

Strategic Allies: AQIM, the MNLA, and the people of Northern Mali

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## Abstract

During the 2012 Malian civil war, one of the main actors was Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Qaeda's most profitable regional franchise. As a result of the group's specific interactions with the MNLA, an ethno-separatist militia that instigated the civil war in the first place, and the civilian population of Northern Mali broadly, AQIM was able to entrench itself within and ultimately control much of Northern Mali. This research demonstrates the three key elements of AQIM's success in Mali. First, the group sought local support by doing two things: allying with the MNLA, which gave AQIM access to the region's ethnically-Tuareg population and providing assistance to Northern Mali's civilians broadly in an attempt to win their "hearts and minds." Second, AQIM was able to eliminate its competition in the area when it ended its alliance with the MNLA, after the group abused local civilians, and expelled the MNLA from Northern Mali. And finally, with the support of new local actors like the Tuareg-Islamist group Ansar Dine, AQIM was able to implement its fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia across the territory it now controlled. Gaining support from the local population, eliminating the competition and ultimately implementing its ideology across Northern Mali are the three elements to AQIM's success.

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# Maps of Mali



Fig. 1 Map of Mali. University of Texas at Austin Libraries.



**Fig. 2** Map of Mali in relation to Africa. *Malinyeta.org*.

## Introduction

In the midst of the 2012 Malian Civil War, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), alongside local militias and other Islamist groups, seized control of the entirety of Northern Mali, roughly 827,000 square kilometers of land that makes up over two-thirds of Mali's entire territory.<sup>1</sup> An Al-Qaeda affiliate operating in Northern and Western Africa, AQIM had allied with a local ethno-separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). AQIM fought the Malian government's presence in the region and assisted the MNLA in its fight for an independent Northern Mali, a region the MNLA refers to as Azawad. Over the course of the alliance, a military coup in Southern Mali in the country's capital, Bamako, caused the Malian government to fall into disarray. Out of the ensuing chaos in Southern Mali, the MNLA and AQIM seized control of all of Northern Mali as government forces fled south. The groups jointly held this territory for a few months, until the end of June 2012, when AQIM, with help from fellow Islamist organizations, Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), turned on their ethno-separatist ally and pushed the MNLA out of Northern Mali entirely. The military coup had allowed AQIM and the MNLA to take control of all of Northern Mali, and by pushing the MNLA out, AQIM and its affiliates now had the entire region to themselves. Upon gaining complete control of the area, AQIM began to implement its fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia, usually known as the values and codes of conduct that compose Islamic law, onto the civilian population.<sup>2</sup> Northern Mali soon became a sort of pseudo-caliphate, an area governed by fundamentalist Sharia, devoid of any form of Malian government influence and controlled instead by Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM — a regional franchise of a large and well-known transnational terrorist network that espouses fundamentalist interpretations

of Islamic texts.

AQIM's success, however, was not because the group simply arrived in Northern Mali, struck a deal with the MNLA and then sidelined its new ally. The group's success in the region, is demonstrated by AQIM's eventual control of over two-thirds of all of Mali, AQIM's strategic alliances with local actors and the group's efforts at consolidating popular support among the region's civilian population. These actions ultimately allowed AQIM to seize control of the entirety of Northern Mali by the end of the summer of 2012, after eliminating its ally-turned-competitor, the MNLA.

## **AQIM**

AQIM has its roots in a militia movement from Algeria, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GPSC), originally formed as an anti-government group in 1998.<sup>3</sup> The GPSC was created by a faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), an opponent of the Algerian government during the Algerian Civil War, who condemned the GIA's indiscriminate abuses of civilians.<sup>4</sup> The GPSC enjoyed widespread support among Algerians when the group pledged to continue fighting the Algerian government while also working to prevent the unnecessary deaths of innocent civilians.<sup>5</sup> By 2003, the GPSC had verbally pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda's global jihadist movement and Osama Bin Laden and became a formal, name-brand affiliate on September 11, 2006, adopting the name Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>6</sup> AQIM has been operating in Mali, specifically Northern Mali, since its founding in 2006, where it conducts a variety of activities, including kidnapping European tourists and holding them for ransom, a major source of the group's revenue, and taxing traffickers utilizing the region's trade routes.<sup>7</sup>

Since its formal founding in 2006, AQIM has become Al-Qaeda's wealthiest regional



franchise and has spread across Western Africa into Mauritania and more recently Mali's neighbor, Burkina Faso. On January 15, 2016, AQIM launched devastating attacks in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, when three individuals affiliated with the group stormed a hotel and coffee shop and open fired into a crowd, killing 30 people and wounding 70.<sup>8</sup>

Despite investments and resources being funneled into counterterrorism efforts in Western Africa, AQIM has continued to be a formidable and resilient force in the region. In 2005, the US established the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a joint initiative between the State Department, the Department of Defense and USAID, to assist Northern and Western African countries in their efforts to eradicate extremism within their borders. Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso are all member countries.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, the French government announced the beginning of Operation Barkhane, a military operation formed to counter the activities of terrorist organizations in Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Roughly 3,000 French soldiers were deployed to the Northern and Western Africa.<sup>10</sup> Despite the efforts of the US and France, AQIM is still capable of launching large attacks across the region, demonstrated by the January 2016 attacks in Ouagadougou.

AQIM to some extent demonstrates behaviors found in Al-Qaeda as an organization overall, especially in the group's efforts to create and maintain popular support. As an Al-Qaeda affiliate, AQIM is a member of a transnational terrorist network that has proven itself to be capable of operating on a global scale. Al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001, the US embassy in Kenya in 1998, Madrid's public transportation in 2004, and the 2005 London bus attack all demonstrate Al-Qaeda's ability to wage terrorist violence in places that are generally perceived to be safe. Additionally, these attacks demonstrate Al-Qaeda's ability to operate in a variety of contexts, an ability that is further exemplified by the group's prolific network of direct

franchises and loose affiliates. Direct Al-Qaeda franchises include Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) — prior to its evolution into the Islamic State. “Al-Qaeda” as a term refers broadly to the organization overall, including its affiliates, like Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Eastern Africa and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> Al-Qaeda’s ability to operate in diverse contexts is a testament to the group’s ability to entrench itself into the social, political, and economic fabric of wherever it happens to reside. Much of this behavior is explained by the belief among many high-ranking Al-Qaeda officials that their movement must have the support of the global Muslim community, the *umma*, in addition to the local community.<sup>12</sup> In order to gain said support the group and its various affiliates must conduct themselves in a manner that is appealing to both of these communities.<sup>13</sup>

None of the areas Al-Qaeda operates within are vacant of local actors – these Al-Qaeda affiliates and franchises do not operate in vacuums – meaning the group must to some extent interact with local actors as it operates in its respective contexts. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership, or Al-Qaeda Core (AQC), has extensively interacted with the Taliban governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan where the group’s senior leaders reside and operate.<sup>14</sup> During the Iraq War, Al-Qaeda in Iraq worked with and fought alongside local Sunni militias against their Shia counterparts.<sup>15</sup> And in West Africa and the Sahel, AQIM interacts with a variety of groups, including ethnic militias, various kinds of traffickers, and other extremist organizations.<sup>16</sup> Al-Qaeda affiliates and franchises consistently interact with other actors with other goals.

Like most terrorist organizations, Al-Qaeda relies on the support of global and local audiences and has proven itself to be extremely adept at fostering positive relationships within the locales it operates, employing a variety of tactics to do two things: gain support of the

civilian population broadly and the support of prominent local actors. The support of both of these local actors is directly influenced by public perception of Al-Qaeda – if the local population finds the group’s actions reprehensible or generally appalling, then Al-Qaeda risks losing the support of the people they operate among. As a result, Al-Qaeda concentrates on its public image, or more colloquially, it hopes to get “good PR” to entrench itself in the local context by gaining local support.

To gain the support of an area’s population broadly, Al-Qaeda works to improve its image among the masses, often by demonstrating charitable behaviors towards civilian communities. This tactic could involve assisting struggling civilians by providing food, medicine, or other necessary supplies. It could also involve providing economic or financial incentives to join Al-Qaeda, especially in areas that are economically depressed and home to poor or struggling communities. By utilizing these tactics, Al-Qaeda works to gain the support of the region’s masses and appeal itself to the various communities and civilians it intends to operate among.

In addition to the masses, Al-Qaeda also works to gain support from more prominent, important local actors. These strategic alliances between Al-Qaeda and prominent local actors helps Al-Qaeda work to entrench itself among the most important and prominent groups of a specific context. As a result, Al-Qaeda attempts to eventually win the support of these important local actors and attempts to get them to support its own goals for the region. Once adequately entrenched, the honeymoon phase of the relationship between Al-Qaeda and these local actors often ends when Al-Qaeda begins to implement its version of Sharia onto the local population. Local dissenters are then often targeted and in some cases completely expelled from the area, dissuading other potential dissenters from taking further action against their new jihadist rulers.

This common pattern of behavior is demonstrated by AQIM in Mali.

