kidal, meanwhile, Malian troops only patrol in the company of MINUSMA peacekeepers, while all the departments of the Malian state are housed within the town hall. “Two powers are in Kidal,” a Chadian army officer is reported to have commented, “the Malian government, which is in a sort of jail, and the armed Tuaregs, who are at home.”¹⁵⁴

150 Grémont et al, *op. cit.*, Chapter 1.

151 The minister of national reconciliation, Cheick Oumar Diarra, nevertheless rejected these claims.

152 See, for instance, Agence France-Presse. 2013. “Army and militants clash in conflict-scarred Mali”. November. <http://reliefweb.int/report/mali/army-and-militants-clash-conflict-scarred-mali>

153 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

154 Maliactu. 2014. “Dans le nord de Mali, Kidal; reste la ville de tous les dangers”. 10/02/14.

5. What has become of the illicit networks?

The magnitude of the international presence in Mali, the shock waves that have been felt across the Sahel and the Sahara from conflict in the country as well as in Libya, and the speed of the democratic transition under way in Bamako all signal deep changes in the conditions under which criminal organizations can operate. Information on the illicit activities being carried on at present is not easily available, nor are police and judicial investigations always a reliable guide. However, a certain amount of evidence suggests that each of the networks analysed in Chapter 3 is undergoing changes in its operating conditions. Using the information that is available, as well as precedents provided by the reconfiguration of other criminal groups, it is possible to plot some of the more probable developments in the main illicit structures within Mali.

Nepotism and corruption in the state

The arrival of the new president, IBK, would appear to have ushered in a novel approach towards the chronic corruption of Mali's public sphere, and the prospect of an end to a decade of predatory, patronage-driven governance. Popular demand for an anti-graft campaign is undoubtedly strong: a survey from late 2013 indicated that 58.8 per cent of Malians believed the fight against corruption and injustice should be one of the president's priorities, a figure surpassed only by the number demanding peace and security in the north.¹⁵⁵

Early gestures from the president signalled a radical turn in management of the judiciary: the justice minister was elevated to a rank just beneath the prime minister after the Cabinet was appointed in early September. Two presidential speeches, meanwhile, placed emphasis on eliminating "money-based procedures in the offices of judges who are forgetful of ethics".¹⁵⁶ Above and beyond the rhetoric, major exemplary actions have been undertaken. Judges ordered the arrest of coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo in November on charges relating to the forced disappearance of around 20 rival military officers following the putsch (at the time of writing he is still remanded in custody).¹⁵⁷ Former prime minister Oumar Tatam Ly, meanwhile, announced that legal actions would be filed against ATT for crimes of treason during his time in power.¹⁵⁸

However, there are strong reasons to believe there will be stiff resistance to any moves to alter the mechanisms by which jobs, contracts and privileges are handed out from the public sector so as to satisfy parliamentarians' needs and those of other powerful vested interests. The nature of IBK's assumption of the presidency suggests that the continuity of

155 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. 2013. *Enquête d'opinion*. Bamako: FES, p. 45.

156 *Le Prétoire*. 2013. "IBK: La Croisade contre la corruption au sein de la justice". 24/09/13. <http://www.maliweb.net/corruption-lutte-contre-la/ibk-la-croisade-contre-la-corruption-au-sein-de-la-justice-171468.html>

157 For comprehensive information on the state of these investigations, see Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme. 2014. Mali. *La Justice en Marche*. Paris: FIDH.

158 The former president is believed to have taken up residence in Dakar, Senegal.

corrupt and nepotistic practices remains a concern. A total of 34 ministers were appointed to the president's first Cabinet, with a wide range of interest groups represented. Seasoned political observers in Bamako, meanwhile, expressed concern over the share of state spoils that may be demanded by the 20 presidential candidates who supported IBK in the second round of polling,¹⁵⁹ or by the Islamic social movement Sabati, which backed the new president in the final vote. So far, President Keïta appears to have resisted such special pleading. However, the recent appointment of the president's son, Karim Keïta, as chair of the defence committee in the National Assembly, and of Karim's father-in-law, Issaka Sidibé, as president of the Assembly, has raised doubts over the resolve of the president to eliminate nepotistic practices. These and other concerns over "dysfunctions" in the new government appear to have motivated the resignation of Prime Minister Oumar Tatam Ly in April 2014.¹⁶⁰

