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THESIS

**FROM MARGINALIZATION TO MILITANCY:
EXPLORING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN
THE SAHEL THROUGH THE LENS OF
TUAREG COMMUNITIES IN MALI**

by

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December 2023

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EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL THROUGH THE LENS OF TUAREG
COMMUNITIES IN MALI**

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ABSTRACT

In the northern regions of Mali, Tuareg involvement in violent extremism has emerged as a pressing concern. Historically marked by armed rebellions due to political exclusion and economic marginalization, these regions have become breeding grounds for various extremist groups. This thesis delves into the factors driving Tuareg communities toward embracing violence and their role as vectors for terrorist recruitment. Focusing on grievances and opportunity models, it examines the impact of economic hardships, political marginalization, and their convergence with post-Arab Spring developments, such as the 2011 Libyan revolt, which intensified Tuareg grievances. The thesis investigates the region's instability, a sanctuary for extremist ideologies due to the void created by state disengagement.

Considering the Sahel region's standing as a terrorism epicenter, policy responses and multifaceted approaches are crucial. Highlighting the need to address grievances and improve governance while countering illicit networks, the study explores economic and political inclusiveness as potential solutions. It underlines that strengthening state capacity is vital to curbing the opportunities that nurture extremism. The thesis determines the future pathways to address the needs of Tuaregs as marginalized communities while countering extremist influences in the Sahel region.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASIFU	All-Source Intelligence Fusion Unit
AQIM	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination Movement of Azawad
CNDP	Conseil National pour le Dialogue Politique (National Council For Political Dialogue)
CVE	Counter Violent Extremism
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
FAM	Malian Armed Forces
FLM	Front de Liberation Macina (Macina Liberation Front)
GSPC	Group Salafist for Preaching and Combat
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IS	Islamic State
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINUSMA	Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali)
MNLA	Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSINT	Open-Source Intelligence
UN	United Nations

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tuareg's involvement in violent extremism has become a critical issue within a turbulent landscape in Mali. In the post–Arab Spring era, the once-disparate armed groups have converged, leveraging the security vacuum to expand their influence within the Tuareg territories. These regions, historically rife with armed rebellions driven by a sense of marginalization, have become contested spaces, welcoming various extremist groups vying for control.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The threat of violent extremists is snowballing in the Tuareg regions of Mali in northwest Africa. Local Tuareg armed groups, as well as affiliates of transnational extremist terrorist organizations, such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, are competing to expand their territorial foothold and increase their resources in these poorly governed spaces. Due to state disengagement and a security vacuum, armed groups see Tuareg regions as permissive environments for their continued growth and view Tuareg communities as potential allies and networks of support for their militant organizations.¹

Tuaregs in Mali consider themselves politically excluded and economically marginalized by their central governments. They have launched successive armed rebellions since the decolonization era to gain autonomy or complete independence from their states. Recent developments, such as the 2011 revolt in Libya against Muammar al-Gaddafi, have further aggravated the grievances of Tuareg communities in Mali.² Having lost an important source of support in the former Libyan regime, some embraced violent extremist organizations as a substitute.

¹ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “Rebellion and Fragmentation in Northern Mali,” in *The Roots of Mali's Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, by Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme (Wassenaar, Netherlands: Clingendael Institute, 2015), 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05533.8>.

² Virginie Baudais, Amal Bourhrous, and Dylan O'Driscoll, “The Crisis in the Sahel: From Domestic Rebellions to Regional Destabilization,” in *Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding in the Sahel: The Role of Maghreb Countries in an African Framework*, by Virginie Baudais, Amal Bourhrous, and Dylan O'Driscoll (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021), 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28281.8>.

Consequently, the region has become highly unstable and a breeding sanctuary for violence. This thesis seeks to address the factors that push and pull Tuaregs to join violent extremist organizations in Mali. It asks: What factors drive the Tuaregs to embrace violence in Mali, and how have these communities become vectors of radicalization and recruitment for terrorist organizations?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The Sahel region has become the frontier of counterterrorism efforts, with Mali being among the most affected countries. The spread of terrorism and the emergence of the deadliest terrorist organizations in the world in 2022, including long-standing groups like Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and newer organizations like the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), pose significant security challenges.³ The Global Terrorism Index identified the Sahel region in 2022 as an epicenter of terrorism, recording more fatalities and surpassing South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa (MENA) combined.⁴

It is crucial to understand the root causes and enabling environments that have led to the gradual rise of violence and militant Islamism among Tuareg tribes in Mali. Discrimination, neglect, and abuse by central governments, as well as weak governing institutions, the frailty of the rule of law, porous borders, and the abundance of arms have contributed to the growth of militancy. Extremist groups have exploited these factors to recruit disaffected communities to their groups. It is essential to address these crucial factors to combat terrorism in the Sahel region.⁵

³ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023), 2, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources/>.

⁴ Puja Pandit, “Key Findings from the 2023 Global Terrorism Index,” Vision of Humanity, March 2023, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-terrorism-index-2023-key-findings-in-5-charts/>.

⁵ Borrell Josep, “The Terrorist Threat Is Expanding in the Sahel EEAS Website,” August 19, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/terrorist-threat-expanding-sahel_en?s=331.

Over the past decade, the situation in the Sahel region has been the most significant security challenge to Northwest Africa and the international community.⁶ It requires an effective, multipronged policy response that addresses both the underlying causes of conflict—the needs of marginalized communities—and the permissive opportunities that weak governance and fragile states present to violent extremist organizations. It certainly will require a coordinated and comprehensive response from the international community and regional actors. Lastly, in an era of strategic competition, the Sahel region could present an opportunity for Russia and China to expand their influence at the expense of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) states, including the use of proxy actors such as the Wagner Group.⁷

C. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

In the last decade, the Sahel region in Africa has seen a significant increase in violence and terrorist organization activities. Indeed, since the 1960s, Tuareg communities in Mali have launched successive rebellions to assert their resentment of political exclusion and economic marginalization exercised by their central governments.⁸ However, the causes of such activities are always complex and can encompass many factors. Terrorism and violence are complex phenomena, and their drivers are multifaceted. There are at least two possible approaches to understanding terrorism: The Grievance Model and the Opportunity Model.

1. Grievance Model of Terrorism

Scholars debate the connection between economic deprivation and political violence. Some maintain that economic grievances such as poverty and economic discrimination (horizontal inequalities) can contribute to societal radicalization. These

⁶ United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2023), 51, <https://doi.org/10.18356/9789210025812>.

⁷ Institute for Economics & Peace., *Global Terrorism Index 2023*, 69.

⁸ Nicholas Idris Erameh, Victor Ojakorotu, and Deborah Odu Obor, “The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation and the Tuareg Rebellions: A War with No End in Sight?,” *African Renaissance* 18, no. 1 (March 2021): 11, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-5305/2021/18n1a1>.

scholars argue that economic marginalization is a crucial driver of radicalization and violence.⁹ In his research, Ted Gurr found that relative deprivation, mainly when induced by poverty and discrimination, is associated with social instability and demands for political rights, which can foment violence.¹⁰

According to James A. Piazza, Gurr's model shows that state social discrimination in terms of economic assistance against communities demographically concentrated in one region of the country results in resentment and alienation that could incentivize such populations to use violence as a means to express their exasperation.¹¹ Furthermore, in support of Gurr's model and his studies on the relationship between domestic terrorism and economic discrimination, Piazza's empirical findings demonstrate that nations substantially boost their vulnerability to domestic terrorism when they allow economic discrimination against their minority groups.¹² When people are poor, unfairly treated, and desperate, violent radical beliefs give them a way to vent their anger and fight against the status quo and a government they do not trust.¹³

However, a study by Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova on the link between poverty and lack of education, on the one hand, and terrorism, on the other, reveals that the connection is indirect and even negligible. They argue that it is more appropriate to view terrorism as a reaction to political circumstances, not economic deprivation and frustration.¹⁴ Likewise, Piazza, in literature tracing the roots of terrorism among societies that suffer poverty, and contrary to what politicians and officials often assert, argues that

⁹ James A. Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3 (May 2011): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310397404>.

¹⁰ Ted Robert Gurr, "Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict Since 1945," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 14, no. 2 (1993): 188, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1601151>.

¹¹ Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," 341.

¹² Piazza, 350.

¹³ United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 110.

¹⁴ Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1257/089533003772034925>.

none of the data indicate a linear connection between terrorism and poverty.¹⁵ Piazza's nuanced results show that economic discrimination as a variable significantly impacts domestic terrorism rather than poverty as an absolute measure. He demonstrated that even states with better levels of economic development suffer higher rates of domestic terrorism than poorer nations. Therefore, violent episodes are significantly predicted in countries where economic discrimination against minorities persists.¹⁶

Given the debate over the role of economic marginalization, this thesis will explore if there is a connection between economic grievances and Tuareg radicalization:

H1: Tuareg's support for violent extremist organizations is driven by economic grievances and discrimination against their communities.

Not all grievances are economic. Scholars often cite political grievances as one of the main drivers of violence and terrorism. Understanding the causal influence of these grievances on violence is crucial for developing effective policies to prevent such acts.

According to Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza, ethnic groups that feel resentment and anger due to political exclusion resort to violent acts to resolve their discontent.¹⁷ Their findings have demonstrated that when individuals and groups feel excluded from the political process, they are more prone to engage in acts of violence and domestic terrorism.¹⁸

Chenoweth's research explores the relationship between democracies and terrorism, and her findings challenge conventional wisdom.¹⁹ She argues that democracies are less susceptible to terrorism because they provide opportunities for the nonviolent expression of grievances, such as free speech, free press, and access to political institutions.

¹⁵ James A. Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590944578>.

¹⁶ Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," 348.

¹⁷ Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza, "Ethnic Groups, Political Exclusion and Domestic Terrorism," *Defence and Peace Economics* 27, no. 1 (2016): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2014.987579>.

¹⁸ Choi and Piazza, 56.

¹⁹ Erica Chenoweth, "Terrorism and Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (2013): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-032211-221825>.

According to Chenoweth, people with peaceful avenues to voice their grievances are less likely to resort to terrorism.²⁰ She further contends that terrorism often emerges due to intense discontent with the status quo and perceived failures of government structures and policies in addressing the grievances of specific population segments.²¹

Another piece of evidence from Robert W. White shows that the leading cause of political violence is state suppression; he conceptualizes that the repression of protests has counterproductive results.²² In the same vein, Krueger and Maleckova point out that individuals who have experienced political oppression and suffered coercive governments are more likely to engage in acts of terrorism.²³

This idea is supported by the theory of Seung-Whan Choi and James A. Piazza, which states that terrorism and political violence are more prevalent in nations with sizable ethnic minorities isolated from political power.²⁴ James I. Walsh and James A. Piazza accentuate that their research continually demonstrates that terrorism is significantly reduced when people's rights are respected.²⁵ The same scholars conclude that ignoring physical integrity rights pushes at least some to support violent extremist organizations against their governments.²⁶

The examination of political exclusion and the experience of physical persecution paves the way for my second hypothesis:

H2: Tuareg's support for violent extremist organizations is driven by political marginalization and physical persecution of their communities.

²⁰ Chenoweth, 370.

²¹ Chenoweth, 374.

²² Robert W. White, "From Peaceful Protest to Guerrilla War: Micromobilization of the Provisional Irish Republican Army," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 6 (May 1989): 1298, <https://doi.org/10.1086/229155>.

²³ Krueger and Maleckova, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" 119.

²⁴ Choi and Piazza, "Ethnic Groups, Political Exclusion and Domestic Terrorism," 41.

²⁵ James I. Walsh and James A. Piazza, "Why Respecting Physical Integrity Rights Reduces Terrorism," *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 5 (May 2010): 553, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009356176>.

²⁶ Walsh and Piazza, 558.

2. Opportunity Model of Terrorism

The opportunity model of terrorism emphasizes state fragility and permissive environments that allow terrorist actors to grow. The opportunity model investigates how failed states and fragile democracies create a power vacuum promoting terrorism and transnational crime, which extremists can fill easily by linking up with illicit traffickers and organized criminal networks.

Failed states and fragile democracies are factors contributing to the spreading of terrorism and violence. A failed state cannot provide essential services to its citizens and cannot maintain security within its territory. Failed states are often characterized by political instability, a weak rule of law, rampant corruption, and a lack of effective administrative institutions.²⁷ These conditions provide fertile ground for the emergence of extremist groups. For example, the re-emergence of political instability in Mali following the 2020 coup has caused concern about the country becoming a target for Islamic extremist groups.²⁸ The opportunity model suggests that terrorism arises when aggrieved individuals or groups perceive an opportunity to use violence to attain their goals.

Piazza's research provides valuable insight into the "Opportunity Model" of terrorism. Based on his failed states index, Piazza argues that failing states provide an environment that facilitates the growth and spread of transnational terrorism.²⁹ He suggests that failed states offer a permissive environment where terrorists can plan, train, launch attacks, recruit personnel, and gain support, which incentivizes terrorist activity.³⁰ Piazza's

²⁷ Justin George, "State Failure and Transnational Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 3 (2018): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002716660587>.

²⁸ Florina Cristiana Matei, "Mali: The Hot and Cold Relationship between Military Intervention and Democratic Consolidation," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1882>.

²⁹ James A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (September 2008): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2008.00511.x>.

³⁰ Piazza, 471.

analysis suggests that failed states are more likely to experience terrorism, and state failure positively correlates with the number of terrorist attacks.³¹

Thus, my third hypothesis:

H3: Tuareg's support for violent extremist organizations is driven by abundant opportunities to benefit from weak state capacity and illicit networks.

In summary, the findings of the grievance and opportunity models provide different perspectives on the drivers of violent extremism. In order to curb the threat of militant Islamism, policymakers may have to address the root grievances of the Tuaregs, including the unequal distribution of resources and political power. Policies aiming to improve economic and political inclusiveness could help alleviate the grievances that drive violent extremism. Additionally, strengthening state capacity in all its forms—military, security, intelligence, political and administrative institutions, and the rule of law—may be essential to closing down the opportunities that allow criminal enterprises and violent extremists to flourish in fragile states.

D. RESEARCH DESIGN AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

The research design for this thesis involves a comprehensive investigation into the factors driving Tuareg's support for violent extremist organizations in Mali and the intersections between Tuareg communities and these organizations. The thesis will employ qualitative methods to gather and analyze data from various sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, credible news outlets, human rights reports, think tank assessments, and information from government and non-governmental agencies. The qualitative data will provide rich insights into the lived experiences and motivations of individuals involved in violent extremism.

The thesis will also focus on mapping militant Islamist organizations operating in the region, such as ISGS and JNIM, exploring their origins, ideologies, objectives, organizational structures, and activities. By understanding these organizations' dynamics

³¹ Piazza, 483.

and interactions with Tuareg communities, the research aims to shed light on the intersections and interconnected relationships between the two.

The thesis will culminate in a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the findings, contributing to a better understanding of the root causes of the conflict, the processes of radicalization and recruitment within Tuareg communities, and the enabling factors for violent extremism. Ultimately, the research outcomes will inform policy responses that address marginalized communities' needs while countering extremist organizations' influence in the region.

In Chapter I, I give a comprehensive geographic, historical, and sociological examination of Tuareg communities, contextualizing their cultural identity and exploring their societal challenges. In Chapter II, I will delve into the manifestations of violent extremism in the Sahel region, mapping the presence and activities of extremist groups and analyzing their strategies, ideologies, and territorial control. Chapter III will focus on the relationship between militant Islamist groups and Tuareg communities in Mali, exploring how these groups interact with the Tuareg, including recruitment strategies, ideological appeals, and the provision of resources. It investigates how economic grievances, discrimination, political marginalization, physical persecution, weak state capacity, and illicit networks play a role in support of Tuareg individuals for violent extremist organizations.

Drawing upon findings from previous chapters, the concluding chapter will provide an objective analysis of policy options for addressing the threat of militant Islamism in Tuareg communities. It will also evaluate existing counterterrorism strategies, development initiatives, and community engagement programs. Considering the problem's multifaceted nature, this thesis will propose evidence-based recommendations targeting radicalization's root causes to counter the growing threat of violent extremism in the Sahel region.

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II. TUAREG IDENTITY, GEOGRAPHY, AND SOCIETAL CHALLENGES IN MALI

The vast expanse of the Sahara-Sahel region is home to diverse ethnic communities; the Tuaregs stand at the heart of this rugged landscape.³² Nomadic pastoralists by tradition, the Tuareg people have traversed the Saharan regions of northwest Africa for centuries, etching their mark on the arid terrain.³³ Resilient in the face of the harsh desert environment and tenacious against the political and economic pressures of the modern world, the Tuareg have upheld their distinct cultural identity and way of life.³⁴ The Tuareg social fabric is woven with intricate kinship ties, encompassing various tribes and clans scattered across Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso.³⁵ In Mali, they constitute about 10% of the population.³⁶

The chapter begins by examining the geographic distribution of the Tuareg people and the environments in which they live, including their relationships with other ethnic groups and the challenges posed by the harsh desert environment. Next, the chapter delves into the history of the Tuareg people, including their interactions with Arab and European colonial powers and their struggle for political autonomy in contemporary times. Finally, the chapter explores the social organization of the Tuareg people, including their kinship system, nomadic lifestyle, and economic activities.

³² Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012–2013* (Farnham, UK: Routledge, 2014), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612096>.

³³ Paul D. Williams, *War & Conflict in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 132.

³⁴ Ines Kohl, “Modern Nomads, Vagabonds, or Cosmopolitans? Reflections on Contemporary Tuareg Society,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 66, no. 4 (2010): 449, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20798861>.

³⁵ Lawrence E. Cline, “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (2013): 617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.802972>.

³⁶ Williams, *War & Conflict in Africa*, 132.

A. GEOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

The Tuareg people have inhabited the central Saharan mountains of Northwest Africa since 1500.³⁷ Spanning the Hoggar and the Ajjer in the north, the A'ir in the east, and the Adagh n Ifoghas in the west, while their presence extends southwards to the limits of the Sahel, along the interior perimeter of the Niger river.³⁸ The Tuaregs are a nomadic pastoral community, regularly moving from region to region for survival. Their migratory patterns and geographical distribution are intricately tied to the availability of seasonal resources, facilitating their sustenance and trade and social connections.³⁹ Renowned for their existence in the vast desert landscapes, the Tuareg possess exceptional navigational skills that enable them to traverse great distances in search of vital resources such as grazing lands and water sources for their livestock.⁴⁰

Their migratory history has ensured their adaptation and survival in challenging environments. For example, Tuareg's seasonal transhumance allows them to access water and pasture for their herds, moving between different water sources due to variations in rainfall across the Sahelo-Saharan region.⁴¹ Furthermore, this nomadic lifestyle has profoundly shaped their cultural identity. Migration has immense significance within Tuareg culture, particularly in Mali, with a legacy spanning generations. Their ability to journey across vast expanses and establish relationships with diverse regions has fostered a distinct sense of identity among the Tuareg, solidifying a rich heritage deeply rooted in

³⁷ Matei, "Mali," 6.

³⁸ Baz Lecocq and Georg Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (2013): 425, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24709398>.

³⁹ Tor A. Benjaminsen, "Does Supply-Induced Scarcity Drive Violent Conflicts in the African Sahel? The Case of the Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 6 (2008): 832, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343308096158>.

⁴⁰ Andrew Alesbury, "A Society in Motion: The Tuareg from the Pre-Colonial Era to Today," *Nomadic Peoples* 17, no. 1 (2013): 110,111, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43123923>.

⁴¹ Alesbury, 110.

their nomadic livelihood.⁴² This heritage includes the persistence of craftsmanship, pastoralism, and trade within their society regardless of its hierarchy evolution.⁴³

As a nomadic group, the geographical distribution of the Tuareg communities has not been static. Various historical events and sociopolitical factors have shaped it. For instance, the region of northern Mali served as a hub for economic commerce exploitation and an interchange place for the Saharan, African, and Arab civilizations; Timbuktu was a central economic hub where gold was traded, negotiated, and sold to nations in the Maghreb, the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁴

During the colonial era, the Tuareg community gained military dominance over other local communities, translating into sociopolitical influence and tribal superiority.⁴⁵ However, colonial borders drawn during the late 19th and early 20th centuries divided the Tuareg territories across multiple countries, affecting their traditional migration routes and disrupting their social fabric.⁴⁶

Today, as Figure 1 illustrates, the present scattered distribution of Tuareg communities across the expansive Sahel region, which acts as a transitional zone between the Sahara Desert and the savannah grasslands, covering approximately 1.5 million square miles and encompassing multiple countries, such as Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, and Burkina Faso.⁴⁷

⁴² B. Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 223,224, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/18540>.

⁴³ Susan Rasmussen, “Re-Formations of the Sacred, the Secular, and Modernity: Nuances of Religious Experience among the Tuareg (Kel Tamajaq),” *Ethnology* 46, no. 3 (2007): 188, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20456624>.

⁴⁴ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “The Failed Path to National Unity,” in *The Roots of Mali’s Conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis*, by Grégory Chauzal and Thibault Damme (Wassenaar, Netherlands: Clingendael Institute, 2015), 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05533.7>.

⁴⁵ Baz Lecocq, “Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The Teshumara Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society,” *International Review of Social History* 49 (2004): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859004001658>.

⁴⁶ Alesbury, “A Society in Motion,” 107.

⁴⁷ Emizet F. Kisangani, “The Tuaregs’ Rebellions in Mali and Niger and the U.S. Global War on Terror,” *International Journal on World Peace* 29, no. 1 (2012): 64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23266590>.

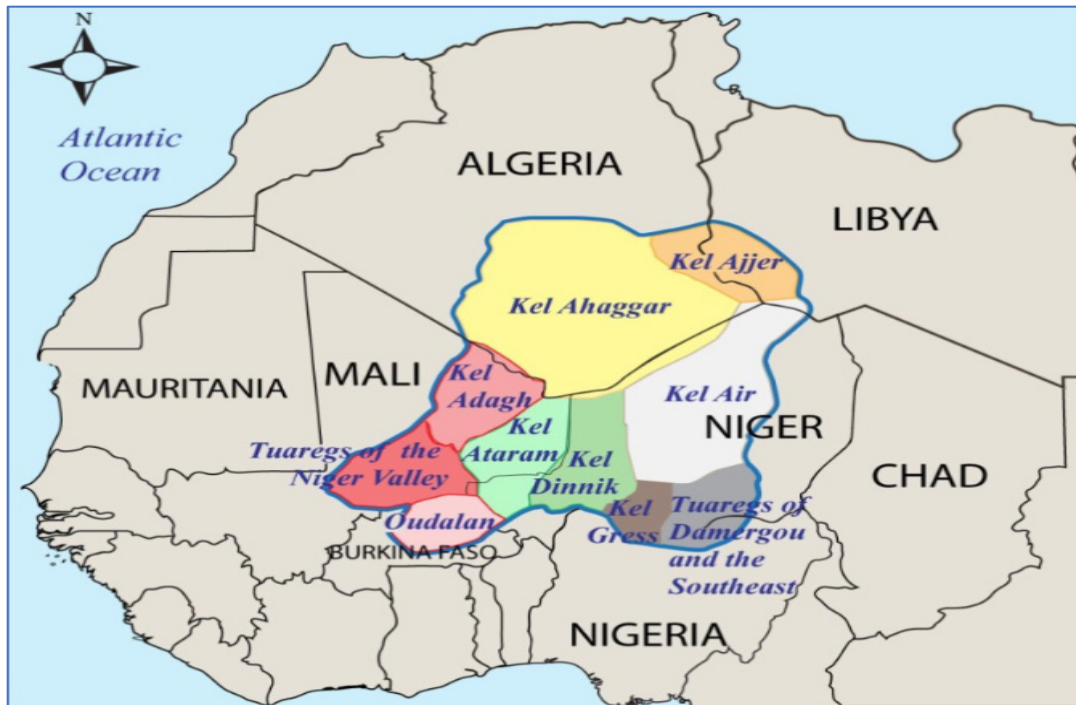


Figure 1. Tuareg Map⁴⁸

The Tuareg population is estimated to range from 1.2 million to 3 million individuals. In Mali, the Tuareg communities are distributed across several regions.⁴⁹ In Mali, they are mainly concentrated in the northern part of the country, including areas such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal.⁵⁰ Most of them reside in the northern regions, comprising approximately 10% of the state.⁵¹ Despite the arid nature and significant economic challenges this region faces, it is widely acknowledged to possess substantial reserves of valuable natural resources, including oil and minerals, particularly uranium.⁵²

In recent decades, Tuareg society has undergone notable transformations triggered by nation-states' modernization initiatives after gaining independence and the profound

⁴⁸ Source: Patricio Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg: A Nation Without Borders?* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2013), 4, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA587213>.

⁴⁹ Asfura-Heim, 3.

⁵⁰ William G. Moseley, "Recovering from Livelihood Insecurity and Political Instability in Northern Mali: Bouncing Back," *International Journal* 68, no. 3 (2013): 436, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24709399>.

⁵¹ Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 3.

⁵² Williams, *War & Conflict in Africa*, 133.

impact of droughts in the Sahel. These changes have resulted in conflicts and shifts from their traditional way of life.⁵³ Tuareg rebellions in Mali have resulted in significant human displacement, economic hardships, and social relationship ruptures within Tuareg communities and neighboring groups.⁵⁴ Moreover, drought-induced disruptions significantly altered their pastoral patterns and settlement dynamics, while the prevalence of banditry and smuggling practices also shaped their geographical concentration.⁵⁵

Overall, the geographical overview of the Tuareg communities in the Sahel reveals a dispersed but interconnected network across the entire region, not just in Mali. Their migration patterns have historically allowed them to adapt to the harsh desert environment and sustain their pastoral way of life. However, political and environmental factors have also shaped their distribution, presenting challenges and opportunities for the Tuareg people as they navigate their cultural heritage and strive for socio-economic and political recognition.

B. DYNAMICS SHAPING TUAREG HISTORY

Similar to the Kurds who were split between four countries—Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran⁵⁶—after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Tuareg people, after the decolonization process and the emergence of independent African nation-states in the 1960s, became divided into five separate countries, each with its own educational systems, economic pursuits, and political ideologies due to the establishment of distinct borders in the Sahara and Sahel regions, symbolizing the modern state structure.⁵⁷

Environmental, political, and cultural pressures have increasingly compelled Tuaregs to settle in one place or navigate across national borders illegally, which poses

⁵³ Lecocq, “Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara,” 89.

⁵⁴ Alesbury, “A Society in Motion,” 122.

⁵⁵ Cline, “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers,” 618–19.

⁵⁶ Eylül Arslan, “The Kurds in Turkey and The Tuareg: A Shared History of ‘Othering’ and Oppression at the Peripheries of Hegemonic Nation-States,” *International Journal of African Studies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 38, <https://doi.org/10.51483/IJAFRS.1.1.2021.37-44>.

⁵⁷ Kohl, “Modern Nomads, Vagabonds, or Cosmopolitans?,” 452.

significant challenges to their longstanding practices of nomadism and pastoralism.⁵⁸ In exploring the historical dimension of Tuareg communities, it is crucial to highlight the critical events that have shaped Tuareg rebellions and their struggle for recognition and autonomy. The following five key events provide this essential context.

1. Colonial Encounters

The colonization of Africa by European powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries profoundly impacted Tuareg communities. Most Tuareg factions fiercely opposed the colonial invaders and demonstrated their strength by repeatedly overcoming French expeditions.⁵⁹ Indeed, many Tuareg individuals in Mali opposed French colonial and postcolonial secular educational institutions, viewing them as strategies to compel them to accept sedentarism and give up their cultural heritage.⁶⁰ Instead, Tuaregs aspired to political integration and regional equality regarding economic developments while preserving their national identity.⁶¹

Colonial boundaries disrupted traditional Tuareg territories and nomadic routes, leading to conflicts between tribes over land and resources. The French colonization of the Sahel region, particularly in Mali, and its use of the “divide and rule” policy resulted in the marginalization and subjugation of the Tuareg people. This policy was implemented through various means, including political exclusion, military recruitment, and economic policies favoring certain groups.⁶² It is unclear whether the policy aimed to turn one Tuareg clan against another or to turn non-Tuaregs against the Tuaregs. However, its objective was to create divisions and tensions among ethnic groups to maintain French control over the region, thereby negatively impacting the Tuareg community.

⁵⁸ Kohl, 450.

⁵⁹ Lecocq and Klute, “Tuareg Separatism in Mali,” 425.

⁶⁰ Susan J. Rasmussen, “Reflections on Witchcraft, Danger, and Modernity among the Tuareg,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 74, no. 3 (2004): 321, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3557006>.

⁶¹ Rasmussen, 321, 322.

⁶² Kisangani, “The Tuaregs’ Rebellions in Mali and Niger,” 69.

2. Independence Movements

Following World War II, anti-colonial sentiments grew across Africa, and the Tuareg, like many other ethnic groups, called for separatism and sought self-determination.⁶³ In the northern regions of Mali, encompassing Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao, during the colonial era and post-independence, the Tuareg fiercely struggled to assert sovereignty over their land.⁶⁴ However, their aspirations for autonomy were often disregarded by postcolonial governments, which led to simmering grievances.

During the four decades that followed independence, political power in Mali has been predominantly held by the Bambara and Djerma ethnic groups, which comprise the majority population in these states; this situation can be attributed to historical racial events between the Tuaregs and other ethnic groups during the pre-colonial era.⁶⁵ Throughout this period, the Tuareg lacked a significant political voice due to the politics of exclusion and have been unable to advocate effectively for their interests within the government.⁶⁶

3. Tuareg Rebellions

Since its independence in 1960, Mali has seen four distinct rebellions (1963–1964, 1990–1996, 2006–2009, and 2012–2013).⁶⁷ Frustrated by the lack of political representation, economic opportunities, and social development in their regions, Tuareg communities in Mali embraced violence to challenge the central governments. A sense of marginalization, political exclusion, and socio-economic disparities drove these rebellions.⁶⁸ The enforcement of colonial governance, the formation of autonomous

⁶³ Cline, “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers,” 618.

⁶⁴ Maxim Ananyev and Michael Poyker, “Identity and Conflict: Evidence from Tuareg Rebellion in Mali,” *World Development* 161 (2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106108>.

⁶⁵ Thomas Krings, “Marginalisation and Revolt among the Tuareg in Mali and Niger,” *GeoJournal* 36, no. 1 (1995): 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41146473>.

⁶⁶ Kisangani, “The Tuaregs’ Rebellions in Mali and Niger,” 82.

⁶⁷ Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, “A Brief History of Mali’s Rebellions and the Implementation of Peace Accords,” in *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement*, by Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt15zc57q.9>.

⁶⁸ Kisangani, “The Tuaregs’ Rebellions in Mali and Niger,” 83.

nation-states, severe droughts occurring in the 1970s and 1980s, and the cyclic uprisings starting from the 1960s have intensified the rifts between Tuareg communities and the respective governments.⁶⁹ These rebellions have led to considerable casualties and displacements in the region.

4. Peace Agreements and Broken Promises

In the aftermath of the rebellions, peace agreements were signed between Tuareg armed groups and the governments of Mali. The 1995 and 1996 peace accords aimed to resolve the conflicts and promote reconciliation, including reforms to integrate Tuareg representatives in the army and the government.⁷⁰ However, the implementation of these agreements has been uneven, with many Tuareg communities feeling that their grievances were not adequately addressed, leading to cycles of renewed unrest.⁷¹

5. The Emergence of Extremist Groups

Historically, extremist ideologies were uncommon among Muslims in West Africa until recently.⁷² The Tuareg population predominantly practices Sunni Islam, with some Sufism in settled communities. They also embrace pre-Islamic beliefs, showcasing the syncretism between traditional and Islamic ideologies.⁷³ This complex spiritual tradition contributes to the unique cultural identity of the Tuareg people in the Sahara-Sahel region. Before 2012, the Tuareg's rebellions were motivated by a secular ideology, and they aimed to challenge the governments of Mali, seeking political representation as well as economic and social development.⁷⁴ Amidst the outbreak of the 2012 rebellion, the northern region of Mali became a focal point for the activities of radical Islamist groups, including AQIM and its affiliates, namely Ansar Eddine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West

⁶⁹ Alesbury, "A Society in Motion," 107.

⁷⁰ Rasmussen, "Reflections on Witchcraft, Danger, and Modernity among the Tuareg," 321.

⁷¹ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 91.

⁷² Kassim Kone, "A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali," *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (2017): 58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26410201>.

⁷³ Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 5.

⁷⁴ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 7.

Africa (MUJWA).⁷⁵ These groups adeptly utilized the grievances and socio-economic vulnerabilities prevalent within the Tuareg communities in the region, employing them as opportunities to recruit combatants and extend their influence. This intersection between Tuareg rebellions and the rise of extremism has added a complex layer to the region's struggle for autonomy and stability.

C. SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF TUAREG COMMUNITIES

The sociological aspects of Tuareg communities in Mali offer an insight into their cultural practices, social structures, and enduring traditional institutions. Following the Arab conquest of the Sahara, some Tuaregs embraced Islam as their religion and preserved certain aspects of their traditional beliefs.⁷⁶ In addition to living alongside various other ethnic groups, the Tuaregs find themselves connected by the unifying power of Islam, as most Malians (90%) adhere to the Maliki branch of Sunni Islam.⁷⁷ Although predominantly observed among the Tuaregs, this religious commonality may not hold central importance for all community members because some Tuaregs still believe in things like magic and spirits, do rituals to predict the future, and wear lucky charms, even though these practices go against Islamic rules.⁷⁸ Similar to other West African cultures, this blending of Islam with ancestral traditions has fostered a tradition of tolerant Islam for which the Tuareg and West Africans, in general, have been recognized.⁷⁹

Local narratives depict the region as a harmonious meeting point and stronghold, with revered ancestors as cultural icons. However, colonial and postcolonial eras interrupted these ideals through artificial borders, European-based nation-states, and disruptions in traditional economic activities like caravan trade.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Alesbury, "A Society in Motion," 121–22.