### **The Malian Civil War & AQIM Success**

The 2012 Malian Civil War was instigated by the MNLA, an ethno-separatist movement that claims to represent the interests of Northern Mali's Tuareg population, a formerly nomadic ethnic minority that has revolted against the Malian government four times since Mali's independence from France in 1960. The Tuaregs view the Malian government as their largest adversary, and the nature of this conflict is rooted in both ethnic and regional tensions. Prior to the 2012 conflict, the most recent Tuareg uprising took place in 2006, which ended with a peace agreement between Tuareg militias and the Malian government. During colonial times and just prior to Mali's independence from France, Tuaregs had kept the ethnically different "black" Malians living in Southern Mali as slaves.<sup>17</sup> Upon gaining independence, Mali's new government was based entirely in the country's southern region, away from the Tuaregs, who were now left to be governed by their former slaves and as a result have an adversarial relationship with the Malian government.<sup>18</sup> While the Tuaregs have historically abused Mali's sedentary ethnic groups, in the wake of Mali's independence and with political power now on its side, the Malian government ensured that Northern Mali was underdeveloped and lacking in services. As a result of these practices and a devastating drought in Northern Mali in the 1960s and 1970s, historically nomadic Tuaregs were forced to seek refuge in other countries to live sedentary lives. At the worst of Northern Mali's neglect, an estimated hundreds of thousands of Tuaregs died, as the drought destroyed crops, killed livestock, and caused widespread disease and starvation.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the animosity between Northern and Southern Mali is rooted in historical grievances between rival ethnic groups that reside in geographically different regions — the

black Malians to the south generally dislike the Tuaregs given their penchant for racism and history as slave-holders, while the Tuaregs to the north dislike the black Malians because they view these people as their former slaves and therefore “lesser,” and because the Malian government has systematically ignored and underdeveloped their historic homeland.<sup>20</sup>

In January of 2012, the MNLA declared war against the Malian government, and the fourth Tuareg uprising began.<sup>21</sup> The Malian military was sent to suppress the rebellion, but was both inadequately outfitted and inadequately trained to combat the Tuareg fighters.<sup>22</sup> The MNLA’s ranks consisted largely of seasoned soldiers with prolonged experience fighting under former Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Qaddafi, many of whom were armed with weapons stolen from Libyan stockpiles or captured from the Malian military.<sup>23</sup> These two factors; the differences between machinery and training between the MNLA and the Malian military, ensured that the MNLA was a superior fighting force to the Malian military, which in turn contributed to the MNLA’s joint control of the region alongside AQIM.

### **Three Steps to Success**

In January 2012, AQIM and its local affiliated groups, Ansar Dine and MUJAO, began working in conjunction with the MNLA.<sup>24</sup> Ansar Dine, meaning “Defenders of the Faith,” was established in late 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, a well-known Tuareg leader who wanted to implement fundamentalist Sharia across Mali and as a result of his radical beliefs was not given a leadership role within the MNLA.<sup>25</sup> MUJAO was a splinter group of AQIM that shared similar ideologies and goals with both AQIM and Ansar Dine. The reason for the split between AQIM and MUJAO is unclear, although both a lack of black Africans in AQIM leadership positions and MUJAO’s desire to begin operating further into West Africa are possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Despite the

group's split, MUJAO praised AQIM and the two groups maintained fairly cordial relations, as both groups shared similar goals for Northern Mali.<sup>27</sup>

Upon allying with the MNLA, AQIM and its affiliates worked to gain access to the social fabric of Northern Mali by taking on and championing the local separatist cause, in this case the fight for an independent Azawad. The MNLA was and is a prominent organization in Northern Mali, and therefore a strategically important actor in AQIM's attempts to embed itself in the region. In addition to the alliance with the MNLA, AQIM began pursuing the support of Northern Mali's civilians by providing goods and services to underserved communities. By assisting the struggling civilian population, AQIM worked to win the support of Northern Mali's civilian communities more broadly. Both of these behaviors, allying with a local organization and providing aid to struggling local communities, were deliberate attempts at winning favor with two segments of the local population.

Despite blatant contradictions between the groups' ideologies, the alliance between AQIM, its affiliates, and the MNLA lasted into the summer of 2012, as AQIM used the MNLA to gain access to Northern Malian society. As a result of a coup against the Malian President Touré, the MNLA and its new Islamist allies were able to overtake almost the entirety of Northern Mali in the wake of the political chaos erupting in the south.<sup>28</sup> The MNLA, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine jointly controlled the region for several months, despite the aforementioned ideological differences – the MNLA is a strictly ethno-separatist organization that championed the creation of a secular Azawad state.<sup>29</sup> Comparatively, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine are jihadists organization that, like the rest of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, wish to one day recreate an Islamic caliphate governed by strict interpretations of Sharia. AQIM allied itself with and jointly controlled Northern Mali alongside the MNLA, as part of a concerted effort to

embed itself further into the social and political fabric of the region.<sup>30</sup>

The alliance between the MNLA and AQIM, however, became problematic when the MNLA began to abuse Northern Malian civilians, especially those belonging to other ethnicities. The alliance dissolved in June 2012 after MNLA fighters looted, robbed, and raped civilians, demonstrating the general lack of control the MNLA leaders had over their subordinates.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the MNLA ruined its own reputation with Northern Mali's civilians – and by association, jeopardized the public support that AQIM and its affiliates, the MNLA's new allies, were hoping to foment by their previous efforts to provide services to these same civilian populations. Thus, at this time, the alliance between the MNLA and AQIM was not only unhelpful in the pursuit of AQIM's goals in the region, it was likely detrimental to said goals. AQIM and its affiliates needed to end the alliance with the MNLA to save their project in Northern Mali, while still maintaining the support of the area's civilians.

In late June, AQIM and its affiliates successfully severed their relationship with the MNLA and expelled the Tuareg group from Northern Mali, preserving their public image among the local civilians while also effectively eliminating their main competitor.<sup>32</sup> As members of a large and wealthy transnational terrorist network franchise, AQIM was better armed, better funded, and better trained, and as a result was able to expel its former allies from Northern Mali. AQIM and its affiliates were able to use the transgressions of their former allies to further entrench themselves in the local context and to gain additional popular support from local civilians who had complained to them about the MNLA's actions by ending their relationship with the MNLA and presenting themselves as liberators of Northern Mali's civilians. Additionally, AQIM and its affiliates now had no remaining competition in the area and had Northern Mali effectively all to themselves. By eliminating the MNLA at the behest of local

communities, AQIM was able to simultaneously continue its tactic of gaining popular support from the local population while ending the use of its other tactic, allying with a strategic local actor.

Despite the group's previous charitable behavior towards Northern Mali's civilians, the niceties ended once AQIM and its affiliates consolidated power across the region. Upon becoming one of the few controlling actors in the area, AQIM began imposing strict interpretations of Sharia onto the civilians who had just recently complained about the MNLA's abuses.<sup>33</sup> AQIM was able to implement this version of Sharia with help from local actors that had been radicalized by Islamic fundamentalist groups already within Northern Mali. Most important of these actors is Ansar Dine, the aforementioned local organization that shares much of AQIM's ideologies but puts a local, Tuareg face on the group's fundamentalist beliefs. AQIM's original interactions with the MNLA, prior to the end of the alliance, and AQIM's efforts to further the cause of Azawadian independence had allowed the group to become initially entrenched among prominent Tuareg families and individuals. This entrenchment among Northern Mali's Tuareg population was able to continue after AQIM ended its alliance with the MNLA due to Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali, who founded Ansar Dine. Ghali and Ansar Dine gave AQIM more legitimacy among Northern Mali's Tuareg population, given Ghali's ethnicity and Ansar Dine's predominantly Tuareg ethnic-makeup. Once AQIM consolidated control of the region, Ansar Dine and other strategic local actors on the ground helped AQIM implement its form of Sharia law and otherwise assisted the group in achieving its objectives for the region.

AQIM's success in Northern Mali is the result of a three-part strategy to gain support from the region's local actors. Strategically allying with the MNLA, while also working to gain the support of Northern Mali's civilians allowed AQIM to gain a foothold among both the



region's prominent actors and the region's masses. As AQIM worked to gain a hold in the local context, it eliminated its competition, specifically the MNLA, when the MNLA began to abuse Northern Malian civilians. The MNLA's actions gave AQIM an opportunity to both eliminate competition and consolidate power across the region, all while maintaining the support of Northern Mali's civilians. Finally, upon consolidating control of Northern Mali, AQIM successfully implemented fundamentalist Sharia with the assistance of radicalized local actors like Ansar Dine, marking the end of the group's efforts to gain popular support of the population broadly. While AQIM had ended its previous tactic of gaining broad popular support, by allying with and working alongside Ansar Dine, AQIM repeated its same initial tactic of maintaining strategic alliances with prominent and important local actors that it had used in its initial interactions with the MNLA.

## **Methodology**

Delving further into the facets of AQIM's success required intensive chronological research and the consultation of various sources on AQIM, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and the MNLA. The three facets of AQIM's success in Northern Mali are major developments in the Malian Civil War, thus AQIM's three-part success story is demonstrated by the history of the war. A variety of sources that documented the war's development were consulted, namely news articles, reports from organizations like the UN and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), United States Congressional testimonies, and academic sources. Dr. Stephen Harmon's interviews of Northern Malians living on the ground at this time, from his book *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel region: Corruption, contraband, jihad and the Mali war of 2012-2013*, were used to better understand the sentiments of civilians towards the various armed

groups that operated in the region and among them. Additionally, eyewitness accounts from FIDH reports were also used to better understand the interactions between armed groups, like the MNLA, AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO, and the civilians living under their control. Internal correspondence between AQIM leaders and subordinates was also consulted, as was the MNLA's official web page (<http://www.mnlamov.net>).