Within the public sector, and particularly the police and judiciary, expectations of a determined purge of tainted employees and a return to meritocratic recruitment may also have to be tempered in the short run. The power of unions (*syndicats*) within the public sector was demonstrated by the support some of them gave to the coup in 2012. Their campaigning on behalf of employees threatened with redundancy or redeployment was noted by a high-ranking police officer as a constant source of internal disruption: he mentioned that five different union factions were active within his force.¹⁶¹ Although foreign resources and technical assistance are now flowing towards these sectors through MINUSMA, the EU and bilateral donors, there is no doubt in the mind of one European police expert that the process of re-equipping, training and restructuring the security forces and the judiciary would take about one to two decades. An illustrative case of the disrepair of these bodies can be found in the National Drug Control Office,¹⁶² created with French funds in 2010, but now described by this expert as a hollowed-out façade: "Its premises are empty, very little activity is conducted, and most of the personnel have been moved elsewhere."¹⁶³

The shadow state

Changes across the front line of political life, and above all in the presidency, appear to have done much to eliminate the shadow state structures that proliferated under ATT. Mamy Coulibaly, head of the intelligence service DGSE until March 2011, and a reputedly pivotal figure in the handling of northern Mali, was last reported to be serving as head of Mali's consulate in Côte d'Ivoire. Intermediaries with formerly easy access to the pinnacles of the state, whose activities are described in Chapter 2, are generally in hiding: Ag Ghali is supposedly in his mountain refuge, Deity ag Sidimou is said to be holed up in his home base of Tessalit, close to the Algerian border,¹⁶⁴ while Baba Ould Cheick was arrested in 2013 after a first attempt at seizing him failed. Likewise, there is no indication that the prime suspects in the Air Cocaine case, all of whom were released in 2012, have resumed any illicit business activities in Mali.

159 A total of 28 candidates stood in the first round.

160 This is the word chosen by the former premier minister in his letter of resignation. No concrete reason for his decision was given. Maliweb. 2014. "La lettre de l'ex premier ministre Oumar Tatam Ly." 06/04/14: <http://www.maliweb.net/politique/gouvernement/lettre-demission-lex-premier-ministre-oumar-tatam-ly-222002.html>

161 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

162 In French : *Office de Lutte contre les Stupéfiants*.

163 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

164 See Chapter 2 for details on Baba Ould Cheick. Deity ag Sidimou's current location was provided by sources from Kidal.

Meanwhile, judicial pressure has been exerted against several key figures in the criminal economy. Indictments were served in February 2013 against 28 leading drug traffickers and armed rebel leaders from the north, including the three men mentioned above. However, warrants were later lifted against four of these suspects because of their role as leaders of the MNLA and HCUA,¹⁶⁵ which are both represented in peace talks with the government, as well as in the preservation of peace in Tuareg-dominated areas of northern Mali such as Kidal. However, in the eyes of senior Malian officials these warrants still serve a useful deterrent purpose and are a potential bargaining chip.

Lastly, the proposal to create a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission was given a fresh lease of life by the president in December, and was approved in March by the National Assembly. With a mandate due to last for three years, the Commission is expected to investigate crimes committed during armed conflicts that have affected in Mali since independence, and as a result may uncover fresh details about the connections between the central state, northern intermediaries and armed or criminal groups. Depending on the evidence amassed, the Commission might conceivably provide a basis for future prosecutions, possibly including that of ATT and his senior ministers.

However, this cluster of names and notorious figures from the disreputable past does not account for the entirety of the shadow state structure. A senior figure in the prosecution service expressed his conviction in an interview that the structures of impunity and criminal facilitation within the DGSE had not been altered,¹⁶⁶ as appears to have been shown by the botched extradition of a Colombian trafficker.¹⁶⁷ Most importantly, the criminal presence in Malian governance is likely to undergo the same adaptive process that has been witnessed in numerous countries, notably Colombia, Mexico and several Central American countries. The erosion of illicit ties to central government has in those contexts prompted a rearrangement of spheres of influence, with criminal networks focusing their energies instead on more pliable bodies, such as parliamentarians, municipal authorities and local security forces.