⁷⁶ Kone, "A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali," 58.

⁷⁷ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 67.

⁷⁸ Kone, "A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali," 58–59.

⁷⁹ Kone, 58.

⁸⁰ Susan J. Rasmussen, "Global Media and Local Verbal Art Representations of Northern Malian Tuareg," *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (2017): 80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26410202>.

1. Cultural Practices

Tuaregs speak Tamasheq, a Berber language, and their ancestral roots can be traced to various regions in the Maghreb and the Fezzan region in Libya, from where they migrated between the 12th and 14th centuries.⁸¹ Tuareg culture boasts several distinct characteristics that mark the minds of Arabs and Europeans. One notable aspect is the tradition of men veiling their faces in the presence of women, raising questions about their cultural practices. In fact, wearing indigo-dyed veils, known as Tagelmust or cheche, reflects Tuareg's nomadic heritage and protects against challenging desert conditions.⁸² However, while Tuareg culture provokes outsiders' curiosity, the community holds preconceived notions about Europeans and neighboring groups, often labeling them in Tamasheq as "Ikufar," or infidels, and considering them ethically and morally inferior due to their non-Islamic beliefs.⁸³ Within Tuareg society, women hold a significant position, esteemed for their social status, inheritance rights, and the authority to initiate divorce, even compelling their ex-husbands to vacate their homes.⁸⁴ These matriarchal cultural practices offer a unique insight into the Tuareg people's distinctive way of life in a region dominated by patriarchal societies.

2. Social Structures

The social structures within Tuareg communities are characterized by a distinct blend of egalitarianism and hierarchical elements, creating a unique dynamic.⁸⁵ Their social relationships web, forged through extended families and clans, engenders a profound sense of belonging and interdependence among the Tuareg.⁸⁶ In rural communities, there exist social categories that hold ideological significance and trace back to pre-colonial social classifications based on descent: *Imajeghen*, representing nobility and those of

⁸¹ Glenn Welker, "Mythologies of the Tuareg People," Indigenous Peoples Literature, March 26, 2023, <https://indigenousofthepeople.net.wordpress.com/2023/03/26/mythologies-of-the-tuareg-people/>.

⁸² Welker.

⁸³ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 74,75.

⁸⁴ Welker, "Mythologies of the Tuareg People."

⁸⁵ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 67.

⁸⁶ Welker, "Mythologies of the Tuareg People."

aristocratic heritage; *Imghad*, referring to individuals from the tributary social stratum; *Inaden*, denoting artisans; and *Iklan*, designating the enslaved people.⁸⁷

Like many nomadic communities, the Tuareg have been subject to stereotypes, including being labeled as racist slaveholders and warriors.⁸⁸ Another misconception is viewing them as anarchists due to their social-political structure and nomadic lifestyle. However, these misconceptions overlook the hierarchical organization within their society, where social order is defined by lineage and status.⁸⁹

The Tuaregs' self-perceived superiority over neighboring communities has frequently resulted in tensions. Their historical acceptance of smuggling and banditry has contributed to negative perceptions among both modern state authorities and West Africans.⁹⁰ The Tuaregs were renowned for raiding trade caravans and capturing individuals for trade or domestic purposes.⁹¹ This pattern was particularly pronounced in the pre-colonial era when they controlled trade routes in Sahelian regions. Furthermore, the Tuaregs maintained a tradition of imposing taxes on goods and people as they passed through their territories.⁹² These practices underscore their historical involvement in raiding, trading, and taxation—a complex set of activities that held multifaceted implications for their relationships in the Sahel region.

By controlling trade routes and imposing taxes, the Tuaregs secured economic benefits and achieved a certain degree of influence over the movement of people and resources across their territories. In fact, these behaviors have shaped their interactions with neighboring communities and contributed to the region's complex socio-economic and political dynamics.

⁸⁷ Alesbury, "A Society in Motion," 109.

⁸⁸ Kalifa Keita, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg Insurgency in Mali," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 9, no. 3 (1998): 107–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592319808423221>.

⁸⁹ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 112.

⁹⁰ Keita, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Sahel," 108.

⁹¹ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 68.

⁹² Kisangani, 68, 69.

3. Traditional Institutions

Various political class and racial divisions characterize the notable hierarchical institution of the Tuareg society. At the heart of this hierarchy exists nine to eleven distinct factions, each with a unique socio-political system, under the so-called Ettebel in Tamasheq, representing large tribal concentrations or transnational confederations.⁹³ Within these tribal groupings, individuals are classified into different castes, delineating “noble” and “vassal” elements within Tuareg society.⁹⁴ Another significant division in the cultural hierarchy is skin color, which varies significantly among Tuareg groups. In northern Mali, for instance, the predominant tribal confederation is the Kel Adagh (also known as Kel Ifoghas), which includes a ruling class composed partly of Tuareg with Arab ancestry.⁹⁵ In the Sahara, the idea of being related to Arab culture is fundamental when it comes to skin color, tying “white” Arab Islamic culture to Southern Saharan identity and reinforcing notions that “whiteness” is associated with being the custodians of “true” Islam.⁹⁶

Central to the Tuareg social fabric is traditional institutions that continue to shape communal life. These institutions serve as pillars of governance and community cohesion and illuminate the historical, social, and power relationships that have shaped the Tuareg people’s identity, interactions, and responses to external influences.

At the local level, disputes are often resolved by councils of elders, chiefs, and marabouts, while secular courts in urban centers offer alternative avenues for settling conflicts. The traditional amenokal office and regional confederations persist in contemporary times, although they now receive support from the state for tasks such as tax collection, school registration, and census-taking.⁹⁷

⁹³ Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 3, 4.

⁹⁴ Alesbury, “A Society in Motion,” 109–11.

⁹⁵ Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 4.

⁹⁶ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 81.

⁹⁷ Rasmussen, “Re-Formations of the Sacred, the Secular, and Modernity,” 189.

D. SOCIETAL CHALLENGES AND GRIEVANCES AMONG TUAREG COMMUNITIES IN MALI

The Tuareg people have faced challenges, including a transformation of livelihoods, political fragmentation, and religious debates. They also hold grievances related to marginalization, historical injustices, socio-economic disparities, armed conflict, and environmental challenges. These interconnected issues shape the experiences of the Tuareg in Mali.

1. Tuareg's Challenges

The Tuareg, traditionally a nomadic people relying on their herds, have faced challenges to their livelihoods due to external influences in the past century and a half. While some continue their nomadic lifestyle, others have settled in urban areas or adopted semi-nomadic or sedentary ways, influenced by political instability, climate change, and economic pressures.⁹⁸ Despite these changes, the Tuareg's enduring presence showcases their adaptability in a vastly different world. Their nomadic heritage and reliance on extensive livestock remain crucial for survival in the challenging desert environment, shaping their rich social history as desert raiders, traders, and warriors.⁹⁹

The political landscape of Mali had already influenced internal political aspirations, with the notion of kinship ideology posing a significant obstacle to the successful assimilation of the Tuareg. The social and political structure of the Tuareg, organized into *tewsiten* (clans), impeded the nationalist movements as various factions based on clan affiliations vied for political supremacy, a struggle that persisted throughout the 1980s, the period of rebellion, and even after, leading to internal conflicts and tensions within the movement.¹⁰⁰ This suggests that while there was a nationalist discourse and a focus on territory, the influence of kinship ties through clans and tribes continued to shape political practice, creating divisions within the nationalist movement.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Alesbury, "A Society in Motion," 106, 107.

⁹⁹ Keita, "Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Sahel," 107.

¹⁰⁰ Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, 310.

¹⁰¹ Lecocq, 193.

Moreover, another challenge that Tuareg communities currently grapple with beyond economic disruption and political violence is the religious debates, which significantly impact their Muslim, semi-nomadic, and socially stratified way of life.¹⁰² These challenges are deeply intertwined with historical, political, and economic factors, contributing to the complexities faced by the Tuareg people in these regions.

2. Tuareg's Grievances

Tuareg communities in Mali have a range of significant grievances, shaping their experiences and influencing their lives. One of their resentment triggers is the sense of marginalization and political exclusion, as they have often felt neglected and overlooked by the central governments.¹⁰³ This exclusion has led to limited representation in key decision-making processes and restricted access to essential resources and services, fueling a growing sense of alienation and disenfranchisement within the Tuareg communities.

In response to historical injustices and identity issues, the Tuareg have grievances deeply rooted in their interactions with colonial powers and post-independence governments. Among their concerns are the loss of ancestral lands, restrictions on cultural practices, and suppression of their traditional nomadic lifestyle.¹⁰⁴ These historical injustices have contributed to preserving their cultural identity while grappling with the realities of modernization and globalization.

Socio-economic disparities and development gaps further compound the grievances faced by Tuareg communities. In Mali, for example, limited access to quality education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities exacerbates their precarious situation.¹⁰⁵ The nomadic lifestyle of some Tuareg groups presents additional hurdles,

¹⁰² Rasmussen, "Re-Formations of the Sacred, the Secular, and Modernity," 186.

¹⁰³ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 5.

¹⁰⁴ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 90, 91.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Hernann, "Discourse in Crisis: Situating Slavery, Jihad and Military Intervention in Northern Mali," *Dialectical Anthropology* 40, no. 3 (2016): 273, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44979450>.

hindering their access to services and formal participation in the economy.¹⁰⁶ As a result, socio-economic inequalities have fostered discontent and frustration among Tuareg communities, intensifying their grievances.

Conflict and insecurity have profoundly impacted Tuareg communities in Mali. They have experienced periodic armed conflicts and clashes with rebel groups and state forces, leading to displacement, loss of lives, and infrastructure destruction.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, extremist groups in the Sahel region have heightened insecurity, with Tuareg communities caught in the crossfire between various armed factions. These conflicts have further deepened their sense of marginalization and contributed to perpetuating cycles of violence.

Environmental challenges and climate change add another layer of complexity to the grievances faced by the Tuareg. Reliant on pastoralism and transhumance, they have been significantly affected by desertification, recurring droughts, and the depletion of natural resources.¹⁰⁸ These environmental challenges pose significant obstacles to their economic stability and food security, further contributing to their vulnerabilities.

E. CONCLUSION

The in-depth exploration of Tuareg communities in Mali uncovers the complex interplay of geographical, historical, and sociological factors that have shaped their identity and influenced their struggles. The geographical overview reveals migration patterns and vulnerabilities, offering crucial insights into extremist exploitation for recruitment and activities. The historical dimension highlights pivotal events, such as colonial-era impositions and border delineations, fueling grievances related to land rights, political marginalization, and cultural suppression. Sociological aspects emphasize their vibrant cultural practices, social structures, and traditional institutions, which underscore the need

¹⁰⁶ Muna A. Abdalla, “Understanding of the Natural Resource Conflict Dynamics: The Case of Tuareg in North Africa and the Sahel,” *Institute for Security Studies Papers* 2009, no. 194 (2009): 3, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Paper194.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Alesbury, “A Society in Motion,” 120–22.

¹⁰⁸ Annika Ericksen, “Productions of Space in Tuareg History: Power, Marginalization, and Resistance,” *Arizona Anthropologist* 20 (2010): 62–63, <http://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/arizanthro/article/id/473/>.

for nuanced understanding to address their grievances and aspirations amid modernization and globalization.

Overall, this chapter provides an essential foundation of knowledge for understanding the Tuareg people and their role in the Sahel region of North Africa. By establishing this foundation, the thesis can move on to examine the factors that drive the Tuaregs to embrace violence in Mali and how these communities have become vectors of radicalization and recruitment for terrorist organizations.

III. MAPPING MILITANT ISLAMISTS IN THE SAHEL REGIONS OF MALI

Over the last ten years, the Sahel region has experienced a surge in militant Islamism and a complicated security crisis.¹⁰⁹ The emergence and expansion of various militant Islamist groups have posed severe threats to the stability and development of the countries and communities in the region.¹¹⁰ This convergence of violence has deeply impacted Mali, placing it among the ten nations most afflicted by terrorism since 2020.¹¹¹ Moreover, the rise of these militant Islamist groups in the Sahel has woven another layer of complexity into the Tuareg predicament. Notably, within Mali, prominent Jihadist organizations, including Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the newly emerged Al-Qaida-affiliated coalition Jamaat Nusrat Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, Supporters of Islam and Muslims Group), have taken center stage.¹¹² Some of these groups, variably exploiting Tuaregs' grievances for recruitment or branding them as adversaries, have catalyzed multiple challenges and shifts in the Tuaregs' relationships with militant factions, state authorities, and regional stakeholders.¹¹³

An overview of these groups is crucial to understand better their origins, motives, activities, challenges, and influence on Tuareg communities in Mali. This chapter describes the main militant Islamist actors operating in the Sahel region of Mali: who they are, their strengths, what they want, and how they relate to the Tuaregs and other stakeholders. The first section provides historical background on the evolution of militant Islamism in Mali. The second section maps the main militant Islamist groups in the region based on their affiliation, ideology, objectives, tactics, and areas of operation. This chapter finds a

¹⁰⁹ Madeline Velturo, "Violent Islamist Groups in the Central Sahel" (Washington, DC: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2021), 1, <https://www.uscifr.gov/>.

¹¹⁰ Silvia D'Amato and Edoardo Baldaro, "Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—ICCT, July 7, 2022, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/counter-terrorism-sahel-increased-instability-and-political-tensions>.

¹¹¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 50.

¹¹² United Nations Development Programme, 49–50.

¹¹³ Olivier J. Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, "Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (2015): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.809340>.

connection between Tuaregs and militant Islamist activities. It paves the way for the next chapter, which analyzes drivers that set the stage for violence and extremism to flourish in a multifaceted arena where many factors intersect.

A. HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF MILITANT ISLAMISM IN MALI

An examination of Mali's historical armed conflict and violence cycles, dating back to 1963, highlights the prominent role of Tuareg communities in the country's political landscape.¹¹⁴ The emergence and evolution of militant Islamist groups in this region can be traced to 2007, when the group formerly known as the Salafist Preaching and Combat Group (GSPC) transformed into Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), aligning itself with Al Qaeda's transnational network and reaffirming its jihadi Salafist ideology.¹¹⁵ This transformation marked the group's attempt to gain support and forge alliances in northern Mali as it maneuvered to strengthen its structure and achieve strategic objectives after being defeated by Algerian Security Forces and forced to withdraw from Algerian territories.¹¹⁶

Following its transformation in 2007, AQIM expanded its operational scope into Sahelian countries like Mali, where rival AQIM leaders Belmokhtar and Abu Zayd engaged in fierce competition, orchestrating a series of assaults on security forces, civilians, and Western interests.¹¹⁷ This expansion saw AQIM establish bases in northern Mali, strategically engaging in kidnapping, smuggling, and extortion.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, and S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 8–10, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1241.html.

¹¹⁵ Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 145.

¹¹⁶ Douglas Livermore, "The Case for Azawad: Rectifying the Past to Save the Future in Northern Africa," *African Security Review* 22, no. 4 (2013): 287, 288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2013.839100>.

¹¹⁷ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 81.

¹¹⁸ Rida Lyammouri, *Northern Mali: Armed Groups, State Failure, and Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2013), <https://vdocuments.mx/northern-mali-armed-groups-state-failure-and-terrorism.html?page=1>.

B. COMPLEX LANDSCAPE: A PANORAMA OF EXTREMIST ENTITIES

The growth of militant Islamism in the Sahel spiked after the eruption of the Libyan conflict and the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi.¹¹⁹ The collapse of Gaddafi's regime in Libya created a power vacuum and a proliferation of weapons in Mali.¹²⁰ Following the fall of Gaddafi in October 2011, the Tuareg fighters and Sahelian mercenaries he had recruited were forced to leave Libya, resulting in their return to Mali along with a significant influx of armed and experienced fighters.¹²¹ Weak local state capacity and awkward security approaches have set conditions for Salafi-jihadis to orient public opinion, provide security, and exploit existing grievances within affected peripheries.¹²²

The presence of militant Islamist groups like AQIM, along with the MNLA's territorial control and aims to establish an independent state called Azawad in the North of Mali, prompted the 2013 French intervention Operation Serval to counter the threat and stabilize the region.¹²³ This French-led military intervention successfully dislocated the Islamist rebels from northern Mali and restored the country's territorial integrity.¹²⁴ However, the security situation remained volatile and complex as the Islamist groups retreated to ungoverned areas, where they reorganized into new coalitions and factions.¹²⁵ As a result of these events, terrorist groups are attracted to the Sahel, particularly Mali, due

¹¹⁹ Ricardo Larémont, "After the Fall of Qaddafi: Political, Economic, and Security Consequences for Libya, Mali, Niger, and Algeria," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 2 (2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.bq>.