Despite the variety of sources consulted, information on the actions and operations of terrorist organizations, especially during a conflict like the Malian Civil War, is not always widely available. Such was the case for this specific research undertaking and should be acknowledged as a limitation of this study. The lack of availability is due to a number of reasons – the information simply does not exist, or if it does, specific information on terrorist organizations like AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO in Northern Mali may not be accessible without a security clearance. Specific examples of these information gaps include: the lack of knowledge on the sentiments of the Northern Malian population as a whole towards AQIM as no public polling was executed or recommended at the time of the group's occupation, the explicit details of the MNLA's financial capacities in the summer of 2012, and the specifics of AQIM's organizational capacity at the time of the Malian Civil War. While AQIM certainly is a wealthy organization, the specifics of the MNLA's finances are missing in this research. In addition, much of the information available on Northern Mali's Islamist groups and the MNLA was originally written in Arabic and French, respectively, two languages that the researcher does not speak. Thus, it should be stated that part of this research relies on the translations of third-parties.

In addition to the translations of third-parties, this research relies heavily on the concept of "success," in regard to the success of a terrorist organization. Success in the context of AQIM and Northern Mali refers to the ability of AQIM to hold territory and implement its own form of

governance on the population. Holding this territory and eventually implementing its own version of Sharia onto the population is the final product of AQIM's three aforementioned tactics. As a result, the group's overarching success is a product of those same three tactics. Working to earn the support of the local population, at both the top and bottom levels of Northern Malian society, subsequently eliminating a rival group from the region and finally implementing its own brand of Sharia are all components of AQIM's three-fold, sequential success in Northern Mali.

## Chapter 1

### Literature Review

#### Important Definitions

The term “terrorism” notoriously has no universally accepted definition. Even among different agencies in the United States government, there is no single, universally accepted definition. Generally, however, “terrorism” has been defined as violent attacks against civilians in the name of a larger cause, often social or political in nature. In some cases, the definition has defined the targets of terrorism as “non-combatants,” as opposed to simply civilians, broadening the definition to possibly include those who would otherwise be considered combatants – sleeping Marines in Beirut, by this definition, could be considered non-combatants. Those who commit terrorism are subsequently called terrorists. This research defines terrorism as violence towards civilians committed by non-state actors in the name of larger social or political goals.

This research defines AQIM as a terrorist organization, however there are important caveats to make to this definition and categorization. Although traditionally Al-Qaeda has operated and been categorized as a bonafide terrorist organization, this research finds that Al-Qaeda affiliate AQIM also demonstrates qualities of both a pseudo-state and an insurgency. According to Audrey Cronin, Al-Qaeda as a whole can be defined as a terrorist organization because the group has a small membership, attacks civilians, does not hold territory and does not “directly confront military forces.”<sup>34</sup> Unlike Al-Qaeda, Cronin says, the Islamic State is not a terrorist organization, as the group in 2015 boasted over 30,000 fighters, “held territory in Iraq and Syria... command[ed] infrastructure, fund[ed] itself and engage[d] in sophisticated military operations.” Instead, Cronin argues, the Islamic State is better defined as a pseudo-state with a

conventional military. AQIM, however, demonstrates many of the qualities that Cronin says qualify the Islamic State as a pseudo-state. From the summer of 2012 to January 2013, AQIM held control over Northern Malian territory. Regarding the group's funding, as a result of its kidnapping for ransom operations and involvement in the regional trafficking trade, in 2012 AQIM was, and is, Al-Qaeda's most profitable affiliate. And on multiple occasions and with the assistance of other local groups, AQIM directly engaged the Malian military, and in some cases actively defeated these forces. At the end of January 2013, however, the French were able to expel AQIM from Northern Mali, demonstrating that although the group was able to directly engage with the Malian military, when put face to face with a specialized and high-capacity force, AQIM was no match. Thus, AQIM demonstrates qualities of a terrorist organization and a pseudo-state.

An additional facet of AQIM's categorization is the qualities the group shares with insurgencies. The *Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought* defines insurgency as an "uprising (insurrection) against constituted government which falls short of revolution, rebellion or civil war."<sup>35</sup> The Marine Corps Insurgency Field Manual defines insurgency as an "organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control."<sup>36</sup> An insurgency is successful as a result of its ability to gather support from the local population. The overarching goal of an insurgency is to persuade the local population to accept the legitimacy of the insurgent forces and its governing forces or institutions. For the purpose of this research, the definition provided by the *Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary* will be at least partially used. Insurgency is therefore in this research defined as a revolt against a government that does not meet the threshold of a civil war or revolution and relies heavily on the support of

the local population and as a result actively courts the support of said population. Much of AQIM's activities are attempts at gaining the support of Northern Mali's population, so in addition to terrorist and pseudo-state qualities, AQIM also demonstrates characteristics normally attributed to insurgencies. Thus, the use of terminologies and theories from insurgency and counterinsurgency literature is pertinent to better understanding the various facets of AQIM's behavior, seeing as the group demonstrates a wide variety of characteristics including those of an insurgency.

Finally, the author would like to clarify the meaning of the term "Sharia," to ensure that broad strokes and judgments about the governance system and Islam as a whole are not made. When discussing Islamic fundamentalist groups like AQIM, it is crucial to understand that the versions of Sharia law these groups espouse are reprehensible to the global Muslim community. To many Muslims, these fundamentalist groups themselves are *takfir*, or non-Muslims, as they are seen to be perverters of Islam. This research does not wish to paint Sharia or Islam as a whole in a negative light – the forms of Sharia being described and implemented upon the people of Northern Mali are selective and not at all indicative of the governance system or the religion as most Muslims know it. AQIM's behavior towards Northern Mali's civilian populations is indicative of the group's crude interpretation of Sharia, and not the Sharia familiar to most Muslims around the world. Thus, the term "Sharia" in this research refers only to the fundamentalist interpretations of groups like AQIM, and in no way refers to the governance system as a whole.

A variety of factors could and should be considered when discussing what does and does not qualify a terrorist organization as successful, and a discussion of successful terrorism should

start with a discussion of terrorist attacks. Attacks are intended to assist a terrorist organization in achieving its larger goals. Subsequently, the attention a terrorist organization received from its attacks is in turn another way for the group to be successful, as attacks increase support among audiences potentially sympathetic to their cause. Thus, through attacks a group can gain support. There are, however, other forms of gaining popular support used by terrorists as demonstrated by AQIM's actions in Northern Mali towards struggling civilian populations. The use of "hearts and minds" tactics, a term borrowed from insurgency and counterinsurgency literature, demonstrates that although attacks are undoubtedly a crucial component of what makes a terrorist organization successful, the support of a specific population or audience is also important. Ultimately what makes a terrorist organization successful is the support the group has among its desired audiences – this support can be gained from attacks or other behaviors, like the provision of food and medicine to struggling communities. Counterinsurgency and insurgency scholars like Kalev Sepp and Richard Shultz argue that both insurgents and counterinsurgent forces need the support of the local population, and to gain this support must attempt to win the "hearts and minds" of said local population. AQIM's pursuit of popular support mirrored the tactics typically used by insurgencies and counterinsurgency forces, as the group actively worked to win the "hearts and minds" of the population it was operating among.

Attacks and gaining support from a desired or specific audience are two potential indicators of success for terrorist organizations, but AQIM's success in Northern Mali is best indicated by the group's eventual implementation of fundamentalist Sharia. AQIM's path to success in Northern Mali, exemplified by the aforementioned implementation of Sharia, is three-fold and sequential, as the group was able to build on previous successes – gaining support and initial entrenchment in the region was followed by eliminating the MNLA, which was then

followed by the implementation of AQIM's version of Sharia.

### **Meaning of Success**

A contributor to AQIM's success in Northern Mali was the group's positive interactions and alliances with various local actors, and not necessarily the group's direct tactical operations like its fight against the MNLA – although expelling the MNLA certainly helped facilitate later success. The positive interactions and alliances helped AQIM build support, which is to some extent important to all terrorist organizations. These organizations, however, are not all the same and as a result often measure the success of their operations differently. Operating in different contexts, championing different causes and working against different adversaries all contribute to different types and measurements of success among terrorist organizations.

There are, however, some standard activities and behaviors that contribute to a terrorist organization's success that are found across a number of organizations, most obvious of these activities being the efficacy of a group's attacks. The analysts at Stratfor argue that terrorist organizations, and especially Al-Qaeda, are considered to be successful when a completed attack serves the group's larger political, social, or economic goals.<sup>37</sup> This does not simply mean the attack was executed correctly and was carried out as planned; a truly successful attack helps the group's broader agenda. The most effective example of this form of success is the political fallout resulting from Al-Qaeda's attack on Madrid's railways on March 11, 2004.<sup>38</sup> The attack was successfully executed – 10 cellphone activated bombs were strewn across four different trains during morning rush hour and subsequently detonated.<sup>39</sup> Thus, tactically speaking, the attack was immensely successful, and left 191 people dead and thousands more wounded.<sup>40</sup> Politically and socially speaking, the attack was also immensely successful. Just weeks prior, Al-



Qaeda had called on the Spanish people to vote out the People's Party from the country's legislature, the majority party that supported Spain's involvement in the growing US-led coalition to fight the war in Iraq.<sup>41</sup> Immediately after the March 11 attack, the People's Party dropped five percentage points in the polls and was soon overtaken by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, which did not support Spanish involvement in the Iraq War coalition.<sup>42</sup> Not only was Al-Qaeda's attack in Madrid tactically successful, killing scores of Spanish civilians, the attack also helped instill fear among Spanish citizens largely. As a result, Al-Qaeda was able to sway public opinion towards a political outcome that the group preferred.

Executing a successful attack, and that attack achieving one of the group's goals, however, are not the only measurements of a terrorist organization's success. An additional measurement of a terrorist organization's success is the attention that stems from the group's operations, specifically attention from attacks. This attention can result in increased financial donations, an influx in recruits and a more favorable public opinion of the terrorist organization among its desired audience. Attacks are, in effect, a form of communication between the terrorist organization and its desired audiences. Bruce Hoffman argues that the language of terrorist organizations is violence, and that these organizations communicate to their audience through violence and destruction, choosing their targets and nature of the attack to either gain more support from their audience or to strengthen already existing support.<sup>43</sup> Support from a specific audience is another measure of and contributor to the success of a terrorist organization.