Although it is too soon to assess where illicit influence might be most effectively exerted in the future, a number of risks are worth highlighting. IBK's party, *Rassemblement pour Mali*, has become the dominant force in the National Assembly after elections late last year (winning 115 out of 147 seats); the consequences are difficult to foretell. On one side, the solidity of the president's ruling coalition might conceivably offset the reluctance of ministers to receive open parliamentary criticism, particularly if backbenchers grow restless with the government. However, as was the case under ATT, smaller parties are jostling to support the ruling party in exchange for official favours, while the significant costs incurred in election campaigns by all candidates will have to be recouped.¹⁶⁸ Concern as to the possible influence of illicit business on the legislature is reinforced by the inclusion of northern Malian deputies suspected of links to narco-trafficking and to Islamist armed groups in RPM's parliamentary caucus.¹⁶⁹ Alternatively, their inclusion could be viewed as excusable so long as it is a strategy of political co-option.

165 Agence France-Presse. 2013. "Levée des mandats d'arrêt contre des chefs rebelles touareg". 29/10/13.

166 Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

167 See Chapter 3.

168 Van Vliet, op. cit., p. 57.

169 See Global Initiative, op.cit., p. 16; *Africa Confidential*. 2014. "Talking Timbuktu." 21/03/14.

Municipal elections, which have been postponed to October this year, might also offer a platform for criminal influence, as was the case during the 2009 poll. However, for now, the list of decentralized powers in Mali is limited, and they do not extend to provision of local security or exclusive control over land. As a result, the gains to criminal actors from co-opting local authorities would appear to be more symbolic than material, although this balance could well change if President Keïta's desire to deepen decentralization and regional autonomy in Mali¹⁷⁰ move ahead without stricter means for oversight and transparency in local electoral processes.

Whichever institutions are targeted by criminal actors, it is likely that clan-based connections, the sources and structures of which are extremely difficult to track in Mali, will serve as useful bonds of trust and honour in perpetuating illicit activity.

Illicit activity in the north

Low-intensity armed violence continues to affect northern Mali, making the continued presence of MINUSMA peacekeepers an essential part of the country's post-conflict recovery. It is clear from recent events, recounted in the previous chapter, that the threat of kidnapping, terrorist attacks and ethnic or tribal skirmishes remains high. The complex condition of the hinterland, and its volatile links with non-state armed groups, undergirds the character of MINUSMA as an 'intelligence-led' mission.¹⁷¹ In some ways, the north remains what the military theorist Emile Simpson describes as a "highly politicised, kaleidoscopic conflict environment",¹⁷² in which poorly conceived counter-insurgent operations could backfire by cementing a broad front of multi-factional resistance.

What is less easily decipherable at present is the exploitation of northern Mali as a zone for intensive illicit trafficking. Smuggling undoubtedly is still being carried out, albeit with the difficulties caused by the official closure of the Algerian border from January 2013,¹⁷³ and uncertainty over which armed group controls a given parcel of territory. Yet it is higher-value trafficking, above all of cocaine, and to a lesser extent amphetamine-type substances (ATS) and Moroccan hashish, that appear to face a more serious challenge. In particular, groups transporting cocaine convoys, valued at millions of US dollars, should in theory face hostile conditions right now in northern Mali. A proliferation of armed groups and foreign peacekeepers and soldiers make the deals needed for protection and safe passage more difficult to assure, and the risk of surveillance considerably larger.¹⁷⁴ The eclipse of the Malian shadow state, as well as its trusted intermediaries, deprives transnational traffickers of one of the guarantees of compensation they may once have had in case of loss or theft. The retreat of AQIM and other Islamist groups, also able to arbitrate over the entire north, has removed

170 Diallo, Tiemoko. 2013. "Mali's Keïta calls for more local autonomy, rejects secession". Reuters 21/10/13.

171 Information and intelligence gathering is due to be centred in an All Sources Information Fusion Unit, based in Bamako. Interview with MINUSMA official, September 2013.