¹²⁰ Larémont, 1.

¹²¹ Lecocq and Klute, "Tuareg Separatism in Mali," 429, 430.

¹²² Emily Estelle, *The Underestimated Insurgency: African States at Risk for Salafi-Jihadi Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2022), 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42759>.

¹²³ Elena Dal Santo and Elizabeth Johanna van der Heide, "Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts: Connecting Geopolitics to Individual Pathways to Terrorism in Mali," *African Security* 11, no. 3 (2018): 280–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2018.1505232>.

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War: Sovereignty, Responsibility, and the War on Terror*, no. 19 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018), 302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2020.1718350>.

¹²⁵ Schmidt, 303.

to its thriving trade routes and the vast ungoverned spaces allowing organized criminal enterprises, including kidnapping and cigarette smuggling, to flourish.¹²⁶

Four years later, in 2015, the region saw the emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)¹²⁷ as the deadliest Islamist group, affiliating itself with the broader Islamic State (IS) and establishing its operational stronghold within Mali.¹²⁸ In the Malian peripheries of Menaka and Gao in Mali, ISGS aimed to establish an Islamic state and carried out attacks against security forces, civilians, and international peacekeepers.¹²⁹

A significant trend in the current Malian extremism landscape emerged from the formation of an Islamist coalition in 2017, bringing together four Al-Qaeda-linked groups—Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front (FLM), al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM Sahara—under the banner of JNIM.¹³⁰ This coalition, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Ansar Dine, sought to consolidate the jihadist movement within the Sahel and advance his political ambitions.¹³¹ At its core, JNIM’s founding mission encompassed unifying the Sahel jihadist movement and fighting against foreign intervention, secular regimes, and (later) the Islamic State.¹³²

Consequently, the complex interplay of violence, instability, and rivalry that marks the current landscape of militant Islamism in the Sahel and the growth of militant Islamist groups in northern Mali finds its roots in the failure of the Malian government’s diplomatic

¹²⁶ Atta Barkindo, “The Sahel: A New Theatre for Global Jihadist Groups?,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 2 (2020): 24, 25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26908281>.

¹²⁷ It was formed by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former member of al-Mourabitoun, who pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

¹²⁸ Jason Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (November 2020): 18–33, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/outlasting-the-caliphate-the-evolution-of-the-islamic-state-threat-in-africa/>.

¹²⁹ Pauline Le Roux, “Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, June 10, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/exploiting-borders-sahel-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-igs/>.

¹³⁰ Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel,” *Africa Security Brief*, no. 38 (December 2020): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27050>.

¹³¹ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 145.

¹³² United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 49.

endeavors to implement the 2015 Algiers peace agreements and negotiations.¹³³ Despite its repeated attempts to engage with rebel factions, including the Tuareg-led Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), the implementation of these agreements has exhibited limited progress and only gradual outcomes.¹³⁴ This governance vacuum has created fertile ground for expanding militant ideologies and activities.

The situation has worsened since 2021. The ongoing military coups in Mali, coupled with the spread of Islamist groups like JNIM and ISGS, which took advantage of factors such as state absence from certain regions, porous borders, ethnic tensions, social grievances, and French forces' withdrawal, have contributed to the increase of political violence by 150%.¹³⁵ These groups have expanded their operations from northern to central and southern Mali and extended their influence within neighboring countries like Niger, with a closer presence to Niamey.¹³⁶ This expansion has also triggered confrontations between Islamist factions, particularly between JNIM and ISGS, as they vie for control over territories and resources. The intensity of this rivalry has escalated since 2019 following IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's formal recognition of ISGS as an official province of the Islamic State.¹³⁷ As a result, intense confrontations and conflicts have arisen between JNIM and ISGS, resulting in substantial casualties on both fronts. Furthermore, within this complex terrain, the lack of initiatives aimed at redressing regional concerns, coupled with the impending withdrawal of U.S. involvement in Africa, is poised to strengthen the resolve of these factions and expand the reach of their activities throughout the Sahel region and the entire African continent.¹³⁸

¹³³ Ibrahim Maïga, *Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the Labels* (Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies, 2016), 10, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/armed-groups-in-mali-beyond-the-labels/>.

¹³⁴ Maïga, 9.

¹³⁵ Hénì Nsaibia, "The Sahel: Geopolitical Transition at the Center of an Ever-Worsening Crisis," Conflict Watchlist 2023, February 2023, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2023/sahel/>.

¹³⁶ Nsaibia.

¹³⁷ Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The End of the 'Sahel Exception,'" New Lines Institute, May 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>.

¹³⁸ Nasr.

The impact of militant Islamism on regional security and stability has been devastating, as these groups have posed severe threats to the sovereignty and integrity of the Sahelian states, especially Mali, as well as their human rights and development prospects. For instance, in 2021, 48% of deaths from violent extremism were in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the chaotic situation has displaced rural communities like the Tuaregs, disrupted social services and economic activities and undermined the rule of law and governance.¹⁴⁰

C. OTHER PLAYERS

The Islamist groups in Mali have challenged the regional and international efforts to foster peace and stability in the Sahel, such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and the French-led Operation Barkhane.¹⁴¹ According to Human Rights Watch, Islamist groups aligned with Al-Qaida and the Islamic State have committed more than 600 unlawful killings since late 2019 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.¹⁴² Notable incidents include killing more than 100 villagers in Niger in January 2021 and 32 villagers in Mali in July 2020. These circumstances have led to a surge in recruitment efforts and aggravated security crisis in the region.¹⁴³

The recent involvement in the region of the Wagner Group, the Russian private military company used as an efficient proxy tool by the Kremlin, has added another layer of complexity and uncertainty to the security situation. In Mali, Wagner Group is counted among the top four dynamic participants in the state's internal conflict in terms of active engagement; it comes after Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State

¹³⁹ United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 49.

¹⁴⁰ Héní Nsaibia, "The Sahel: Mid-Year Update," 10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022, accessed January 31, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/mid-year-update/>.

¹⁴¹ Velluro, "Violent Islamist Groups in the Central Sahel," 3.

¹⁴² "Sahel: End Abuses in Counterterrorism Operations," Human Rights Watch, February 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/13/sahel-end-abuses-counterterrorism-operations>.

¹⁴³ Human Rights Watch.

Sahel Province (IS Sahel), and the Malian Armed Forces (FAM).¹⁴⁴ The Wagner Group reportedly deployed hundreds of mercenaries to Mali in December 2021, providing training, equipment, and protection to the Malian military junta that seized power in May 2021.¹⁴⁵ The Wagner Group has also been accused of engaging in human rights abuses, disinformation campaigns, and election meddling in other African countries where it operates, such as the Central African Republic, Libya, and Sudan.¹⁴⁶

The Wagner's involvement in Mali has raised concerns among Western and regional actors, who fear it could undermine the democratic transition process, aggravate the humanitarian crisis, and fuel the Islamist insurgency.¹⁴⁷ While the group's presence in the Sahel region aimed to combat terrorism, research indicates a contrary trend—jihadi attacks in Mali have risen since its intervention. The ISGS has expanded its stronghold and carried out more attacks.¹⁴⁸

These developments underscore the questionable effectiveness of Wagner's counter-terrorism efforts. Moreover, as highlighted by Sorcha MacLeod of the United Nations (UN) Working Group on the use of mercenaries, such actors, motivated by profit, lack incentives to truly end conflicts, potentially perpetuating instability in the regions in which they operate.¹⁴⁹ However, the group has remained restrained in its engagement in

¹⁴⁴ Ladd Serwat, Hédi Nsaibia, and Nichita Gurcov, *Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World* (Grafton, WI: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2023), <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/>.

¹⁴⁵ Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (November 2022): 21–30, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

¹⁴⁶ Nasr.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Faulkner, "Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 6 (June 2022): 28–37, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/undermining-democracy-and-exploiting-clients-the-wagner-groups-nefarious-activities-in-africa/>.

¹⁴⁸ Tanya Mehra and Méryl Demuynck, "Raising the Stakes against the Wagner Group: From Mercenaries to a Designated Terrorist Group?," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), January 17, 2023, <https://icct.nl/publication/wagner-group-mercenaries-or-terrorist-group/>.

¹⁴⁹ Mehra and Demuynck.

Northern Mali, where most Tuaregs reside. It was not until the second half of 2022 that Wagner started launching operations near Gao and Menaka.¹⁵⁰

D. MILITANT ISLAMISTS' AREAS OF OPERATION IN MALI

A central feature of the evolving land scape of militant Islamist groups in Mali is the activities and challenges posed by AQIM, ISGS, and JNIM, which arise from their origins, ideologies, areas of operation, activities, and interactions with local communities. Despite international efforts, these groups persist in expanding their influence, emphasizing the urgency of strategic responses to tackle the escalating threat of extremism in the region. For instance, since the junta took power in Mali in 2020, the number of violent events related to militant Islamist groups tripled, crossing the line of 1,000 episodes in 2023.¹⁵¹

Figure 2 provides a comprehensive visual representation of militant Islamist group activities in Mali since 2016. It distinctly showcases the concentration of groups such as JNIM and ISGS, as well as the areas marked by armed disputes. This figure effectively validates the escalation of violence within Tuareg territories, emphasizing the significant role these groups play in fostering instability in Mali.

¹⁵⁰ Serwat, Nsaibia, and Gurcov, *Moving Out of the Shadows*.

¹⁵¹ "Mali Catastrophe Accelerating under Junta Rule," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 10, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-catastrophe-accelerating-under-junta-rule/>.

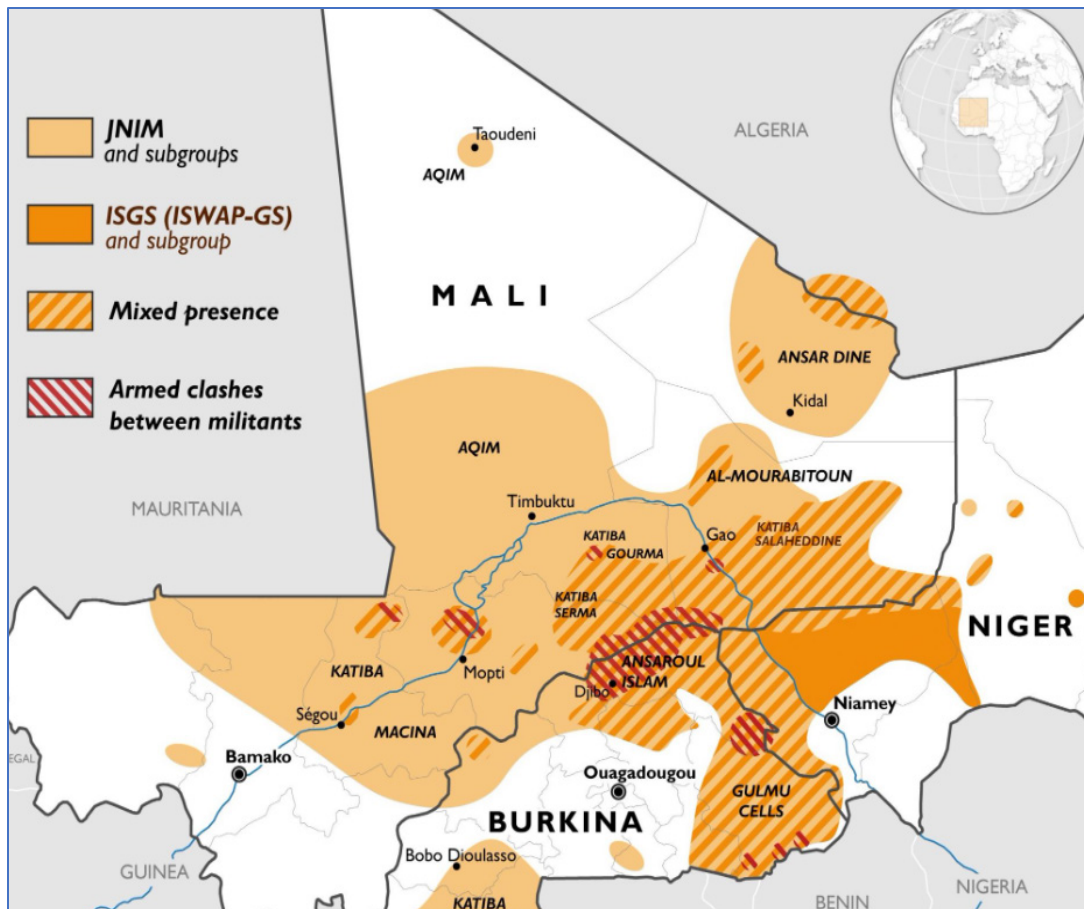


Figure 2. Militant Islamist Groups Areas of Operations since 2016¹⁵²

1. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AQIM's role in the Saharan region, especially northern Mali, has been substantial and dynamic, with its influence becoming prominent during the mid-2000s Tuareg rebellions.¹⁵³ In 2012, as the Tuareg rebellion intensified in Mali, AQIM opportunistically deepened its involvement, initially aiding the Tuaregs as they secured control over a

¹⁵² Source: Héní Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (July 2020): 5, <https://ctc westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

¹⁵³ Caleb Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Expansion into West Africa* (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center, 2022), 2, <https://ctc westpoint.edu/aqims-imperial-playbook-understanding-al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-expansion-into-west-africa/>.

significant portion of the country.¹⁵⁴ AQIM traces its roots to the GSPC, an Algerian extremist organization formed during the 1990s, and exploited the Sahel region as a rear base to reorganize itself and launch attacks inside the Algerian territories.¹⁵⁵ In 2007, the GSPC officially aligned itself with Al-Qaeda and adopted the name AQIM, signaling its connection to the broader global jihadist movement led by Osama bin Laden.¹⁵⁶ This affiliation marked a significant shift in the group's objectives and tactics.

AQIM's guiding ideology is rooted in al-Qaida's global jihadist doctrine. This doctrine aims to establish a universal Islamic caliphate through forceful jihad against perceived adversaries of Islam, encompassing the West and local apostate governments.¹⁵⁷ The group adheres to the Salafist interpretation of Islam, which claims to reject any deviation from the Prophet Muhammad's and his companions' teachings.

AQIM sees itself as a regional arm of Al-Qaeda, sharing its broader goals of expelling foreign forces from North Africa, toppling secular regimes, and ultimately establishing a unified Islamic state.¹⁵⁸ AQIM's transnational objectives extend beyond national boundaries; however, within Algeria, its strategic aims encompass the destabilization and overthrow of the Algerian government, as evidenced by its perpetration of two spectacular attacks in Algiers in 2007, resulting in 17 fatalities among UN employees and 30 individuals in a separate assault targeting the Constitutional Court.¹⁵⁹ The organization expanded its influence within the Sahel and West Africa to establish Islamic emirates and unite North African and Sahelian regions under its ideological banner.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the group targets Western interests in the area, focusing particularly

¹⁵⁴ Weiss, 2.

¹⁵⁵ Weiss, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Valeria Rosato, "'Hybrid Orders' between Terrorism and Organized Crime: The Case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *African Security* 9, no. 2 (April 2016): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2016.1175877>.

¹⁵⁷ Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Council on Foreign Relations, March 27, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/background/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb>.

¹⁵⁸ Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook*, 33.

¹⁵⁹ Laub and Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

¹⁶⁰ Stanford University, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Mapping Militant Organizations, July 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/aqim>.

on France, which it sees as a neocolonial power and a historic enemy of Islam.¹⁶¹ The reports on AQIM's strategies over the years have shown that it engages in a certain level of adaptation and evolution vis-à-vis evolving conflicts, from integrating splinters that shape conflicts and winning hearts and minds within affected communities to expanding its influence in new theatres.¹⁶²

Beyond its origins in Algeria, the group and its affiliates operate across various countries in the Sahel, including Mali, without any specific area of concentration. For example, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group was more active in Mauritania. At the same time, his rival Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd exploited the north of Niger for kidnapping. Yet these two AQIM regional leaders kept their hostages in northern Mali.¹⁶³ The 2012 Tuareg rebellion created a substantial opportunity for the organization to reinforce its presence north of Mali.¹⁶⁴ Since 2013, AQIM has acquired a new operational environment after integrating operatives from different Sahelian ethnic backgrounds.¹⁶⁵ Roughly speaking, AQIM's areas of operation are characterized by weak governance, porous borders, and historical social networks and systems that facilitate its survival. Thus, the Sahelian landscape, mainly Mali, provides AQIM with rugged terrain, evading counter-terrorism efforts and maintaining its presence.

AQIM has undergone several metamorphoses regarding The group's leadership and organizational structure since its inception, including a merger with several other jihadist groups in the region in 2017 to form JNIM.¹⁶⁶ The group's first leader was Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), who held the position until French forces took him down in June 2020.¹⁶⁷ Since November 2020, Abu Obaida Yusuf al-

¹⁶¹ Laub and Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

¹⁶² Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook*, 75.