Although the nature of modern media allows these groups to enjoy the attention of a global audience, terrorist attacks deliberately target a more specific audience – as long as that audience sees and is receptive to the message, then the organization has successfully communicated through violence. Oftentimes, attacks can relay a variety of messages and serve a variety of

purposes. For example, Al-Qaeda committing the 9/11 attacks portrays the group's underlying ideology of anti-Western, anti-American sentiment, and as a result would attract likeminded individuals to the Al-Qaeda cause, while also invoking fear among Americans.

While attacks help a group gather and increase support from its audience, conversely if a terrorist organization conducts attacks in an irresponsible manner, the group risks alienating the audience it hopes to gain support from. Thus, terrorist organizations must employ a strategic calculus when deciding when and what to target. Aaron Clauset found that at least among Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, the frequency and severity of the groups' attacks were inversely related to the public opinion of these groups, and once established as representatives of a specific population, these groups needed to prevent attacks that may ruin that population's opinion of them.<sup>44</sup> Due to their reliance on positive public opinion and therefore public support, carrying out attacks that result in the deaths of civilians or choosing to target illegitimate or popular targets may result in a decrease in the overall public opinion, and overall popular support, of the terrorist organization.<sup>45</sup> Conversely, these groups cannot opt out of attacks, since doing so would effectively muzzle their ability to communicate with their desired audiences, and could result in the rise in popular support of a rival or competing organization that does decide to carry out attacks, despite the potential risk of alienating the target audience.<sup>46</sup> Thus, when considering what and when to attack, terrorist organizations must keep in mind a variety of different factors that may contribute to or hurt their support among the public. Specifically, terrorists must consider the frequency, severity and target of their attacks and the potential of a subsequent increase or decrease in public support. If a terrorist organization fails to consider this strategic calculus and is overzealous in its activities, then the group subsequently jeopardizes the support of its relevant audiences and, subsequently, its chances of success.

## **Public Popular Support**

In order to first entrench itself within Northern Mali, AQIM had to have some measure of public support, meaning public opinion of the group needed to be positive. This entrenchment via positive public opinion among the local population is exemplified by other Al-Qaeda franchises, including Al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan, who understand that they operate to some extent with the permission of the Pakistani government, and as a result have an incentive to make their presence at least somewhat conducive or at least not detrimental to the other parties' interests.<sup>47</sup> Not considering Al-Qaeda senior leadership and their relationship with the Pakistani government, most terrorism organizations and movements operate without the support or legitimacy of governments and other official actors. As a result, terrorists rely on the support and legitimacy given to them by the local civilian population or other relevant, non-governmental audience, and hope that this popular support is enough to make up for the discrepancies between them and more legitimate governmental actors. This behavior is typical of the actions of Al-Qaeda as an organization broadly, and especially within specific Al-Qaeda franchises like AQIM.

Terrorist organizations need this support in order to operate, and as a result undermining the group's support among a specific population may prove to help counter the group's operations. In his attempt at defining terrorism, Boaz Ganor argues that terrorist organizations often rely on a sympathetic civilian population, and that working to undermine this civilian support is, or should be, a crucial aspect to counterterrorism efforts.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, Ganor argues that attacking the terrorist organization's public relations and legitimacy among the civilian population could limit the group's ability to operate.<sup>49</sup> The support of a relevant population or audience is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of a terrorist organization's operations, and as a result

these organizations work to gain respect, support, and legitimacy from said relevant populations and audiences. To gain this support, Ganor argues, in some circumstances terrorist organizations will portray or posture themselves as the liberators and saviors of a specific population or audience.<sup>50</sup>

The cliché, “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” alludes to this behavior, as terrorist organizations hope to justify their actions in terms of liberty, and freedom, as opposed to more realistic terms that involve indiscriminate violence towards civilians and other noncombatants.<sup>51</sup> This revolutionary or liberator posturing is demonstrated by a variety of terrorist organizations, including those not necessarily embroiled in a separatist or revolutionary conflict, as a way to gather support among the local population and potentially capitalize on local and regional grievances.<sup>52</sup> In their analysis of Al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Bakir Naji’s works, Jarret Brachman and William McCants assert that in their various manuscripts, Naji and other jihadi ideologues focus heavily on the relationship between the liberator and the liberated, arguing that this relationship should be comparable to the relationship between the mujahideen and the local population of the context in which they work.<sup>53</sup> In the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq, Naji argues that various jihadi organizations should take advantage of the situation in Iraq and invade the surrounding countries, where he argues they will be treated and viewed as liberators.<sup>54</sup> According to Brachman and McCants, Naji’s concept of a relationship between the liberator and the liberated requires the liberators, or the jihadis, to fight justly and ensure that they maintain the moral high ground.<sup>55</sup> As a result, to maintain their reputation as liberators, these organizations must act in a manner that reflects these ideals and do not abuse the populations they operate among. These tactics and ideologies are further demonstrated by AQIM, who utilized the dichotomy between liberator and liberated in Mali as an attempt to gain

support. After the MNLA raped, robbed, and looted civilians, AQIM and its affiliated organizations turned on the MNLA, expelling the group from Mali, and subsequently positioned themselves as the liberators and heroes of Northern Malian civilians.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to presenting themselves as liberators and capitalizing on the oppression and abuse of the local population, terrorist organizations may more directly acknowledge and address the local population's grievances, or otherwise provide an outlet for said grievances. In her work on explaining the recent increase of Islamist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Caitriona Dowd finds that much of that increase can be explained in terms of *grievance-based violence*, meaning violence that stems from historical and contemporary grievances among a specific population.<sup>57</sup> Dowd found that regions within Sub-Saharan and Sahelian Africa that experienced high levels of Islamist violence had higher reported rates of economic and political grievances among the local Muslim populations.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Dowd found that the same regions experiencing higher rates of Islamist violence had also previously experienced higher rates of non-Islamist political violence.<sup>59</sup> This history of violence, coupled with economic and political marginalization and what Dowd calls "triggering events," all contribute to the outbreak and increase of Islamist violence in Sahelian and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>60</sup> Thus, grievances can be and are exploited by terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and AQIM, who gather support among the local population by addressing said grievances and capitalize on triggering events to instigate additional violence.

Considering the factors outlined by Dowd that contribute to the rise of Islamist violence, it becomes clear that those same factors are present in Mali and have contributed to the conditions that make Northern Mali a conducive area for AQIM to operate within. Northern Mali has been, and currently is, deliberately underdeveloped, disadvantaged, and politically excluded from national Malian politics by the Malian government.<sup>61</sup> In addition to these grievances, Mali,

and Northern Mali especially, has a long history of non-Islamist political violence, a result of the four different ethno-separatist Tuareg revolts since the country's independence from France in 1960.<sup>62</sup> And finally, in 2012 with the fall of Prime Minister Muammar Qaddafi in bordering Libya, Mali experienced a sudden influx of ethnic Tuareg fighters that had previously been fighting under the former Libyan dictator.<sup>63</sup> With these fighters also came a sudden influx of Libyan weapons and supplies, taken from unguarded stockpiles.<sup>64</sup> The fall of Qaddafi and the sudden arrival of ethnic Tuareg fighters and weaponry acted like Dowd's "triggering events" and succeeded in jumpstarting the 2012 Malian crisis.<sup>65</sup> The grievances of the Tuareg people and Northern Mali overall offered a valuable opportunity for AQIM to embed itself in the local area by addressing these grievances and subsequently gaining support. Thus, the rise in Islamist violence, and the corresponding presence of AQIM in Northern Mali, are at least partially the result of grievances held by the local population, the region's history of violence and subsequent triggering events. The conditions, and specifically the grievances, within Northern Mali made the area a conducive context for AQIM's efforts to gain support and win "hearts and minds."

### **Insurgent Tactics**

The need and subsequent drive for public support are common facets of many types of organizations and movements, not just terrorist organizations. Insurgents or other actors involved in revolutionary warfare also depend on the support of the local populace.<sup>66</sup> While AQIM is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States government, Sergei Boeke argues that the group demonstrates elements of both an insurgency and a terrorist organization.<sup>67</sup> According to Boeke, AQIM's efforts to gain control over and support from the civilian population indicate the group's insurgent tendencies.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, however, Boeke categorizes AQIM as a terrorist

organization, albeit with insurgent tendencies, two organizational categories that both require popular support to operate.<sup>69</sup> Colloquially, this form of popular support from the people of Northern Mali broadly can be referred to as the “winning of hearts and minds.” It is from insurgency and counterinsurgency literature that the term “hearts and minds” stems from — United States President John Adams used the term while reflecting on the American Revolution, itself an example of an insurgency.<sup>70</sup> The term widely refers to gaining the support of the local population, but in different contexts can reference different activities. While used mostly in counterinsurgency circles, the tactics that terrorist organizations, like AQIM in Northern Mali, utilize certainly qualify as attempts at winning “hearts and minds.” Providing food and medicine and as a result ensuring some degree of human security to these struggling civilian populations were all efforts of AQIM to win over the hearts and minds of Northern Mali’s civilians, as was the group’s expulsion of the MNLA after receiving civilian complaints. Thus, a portion of AQIM’s success in the region is a result of the group’s adoption of insurgent tendencies in an effort to gain broad popular support.