172 Simpson, op. cit., p. 5.

173 The borders were closed in January 2013 as a response to the French military offensive. In November, it was announced that the crossing would be reopened once every fortnight. See BBC Afrique. 2013. "Mali: l'Algérie retrouve la frontière". http://www.bbc.co.uk/afrique/region/2013/11/131111_mali_algerie_frontieres.shtml

174 According to Malian judicial sources, traffickers are no longer able to use satellite phones, owing to French intercepts. Interview in Bamako, September 2013.

the sole alternative guarantor; by November 2013, a reported 201 people had been jailed on charges relating to war crimes in the north.¹⁷⁵

As well as appearing less enticing to traffickers, Mali is drawing on a much smaller supply line. The quantities of cocaine that are reportedly traversing West Africa have declined, with a reduction to less than half of the quantities estimated for 2007.¹⁷⁶ For getting from Latin America to Europe – the most lucrative final market for cocaine after North America – other routes seem to have gained greater traction. The UNODC reports that maritime shipments now account for 41 per cent of all seized drugs.¹⁷⁷ This trend is supported by evidence of drug trafficking and corrupted customs services through a number of Latin America's most active seaports.¹⁷⁸ Direct routes that cross the Atlantic, skirting Africa entirely, are not restricted to transport by sea. The largest haul of cocaine in Europe last year was recorded in Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, where 1.3 tonnes of cocaine was found in 30 suitcases on an Air France flight from Venezuela.¹⁷⁹

However, it would be premature to assume that Mali has no future in the narcotic trade. Drugs continue to flow across the Sahara and Sahel, even if it remains extremely difficult to confirm what portions of these convoys are composed of cocaine, or other, more bulky and less valuable substances, such as ATS or hashish, or how these trades compare in value to illicit streams of smuggled cigarettes and arms.

For now, it appears that drug trafficking has been displaced to Niger, where fighting between a 12-vehicle drug convoy and the armed forces was reported last September,¹⁸⁰ and whose foreign minister has asked for the US to deploy armed drones so as to “shoot down” the traffickers.¹⁸¹ Algeria declared a war on drugs last July, deploying a reported 25,000 border guards for the purpose.¹⁸² However, the consequences for trafficking through the south of the country are uncertain, since Algerian security forces are well known for a traditionally complicit disposition towards the drug trade. Likewise, Libya's booming illicit marketplace, once protected under Colonel Qadhafi's regime, has been associated with a rise in narco-trafficking and other illicit flows.¹⁸³ Once again, however, few seizures have been made, and the trade appears to be largely made up of hashish, ATS and prescription medicines.

175 Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme, op. cit., p. 9.

176 See Chapter 2 for an overview of Mali's reported involvement in the global cocaine trade over recent years.

177 UNODC. 2013b. *World Drug Report 2013*. Vienna: UN, p. 20.

178 See Romero, Mauricio. 2014. “Puerto de Buenaventura” in forthcoming book from IDEA International on illicit networks in Latin America.

179 BBC. 2013. “Huge cocaine haul seized on Air France plane in Paris”. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24191714>. It is worth noting that the Air Cocaine flight also left from Venezuela.

180 Radio France International. 2013. “Niger: combats entre l'armée et des narcotrafiquants dans le Ténéré”. 06/09/13. http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130906-niger-combats-entre-armee-narcotrafiquants-passe-salvador/#./?&_suid=1392988073226011823046764343348

181 Reuters. 2013. “Niger would welcome armed US drones: foreign minister.” 18/09/13. According to Global Initiative, op. cit., p. 9, between 7 and 30 convoys cross the Niger-Libya border daily.

182 Magharebia. 2013. “L'Algérie intensifie ses efforts contre le trafic de drogue”. <http://magharebia.com/fr/articles/awi/features/2013/07/25/feature-03>

183 See Global Initiative, op. cit., p. 9.

According to one Kidal-based political source, Mali has indeed been displaced from the main drug routes.¹⁸⁴ Whereas formerly it was connected to the eastward trade routes in these substances, now it is being avoided entirely. Reportedly, the main route currently moves from Polisario Front control in the Western Sahara, through Mauritania, to southern Algeria, northern Niger and on to Libya. From Libya, the substances can then be moved by boat to Europe, or overland to the Middle East and the Gulf.

Drug trafficking activity in Mali, in short, is now a somewhat diminished activity. Of the few cocaine seizures made last year, most were at Bamako airport, and involved small quantities smuggled without sign of involvement by a larger criminal organization. A citizen of Sierra Leone was arrested in April for carrying a kilogramme of cocaine from Lisbon, as was a Bolivian carrying 5.5 kilogrammes in December.¹⁸⁵ On the basis of these arrests, it is safe to assume there is a regular flow of small quantities of narcotics in and out of the airport.