¹⁶³ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 80, 81.

¹⁶⁴ Lyammouri, *Northern Mali*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook*, 54.

¹⁶⁶ Eizenga and Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," 1–2.

¹⁶⁷ Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly."

Annabi has taken over the organization's leadership.¹⁶⁸ In the north of Mali, Droukdel received assistance from local key persons, such as Iyad ag Ghali an Ifoghas Tuareg, who supported the group's ideology and later became the leader of the splinter Ansar dine.¹⁶⁹

AQIM's tactics have included acts of terrorism, kidnapping for ransom, participation in smuggling networks, and recruitment of fighters. Their targets have primarily been the region's security forces, government officials, and Western interests.¹⁷⁰ AQIM has been involved in smuggling activities, especially illicit goods and drugs, contributing to its funding and operational capacity.¹⁷¹ Among many attacks attributed to AQIM, two hostage crises stand apart: the 2013 attack on the Tigentourine gas facility at In Amenas in southeastern Algeria and the attack in Mali on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako in 2015.¹⁷² These attacks demonstrate AQIM's strategy of targeting symbols of Western influence and destabilizing regional governments.

AQIM faces numerous challenges, including international and regional military pressure, competition with rival jihadist entities like the Islamic State, internal leadership defections, competing ideologies, and internal divisions often rooted in ethnic and strategic disagreements. AQIM's presence in Mali has added complexity to the security landscape. Its ties to the global Al-Qaeda network give it access to resources, training, and ideological support. However, internal divisions and competition with other groups, particularly ISIS-affiliated ones, have also influenced its strategies and alliances.¹⁷³

Since 2013, AQIM's interactions with Tuareg local populations in northern Mali have been a complex mix of coercion and co-option. It has exploited economic disparities,

¹⁶⁸ Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook*, 78.

¹⁶⁹ Katherine Zimmerman, *Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2020), 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24617>.

¹⁷⁰ Laub and Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

¹⁷¹ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 87.

¹⁷² Stanford University, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

¹⁷³ "Is Al-Qaeda's North African Franchise Shifting to New Tactics?," Future for Advanced Research & Studies, October 2017, <https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/3294/is-al-qaedas-north-african-franchise-shifting-to-new-tactics>.

marginalization, and governance challenges to gain support and recruits.¹⁷⁴ The group has presented itself as a defender of Muslims against perceived Western aggression, attempting to appeal to local sentiments and create a sense of legitimacy.¹⁷⁵ However, these populations frequently object to AQIM's violent methods, radical perspectives, external interference, and racial biases, posing hurdles to the group's expansion and influence.

2. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) origins trace back to Ramadan in 2014, when Hamada Ould al-Khairy, a senior commander of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), expressed support for the Islamic State.¹⁷⁶ The group metamorphosed before ultimately aligning itself with the Islamic State in May 2015 under the leadership of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former al-Mourabitoun member who pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁷⁷

The ISGS is a Salafi-jihadist militant group operating as the Sahelian affiliate of the global Islamic State organization, mainly in the tri-border area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, known as Liptako-Gourma.¹⁷⁸ The core ideology of ISGS shares similarities with the Islamic State, centering on establishing a caliphate founded on a strict interpretation of Islamic law and pursuing jihad against perceived adversaries.¹⁷⁹ However, ISGS resiliency is an outcome of its flexibility in adapting ideological narrative to suit local contexts, capitalizing on ethnic grievances, social disparities, and the fragility of state structures to recruit and mobilize sympathizers effectively.¹⁸⁰ It's leadership delegates authority to its various cells dispersed in the Sahel to allow them self-discipline

¹⁷⁴ Weiss, *AQIM's Imperial Playbook*, 9.

¹⁷⁵ Laub and Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

¹⁷⁶ Warner et al., "Outlasting the Caliphate," 22.

¹⁷⁷ Hénì Nsaibia and Ana Marco, "Actor Profile: The Islamic State Sahel Province," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), January 13, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/01/13/actor-profile-the-islamic-state-sahel-province/>.

¹⁷⁸ Barkindo, "The Sahel," 22.

¹⁷⁹ Le Roux, "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel."

¹⁸⁰ Le Roux.

and efficiency.¹⁸¹ In addition, the group portrays itself as a protector of marginalized communities, including the Fulani pastoralists, positioning itself against what it perceives to be state oppression and corruption.¹⁸²

In Mali, ISGS militants are known for their indiscriminate and large-scale violence against various targets, including military forces, rival militants, and civilians.¹⁸³ Extorting populations through violence represents 45% of its activities.¹⁸⁴ Their tactics involve ambushes and swarming assaults using motorcycles and vehicles, setting them apart from JNIM, their Qaida counterpart. Moreover, ISGS has expanded its acts of terror beyond Mali, sporadically engaging in activities in Algeria, Benin, and Nigeria.¹⁸⁵

The group's objectives are shaped by territorial expansion and ideological adherence to the IS's principles, especially after the decline of IS in Iraq and Syria. However, ISGS does not have a coherent political agenda or a defined territorial claim. Some analysts suggest that the ISGS Salafi-Jihadi network aims to undermine the region's state authority and legitimacy, expand its influence and control over resources and populations, and challenge its rivals, such as JNIM and other armed groups.¹⁸⁶ Its willingness to take on JNIM in protracted clashes highlights its pursuit of supremacy and influence in contested regions.¹⁸⁷ The group's composition reflects the diverse social landscape of the area, and its leadership has been rooted in Western Saharan militants. Subsequently, its members belong to ethnic groups such as Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Dawsahak, Songhai, and Djerma.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸¹ Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," *Examining Extremism* (blog), July 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-greater-sahara>.

¹⁸² Le Roux, "Exploiting Borders in the Sahel."

¹⁸³ Nsaibia, "10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022."

¹⁸⁴ "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara Expanding Its Threat and Reach in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-expanding-its-threat-and-reach-in-the-sahel/>.

¹⁸⁵ Nsaibia and Marco, "Actor Profile."

¹⁸⁶ Zimmerman, *Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel*, 4.

¹⁸⁷ Nsaibia and Marco, "Actor Profile."

¹⁸⁸ Nsaibia and Marco.

The group spans the vast expanse of the Sahara, reaching out to neighboring countries, like Niger, where it perpetrated large-scale violence against Tuareg communities in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions.¹⁸⁹ Known for its atrocity, ISGS prioritizes Western targets, such as the kidnapping of U.S. missionary Jeffrey Woodke in 2016 in the Tahoua Region in Niger and the 2017 and 2019 ambushes against U.S. soldiers and Nigerien security forces near Tongo Tongo.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, IS Sahel is involved in resource extraction through theft, extortion, and zakat collection.¹⁹¹ In March 2022, after gaining provincial status and changing its name to IS Sahel, the organization launched a massive offensive in Mali's Menaka and Gao regions, resulting in significant casualties among civilians, militia members, and rival fighters.¹⁹²

ISGS faces many organizational challenges, including its limited resources, internal divisions, and confrontations with other regional armed groups.¹⁹³ Military operations against the group since 2018 have resulted in significant attrition, and its leadership has changed due to losses, including the death of founder Abu Walid al-Sahrawi.¹⁹⁴ Since 2019, battles between ISGS and JNIM, its rival al-Qaeda-linked coalition, over territory and resources have resulted in thousands of casualties among their combatants.¹⁹⁵ Despite these setbacks, IS Sahel has proven resilient and continues to consolidate its hold in traditional strongholds while seeking to expand its presence in new areas. The group's activities remain a significant concern, particularly given its ability to exploit regional vulnerabilities and carry out large-scale violence.

¹⁸⁹ Nsaibia, "10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022."

¹⁹⁰ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 212.

¹⁹¹ "Five Zones of Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/five-zones-militant-islamist-violence-sahel/>.

¹⁹² Nsaibia and Marco, "Actor Profile."

¹⁹³ Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly," 10.

¹⁹⁴ Héní Nsaibia, "Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), March 21, 2018, <https://acleddata.com/2018/03/21/targeting-of-the-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs/>.

¹⁹⁵ Nsaibia and Marco, "Actor Profile."

3. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) was formed in 2017 by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a former Tuareg rebel involved in various uprisings and insurgencies in Mali since the 1990s.¹⁹⁶ The group enforces conservative Islamic governance in its controlled areas, imposing religious restrictions, taxing civilians, and using violence to quell dissent.¹⁹⁷ The group's objectives encompass consolidating the jihadist movement in the Sahel, combating foreign intervention, and challenging secular administrations.¹⁹⁸ In Northern Mali, the group engages in dialogue and mediation as a political tool to gain support and tolerance among local communities and traditional leaders.¹⁹⁹ Through a disinformation campaign, JNIM continues to present itself near local communities in Gao, Menaka, and Kidal, where most Tuaregs live, as freedom fighters against the French invasion.²⁰⁰

While the JNIM coalition encompasses numerous independent groups, each with distinctive leadership and organizational dynamics, it also collaborated and competed with fellow jihadist factions, such as ISGS.²⁰¹ From 2017 to 2019, JNIM and ISGS coordinated an unprecedented escalation in violent attacks in Mali, encompassing suicide bombings, IED attacks, and high-profile kidnappings.²⁰² However, differences in ideological perceptions ignited bloody clashes and disputes between the two groups, reducing JNIM's combat capabilities and exposing it to counterterrorism operations.²⁰³

In the context of Mali, JNIM stands out as the most actively operational militant group, surpassing ISGS and Malian forces; it has maintained its expansion, gradually

¹⁹⁶ Eizenga and Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel."

¹⁹⁷ Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin," *Examining Extremism* (blog), July 15, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin>.

¹⁹⁸ Zimmerman, *Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 145.

²⁰⁰ Héní Nsaibia, "Mali: Any End to the Storm?," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), December 17, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/12/17/mali-any-end-to-the-storm/>.

²⁰¹ Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Jama'at."

²⁰² Thompson.

²⁰³ Thompson.

surrounding the capitals of Bamako and Ouagadougou and stretching its operations closer to Niamey while also recording the highest casualty count among all regional actors.²⁰⁴ As a driver of insecurity in Mali, JNIM has consistently conducted attacks targeting civilians, local security forces, international militaries, and UN peacekeepers, effectively operationalizing local grievances.²⁰⁵ For example, in October 2022, right after the decision of the French government to withdraw from Mali, JNIM performed around 50 attacks, killing 20 soldiers from the MINUSMA peacekeeping coalition.²⁰⁶

The group faces challenges in Mali as it continues to threaten civilians, local and international forces, and UN peacekeepers. Counter-terrorism efforts have been hindered by the security force's human rights abuses and an inability to establish lasting stability.²⁰⁷ Despite neutralizing 1,400 operatives during military operations in Mali from 2020 to 2021 and the broken peace agreements, JNIM continued triggering the spike of violence and an unprecedented population displacement.²⁰⁸ The region's political turmoil, coups, and shifting military strategies complicate the situation, potentially amplifying JNIM's influence and spreading violence across borders. JNIM's relationship with the Tuareg community is complex, with Ag Ghali leveraging historical ties and political connections to navigate local dynamics and secure his footprint and influence.²⁰⁹

E. CONCLUSION

In summary, the rise of militant Islamist groups in Mali exploits the neglected borderlands' sociopolitical aspects, where state authority is often attenuated.²¹⁰ This surge has not only profoundly impacted regional stability but also intricately woven a layer of

²⁰⁴ Nsaibia, "The Sahel."

²⁰⁵ Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel."

²⁰⁶ Nsaibia, "10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022."

²⁰⁷ Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Jama'at."

²⁰⁸ Héní Nsaibia and Jules Duhamel, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), June 17, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/>.

²⁰⁹ Eizenga and Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel."

²¹⁰ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 232.

complexity into the Tuareg predicament. Prominent Jihadist organizations, including AQIM, ISGS, and JNIM, have taken center stage within Mali, exploited Tuareg grievances for recruitment, integrated into communities, and capitalized on conflicts, highlighting the interplay of state weakness, ethnic tensions, and societal issues in creating opportunity for these groups to gain influence. Furthermore, the insights gained from this exploration of militant Islamist groups in Mali serve as a crucial foundation for the next chapter that dissects the push and pull factors driving Tuareg communities to embrace militant Islamism. By testing the grievances and the opportunities, the chapter aims to unravel the complexities driving Tuaregs toward these extremist factions, shedding light on the underlying motivations that have reshaped their interactions with these groups.

IV. FACTORS DRIVING TUAREGS TO MILITANT ISLAMISM IN MALI

In Mali, extensive economic hardship has created a larger pool for militant recruitment enabled by financial incentives and denied social status, while Islamist violence tends to emerge in areas with higher-than-average political and economic grievances among Muslim populations.²¹¹ Since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, Mali has plunged into deeper turmoil and instability, creating fertile ground for the growth of militant Islamist groups such as AQIM, ISGS, and JNIM.²¹² These groups had to navigate the fine line between maintaining the population's support and avoiding excessive violence or strict rules that could lead to resistance from local communities.²¹³ Amidst this intricate landscape, Tuaregs were caught in a complex web of competing armed groups that vied for dominance and influence over territory.²¹⁴ Moreover, regional instability, caused by factors like Algeria's campaign against terrorism and Libya's upheaval, has amplified the recruitment patterns among Tuareg communities.²¹⁵ First, Algeria's armed Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) spillover into Mali has created a volatile environment that has contributed to radicalization and recruitment, especially among marginalized Tuareg populations seeking outlets for their frustrations.²¹⁶ Secondly, Libya's destabilization, including the resulting influx of arms into Mali, has contributed to increased violence and provided the opportunity for recruitment of the Tuareg by various militant groups.²¹⁷

²¹¹ Caitriona Dowd, "Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 4 (2015): 514, 515, <https://www.jstor.org.libproxy.nps.edu:2048/stable/26309887>.

²¹² Rida Lyammouri, *Literature Paper: Jihadist Armed Governance in Mali* (Morocco: Policy Center for the New South, 2021), 1–2, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/literature-paper-jihadist-armed-governance-mali/>.

²¹³ Lyammouri, 1–6.

²¹⁴ Lyammouri, 1.

²¹⁵ Dal Santo and van der Heide, "Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts," 281.

²¹⁶ Dal Santo and van der Heide, 280.

²¹⁷ Dal Santo and van der Heide, 279.

This chapter explores the intersection of militant Islamism and Tuareg communities in Mali, examining the factors that have made Tuaregs a vector for recruitment and radicalization for terrorist organizations. First, it uses the grievances model to assess factors that push Tuaregs to embrace militant Islamism: economic grievances, social discrimination, political marginalization, and physical persecution. Second, the chapter uses the opportunity model, stressing how weak state capacity and prosperous illicit networks have enabled extremist organizations to foster their ideologies and build associations with Tuareg people in Mali. Besides the grievances and the opportunity model, this chapter covers the challenges that have contributed to intelligence ineffectiveness in Mali, including political instability, fragmentation within MINUSMA's intelligence framework, and disparities between Western and African troops, ultimately hindering efforts to counter militant extremist groups in the region and offering more opportunities for violent extremist groups to prosper and to recruit the Tuareg.

A. TUAREG PERIPHERIES IN MALI: A FERTILE GROUND FOR RECRUITMENT

The overlapped complexities of Salafi-jihadi ideologies are evident within Malian Tuareg communities. Al-Qaeda prioritizes supporting local rebellions against secular regimes and building its transnational network, avoiding controversial actions to retain regional alliances.²¹⁸ However, local jihadist groups aim to establish sharia law within existing borders, combining Salafism with nationalism to accommodate diverse communities.²¹⁹ For example, Ansar Eddine (a local Tuareg AQIM splinter) has adopted this ideology to support the MNLA secessionist movement, creating Azawad state.²²⁰ By contrast, the Islamic State pursues an irredentist vision, seeking to restore an Islamic caliphate across territories divided by historical borders, disregarding state sovereignty and

²¹⁸ Mohammed M. Hafez, "Jihadi Salafism," in *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam*, Second edition (New York : Routledge, 2021), 271, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429425165>.

²¹⁹ Hafez, 271.

²²⁰ Jason Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa: The Emergence, Evolution, and Future of the Next Jihadist Battlefield* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 174, 175.

local considerations.²²¹ The coexistence of these interconnected approaches within Mali has created complex dynamics that impact radicalization among aggrieved Tuareg populations.

The involvement of AQIM, formerly GSPC, in attacks against Westerners and foreigners in Algeria and northern Mali since 2003 has paralleled an increased drive among this group to recruit marginalized individuals, including Tuaregs.²²² AQIM attempted to exploit the social and political vacuum created through decades of governmental neglect and mismanagement in Mali while increasing the appeal of extremist ideologies in the region.²²³ In addition, amidst the recent global COVID-19 pandemic and Mali's military coups, new militant Islamist organizations, like JNIM, have risen and sought to exploit local discontent and socio-economic challenges in northern and central Mali.²²⁴

B. PUSH FACTORS: ROOT CAUSES OF RADICALIZATION AND REBELLION

The main push factors driving individuals in Tuareg regions toward involvement in violence and militant extremism are multifaceted. These factors encompass economic grievances, social discrimination, ethnic tensions, political exclusion, and physical persecution. Understanding and addressing these underlying issues is essential for devising effective policies to foster stability and reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies in Mali.