### **Sharia as Success**

While adopting insurgent tactics may have helped AQIM consolidate support from civilian populations, a defining component of the group’s success was its ability to enforce its version of Sharia onto these same populations. The strict enforcement of fundamentalist Sharia on a largely unwilling population demonstrates a partial abandonment of the group’s previous “hearts and minds” tactics that are more commonly demonstrated by insurgencies, although AQIM continued to provide food and aid to struggling populations during its occupation and implementation of Sharia. Thus, adhering strictly to insurgent tactics and attempting to win over

the hearts and minds of the local civilian population are not the only factors that contributed to AQIM's success in Northern Mali.

Implementing fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia was the final component of AQIM's success and built upon the group's previous successes in the region. AQIM's ability to even attempt implementing its version of Sharia is itself demonstrative of the group's success, specifically the group's success in gaining popular support and eliminating its competition. This implementation was made more impressive when the large differences between Western Africa's more liberal Islamic traditions and the fundamental Salafist or Wahhabist ideologies being imported by groups like Al-Qaeda, are considered.<sup>71</sup> Implementing its own version of Sharia is the final portion of AQIM's success in Northern Mali, and the group was able to do so besides the region's long history of traditionally liberal Islam.



## Chapter 2

### Strategic Alliances & Hearts and Minds

The first portion of AQIM's three-part success in Northern Mali was the group's attempts at gaining popular support from the local population. To do so, AQIM worked to gain support from the top of Northern Malian society, among the region's prominent actors like the MNLA, and the bottom of Northern Malian society, specifically the struggling civilian masses. AQIM courted the support of the upper-crust of Northern Malian society by allying with the MNLA and marrying into important local families and tribes. Trucking in supplies and generally assisting the bottom of Northern Malian society and the masses were all efforts of AQIM to gain support from the region's lower classes. These simultaneous top-down and bottom-up tactics helped AQIM entrench itself in the region, initiating the first step of the group's success in Northern Mali. This tactic ended when AQIM eventually turned on the MNLA and expelled the group from Northern Mali.

Al-Qaeda's senior leadership has stressed the importance of popular support to their subordinates in other franchises, specifically emphasizing the need to win support from the people living in the spaces Al-Qaeda resides and operates within. To do so, Al-Qaeda and its regional franchises like AQIM work to foster positive relationships with local populations so the group has a receptive local audience for both their ideology and their operations. In an interview with *The New York Times*, AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal discusses his group's goals in the region, many of which involve saving or liberating the Islamic Maghreb from a variety of adverse actors. The group's stated goals in the Maghreb are to essentially rescue the region's people, a manifestation of the group's attempts to win the hearts and minds of the people living

there. According to Droukdal, AQIM intends to “liberate the Islamic Maghreb from the sons of France and Spain,” while also working to “protect [the Islamic Maghreb] from foreign greed and the crusader’s hegemony,” meaning that the group intends to counter the French and Spanish, and generally Western, influences and presence in the region.<sup>72</sup> By Droukdal’s own assertion, AQIM’s broad goal in the Islamic Maghreb, which includes Northern Mali, is to liberate and protect the region and its people. Presenting themselves as liberators and protectors is a key component of AQIM’s attempts at consolidating popular support and in general a key component of Al-Qaeda’s entrenchment tactics more broadly.

AQIM’s actions in Northern Mali exemplify Droukdal’s statements and demonstrate the group’s attempts at consolidating popular support. AQIM pursued popular support in a variety of ways, but the group’s tactics can be put into two broad categories: tactics used to strategically ally AQIM with important and prominent regional actors, and tactics used to help AQIM gain the support of Northern Mali’s population in general. To gain the support of prominent and important local actors, AQIM allied itself with the MNLA, demonstrating its willingness to champion the MNLA’s cause, a cause that was deeply embedded in the social, political, and historical fabric of the region. An additional AQIM tactic to gain support from Northern Mali’s important and prominent actors was the strategic arrangement of marriages between its high-ranking operatives and the daughters of important local chiefs and tribes. Allying with the MNLA and marrying into prominent Northern Malian families allowed AQIM additional access to the region’s social and political fabric. To gain popular support among the masses, or less prominent actors, in Northern Malian society, AQIM provided struggling civilian populations with a variety of services and other utilities that these people have historically not received. AQIM continued its efforts to gain popular support with regular people by practicing generous

business etiquette and behaving in a charitable manner. The provision of services and respectable posturing were all attempts of AQIM to win support from the masses of Northern Mali, while allying with the MNLA was an attempt to win favor with Northern Mali's more prominent actors. This two-pronged approach at gaining local support, from both the top and bottoms of Northern Malian society, helped AQIM become successful in the region.

### **Strategic Alliances**

At the time the AQIM-MNLA alliance was formed, in January 2012, Northern Mali was home to a variety of different armed groups, drug and human trafficking, and other similar illicit activities. Within this cocktail of violence, rival armed groups, and trafficking, the MNLA, AQIM, and AQIM's affiliates worked in conjunction with one another to counter the Malian government's presence in the area.<sup>73</sup> The alliance was beneficial to both sides: the MNLA now had the assistance of a large transnational terrorist franchise to help in its fight for an independent Azawad and AQIM was working alongside an important and prominent local organization. Allying with the MNLA additionally helped AQIM gain both access to and eventually support from Northern Mali's Tuareg population.

AQIM's ethnic makeup as of January 2012 suggests that the group did not ally with the MNLA because individual operatives felt personal allegiances to the MNLA's fight for an independent Azawad, and instead did so to entrench itself among the Tuareg population. Many of AQIM's individual soldiers were Algerian, given the group's roots in an Algerian anti-government militia, with other soldiers coming from Mauritania, Senegal, Niger, and Mali.<sup>74</sup> Essentially, this did not have to be AQIM's fight, as the group had little personal adherence to the MNLA's fight for a secular and independent Azawad. Instead, AQIM took the local cause as

its own in order to win favor and credibility among Northern Mali's Tuareg population. The priority of this alliance among Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is exhibited in a letter sent from AQIM Emir Droukdal to his lieutenants in Northern Mali, in which Droukdal references the strategic necessity of this alliance and calls the MNLA a "very important wing of the society."<sup>75</sup> Droukdal's prioritization of this alliance demonstrates AQIM's use of strategic alliances to gain support from an important section of Northern Malian society, especially since most of AQIM was neither ethnically Tuareg nor from Mali. The MNLA's importance to AQIM stemmed from the group's importance and prominence in the region as a force actively working against the Malian government. The Tuaregs were fighters and had already proven themselves to be capable of handily defeating the Malian military – in late January 2012, the MNLA had captured and executed 80 Malian soldiers at a Malian military base and two months later had captured the strategic city of Tessalit from the military.<sup>76</sup> The initial alliance with the MNLA contributed to AQIM's success.

AQIM explicitly demonstrated its willingness to champion the MNLA's cause in January 2012, when the two groups led a joint-attack on a Malian military installation. On January 24, 2012, AQIM, Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and the MNLA attacked a Malian military camp in Aguelhok, a town in the north of the Kidal region. Armed attackers from both the MNLA and AQIM attacked the camp for several hours until the Malian soldiers ran out of ammunition and were taken prisoner.<sup>77</sup> Some of the Malian soldiers were tortured and all of them were executed, many with their throats slit by their attackers — a signature component of Islamist group executions, demonstrating the large Islamist influence and the fingerprints of AQIM and its Islamist affiliates on the attack.<sup>78</sup> Several days afterwards, the MNLA and the AQIM-affiliated Islamist group Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for both the attack and the deaths of over 150

Malian soldiers.<sup>79</sup> AQIM and its affiliates helped further the MNLA's cause by attacking this military camp, further weakening the Malian military's presence in Northern Mali.

### **Strategic Marriages**

AQIM further entrenched itself into Tuareg society and Northern Malian society as a whole by marrying into prominent families of various ethnic groups and clans. Like AQIM's strategic alliance with the MNLA, these marriages were strategically arranged between the daughters of prominent local families and high-ranking AQIM operatives. In addition, the weddings were financed by AQIM. By marrying into the prominent families of Northern Mali, AQIM entrenched itself even further into these communities by embedding its operatives into the social, and now *familial*, fabric of the region. Most prominent of these marriages were those involving Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a high-ranking AQIM commander who married the daughter of an Arab Barabicha chief, integrating himself into an additional ethnic group of Northern Mali.<sup>80</sup> Belmokhtar is said to have later gone on and married three other women from other local tribes, including women from prominent Tuareg families.<sup>81</sup> The United States and other assisting actors struggled and were unsuccessful in their attempts to apprehend Belmokhtar as a result of the refuge offered by his new in-laws. The families and clans of his respective wives helped insulate both Belmokhtar and AQIM as a whole by providing refuge and protection, making these marriages both of strategic and practical importance.<sup>82</sup> The relevant authorities and forces were unsuccessful in their attempts to apprehend Belmokhtar until sometime between 2013 and 2015 when Belmokhtar's death by airstrike was announced by an Al-Qaeda spokesperson.<sup>83</sup>

## Hearts and Minds

Northern Mali is one of the poorest and most economically depressed regions in Africa, a fact that AQIM exploited in its efforts at gaining support from the masses. If the MNLA was successful in creating an independent Azawad, roughly two-thirds of Mali's entire territory, the new country would have the smallest GDP of any African country, less than one billion USD.<sup>84</sup> AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal highlighted the poverty of the Islamic Maghreb and lamented that without the assistance of AQIM and the eventual overthrow of the secular and infidel governments in the Islamic Maghreb, the "conditions of the poor people, they will not change. The poverty will remain plagued in the body of the nation."<sup>85</sup> Positioning himself and AQIM on the side of Mali's oppressed poor, Droukdal further criticized the simultaneous rise in oil revenues but drop in living standards across the region, "It is logic that this situation drags us to ask this question: Where does the oil and gas money go?"<sup>86</sup> In doing so, Droukdal addresses the grievances of the region's civilians in an effort to gain their support by "winning their hearts and minds."