However, the apparent marginalization of Mali from the most profitable drug trade cannot be assumed to be permanent. Across the main cities of the north, knowledgeable traffickers with experience in the drug trade, transnational connections and powerful political linkages retain major shares of influence. According to sources consulted, these include Ablil ag Albacher in Kidal, who is an Ifoghas and a nephew of Algabass ag Intallah; a number of senior leaders in the MNLA; and Cherif Ould Sidi (aka Cherif Ould Tahar), an Arab businessman from Gao who is linked to MUJAO and is now reportedly resident in Burkina Faso.¹⁸⁶ It appears that Ould Sidi may now be involved in negotiations aimed at releasing six Algerian hostages held by MUJAO since 2012.

Alongside evidence that trafficking networks, entrepreneurs and intermediaries are still in place, there is little doubt that drug trafficking maintains an extraordinary allure for many inhabitants of the north. To some, indeed, it appears the sole route to riches. So strong is the basic structure for trafficking that some analysts argue that the drug trade has not been seriously affected by the retreat of Islamist rebels, or the arrival of foreign troops and peacekeepers.¹⁸⁷ However, a number of sources in the judiciary and police consulted for this research, as well as independent experts, remain convinced that conditions are at present hostile for the high-value transit of narcotics. This reduction in the value of smuggled goods, as well as the closure of the Algerian border, would appear to underlie the ethnic violence that affected the frontier last year. These skirmishes may also be derived from a renewed interest in controlling territory for future natural resources exploitation. Northern Mali's potential production of oil and gas has stimulated the acquisition of mineral rights by a dozen multinational firms in recent years, although one of the most important, the Italian firm ENI, handed back its licences, citing the area's low potential. Prospecting for uranium, gold and other rare minerals has also occurred, although without any definitive success.¹⁸⁸

184 Interview Bamako September 2013.

185 *Le Coq*. 2013. "Aéroport de Bamako-Sénou: la lutte contre la drogue divise les forces de sécurité". 11/04./13. <http://www.maliweb.net/societe/aeroport-de-bamako-senou-la-lutte-contre-la-drogue-divise-les-forces-de-securite-139051.html>; Maliactu. 2014. "Aéroport de Sénou: Saisie de 5,5 kg de cocaïne". 06/01/14. <https://www.maliweb.net/faits-divers/aeroport-de-senou-saisie-de-55-kg-de-cocaine-188003.html>

186 Information from interviews and unpublished papers.

187 Global Initiative, op. cit., p. 9.

188 Galy (ed.), op. cit., pp 32-34.

Indeed, criminal activity appears to be seeking out new domains for profit. Whereas Malian involvement in transnational trafficking is seemingly stagnant or on the wane, the role of armed groups in establishing coercive protection rackets has become a notable aspect of post-conflict northern Mali. UN internal documents on Mali point to this fragmentation among armed groups such as the MNLA, MAA, HCUA or the new, roving Islamist forces, each of which seek their share of 'local taxes'; this dynamic would help explain the extreme violence with which Fulani pastoralists responded to Tuareg livestock theft earlier this year. Although the revenues made by extorting local business are invariably smaller than those from transnational trafficking, they at least provide a steady income, and most importantly, the sort of firm territorial grip that can later be exploited as a political base, medium for influence in the central government, and platform for future illicit flows. It is not improbable that the protection economy currently emerging in northern Mali will thus consolidate the dynamics that were witnessed in abbreviated form before and during the 2012 crisis: a fusion of criminal and armed activity, and the connection of both to new niches in the state.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Mali found its way into the transnational criminal economy through the displacement of trafficking routes from elsewhere, as well as by the huge competitive advantages offered by an established, well-connected and socially rooted smuggling economy in the north of the country. Yet this process, which generated new income through a variety of illicit commodities, was far from being a self-contained business operation, as it may at first appear.