1. Economic Grievances

Economic grievances have emerged as a potent driver propelling Tuaregs in Mali into the orbit of violent extremist organizations to achieve autonomy and resource management.²²⁵ Extremist groups tempt Tuaregs with promises of essential resources, job

²²¹ Hafez, "Jihadi Salafism," 272.

²²² Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 75–84.

²²³ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 87–88.

²²⁴ Puja Pandit, "Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," Institute for Economics & Peace, March 2022, 4,15,17, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/report/global-terrorism-index-2022/>.

²²⁵ Cline, "Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers," 625.

prospects, and financial rewards, tapping into their economic struggles. Persistent poverty, exacerbated by droughts, resource scarcity, and economic transformations, has left Tuareg communities grappling with financial hardships, making them susceptible to the appeal of extremist groups.²²⁶ These grievances, rooted in the decline of nomadic pastoralism, have significantly contributed to the radicalization of Tuaregs in Mali; they have driven some to join these organizations for economic survival.²²⁷

Stressing the role of economic grievances in the case of the Tuaregs in Mali, the core of the conflict has been the ongoing imbalance in access to land and natural resources.²²⁸ Tuaregs turned to an armed confrontation in response to diminished resource access for sustaining their nomadic livelihood. The lack of government assistance to these communities exacerbated the impacts of drought and climate change.²²⁹ Moreover, shifts in economic growth, influenced by fluctuations in precipitation patterns, have a direct correlation with the occurrence of conflicts across sub-Saharan African nations.²³⁰

Furthermore, Tuaregs have always related their dilapidated economic status to the restrictions imposed by state borders. Artificial political boundaries disturbed the dynamics of the Tuareg's trans-Saharan ties and raised pressure on their economic survival, pushing them to rebel.²³¹ In contrast, while the Tuaregs lament their economic marginalization and isolation, other minority groups face comparable difficulties in the African continent and have not turned to violence.²³² Therefore, it is not appropriate to confine the explanation

²²⁶ Marina Caparini, *The Mali Crisis and Responses by Regional Actors* (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2015), 5, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2670222>.

²²⁷ Pandit, "Global Terrorism Index 2022," March 2022, 53–54.

²²⁸ Abdalla, "Understanding of the Natural Resource Conflict Dynamics," 9.

²²⁹ Abdalla, 9.

²³⁰ Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, and Ernest Sergenti, "Economic Shocks and Civil Conflict: An Instrumental Variables Approach," *Journal of Political Economy* 112, no. 4 (2004): 746, <https://doi.org/10.1086/421174>.

²³¹ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 16.

²³² Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 2.

of violence among Tuareg communities to a functionalist paradigm in response to which states could implement direct economic policy.²³³

Fully aware of these challenges, extremist organizations have seized the opportunity since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali to present themselves to the Tuareg as providers of economic relief, promising them access to vital resources and employment opportunities.²³⁴ AQIM has taken advantage of Tuareg communities' financial weaknesses by compensating young people from underprivileged backgrounds for employment and thereby recruiting them.²³⁵ Using its substantial financial resources, AQIM ensured the loyalty of local criminal networks and gained the favor of northern communities, including aggrieved Tuaregs, by providing financial incentives, medical assistance, and support for youth, ultimately attracting recruits motivated by a combination of security and economic factors.²³⁶ Moreover, in Timbuktu, AQIM aimed to win over the local population by supporting traders and smugglers and announcing that they would no longer enforce customs duties or tolls, trying to gain their support.²³⁷

In addition, Mali's history of recurring violence in the north stemmed from Tuaregs seeking autonomy, coupled with increased corruption opportunities from decentralization, which has inadvertently pushed some Tuaregs toward extremist groups.²³⁸ JNIM has

²³³ Adib Bencherif, *De La « question Touarègue » Aux Mémoires Du Conflit : Pour Une Réconciliation Malienne [From the "Tuareg Question" to the Memories of the Conflict: For a Malian Reconciliation]* (Montréal (Québec): Centre FrancoPaix en Résolution des Conflits et Missions de Paix, 2018), 21, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323141484_De_la_question_touaregue_aux_memoires_du_conflit_pour_une_reconciliation_malienne.

²³⁴ Anouar Boukhars and Carl Pilgram, *In Disorder, They Thrive: How Rural Distress Fuels Militancy and Banditry in the Central Sahel* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2023), 6, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/disorder-they-thrive-how-rural-distress-fuels-militancy-and-banditry-central-sahel>.

²³⁵ Dal Santo and van der Heide, "Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts," 283.

²³⁶ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, *A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2017), 8, <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/IPI-Rpt-Inter-Malian-Agreement.pdf>.

²³⁷ Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali," *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2015.1100501>.

²³⁸ Dowd, "Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," 521.

seized upon deteriorating conditions among Tuaregs in northern regions and conflicts between farmers and herders as recruitment opportunities.²³⁹ The lack of opportunities for young people in the north of Mali makes temporarily joining jihadist groups desirable. The average monthly salary of a Malian is 58,000 FCFA (88 euros); joining the JNIM network allowed them to earn three times that amount: 150,000 FCFA (229 euros) and being a suicide bomber up to 750,000 FCFA (1,189 euros).²⁴⁰

While economic grievances played a significant role in the radicalization of some Tuaregs, pinpointing exact recruitment numbers and motivations is difficult in such a complex environment, where poverty, religious beliefs, and ethnic identities often intersect, fostering uncertainty and insecurity among Tuaregs.²⁴¹

2. Social Discrimination and Ethnic Tensions

The impacts of the social exclusion of Tuaregs, assuming that due to their rural lifestyle and geographical isolation, Tuaregs also have limited access to education and healthcare. As a result, Tuareg children are less likely to attend school, and their communities are deprived of healthcare services.²⁴² These practices have made the Tuareg more vulnerable to rebellions like the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and violent extremist organizations like AQIM and Ansar Dine.

As the 2012 Malian rebellion shifted to Islamist insurgency, preexisting societal issues, coupled with ethnic disparities in northern Mali, created fertile ground for extremist organizations to recruit and radicalize individuals from Tuareg communities.²⁴³ The

²³⁹ Brian Carter, “Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in the Sahel,” Critical Threats, September 30, 2022, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-areas-of-operation-in-the-sahel>.

²⁴⁰ Beatriz de León Cobo, *Conséquences du Coup D'état Au Mali pour la Question Touareg et la Mise en Œuvre des Accords d'Alger. [Consequences of the Coup d'état in Mali for the Tuareg Question and the Implementation of the Algiers Agreements]* (Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2021), 15, https://www.iecee.es/en/publicaciones-new/documentos-de-opinion/2021/DIEEO34_2021_BEALEO_Mali.html.

²⁴¹ Andrew Lebovich, “The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 6 (June 2013): 4–9, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali/>.

²⁴² Rida Lyammouri, *Tribal Dynamics in the Sahel* (Morocco: Policy Center for the New South, n.d.), <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/tribal-dynamics-sahel/>.

²⁴³ Estelle, *The Underestimated Insurgency*, 3.

emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and self-defense militias intensified conflicts, deepening historical ethnic and racial tensions. These underlying instabilities allowed militant Islamist groups to exploit grievances and alliances formed during preceding rebellions among Tuareg communities.²⁴⁴ Seeking to enforce their political stance, extremist groups have capitalized on local discontent to portray themselves as defenders of Tuaregs while assisting Tuareg's political goals of achieving self-governance in northern Mali and overcoming ethnic cleavage.²⁴⁵ Tuaregs, on their side, helped these organizations extend their footprints and connections to access financial resources, weaponry, and assistance when engaging in violent confrontations with local government.²⁴⁶

Feelings of marginalization, state indifference to their suffering, and political exclusion have left Tuaregs vulnerable to the appeals of extremist groups like AQIM and MUJWA, who exploited these grievances to further their agendas.²⁴⁷ The historical rivalries and divisions among ethnic communities in Mali, including Tuaregs, Arabs, Songhais, and Peuls, have fueled local conflicts and allowed extremist groups to exploit these fault lines.²⁴⁸ While Tuaregs and Arabs were in constant discord with Bamako, militant Islamist organizations operating in Mali, such as JNIM, have skillfully used this resentment of societal discrimination by fostering connections between its fighters and local Tuareg populations.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 78–79.

²⁴⁵ Andrew Lebovich, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed September 17, 2023, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping.

²⁴⁶ Juan Carlos Antúnez, "The Root Causes of Violence in the Sahel," Global Strategy, December 6, 2022, <https://global-strategy.org/the-root-causes-of-violence-in-the-sahel/>.

²⁴⁷ Aurélien Tobie and Boukary Sangaré, "The Governance of Armed Groups in Central and Northern Mali," in *The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali: Necessary Adaptations of the Strategies for Re-Establishing Peace*, by Aurélien Tobie and Boukary Sangaré (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019), 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24501.6>.

²⁴⁸ Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, *From Disfunctionality to Disaggregation and Back?: The Malian Crisis, Local Players and European Interests* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2013), 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09822>.

²⁴⁹ Tobie and Sangaré, "The Governance of Armed Groups in Central and Northern Mali," 9.

Another critical aspect of societal discrimination is the perception among Tuaregs that the government has been indifferent to their suffering and hardships, pushing them to embrace radicalization to achieve independence.²⁵⁰ Tuareg communities, particularly those in remote and marginalized regions, have faced numerous challenges, including food and water scarcity, limited access to education and healthcare, and inadequate infrastructure; indeed, these issues have persisted without effective intervention from the government.²⁵¹ AQIM exploited these grievances within Tuareg communities by strategically aligning with their grievances against the Malian government and ambitions to gain autonomy.

In 2012, the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali initially aimed for greater autonomy and regional control. AQIM saw an opportunity to merge its Salafi-jihadi goals with the Tuareg rebellion's desire for independence and local power.²⁵² This fusion created a unique hybrid insurgency where AQIM absorbed the Tuareg's objectives by appearing to support their cause. Essentially, AQIM strategically aligned itself with Tuareg's aspirations for autonomy and leveraged its fight against the Malian government. This allowed AQIM to control northern Mali, impose Islamic laws, and establish an anti-Western jihadi stronghold while presenting affiliated groups like Ansa Eddine and MUJWA as local Tuareg jihadist entities.²⁵³ Ethnic tensions, social inequalities, and insecurity thus created fertile ground for extremist organizations to prosper as they exploited grievances, offered alternative sources of support, and presented themselves as champions of marginalized communities.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Asfura-Heim, *The Tuareg*, 5.

²⁵¹ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 21.

²⁵² Estelle, *The Underestimated Insurgency*, 3.

²⁵³ Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, *North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), 8–9, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR415.html.

²⁵⁴ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 20–22.

3. Political Exclusion

Since Mali gained independence from France in 1960, Tuaregs have consistently denounced central government abuses, particularly concerning social inequality and ethnic discrimination. The implementation of the Malian land reforms further intensified existing tensions and escalated the conflict. Consequently, some Tuareg leaders perceived these reforms as a deliberate attempt to eradicate their culture and obliterate communal unity.²⁵⁵

Political exclusion has contributed to alienation and frustration among the Tuaregs in Mali.²⁵⁶ These communities have felt that their central governments are neglecting their concerns and scorning their voices, causing a distrust breakdown and hindering attempts between Tuaregs and their nation-states to establish long-term peace and stability. For example, Tuaregs and Arabs had fewer representatives within the Malian government than the Peul as an ethnic group.²⁵⁷

Apart from the economic and social factors, there is a distinctive driver behind the Tuareg association with militant Islamist organizations in Mali. The political exclusion of the Tuareg people in Mali has been a significant driver behind their association with militant Islamist organizations.²⁵⁸ Historically, Mali's excessive centralization of power has contributed to the deteriorating living conditions of the Tuaregs, particularly as their traditional nomadic way of life faced challenges due to shrinking mobility areas.²⁵⁹ Their omission from decision-making has fueled frustration and their sense of being ignored by the government, especially concerning their suffering and hardships in the north.²⁶⁰ This feeling has, in turn, incentivized some Tuaregs to explore alternatives, including alignment with militant Islamist groups, with initial goals of achieving increased economic prosperity and fairness.²⁶¹ The lack of restored government administration in liberated areas and

²⁵⁵ Abdalla, "Understanding of the Natural Resource Conflict Dynamics," 5.

²⁵⁶ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 7.

²⁵⁷ Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 183.

²⁵⁸ Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger," 59.

²⁵⁹ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 5.

²⁶⁰ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 16.

²⁶¹ Abdalla, "Understanding of the Natural Resource Conflict Dynamics," 8.

insecurity and absence of public services have enabled jihadists to establish and expand their presence.²⁶²

The Tuareg's will for political autonomy and recognition has profoundly impacted their relationship with militant Islamist organizations. For instance, the emergence of figures like Iyad Ag Ghali, who represented the aspirations of the marginalized Tuareg community, led to alliances with groups like AQIM. These alliances allowed Ag Ghali's Ansar Eddine to surpass the MNLA as the dominant Tuareg military force swiftly.²⁶³

AQIM's substantial financial resources and the leverage it held through hostage situations played a pivotal role in gaining local support.²⁶⁴ It offered an alternative power structure and appeared to defend Tuareg's rights and identity against perceived government indifference and mistreatment.²⁶⁵ Moreover, the broader trend observed across many African countries suggests that political marginalization can institutionalize ethnic violence and manipulation of the people by elites.²⁶⁶ This trend manifested in the case of the Malian Tuareg. In regions like Kidal, Tuareg's opposition to the central state's authority created a suitable milieu for militant Islamists to capitalize on grievances and expand their dominance.²⁶⁷

4. Physical Persecution

Tuaregs, seeking retribution and protection, have been compelled to join extremist organizations due to physical persecution inflicted by both state security forces and non-state armed groups. Malian security forces and non-state actors have been responsible for

²⁶² Jean-Herve Jesequel and Vincent Foucher, "Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural," International Crisis Group, January 11, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>.

²⁶³ Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," in *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara*, ed. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wpjcm.7>.

²⁶⁴ Lacher, 76.

²⁶⁵ Shurkin, Pezard, and Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle*, 12, 13.

²⁶⁶ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 19–20.

²⁶⁷ Dowd, "Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," 518–19.

acts of violence against Tuareg individuals and communities.²⁶⁸ These incidents range from arbitrary arrests and torture to extrajudicial killings, exacerbating a sense of injustice and alienation among the Tuareg population.²⁶⁹

As a result, during the 2012 Tuareg rebellion in Mali, the Tuareg minority aligned with MNLA and collaborated with militant Islamist groups such as AQIM, MUJWA, and Ansar Eddine. Their primary goal was to expel government forces from the northern territories.²⁷⁰ Following the 2012 rebellion and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad, international efforts led by France and the African Union aimed to curb extremism.²⁷¹ While some tactical successes were achieved through these efforts, groups like AQIM and JNIM continued to grow, expanding their operations beyond Mali into neighboring countries.

Military counterterrorism operations, such as Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane, were launched to end terrorist groups' influence in northern Mali. However, their impact on Tuareg communities and recruitment patterns has been mixed.²⁷² While these operations disrupted some terrorist activities and limited their territorial control, they also inadvertently contributed to increased recruitment: The abuses they inflicted upon Tuareg and Arab civilians, intensifying after the Western-led military intervention, fueled jihadism in Mali's Tuareg territories by galvanizing support for extremist groups and deepening hostility toward the West.²⁷³

Amidst these military operations' mixed results, it's essential to delve deeper into the emerging complex dynamics. Organizations affiliated with both Al-Qaida and the Islamic State initially leveraged local sentiment to recruit new members. The desire for

²⁶⁸ "Mali: Lawlessness, Abuses Imperil Population," Human Rights Watch, April 14, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/mali-lawlessness-abuses-imperil-population>.

²⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch.

²⁷⁰ Center for Preventive Action, "Violent Extremism in the Sahel," Global Conflict Tracker, August 10, 2023, <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>.

²⁷¹ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War*, 299.

²⁷² Dal Santo and van der Heide, "Escalating Complexity in Regional Conflicts," 282.

²⁷³ Schmidt, *Foreign Intervention in Africa after the Cold War*, 303–4.

retribution against extrajudicial executions and other forms of abuse by government troops and pro-government militias pushed Tuareg individuals into the ranks of jihadist movements.²⁷⁴ Moreover, intensified militarization exacerbated grievances fueling local Tuareg insurgency, as security forces unintentionally disrupted nomadic cross-border economies and potentially heightened ethnic profiling.²⁷⁵

Physical persecution was thus a catalyst that amplified the Tuaregs' grievances rooted in political marginalization.²⁷⁶ The experience of violence, displacement, and human rights abuses deepened the sense of injustice and victimhood within the Tuareg community. Concurrently, it created a receptive environment for extremist ideologies that promise protection, retribution, and a platform to resist their oppressors.