In the case of AQIM, the phrase "winning hearts and minds" is used to define an array of the group's activities that involve appealing to the broad masses of Northern Mali as a way to earn their support. The phrase stems from counterinsurgency literature, where it is used to describe the process of gaining respect and support among an insurgent population or a population in which an insurgent group operates among or could potentially recruit from.<sup>87</sup> During the Iraq War, American soldiers made the shift away from their initial "shock and awe" tactics, or tactics used to subdue a population, to eventually begin seeking to convert the local population to the American cause, in an attempt to win over their "hearts and minds" and ultimately gain the Iraqi people's support.<sup>88</sup> Winning hearts and minds is therefore contingent on,

and aimed at, the local population's support of an actor. In the case of Northern Mali, this involved fostering local support for a foreign actor whose goals affected the population and their country.

Ensuring support from a local civilian population, according to counterinsurgency literature, often specifically involves ensuring the security of said local civilian population. Ensuring this security could involve a number of activities, from physically protecting civilians from harm to providing food, water, and shelter.<sup>89</sup> In Northern Mali and across the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM used these tactics to win the local population's hearts and minds and as a result the population's support. These tactics and basic counterinsurgency practices are further mirrored in the advice given by Al-Qaeda leaders, like Osama Bin Laden, who highlight the need to support the population the mujahideen is operating among.<sup>90</sup>

In this paper, the term "winning hearts and minds" encompasses all tactics that AQIM utilized or exhibited that worked to increase their support among a population of people, normally the group's target audience. In Northern Mali, AQIM was working to gain support from local communities by providing basic services and aid and demonstrating generous or charitable behavior. AQIM distinguished itself as a generous organization in various interactions with local civilians.<sup>91</sup> The group arranged various business partnerships with local elites and in some cases behaved like an Islamic charity, supporting the poor and providing services that the Malian government was either incapable or unwilling to provide.<sup>92</sup> Anecdotal evidence of these respectable practices include AQIM overpaying struggling merchants and traders for miscellaneous goods — one instance of this behavior involved the sale of a goat originally priced at CFA 25,000, or about \$43 USD, that AQIM paid over double the seller's original asking price.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, in Gao and Timbuktu, AQIM and MUJAO declared that the tolls and

tariffs of the Malian government were illegitimate in the eyes of Allah.<sup>94</sup> A propaganda video declaring the illegitimacy of these tolls and tariffs was televised to the people of Gao.<sup>95</sup>

*“We started prohibiting what Allah the almighty has forbidden, including tolls, customs, taxation and fining people. Trading has returned to normal; more goods are available than before, and at lower prices.”<sup>96</sup>  
– MUJAO operative in a video presented to the people of Gao*

AQIM and its affiliates became known as the groups with money.<sup>97</sup> This generosity increased local support and allowed the group to recruit young men from the surrounding areas, pulled in by the possibility of money and pushed towards these wealthy groups by Northern Mali’s economic stagnation.<sup>98</sup>

According to those living in Northern Mali at the time of AQIM’s occupation, after the MNLA had been expelled from the region, AQIM demonstrated a wide variety of charitable actions. These actions included distributing money and food, medicating and treating the sick, and giving access to SIM cards, which enabled cellular service to remote communities across the region.<sup>99</sup> AQIM’s allocation of services to Northern Mali’s civilian population is best demonstrated by the group’s actions in Timbuktu.

At the end of 2012, civilians under AQIM’s control in Timbuktu were experiencing intense periods of starvation and subsequent tripling of food prices.<sup>100</sup> Partnering with and working alongside its affiliate Ansar Dine, AQIM actively assisted starving residents. An *Al-Jazeera* reporter in Timbuktu at the time referred to AQIM and Ansar Dine as “humanitarians,” for working to mitigate the suffering of Timbuktu’s population.<sup>101</sup> Ansar Dine fighters led caravans of trucks carrying food and medicine to the starving and sick civilians of Timbuktu.<sup>102</sup> Those living in the city’s slums were hit especially hard by the shortage of food and skyrocketing



prices, and had come to completely depend on the charity of these groups in order to survive.<sup>103</sup>

AQIM and its affiliates were not lacking in financial resources and were willing to assist those in need — if those in need then turned around and joined their cause. In Timbuktu’s hospitals, sick and starving civilians were treated with the medicine trucked in by Ansar Dine and AQIM.

According to the same *Al-Jazeera* reporter, Ansar Dine spokesman Sanda Ould Boumana became worried about the state of the local population when starving babies and children began to show up at the local hospitals.<sup>104</sup> Boumana highlighted that Ansar Dine allowed in almost all forms of aid in an attempt to help Timbuktu’s civilians – the only aid they refused was aid from evangelical organizations.<sup>105</sup>

By winning the hearts and minds of the local civilian population, AQIM won the support of the local population and decreased the potential for communal resistance. This effectively entrenched AQIM in the social, political, and economic fabric of Northern Mali and decreased the likelihood that its operations in the region would be impeded by local actors. The various specific actions the group took to win the hearts and minds of Northern Mali’s communities demonstrate the extent to which the group prioritized these sorts of “hearts and minds” tactics. Rather than subjecting the population to abuse and mistreatment, AQIM provided for struggling local communities as a way to bring the civilian population on AQIM’s side. The alliance and provision of services are all direct examples of AQIM’s attempts at winning the hearts and minds of Northern Mali’s civilians.

## Chapter 3

### Getting Rid of the Competition

The second portion of AQIM's success in Northern Mali was due to AQIM's expulsion of the MNLA from Northern Mali. AQIM had first worked to entrench itself in the region by allying itself with the MNLA and assisting civilian populations. When the MNLA began abusing those same civilians, AQIM ultimately responded to civilian complaints and turned on its former ally. With the MNLA gone, AQIM had control over the region, and was ultimately able to implement fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia onto Northern Malians living under its occupation. The MNLA was a secular organization, and by dissolving the alliance, AQIM cleared the way for the eventual implementation of its preferred version of Sharia.

The most prosperous period for the alliance between AQIM and the MNLA came after the Malian military coup in March 2012, when a group of disgruntled junior officers in Mali's military instigated a coup against President Touré, who they accused of giving the military inadequate resources to fight the Tuareg rebellion that began earlier that year.<sup>106</sup> In the wake of this political chaos, the MNLA, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine were able to take control over the entirety of Northern Mali. Just three days after the coup the Malian military abandoned its barracks in all three of Northern Mali's major cities — Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu — to seek refuge in Southern Mali.<sup>107</sup> As the military fled, MNLA, AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine were on its heels. Northern Mali was now entirely in the hands of insurgents and extremists and with the coup causing chaos in Bamako the Malian government could do absolutely nothing about it.

It was during this period of complete MNLA-Islamist control in Northern Mali that the MNLA began to abuse Gao and Timbuktu's civilian populations. On April 1, 2012, exactly one

week after the military abandoned its bases in the region, women and young girls living in Gao were raped en masse by MNLA soldiers, and shops and government buildings were looted and destroyed.<sup>108</sup> Although there is no evidence that Islamist fighters were engaged in the same activities as those of the MNLA soldiers, by being an ally of the MNLA, AQIM and its affiliates risked their support from the broader population by being guilty by association. By abusing these civilians, the MNLA threatened the work AQIM and its fellow Islamists had done to win over the hearts and minds of local civilians. As a result, AQIM and its affiliates turned on its former allies once civilians began to complain.<sup>109</sup> AQIM then expelled the MNLA from the region and consolidated power across Northern Mali, ending the strategic alliance. By expelling the MNLA, AQIM effectively removed its competition from the region, and was able to do so as a result of its greater resources and capacities. Eliminating its competition and consolidating control over Northern Mali marks another facet of AQIM's success in the region.

### **MNLA's Abuses**

Soon after the MNLA and AQIM took control of Gao and Timbuktu, various reports of rape and gang rape began to surface as MNLA fighters assaulted women and girls living in these cities and the surrounding areas.<sup>110</sup> Eyewitness accounts suggest that the majority of these assaults were committed almost exclusively by MNLA fighters, and not their Islamist allies. Victims of the assaults and other eyewitnesses describe soldiers wearing Saharan style military dress, speaking French and Tamasheq (the Tuareg language), and driving trucks flying the MNLA flag; all descriptors attributed to MNLA forces.<sup>111</sup> A number of victims described being both sexually and verbally assaulted by these men, who called them "dirty slave[s]," "dirty black bitches," and "filthy whores."<sup>112</sup> The use of these racial epithets further suggests that the

attackers were Tuareg MNLA soldiers, as Tuaregs consider themselves to be racially superior to black Southern Malians. In addition to the mass rapes of Timbuktu and Gao’s civilians, the MNLA actively looted and destroyed businesses and public buildings, many of which were schools, churches and hospitals.<sup>113</sup> The MNLA also looted and destroyed all of Gao’s pharmacies, likely intending to traffic the stolen medicines along one of Northern Mali’s numerous trade routes.<sup>114</sup> The group then began looting hospitals. During the group’s assault of Gao’s hospital, soldiers seized medicine, medical equipment, furniture, and motorcycles that belonged to hospital workers; six intensive care patients died as a result.<sup>115</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the MNLA soldiers were joined by their Islamist allies in these activities.