On one side, it was concurrent with a catalogue of other foreign influences on Mali, whether the spread of jihadists from Algeria after the end of that country's civil war (and their kidnapping rackets), or the meddling of neighbouring and nearby states in the unsettled north. On the other side, the boost to criminal revenues had a profound impact on all the Malian interest groups that had attached themselves to the trafficking business for strategic and economic reasons: the central state, local political elites, as well as rival ethnic and tribal factions. Criminal connections to these various vested interests, whether they were foreign or domestic, state or non-state, socially dominant or subordinate, brought the illicit economy into multiple spheres of influence. This was not crime in a vacuum, but in a crowd.

This paper has sought to examine the processes whereby the core economic and geographic logic propelling the expansion of transnational crime in Mali fed into the objectives and tactics of these multiple groups and bodies. It has emphasized the crucial role played by the competitive escalation between ethnic and caste groups in the north of the country, as well as the part played by state officials and their fixers in informally coordinating illicit business. The effects of this broader constellation of interests and its links to crime were to become fully visible in the war and crisis of 2012. Deep Tuareg grievance drove the initial rebellion, and the separatist rallying cry of Azawad. But very soon after the outbreak of hostilities, a structure of armed competition emerged that owed much to interdependence with crime. The marginalization of the MNLA and the rise of MUJAO, the military coup led by low-ranking officers, and the support networks established by the Islamists in the main northern cities cannot be understood without invoking the role played by criminal organizations and revenues.

Now, as the international community squares up to an extended engagement in a country that remains conflict-prone, the issue of what to do about Mali's criminal economy commands ever greater attention. Without proposing detailed programmatic interventions, a number of guides to future policy suggest themselves.

A robust and inclusive political settlement

In light of the competitive complicity with criminal and terrorist groups in the past, a vital precondition for future stability in the north is a political settlement that rules out the exclusion of any social group. This common-sense position is recognized by all donors, although the route to it via government peace talks with supposedly moderate armed groups, as well as broader dialogue with civil society in the north, is strewn with obstacles, including

doubts over the real political commitment of Bamako. For now, the priority would appear to be centred on building confidence across the ethnic divides, isolating spoilers in Bamako and the north, and impressing on all parties the material benefits of co-operation with the dialogue process. Strong buy-in for negotiated peace from nearby countries that have long been involved in northern Mali is also an essential condition, and a diplomatic priority.

Arguably, one achievable settlement would see a deepening of the northern region's autonomy, possibly as part of a nation-wide consolidation of decentralized governance of the sort proposed by President Keïta. But for this initiative to win the approval of armed groups and other northern constituencies, it would most likely require the devolution of powers over core state capacities in areas such as public revenue, mineral resources, security and justice. One major risk would be to repeat what has already been witnessed in a number of Latin American countries: an intensification in criminal efforts to wrest control over empowered and enriched local authorities. This risk would become acute should local authorities become the conduits for foreign investment into northern Mali's as yet untapped natural resources.

At the same time, decentralization that preserves a significant supervisory role for Bamako would either reintroduce governance by remote control (such as through the authority to dismiss tainted local authorities), or reignite the separatist impulse. Preventing these outcomes in Mali requires sustained strategic thinking on how oversight of democracy and the decentralized public sector in the north can be achieved so as to minimize the risk of political-criminal ties while preserving local 'ownership' over the methods by which this is done. MINUMSA should play a leading role by developing a forward strategy unit on the issue.

Whatever the precise nature of a political settlement, it is crucial that the international community and the national government acknowledge that a peace deal is the precondition for broad and legitimate state and security presence in the north, not a desirable posterior add-on. Modest provision of judicial and police services as aids to community security can be achieved immediately, and should have a positive effect on improving public trust in the state presence. Yet without progress towards a robust, inclusive political settlement, the Malian state will remain a contested presence in the north, and will continue to be accused of ethnic and tribal bias. These grievances in turn are readily exploitable by illicit and armed groups.

Incremental security

At the same time, some form of state security provision is imperative, as is the construction of the capacity to combat and deter serious crime. Here, the crucial issue is that of appropriate selection and targeting in light of the evident dangers of conflict. Generalized and indiscriminate policies, notably efforts to establish strict control over northern Mali's c. 3,500-kilometre border, or to sweep up the main smuggling groups, would risk fuelling a multi-factional insurgency, or, more likely, serve to entrench corruption in the forces required to carry out these tasks. The country's current security apparatus would simply be unable to oversee the integrity of these efforts, and it is questionable to what extent MINUSMA or any foreign donor has the capacity or perseverance to do the same.