C. PULL FACTORS: OPPORTUNITIES TO REBEL

In Mali's context, various factors have drawn the Tuareg community toward affiliations with violent extremist organizations. Central to this dynamic is the symbiotic relationship between the state's fragility and the flourishing of illicit networks. To comprehend these pull factors, it's crucial first to examine the background of state weaknesses and the surge in illegal activities, which have substantially shaped the Tuareg involvement with militant Islamist groups in the region.

1. Weak State Capacity and Illicit Networks

The collapse of Libya in 2011 resulted in the return of Tuareg fighters who had supported Gaddafi's regime to Mali and Niger. While Niger implemented strict rules to reintegrate the returning individuals, Mali's failure to control the northern part of the country enhanced opportunities for aggrieved segments to become the epicenter of the

²⁷⁴ Corinne Dufka, "Sahel: Atrocities by the Security Forces Are Fueling Recruitment by Armed Islamists," Human Rights Watch, July 1, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/sahel-atrocities-security-forces-are-fueling-recruitment-armed-islamists>.

²⁷⁵ Carter, "Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in the Sahel."

²⁷⁶ Anouar Boukhars and Frederic Wehrey, "Conclusion," in *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara*, ed. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 187, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wpjcm.12>.

Sahel region security crisis.²⁷⁷ This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of the opportunity model, given that the failure to address grievances and provide meaningful opportunities for reintegration can contribute to the radicalization and recruitment of marginalized groups, such as the Tuareg in this case.

Returning Tuaregs, armed and experienced in fighting, reawakened the separatist movement, which, along with radical jihadist organizations, launched an uprising, triggered a military coup in Bamako, and by the end of 2012, had seized control of the northern half of the nation and threatened to invade the southern regions.²⁷⁸ Mali's inability to address Tuaregs' concerns in the north, where structural and institutional inequalities are more prominent, triggered the onset of armed conflict and the frequency of violence.²⁷⁹ Similarly, political polarization and the absence of effective democratic institutions offered conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.²⁸⁰

The underlying causes behind all four successful military coups were state weakness and inadequate governance in Mali. The security situation in the northern region, predominantly inhabited by Tuaregs, combined with the ineffective response from the state and insufficient international aid, played a pivotal role in fueling violence and the 2012 and 2020 military coups.²⁸¹ The existing relationship between Islamists and rebels demonstrates that terrorists have found suitable circumstances for sustaining their activities in northern Mali due to their freedom of movement and exploitation of territorial state vulnerability.²⁸² Therefore, some jihadist groups have sought to exploit the political grievances of the Tuaregs and the lack of state services to advance their ideological interests and have made these tribes their breeding ground to recruit operatives.

²⁷⁷ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 6.

²⁷⁸ Ananyev and Poyker, "Identity and Conflict," 2.

²⁷⁹ Eramah, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 17.

²⁸⁰ Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "The Malian Crisis and Its Actors," *International Spectator* 48, no. 3 (September 2013): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2013.823731>.

²⁸¹ Matei, "Mali," 13.

²⁸² Walther and Christopoulos, "Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion," 516.

In 2018, six years after the military coup, the failure of the state to restore peace and security not only permitted Islamist organizations like JNIM and the ISGS to monopolize the northern territories but also gave an opportunity to even local ethnically-aligned non-state armed factions to impose power over the populations and become security makers.²⁸³ In addition, due to the Malian government's fragility, violent radical and criminal organizations were able to expand their financial resources and influence by soliciting the assistance of some of their leaders in negotiations for the release of hostages and associated extortion payments.²⁸⁴

Weak state capacity and thriving illicit networks enabled Tuareg's support of violent extremist organizations in Mali. Before 2012, Mali's failure to provide good governance, border security, and equitable justice opened the door for militant Islamist groups to set up bases and broaden their network.²⁸⁵ State fragility, characterized by inadequate governance structures, limited service provision, inability to control vast territories, and collusion with non-state armed groups, created fertile ground for the proliferation of militant Islamist groups.²⁸⁶ The Tuareg community, historically marginalized and residing in remote regions, acutely experiences the consequences of state weakness.²⁸⁷ In areas where the state's presence is minimal, informal power structures often fill the vacuum, allowing extremist groups to gain influence and serve their agendas.²⁸⁸

The lack of state-provided services and governance has eroded the social contract between the Tuareg community and the Malian central government. By contrast, jihadist groups offered essential services, justice mechanisms, and dispute resolution, thus gaining

²⁸³ Lyammouri, *Literature Paper*, 2.

²⁸⁴ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 7.

²⁸⁵ Anouar Boukhars, "Why Extremist Insurgencies Spread: Insights from the Sahel," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, January 2, 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/01/02/why-extremist-insurgencies-spread-insights-from-the-sahel/>.

²⁸⁶ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 7.

²⁸⁷ Boukhars and Wehrey, "Conclusion," 188.

²⁸⁸ Antúñez, "The Root Causes of Violence in the Sahel."

legitimacy and support among the Tuareg population.²⁸⁹ The absence of effective state institutions heightens the allure of these groups by creating an environment where alternative governance systems are perceived by Tuaregs as more reliable and responsive to local needs.²⁹⁰ AQIM established control over a territory where it could conduct operations, exploiting both the absence of a functional Malian central government presence and the preexisting conflict between the Tuareg and the central government to its advantage.²⁹¹

As Libya collapsed in 2011, illicit activities such as smuggling, kidnapping, and drug and weapons trafficking have significantly increased in the north of Mali due to porous borders and weak state security forces.²⁹² The fusion of Tuareg secessionists and Islamist organizations to create an Islamic state in 2012 upgraded these networks to a vital financing source to sustain their struggle against Bamako.²⁹³ In this case, terrorism and organized crime have shown the capacity to exploit state weaknesses, creating alternative forms of power and authority for people and non-state actors.²⁹⁴

Tuaregs' traditional role as traders and familiarity with the vast Sahelian desert terrain position them advantageously within illicit networks, such as drugs, arms, and human trafficking.²⁹⁵ Their involvement in such networks was an economic imperative and a means of circumventing state barriers to resource access.²⁹⁶ The smuggling routes are geographically concentrated in areas with porous borders, making them ideal for

²⁸⁹ Walther and Christopoulos, "Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion," 516.

²⁹⁰ Olivier J. Walther and William F. S. Miles, eds., *African Border Disorders: Addressing Transnational Extremist Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2017), 181, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315166483>.

²⁹¹ Dona J. Stewart, *What Is Next for Mali? The Roots of Conflict and Challenges to Stability* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 30, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/514>.

²⁹² Cristiani and Fabiani, "The Malian Crisis and Its Actors," 92, 93.s

²⁹³ Mathieu Bere, "Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges of International Intervention in Mali," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 7, no. 2 (2017): 62, <https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.7.2.03>.

²⁹⁴ Rosato, "'Hybrid Orders' between Terrorism and Organized Crime," 130.

²⁹⁵ Stewart, *What Is Next for Mali?*, 41.

²⁹⁶ Caparini, *The Mali Crisis and Responses by Regional Actors*, 5.

various trafficking operations, with a notable focus on areas like the famous “Marlboro Road” that extends from Mauritania to Europe, crossing Tuareg territories in northern Mali and Algeria.²⁹⁷ Smugglers in this region often collaborate with terrorists due to their mutual interests despite differing ultimate goals. Another factor that permitted illicit network inflation is the carrots-and-stick approach that the Malian state followed toward the Tuaregs’ engagement in trafficking activities, seeking a social contract to soothe armed rebellions in the north while supporting rival tribal networks to counter the Tuaregs’ control over regional drug smuggling routes.²⁹⁸

In the Gao-Timbuktu region, influential figures like Hanoune Ould Ali and Mohamed Ould Mataly, known as major traffickers, hold considerable sway over the interplay between the military, armed groups, and local authorities. While some of these networks primarily focus on criminal activities, others use them to finance resistance projects, leading to occasional conflicts and collaboration, indicating a fluid relationship between transnational crime and global terrorism.²⁹⁹

Terrorist groups often forge strong connections with influential local tribes through methods like marriage, gaining access to the local social fabric, and community backing.³⁰⁰ By capitalizing on these links and collaborating with Tuareg smugglers, AQIM key figures like Belmokhtar succeeded in establishing a presence in the region and setting well-founded smuggling networks, ultimately legitimizing their influence and securing safe havens within Tuareg territories in northern Mali.³⁰¹

While smugglers are primarily driven by financial gain rather than political motives, trafficking is vital for their economic well-being, offering a means to bypass state

²⁹⁷ Rosato, “‘Hybrid Orders’ between Terrorism and Organized Crime,” 126.

²⁹⁸ Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, “Drug Smuggling and the Stability of Fragile States. The Diverging Trajectories of Mali and Niger,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 16, no. 2 (2022): 229–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1896207>.

²⁹⁹ Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, “Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making,” *International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (2020): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1835324>.

³⁰⁰ Rosato, “‘Hybrid Orders’ between Terrorism and Organized Crime,” 121.

³⁰¹ Rosato, 121.

restrictions and generate income in impoverished and underdeveloped regions.³⁰² As stated by the MNLA spokesman Mossa Ag Attaher in an interview, “religion has never been one of our goals. Most of us are already Muslims, so we do not feel the need to fight to become Muslim.”³⁰³ In contrast, terrorist groups harbor broader political ambitions, seeking to challenge established orders.³⁰⁴

Despite distinct objectives, these pragmatic partnerships serve the economic interests of the smugglers while empowering terrorists to control the contraband market and advance their agendas. The lucrative opportunities these illicit networks present give the Tuareg communities a dual incentive to align with extremist organizations.³⁰⁵ Firstly, the financial benefits of participating in these activities offer economic stability and empowerment in regions plagued by poverty and underdevelopment.³⁰⁶ Secondly, violent extremist groups have exploited existing smuggling routes and networks, providing Tuaregs an avenue for economic advancement within their local context.³⁰⁷

D. INTELLIGENCE INEFFECTIVENESS IN MALI

Since its independence in 1960, Mali has experienced a series of military coups, resulting in frequent changes in leadership and political instability.³⁰⁸ Despite regional and international efforts, the Sahel has witnessed a series of intelligence failures, particularly in Mali, which have contributed to the expansion and growth of deadly extremist organizations like the ISGS and AQIM.³⁰⁹ Moreover, the lack of trust between security forces and local communities in Mali poses a significant intelligence challenge. For

³⁰² Rosato, 126.

³⁰³ Rosato, 121.

³⁰⁴ Rosato, 129.

³⁰⁵ Laurent de Castelli, “Mali: From Sanctuary to Islamic State,” *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (2014): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.928016>.

³⁰⁶ Stewart, *What Is Next for Mali?*, 41.

³⁰⁷ Rosato, “‘Hybrid Orders’ between Terrorism and Organized Crime,” 112.

³⁰⁸ Matei, “Mali,” 2.

³⁰⁹ Brian Dodwell, “A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Rose Keravuori, Deputy Director of Intelligence, United States Africa Command,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 1 (January 2023): 14, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CTC-SENTINEL-012023.pdf>.

example, in northern regions, Tuareg communities perceived international military actors as invaders competing with them for natural resources.³¹⁰ This mistrust has enabled terrorist groups to exploit grievances and opportunities to invest in Islamic ideology and infiltrate Tuareg communities, preventing security forces from penetrating and gathering information.³¹¹

Corruption has undermined the effectiveness of Mali's intelligence agencies, as it has led to the diversion of resources meant for intelligence gathering and compromised the integrity of intelligence processes. This limitation in resources and training has negatively impacted the capabilities of Malian security forces to gather and analyze intelligence, resulting in shortcomings in their ability to detect, prevent, and react to terrorist threats.³¹²

The recent involvement of the Russian Wagner Group leading an unprecedented disinformation campaign and military operations in the Sahelian region added complexity to the intelligence situation.³¹³ Its operations aim to manipulate public opinion and create confusion about the role of foreign forces. They spread false information about the motives and actions of Western powers, such as the United States and France, to erode public trust and fuel anti-Western sentiment. The emergence of the Wagner Group in the region as a proxy tool presents a new challenge for the U.S. intelligence community, as it is known for its support of authoritarian regimes.³¹⁴ As Wagner's presence disrupted MINUSMA's intelligence efforts to counter terrorist activities in Mali, JNIM seized the opportunity to

³¹⁰ Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, 174.

³¹¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2023), 32, <https://www.odni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

³¹² Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2018* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, October 2019), 30, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2018/>.

³¹³ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Mapping Disinformation in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), April 26, 2022, 1, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>.

³¹⁴ Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," 21.

impose its control over local populations and intensified reprisal attacks, further complicating the security situation in Mali.³¹⁵

The military coup in March and the Tuareg uprising in January 2012 challenged not only the stability of Mali overall but also the ability of regional and international leaders to handle a major crisis while simultaneously addressing a security conflict and a political breakdown.³¹⁶ In fact, this political instability strained relationships with neighboring countries and international partners, reducing intelligence sharing, which is critical for countering cross-border terrorist threats.³¹⁷ In Mali, the junta focused more on gaining popular trust than developing counterterrorism measures, leading to a reduced emphasis on intelligence gathering and prevention of extremist group expansion.³¹⁸ As a result, international and domestic intelligence agencies found themselves sidelined or subjected to restructuring cycles in Mali, which kept them from keeping up with the consistent expansion and evolution of jihadists in the Sahel region.

The fragmented intelligence landscape in Mali is a fundamental challenge that has significantly impeded efforts to counter militant extremist groups. This fragmentation is characterized by a lack of coordination between the MINUSMA intelligence branch called the All-Sources Intelligence Fusion Unit (ASIFU) and other regional active intelligence agencies.³¹⁹

³¹⁵ Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel.”

³¹⁶ Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, “Conclusions: A Way out of Recurrent Crisis?,” in *The Roots of Mali’s Conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis*, by Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme (Wassenaar, Netherlands: Clingendael Institute, 2015), 53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05533.10>.

³¹⁷ Lynda Peters, “Intelligence Sharing,” in *The Conduct of Intelligence in Democracies: Processes, Practices, Cultures*, ed. Florina Cristiana Matei and Carolyn Halladay (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2019), 131.

³¹⁸ Anouar Boukhars, “The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali,” in *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara*, ed. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wpjcm.8>.

³¹⁹ Benjamin Oudet, “The United Nations Intelligence Function,” in *The Conduct of Intelligence in Democracies: Processes, Practices, Cultures*, ed. Florina Cristiana Matei and Carolyn Halladay (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2019), 158.

The challenges within MINUSMA's intelligence framework in Mali were multifaceted. Firstly, there was a lack of effective coordination and integration among various intelligence units and actors, leading to issues like stovepiping, duplication, and information gaps, especially with the French Operation Barkhane.³²⁰ Secondly, a significant disconnect existed between the intelligence needs of mission leadership and what contributing countries provided. For example, the level of exploitation of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) among different agencies was mediocre, which held back operational results and prevention methods.³²¹ Thirdly, cultural and operational disparities between Western and African troops complicated intelligence efforts, with Western forces offering advanced capabilities but limited human intelligence (HUMINT). By contrast, African troops were more familiar with the environment but had fewer resources.³²²

Lastly, Mali's intricate and volatile political environment, marked by numerous armed groups, terrorist organizations, criminal networks, and local communities, posed substantial challenges to acquiring reliable and timely intelligence on their intentions, capabilities, and activities, as well as their impact on the country's political, social, and economic landscape. The inability to adequately monitor and assess extremist activities may inadvertently have contributed to the recruitment and radicalization of individuals within Mali's borders. Insufficient resources and training can result in intelligence agencies being unable to identify and counteract recruitment efforts effectively.

E. CONCLUSION

This chapter has analyzed the factors that drive Tuaregs to join militant Islamism in Mali. An interconnection of push and pull factors has contributed to the radicalization of some Tuaregs by various extremist organizations that carry different agendas.

Economic grievances have been a potent driver, with extremist groups exploiting the economic struggles of Tuareg communities by offering promises of essential resources

³²⁰ Oudet, 159.

³²¹ Oudet, 163.

³²² Oudet, 163–64.

and financial rewards. The manipulation of historical ethnic tensions, social discrimination, and ethnic disparities has also fueled radicalization among Tuaregs. Extremist organizations have exploited these divisions and portrayed themselves as defenders of Tuaregs' rights while advancing their own agendas. Political exclusion of the Tuareg people has further fueled their association with militant Islamist groups, as these groups offer an alternative power structure and representation. Physical persecution, both by state security forces and non-state actors, has driven some Tuaregs to join extremist groups in pursuit of retribution and protection. Weak state capacity and thriving illicit networks have enabled these groups to gain influence, as the absence of effective state institutions has created an environment where alternative governance systems are perceived by Tuareg communities as more reliable. Furthermore, intelligence ineffectiveness in Mali, characterized by a lack of coordination, cultural disparities, and a fragmented intelligence landscape, has hindered efforts to counter extremist groups and has contributed to recruitment opportunities. The recent involvement of the Russian Wagner Group has added complexity to the security situation, further challenging intelligence efforts.