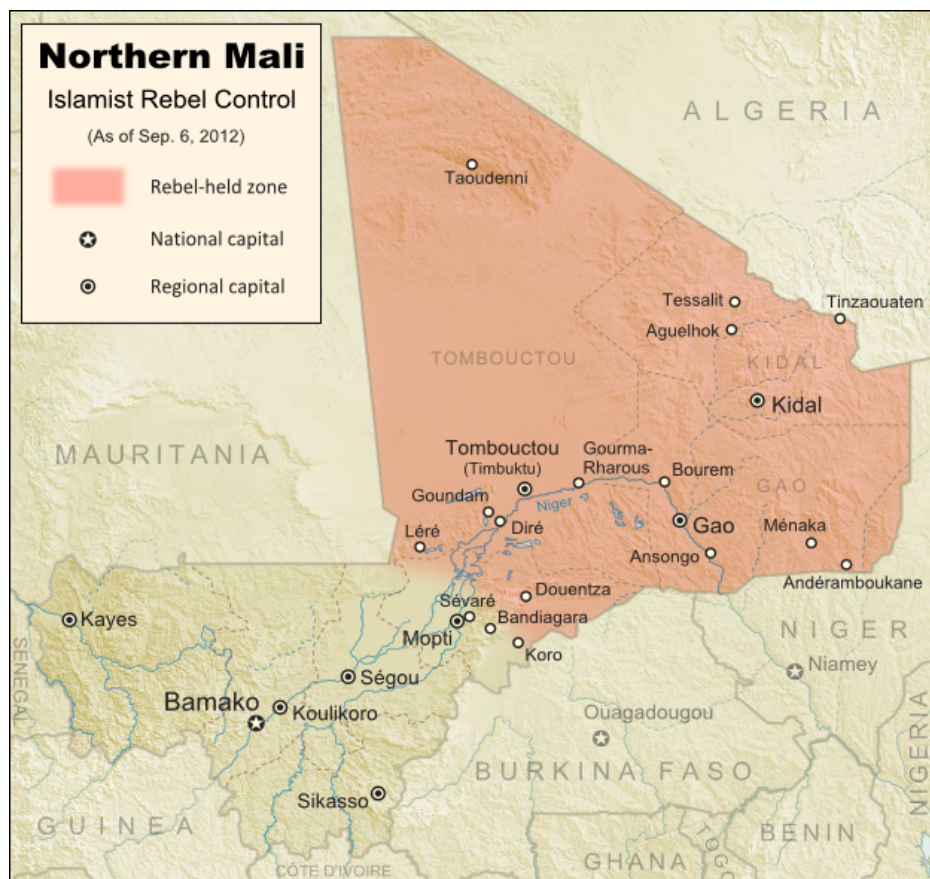
**Fig. 3** The territory held by the MNLA, AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO as of April 6, 2012, several months after the coup against President Touré. *Political Geography Now*.

## AQIM Acts

The MNLA's abuses jeopardized AQIM's efforts to consolidate popular support from the population broadly and contradicted the hearts and minds tactics AQIM was using to try to gain support from Northern Mali's civilians. As the MNLA continued its rampage across Northern Mali, MUJAO, Ansar Dine, and AQIM started receiving complaints from civilian victims at the receiving end of the MNLA's abuses.<sup>116</sup> In Gao, MUJAO explicitly told the MNLA to stop looting.<sup>117</sup> According to a businesswoman that had to flee her home in Gao, MUJAO, Ansar Dine and AQIM told the MNLA that the looting of Gao's civilians constituted "theft."<sup>118</sup> A Malian government official told researcher Stephen Harmon that the Islamist groups in Gao had responded to complaints about the MNLA's abuses from local people.<sup>119</sup> Responding to these complaints, by late June, AQIM and its affiliates had decided to end their brief relationship with the MNLA.<sup>120</sup> When the MNLA did not stop looting and raping, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine turned on the MNLA, presenting themselves as "protectors of the people, protecting them from the MNLA."<sup>121</sup> Allowing the MNLA to continue these abuses without consequences was not an option if AQIM wanted to continue to attempt to gain the support of local communities. In order to continue its hearts and minds tactics in an attempt to gain support from the local population broadly, AQIM needed to do something about its marauding allies.

According to reporters from the *Jeune Afrique*, the AQIM-MNLA alliance officially ended on June 27, 2012.<sup>122</sup> On this day, and in response to civilian complaints, AQIM began its assault on the MNLA in Gao, and was soon joined by Ansar Dine and MUJAO. The day after the alliance officially ended, a joint effort among AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine forced the MNLA to flee its former strongholds of Timbuktu, Menaka and Kidal.<sup>123</sup> The Islamist militias attacked the MNLA, burying the ones they killed in mass graves and ensuring that those still alive were

no longer within Mali's borders.<sup>124</sup> AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine's offensive against the MNLA was quite successful. High-ranking MNLA officials were forced to take refuge in Bamako, not the MNLA's preferred space of refuge given it serves as the capital of the group's main adversary, the Malian government.<sup>125</sup> The MNLA spokesman chose to flee even farther, seeking refuge in France.<sup>126</sup> By September 2012, the MNLA was completely removed from Gao. AQIM and its fellow Islamist groups were in complete control of Northern Mali.



**Fig. 4** The territory held by AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO after expelling the MNLA from Northern Mali. At this time the MNLA had been completely expelled from both Gao and the region overall. *Political Geography Now*.

## AQIM's Competitive Edge

Perhaps the biggest factor in AQIM's success against the MNLA was the capacity and resource disparities between the two groups. AQIM was a large, wealthy affiliate of a transnational terrorist network. The MNLA was, and is, a small regional ethno-separatist group with few international connections and a small Tuareg diaspora to pull money from. By the MNLA spokesperson's own admission, the group struggled to organize and regroup its soldiers after being expelled from Mali by AQIM. In addition to the resource disparities between the two groups, the MNLA's racially-motivated abuses of civilians and the group's legacy of abusing members of other ethnic groups caused a number of ethnic militias and residents of Gao and Timbuktu to also take up arms against the MNLA, all eager to oust their former abusers from the country.<sup>127</sup> Both AQIM's larger capacities and the MNLA's lack of popular support allowed AQIM to implement the next portion of its strategy in Northern Mali, eliminating its competition.

AQIM was, and is, one of Al-Qaeda's most profitable affiliates, bringing Al-Qaeda overall financial success – a fact that assisted the group when it began fighting the MNLA.<sup>128</sup> AQIM was an immensely successful affiliate with a large budget as a result of its operations in Northern Mali. The MNLA in comparison was not as wealthy, and in fact, once the group was expelled from Northern Mali, began to struggle financially. Much of AQIM's wealth came from the group's kidnapping for ransom (KFR) activities. An investigation by *The New York Times* found that from 2008 to 2014, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates made over \$125 million USD solely from kidnapping for ransom (KFR), often by targeting European citizens whose countries are willing and capable of paying large ransoms.<sup>129</sup> Prior to 9/11, Al-Qaeda's overall budget had consisted of roughly \$30 million USD.<sup>130</sup> According to that *Times* investigation, from 2008 to

2013, AQIM was the largest recipient of funds from KFR – the group made \$91.5 million, almost three-quarters of Al-Qaeda’s overall KFR revenue during that time period.<sup>131</sup> In addition to KFR, AQIM utilizes Northern Mali and the Sahel’s long economic tradition of smuggling and trafficking by taxing routes commonly used to smuggle illegal narcotics and other illicit goods. The group generally looks down upon drugs and similar substances and rarely engages in the actual trafficking and smuggling of these goods.<sup>132</sup> The group’s primary source of revenue, however, stems from its kidnapping operations. The UN estimates that AQIM’s annual budget is around \$15 million – half of Al-Qaeda’s overall budget just prior to 9/11, and an impressive feat for a single regional affiliate.<sup>133</sup>

The MNLA, being a small regional organization, does not have access to the same revenue streams as AQIM. According to a woman from Gao, the MNLA had received some financial support from Qatar and the Gulf states, and had brought much of their weapons in to Mali from Libya after the fall of Gaddafi.<sup>134</sup> The precariousness of the MNLA’s financial situation was made clear during a December 2012 interview with Bilal Ag-Achérif, the group’s leader. At that time, the MNLA was almost completely removed from its former territories in Northern Mali and Ag-Achérif was seeking safety in Paris. In the interview, Ag-Achérif directly acknowledged that the MNLA was ill-equipped to continue their fight against AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine.<sup>135</sup> He alleged that the MNLA’s adversaries were recipients of “drug money and hostages [ransom],” and as a result were more financially capable of funding their operations.<sup>136</sup> By comparison, Ag-Achérif said that the MNLA “lacks the means, [our] soldiers do not have enough to eat.”<sup>137</sup>



## **The MNLA's ruined reputation**

While AQIM held an edge over the MNLA financially-speaking, AQIM also had the support of other local actors to assist in its fight against the MNLA. The MNLA's abuse of civilians in Gao and Timbuktu did not endear them to other local militias, nor were they as popular among Northern Malians as broadly as Emir Droukdal depicted them in his letter to his subordinates. While the MNLA certainly played a large role in Northern Mali's social, political and military history, and was an important local actor in this sense, the MNLA lacked support beyond the region's Tuaregs, demonstrating that even among the group's primary audience there was nothing close to universal support. The MNLA's abuse of civilians gave AQIM an additional edge, as the MNLA lost public support and had actually gained other adversaries among other ethnic groups. The MNLA's own actions thus contributed to AQIM's ability to eliminate its competition in the area. In addition to the loss of popular support as a part of the MNLA's actions in Gao and Timbuktu, the four Tuareg rebellions since Mali's independence from France also contributed to the divide between Northern and Southern Mali, and the actions of groups like the MNLA only exacerbated that divide. The Tuareg's attempts to gain independence have caused a number of retributive attacks on civilians as Malian soldiers heavy-handedly attempt to squash local rebellions.<sup>138</sup> As an important local actor, the MNLA may have been a useful ally to AQIM as it gave them access to the militant Tuareg population of Northern Mali. But, the MNLA was not entirely representative of the region and its other ethnic groups, like the Fulani and the Songhai, and while important in the region's history, did not enjoy immense amounts of regional support. Instead the MNLA was seen by many to be an adverse actor.