Instead, security efforts regarding crime must be anchored in a conflict perspective, wherein harm reduction is crucial, and recognition is given to the limits of Malian security and judicial services as they now stand. Informed selection and targeting are thus essential. To start with, all trafficking groups must be made fully aware that tolerance will be extended to

their business activities, but support for armed rebels, ethnic factions, corrupt local or state authorities, any form of organized violence, or involvement in the higher-value echelons of transnational crime (especially cocaine and kidnapping), will be tracked and punished.

Police and intelligence services, starting with those connected to MINUSMA or supported by foreign donors, should be equipped and trained to identify those trafficking groups with the most lucrative trades and powerful contacts in central state and local government, armed forces, jihadist groups, and in neighbouring countries; individuals or groups who combine both nodal influence between these networks and a destabilizing influence on the north should emerge as prime targets for prosecution. Importantly, when security operations are carried out on the basis of the criteria mentioned above, news that the suspects have been detained and charged and will face a due judicial process should receive full public exposure. Secrecy and opaque judicial rulings, hitherto the norm in Mali, must be avoided at all costs.

Over time, it is to be hoped that security and justice reform in northern Mali will result in institutions that are equipped to tackle the criminal threat according to these criteria, and that enjoy the popular legitimacy to do so.

Counter-terrorist strategy

In light of continued kidnappings in Mali, and the vitality of Islamist forces across the countries of the Sahel and Sahara, it is unrealistic to expect that kinetic counter-terrorist operations will cease in the near future. Nevertheless, efforts should be made not just to eliminate the armed threat from Islamist combatants, but to remove the incentives whereby disaffected groups in the north have tended to seek out alliances with these radical armed groups. Progress in peace talks is a crucial element here. But it is also important, if unpalatable, to recognize that some form of communication with the criminal actors who frequently engage with these armed groups should be exploited. In particular, it is vital to impress upon criminal groups and individuals sensitive to the appeal and utility of Islamist terrorists that the process of stabilization and pacification of northern Mali is irreversible, and has distinct benefits so long as weapons are permanently laid down.

There is, however, a distinct incompatibility between the requirement mentioned above to prosecute criminal actors serving as nodes connecting various networks, and the need to work with illicit mediators so as to undermine the resilience of radical Islamist factions. No easy or universal prescriptions are possible in a dilemma that is fairly typical of the sort faced by most stabilization missions. Whether to exploit illicit actors or indict them is a choice that depends on the particular demands of the location, the conditions of the peace process, and an informed calculation as to the likelihood of success.

Cleaning out the shadow state

Lastly, none of these good intentions can be realized over the medium to long term unless Bamako fulfils its side of the deal by acting immediately to curb nepotistic, corrupt and criminal practices within the state. Not only do these undermine tolerance of public authority across the entire country, but, as this paper has recounted, they also serve to distort and exacerbate competitive rivalry in the north. One priority, already embraced in theory by the new Malian government, would be to target the remnants of the shadow state, and send a clear deterrent message by prosecuting senior figures involved in any pre-2012 illicit collusion.

Furthermore, major efforts must be undertaken to reform recruitment processes, and ensure the rightful rewards for merit and talent, above all in the security and justice sectors. Only once progress is made in consolidating meritocracy, and improving the technical capacity of security and justice systems, can Malian authorities expect to adopt a targeted, intelligent counter-criminal policy in the north. In addition, these reforms will be crucial in helping Mali and its neighbours honour the various pledges made to strengthen a regional response to illicit activity, including intelligence-sharing. Regional co-operation on security without trust and mutually recognized professionalism is a rapid route to hollow rhetoric, and is only likely to accentuate foreign meddling in the north.

The international community for its part will also have a large part to play in dismantling Mali's shadow state. Whether through the establishment of parallel units to manage aid, counter-terrorist support and funding for the armed forces, or select briefings with the intelligence service, foreign powers at the very least failed to correct the vices of the Malian establishment – and, at worst, positively encouraged them. A new sophisticated, intelligence-driven approach to politics and crime must, above all else, be grounded on sound information, and seek to justify itself in public through its eventual results. Turning such a strategy into an opportunity for secretive connivance would inevitably lead to the repetition of crisis.