These factors reveal the complexity of the situation and emphasize the need for a multifaceted approach to address the root causes and enablers of Tuaregs' involvement in militant Islamism in Mali. The interconnected nature of these factors underscores the necessity of holistic policy solutions that simultaneously target both push and pull factors. The final chapter synthesizes the findings and insights from this exploration to formulate policy recommendations that allow for addressing the root causes and containing violence while reducing the recruitment of Tuareg communities into militant extremist groups in Mali.

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V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exploring the landscape of Tuareg communities in Mali and their involvement in militant extremism reveals a complex tapestry of historical, sociological, and geopolitical factors that converge to shape their identity, struggles, and choices. This comprehensive exploration, guided by the central question of what drives the Tuaregs to embrace violence in Mali and become vectors of radicalization, reveals a web of interconnected grievances and opportunities driving Tuaregs' involvement with extremist organizations.

As posited in the first hypothesis in the introduction, grievances rooted in economic hardships and discrimination against Tuareg communities propel their support for violent extremist organizations. The weight of this hypothesis is evident in the persistent economic challenges faced by the Tuaregs, rendering them susceptible to the promises of economic relief extended by these groups. The lure of essential resources, job prospects, and financial rewards amid poverty plays a significant role in radicalization, as extremist organizations exploit these grievances. Furthermore, the intricate ethnic and racial tensions in northern Mali exacerbate these vulnerabilities, driving some Tuaregs toward political radicalization.

Also, as the second hypothesis predicted, the physical persecution of Tuareg communities corresponds with their support for extremist groups. Physical persecution resulting from counterterrorism operations by various actors, including Malian forces, foreign interventions, and local paramilitary groups, substantially contributed to the radicalization of some Tuaregs. Historical political exclusion and state indifference left the Tuaregs vulnerable to the appeals of radical organizations. Physical persecution stemming from counterterrorism efforts deepens their sense of injustice and victimhood, propelling some toward extremist ideologies and actions.

Grievances, however, are necessary conditions for radicalization but not sufficient on their own. Thus, the third hypothesis, rooted in the opportunity model of terrorism, proposed that Tuaregs' support for violent extremist organizations is driven by abundant opportunities in an environment characterized by weak state capacity and thriving illicit networks. This hypothesis emphasizes the enabling environment's significance. The

absence of effective state governance and the growth of illegal networks undeniably grant extremist groups influence and legitimacy among the Tuareg communities.

A. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The investigation uncovers critical findings that underpin the intricate relationship between Tuareg communities and militant Islamism. Firstly, historical injustices, including the enduring impact of colonial legacies, have significantly shaped the Tuareg experience, fostering sentiments of marginalization and deep-seated grievances. The fragmentation of Tuareg territories across national borders further complicates their pursuit of recognition and autonomy. Secondly, the root causes driving Tuareg's involvement in violent extremist organizations are multifaceted: economic grievances, political marginalization, and opportunities stemming from state fragility and illicit networks. This amalgamation collectively creates fertile ground for recruitment and radicalization. Thirdly, the proliferation of illegal activities, including smuggling, kidnapping, and trafficking of drugs and weapons, has experienced a substantial upsurge due to weak state security forces and porous borders. Extremist organizations adeptly exploit these networks to provide economic incentives to Tuareg communities. Finally, Mali's intelligence landscape is characterized by fragmentation, a lack of coordination, and challenges in collecting reliable and timely information, exacerbated by corruption, political instability, and the involvement of external factors, such as the Russian Wagner Group, which further complicates intelligence efforts.

When considering the equation that combines high grievances with high opportunities, it becomes evident that the likelihood of embracing Militant Islamism is pronounced within the Tuareg context. These hypotheses collectively reveal that the intertwining of grievances and enabling opportunities has fostered an environment conducive to the proliferation of violence. The Tuareg communities, grappling with economic hardships, discrimination, marginalization, and political exclusion, find their vulnerabilities exploited by extremist organizations that offer financial incentives and alternative governance structures. Weak state capacity and thriving illicit networks further empower these organizations to establish a foothold within Tuareg territories.

The coexistence of high grievances and opportunities has propelled the Tuaregs toward embracing violent extremism in Mali. These factors are profoundly interconnected and have led to the radicalization of some Tuareg individuals while transforming their communities into vectors for recruitment by terrorist organizations. Understanding this complex dynamic is imperative for developing comprehensive policy solutions that effectively address radicalization's root causes and enablers while simultaneously reducing recruitment opportunities.

B. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In Mali, the Tuareg crisis, intertwined with a burgeoning Islamist insurgency, has become the heart of instability in the Sahara Sahel region. To effectively address the increasing danger of terrorism, it is necessary to implement a holistic policy approach that goes beyond the security component to address the structural factors that lead to radicalization and violent extremism. While development aid alone cannot eliminate terrorism in West Africa, a targeted approach to address the socioeconomic factors that facilitate extremism can make a significant difference.³²³ This comprehensive strategy necessitates a focus on non-military measures, guided by measures aimed at enhancing political and economic governance, combating corruption, and narrowing the economic disparities that divide the Northern and Southern regions of Mali in alignment with the principles outlined in the 2015 Algiers accord.³²⁴

In the Malian context, developing and implementing tailored, context-specific counterterrorism strategies is essential. It requires exploring and adapting successful models and best practices from neighboring nations while considering necessary institutional reforms, focusing on factors like governance, resource management, and community engagement in Northern Mali. Such a targeted and localized approach will be crucial for restoring lasting peace and security.³²⁵ The 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement, for

³²³ Benjamin Maiangwa, "Jihadism in West Africa: Adopting a Three-Dimensional Approach to Counterterrorism," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 9, no. 3 (2014): 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48603497>.

³²⁴ Bere, "Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges," 74.

³²⁵ Chauzal and van Damme, "Conclusions," 58.

instance, sought to reestablish peace in Mali through means including but not limited to dialogue, justice, national unity, economic growth (particularly in the north), and decentralization of power.³²⁶ For example, improving public awareness through comprehensive information campaigns, particularly in southern Mali, as well as palpable political support from the President and Prime Minister.³²⁷ International actors should continue exerting pressure on signatory parties, with a focus on key representatives from northern Mali being present during Peace Agreement Monitoring Committee sessions in Bamako.³²⁸ A gradual approach to sensitive issues, like regional autonomy, should be favored over hasty referendums, promoting inclusive national dialogue that builds trust between all stakeholders and reduces pressure on the government objectives.

Algeria's pivotal role in mediating the Malian crisis was not only highly valued and appreciated by both the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Malian authorities, specifically highlighting "the sister Republic of Algeria" as a critical leader in these efforts, but also stood as a linchpin for fostering peace and stability in Mali.³²⁹ Implementing a military response must be combined with other measures to address the underlying causes, including economic development, dialogue, and negotiations. In addition, increased regional and international collaboration could reverse the destabilization created by terrorism and violent extremism.

1. Sustained Counterterrorism Operations

Given the intent of the most dominant terrorist organizations, JINIM and ISGS, to conquer the territory, actions against these groups should involve military and security services, targeting their leadership, training camps, and resources. However, concerns exist that such operations could exacerbate the conflict and generate counterproductive

³²⁶ "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm," International Crisis Group, June 24, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/laccord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire>.

³²⁷ International Crisis Group.

³²⁸ International Crisis Group.

³²⁹ "Mali Crisis Settlement: UN Commends Algeria's Key Role, President Tebboune's Laudable Efforts," Algeria Press Service, April 13, 2023, <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/47270-resolving-mali-crisis-un-commends-algeria-s-key-role-president-tebboune-s-laudable-efforts>.

outcomes.³³⁰ Mali should also employ anti-radicalization economic programs by engaging with current and potential jihadist militants, addressing their grievances, and providing viable alternatives.³³¹

- Local Malian security forces should shape their future operations based on lessons learned from operational failures and mistakes of the French military intervention to set up adaptive plans to neutralize Jihadist groups.
- Due to the lack of intelligence assets, counterterrorism operations should prioritize human intelligence by integrating local Tuaregs in the Malian units as a primary means to track down terrorist activities and organized crime nexus.
- Counterterrorism operations in the north of Mali should aim not only for the physical defeat of extremists but also programs of amnesty and reintegration to give militants an off-ramp from the road of terrorism and insurgency.³³²
- Counterterrorism operations should be conducted by local forces, avoiding any foreign military engagement in Northern Mali that could trigger colonial resentment among Tuareg communities. As stated by the president of Algeria, Abdelmajid Tebboune, who is critical of the Wagner Group in Mali, “The money spent on Russian (Wagner) mercenaries would be more useful if it were invested in economic projects in the Sahel.”³³³

³³⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 142.

³³¹ Bere, “Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges,” 75.

³³² Brigitte Lebens Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 6th ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 216.

³³³ Álvaro Escalonilla, “Algeria and Mali Strengthen Military Cooperation to Contain Jihadist Advance in the Sahel,” Atalayar, January 18, 2023, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/algeria-and-mali-strengthen-military-cooperation-contain-jihadist-advance-sahel>.

- Increase regional counterterrorism capacity-building programs to share intelligence and exchange experiences with neighboring countries like Niger, Algeria, and Mauritania.
- Uphold human rights and the rule of law in all counterterrorism operations. Investigate and address allegations of human rights abuses, ensuring that counterterrorism activities align with international law to reduce the sense of injustice within Tuareg communities.
- With the competition for dominance between the existing terrorist organizations ISGS and JINIM, consistent pressure from Malian security services on terrorist groups will implode their structures and instill doubts among their members.³³⁴
- To effectively counter illicit networks in northern Mali, targeting those associated with Ansar Dine is crucial. By disrupting these networks, particularly by conducting law enforcement efforts against them, the Malian government undermined Ag Ghali's political influence and reduced his access to financing and allies.
- Target the illicit networks that fund extremist groups by strengthening border security, improving customs enforcement, and cracking down on smuggling routes. International collaboration is vital to track and disrupt these networks effectively.

2. Dialogue and Negotiations

Fragile states like Mali, when facing multidimensional conflict, are forced to seek negotiations. In Mali, to achieve better results, the negotiation process should target Tuareg separatist movements.³³⁵ Negotiations could also offer amnesty options to militants

³³⁴ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 95.

³³⁵ Stephen Tankel, "U.S. Counterterrorism in the Sahel: From Indirect to Direct Intervention," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 884, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa089>.

invited to lay down their arms and join the political process. The national council for political dialogue (CNDP), under the supervision of religious leaders and tribal chiefs, is an excellent example to emulate, which widely contributed to the peace process in Niger.³³⁶

3. Promoting Socioeconomic Development and Political Inclusion

According to Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune, the problem in Mali is “20% security and 80% economy.”³³⁷ Investing in healthcare, education, and infrastructure addresses the underlying causes of poverty and marginalization that can fuel support for militant groups. Specifically:

- Implementing economic reforms to improve living conditions could revitalize the northern part of the country by increasing investment in natural resources and creating job opportunities, which could diminish popular support of terrorist groups and shrink recruitment among Tuareg tribes.³³⁸
- Building connection routes to foster commercial ties with neighboring countries in the north could revive the commercial sector among Tuareg communities and hook the next generations to quicken the demise of the radical Islamist cause and dry up its human resources.
- Strengthen Mali’s governance and institutions. Ensure Tuaregs and other minority groups have equal representation in national politics. Decentralization can empower local communities and mitigate political marginalization.
- In terms of essential services, the central government should treat the different ethnic groups equally by creating a national agency for the

³³⁶ Chauzal and van Damme, “Conclusions,” 58.

³³⁷ Escalonilla, “Algeria and Mali Strengthen Military Cooperation.”

³³⁸ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 105.

control of funds distribution among minorities, which will keep peace spoilers out of the equation.³³⁹

- Mali has to increase border security to remove financial support from illegal activities like smuggling and clandestine immigration in the north, which could weaken terrorism funding.³⁴⁰

4. Regional and International Cooperation

As Mali's current situation is complex and requires a regional approach to resolve the Tuareg issue, any attempt to resolve the conflict must consider the regional dimensions of the crisis.³⁴¹

- Promoting regional cooperation in the fight against militant Islamism should involve working with neighboring countries to share intelligence, coordinate counterterrorism operations, and address the root causes of the conflict. The aim would be to create a unified approach to reducing the threat of militant groups in the Sahel. However, there are concerns that regional cooperation may be difficult to achieve due to existing tensions and interests between involved countries.
- Reducing the threat of militant Islamism in Tuareg communities in the Sahel is a complex and multifaceted challenge that requires a subtle approach. A combination of these policy options, tailored to the specific context of the Tuareg conflict in Mali, is an adequate community-security approach to reducing the threat of militant Islamism and promoting peace and stability in the region.

³³⁹ Lyammouri, *Tribal Dynamics in the Sahel*.

³⁴⁰ Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 174.

³⁴¹ Baudais, Bourhrous, and O'Driscoll, "The Crisis in the Sahel," 10.

5. Social Programs

Military interventions to support Mali have proven ineffective in addressing the complex crisis, necessitating a shift toward non-military approaches to prevent radicalization and jihadist recruitment.³⁴² Such a shift requires well-designed strategies for deradicalization and social reintegration, improved communication, and a focus on dismantling extremist ideologies and addressing underlying identity concerns to prevent further recruitment into jihadist groups.³⁴³

Reintegration efforts should focus on providing clear pathways out of militant Islamist groups, conveying that there are alternative options for these individuals beyond a life of violence. Working closely with local communities is essential to facilitate this transition, as fighters are likely to know each other, and their connections and opportunities may influence their decisions more than the motivations of leaders like Ag Ghali.³⁴⁴

Drawing from experiences in other reintegration contexts, such as Algeria, where amnesty and reintegration programs played a vital role in weakening insurgencies, national governments should assure lower-level fighters of their safety and offer pathways to life beyond militancy. These tailored reintegration programs can be instrumental in eroding the critical assets that sustain groups like Ansar Dine in northern Mali.³⁴⁵

- Implementing community engagement programs and counter-violent extremism (CVE) initiatives within Tuareg regions. These programs should involve local leaders and religious figures, providing alternatives to radicalization and promoting resilience to extremist ideologies.
- Develop and implement Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs to encourage militants to lay down their arms and

³⁴² Bere, “Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges,” 80.

³⁴³ Bere, 71.

³⁴⁴ Eizenga and Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel,” 7.

³⁴⁵ Eizenga and Williams, 7.

reintegrate into society. These programs should provide opportunities for former fighters to rebuild their lives as law-abiding citizens.

- Prioritizing education that counters extremist ideologies, working with local schools and communities to promote a moderate form of Islam that discourages radicalization. Engage religious leaders in these efforts to counter extremist narratives.
- Launch public awareness campaigns that expose the destructive impact of extremist groups. These campaigns should reinforce the importance of national unity, cultural diversity, and stability.

To restore peace and eradicate insecurity, the Mali government should prioritize the enforcement of the rule of law, justice, and accountability, as well as ensure judicial oversight while also addressing discriminatory policies and fostering civil society engagement, media freedom, and trust-building initiatives among Tuareg groups and other armed ethnic factions.³⁴⁶

C. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future academic research on the Tuareg crisis and violent extremism in Mali would benefit from exploring several underexplored areas. First, the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies, including international military interventions and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, warrants in-depth assessment to understand their impact, notably after the recent French and UN Forces withdrawal. Second, the dynamics of local governance structures and conflict resolution mechanisms within Tuareg communities require scrutiny, shedding light on their influence on radicalization and opportunities for enhancing community resilience to extremist ideologies. Third, the intersections between humanitarian crises, such as droughts and food scarcity, and extremist recruitment need to be investigated, providing insights into mitigating vulnerabilities and humanitarian responses to prevent radicalization. Climate change's role in exacerbating the Tuareg crisis

³⁴⁶ Erameh, Ojakorotu, and Obor, "The Malian State, Social Exclusion, Political Marginalisation," 21–22.

and its impact on extremist recruitment deserves attention. The influence and strategies of foreign actors, notably the Wagner Group, in the Sahel region's security dynamics remain unexplored and merit focused research. It is essential also to dive deep into the pathways to radicalization among Tuareg youth, including how extremist groups target and recruit younger individuals and the socioeconomic and political factors contributing to their involvement. Lastly, a more comprehensive exploration of the gender dynamics within extremist recruitment, specifically the roles, experiences, and motivations of women within Tuareg communities regarding extremism, would enrich our understanding of this complex issue. Addressing these research gaps is crucial for a more profound comprehension of the Tuareg crisis and for developing more effective, targeted policies for countering extremism in Mali and the wider Sahel region.

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