Glossary of names

Abdelmalek Droukdel: The emir of AQIM.

Abderamane Ould Meydou: Colonel belonging to the Tilemsi Arabs, whose military unit opposed the Ifoghas Tuaregs.

Ablil ag Albacher: Trafficker from the Ifoghas clan with experience in the drug trade. Nephew of Algabass ag Intallah.

Alaji ag Gamou: Colonel belonging to the Imghad Tuaregs, whose militia opposed the Ifoghas Tuaregs.

Alghabass ag Intallah: Tuareg notable who split from Ansar Dine to form what is now known as The High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA). Son of Intallah ag Attaher.

Alpha Oumar Konaré: Mali's first elected president, serving from 1992 to 2002.

Amadou Sanogo: Former Malian army captain who led the coup that overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012. He was arrested in November 2013 on charges related to kidnappings and disappearances within the Malian armed forces.

Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT): President of Mali from 2002 to 2012. He was overthrown in the March 2012 coup.

Andrés José Solano Gaete: Suspected Colombian drug trafficker arrested in Panama in relation to the Air Cocaine case in 2013, but released three months later because the Malian Ministry of Justice had failed to send the corresponding extradition documents.

Baba Ould Cheick: Tarkint Mayor with strong links to Islamist militants, who is linked to the 2009 Air Cocaine incident and to the negotiations that led to the release of the two Canadian diplomats in 2009. Arrested in 2013.

Baye ag Bakabo: Main suspect in the murder of two Radio France International journalists in November 2013.

Cherif Ould Sidi (aka Cherif Ould Tahar): Businessman allegedly involved in negotiations aimed at releasing six Algerian hostages held by MUJAO since 2012.

Deity ag Sidimou: Former Idnan Tuareg deputy from Tessalit with alleged links to drug trafficking.

Dioncounda Traoré: Interim President of Mali from April 2012 to September 2013.

Éric Vernet: French aviation expert arrested in relation to the Air Cocaine case, but later released without charge.

Ibrahim ag Assaleh: A former MNLA spokesman, leader and negotiator who split from the movement to form the Coalition for the People of Azawad in March 2014.

Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK): Veteran politician, and president of Mali since 2013. Father of Karim Keïta.

Intallah ag Attaher: Leader for several decades of the Ifoghas Tuaregs. Father of Alghabass ag Intallah.

Issaka Sidibé: President of the National Assembly. Karim Keïta's father-in-law.

Iyad ag Ghali: Tuareg notable and from late 2011 head of the group Ansar Dine.

Karim Keïta: Chair of the defence committee in the National Assembly. Son of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.

Lamana Ould Bou: Berabiche Arab officer in the Malian army who was believed to be deeply involved in smuggling activities. He was killed in Timbuktu in June 2009, apparently in a reprisal carried out by AQIM.

Louis Guay: Canadian diplomat kidnapped together with Robert Fowler in Niger on 14 December 2008 and transported to northern Mali. They were released on 21 April 2009.

Mamy Coulibaly: Head of the intelligence service DGSE until March 2011 and a reputedly pivotal figure in the handling of northern Mali. He was last reported to be serving as head of Mali's consulate in Côte d'Ivoire.

Miguel Ángel Devesa: A former Spanish police officer and reputed cartel leader arrested in relation to the Air Cocaine case, but later released without charge.

Mohamed Ben Hacko: Malian travel agent arrested in relation to the Air Cocaine case, but later released because of a lack of evidence against him.

Mohamed Ould Awainat: Reputed drug baron, who was released from prison in January 2012 reportedly on condition that he joined the Arab militia fighting the Tuareg rebellion in the north.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Former AQIM commander and current leader of Al-Murabitoun.

Muammar Qadhafi: De facto ruler of Libya for 42 years, killed by Libyan rebels in October 2011.

Oumar Tatam Ly: Economist who was appointed prime minister in September 2013 and resigned in April 2014.

Robert Fowler: Canadian diplomat kidnapped together with Louis Guay in Niger on 14 December 2008 and transported to northern Mali. They were released on 21 April 2009.

Sombé Théra: Malian prosecutor in charge of the Air Cocaine case.

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