Demographically speaking, the MNLA is not representative of the region as a whole. Historically, the fight for Azawadian independence has not been widely championed among the

residents of Northern Mali and has, for the most part, been a largely Tuareg undertaking. Given the ethnic makeup of Northern Mali, only a fraction of the region's residents would even be remotely receptive to the MNLA's cause, as Tuaregs make up a very small portion of the region's population. Northern Mali is home to 10 percent of Mali's entire population, about 1.8 million people. In 2009, Tuaregs accounted for just 1.7 percent of Mali's entire population, putting their total population at about 300,000 people — constituting roughly 16 percent of all of Northern Mali.<sup>139</sup> Numbers are not on their side, and the goals of the MNLA and other Tuareg groups are in no way reflective of the desires of all Northern Malians, or even the majority of Northern Malians, just considering the demographics of the region. Even among Tuaregs the MNLA does not enjoy monolithic support, as the fight for an independent Azawad was only popular among a specific portion of the ethnic group. During the 2012 rebellion, Tuaregs fought for both the MNLA and the Malian military, with the Malian military using Tuareg units to lead its operations against fellow Tuaregs in the MNLA.<sup>140</sup> Those involved in the Azawad-separatist cause or other various Tuareg groups have also historically been exceptionally factionalized — during the Tuareg rebellion in the early 1990s, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) split into more than four different groups.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the Tuaregs not only made up only a portion of Northern Mali's population, only a specific portion of this ethnicity was willing to fight for an independent Azawad. And this final portion of Tuareg's willing to fight for an independent Azawad was highly factionalized.

Comparatively, AQIM recruited from all over the Sahel — Mauritians, Algerians, Libyans, and Moroccans were all represented in the group's ranks. Since the group drew from a much larger audience, they were able to raise a much larger force.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, the MNLA had more than just AQIM and its affiliates fighting against it in summer 2012. When AQIM

began to push the MNLA out of Northern Mali, it was joined by its Islamist affiliates but also ethnic militias and young Gaoi residents intent on defeating their former occupiers. The ethnic militias were Fulbe and Songhai, two other predominant ethnic groups in Northern Mali that had historically adversarial relationships with the Tuaregs and formed fighting forces in response to the MNLA's abuses.<sup>143</sup> The Tuareg group had harassed and assaulted other ethnic groups to the point that those same ethnic groups now mobilized against them, in addition to AQIM and its Islamist affiliates.

Part of what allowed AQIM to push the MNLA out of Northern Mali was the group's poor reputation among many portions of Northern Mali society. The Tuareg constitute a strategically important but numerically small ethnic group, and even among Tuaregs the MNLA's cause was not uniformly popular. The MNLA's treatment of civilians ultimately led to a backlash against the organization, when a number of ethnic militias from a variety of ethnic groups, including the aforementioned Fulani and Songhai, also began to fight the MNLA, in addition to AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine. The MNLA's lack of support, the backlash from other ethnic groups, and AQIM's better organizational capacities, larger financial resources and recruitment pool helped AQIM and its affiliates ultimately expel the MNLA from Northern Mali. In doing so, AQIM and its affiliates eliminated their competition and consolidated power across the entirety of the region.

## Chapter 4

### Sharia and Strategic Alliances

The third and final component of AQIM's success in Northern Mali was the group's capacity to implement its own interpretations of Sharia onto the civilians of Northern Mali. AQIM once again utilized its tactic of strategic alliances, this time allying itself with local group Ansar Dine and its leader Iyad Ag Ghali, who in turn joined AQIM in its implementation of fundamentalist Sharia. Thus, AQIM's third portion of success is in part due to the assistance and presence of preexisting radical actors who agreed with AQIM's interpretations of Sharia. Ultimately AQIM's ability to implement its version of Sharia is itself indicative of the group's success in Northern Mali overall – looking at the group's actions outlined in this research, the final and logical conclusion to the group's efforts and previous successes is the eventual implementation of fundamentalist Sharia. The group first worked to entrench itself, then eliminated its competition and consolidated control of the region, allowing the group to enforce whatever governance system it preferred. In sum, the previous portions of AQIM's success are stepping stones to the final portion – implementing its own version of Sharia.

Once AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine expelled the MNLA from Northern Mali, the Islamist allies enjoyed a monopoly over the region's communities and resources. They then began applying and implementing their version of Sharia onto an unreceptive civilian population, punishing criminals and destroying local cultural sites, which AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO deemed to be idolatrous.<sup>144</sup> The involvement of local actor Ansar Dine in the implementation of Sharia demonstrates AQIM's continued use of strategic alliances with local actors. Between AQIM'S two allies, Ansar Dine and MUJAO, Ansar Dine is the most relevant of the two as the

group largely consists of native Malians, mostly of Tuareg ethnicity, and as a result is the *most* local. MUJAO instead consisted largely of Mauritians. Like its alliance with the MNLA, AQIM's alliance with Ansar Dine was strategically beneficial as it once again gave the group access to the social fabric of the region, and once again did so with the help of a Tuareg organization. As a result of Ansar Dine and MUJAO's assistance, AQIM was able to implement fundamentalist Sharia on Northern Mali despite the region's strong history of tolerant Islam. The implementation of Sharia marked the final aspect of AQIM's strategy in Northern Mali — the group now had control over the districts of Kidal, Gao, and Tombouctou, assistance from local actors that agreed with its fundamentalist ideology, and was in adherence to overarching Al-Qaeda doctrine that dictates its members live by and implement fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia.

### **AQIM's Strategic Alliance to Implement Sharia**

With the help of its allies, AQIM was able to implement its version of Sharia across Northern Mali. Specifically, it was AQIM's strategic alliance with Ansar Dine that helped implement this form of governance and ideology. Civilians were subjected to amputations and stonings, while important cultural sites were destroyed, as AQIM and its allies considered these sites to be idolatrous.<sup>145</sup> All of the aforementioned actions were conducted by both AQIM and Ansar Dine. As it had previously done with the MNLA, AQIM was once again strategically allying itself with an important and prominent local group that helped AQIM achieve its goals in the area, in this case imposing its brand of Sharia.

This imposition of Sharia meant that those who did not act in accordance with these fundamentalist interpretations would be punished. These punishments were carried out jointly by

AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO at police stations and in public, creating an atmosphere of fear among the local population and dissuading any potential dissenters from resisting their jihadist overseers.<sup>146</sup> According to an International Criminal Court report on the situation in Mali, civilians accused of wrongdoing or of breaking this form of Sharia faced "execution, amputation, flogging, stoning and beatings."<sup>147</sup> Individuals who drank, smoke, committed adultery, or did not adhere to a specific dress code were all at risk of being punished.<sup>148</sup> Bar owners either fled or risked being publicly flogged.<sup>149</sup> On multiple occasions, individuals accused of thievery had their hands amputated.<sup>150</sup> Regular court systems did not prescribe these punishments, nor were these punishments doled out arbitrarily. Instead, these punishments are part of AQIM's policies and adherence to fundamentalist forms of Sharia.<sup>151</sup>

The assistance of MUJAO and Ansar Dine continued beyond doling out criminal punishments. Ansar Dine in particular played a large role in the implementation of Sharia across Northern Mali. In addition to stoning, amputating, and flogging civilians, AQIM and Ansar Dine attacked and destroyed a number of sites in Northern Mali that held significant religious and cultural importance.<sup>152</sup> Over the course of two months in the summer of 2012, nine mausoleums and two great mosques, all listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, were deliberately destroyed.<sup>153</sup> These sites were attacked with axes and picks, and then burned.<sup>154</sup> An ICC report on the matter states that the impact of this destruction "appears to have shocked the conscience of humanity."<sup>155</sup> The African Union also released a statement on the destruction of these sites, strongly condemning the "senseless and unacceptable destruction of the cultural, spiritual and historical heritage of this region."<sup>156</sup>

## **Radical Local Actors Assist**

Radicalized local actors like Ansar Dine and MUJAO assisted AQIM's attempts to impose fundamentalist Sharia across Northern Mali, despite Mali's history of tolerant Islam, and as a result heavily contributed to AQIM's final portion of success. Ansar Dine, and specifically its leader Iyad Ag Ghali and his familial contacts, subscribed to AQIM's fundamentalist ideology and helped the group implement its fundamentalist ideology. Unlike the MNLA, Ansar Dine and AQIM were resoundingly religious organizations. As a result, AQIM and Ansar Dine had the same or similar long-term goal, the creation of a Northern Mali governed by their versions of Sharia. The radicalization of prominent local individuals like Ghali made these same individuals receptive and willing to assist AQIM's implementation efforts. In the case of Ghali, his radicalization ultimately resulted in the creation of Ansar Dine. By strategically allying with these individuals and Ansar Dine, AQIM once again demonstrates its tactic of creating strategic alliances with local actors. In this case, allying with Ansar Dine helped AQIM achieve one of its major goals in the region and ultimately resulted in the eventual achievement of AQIM's success, as defined by this research.

The assistance of local actors was crucial to the implementation of fundamentalist Sharia in Northern Mali, but the assistance of prominent and important members of society was especially important given their standing in Northern Malian society and their ability to spread fundamentalist ideology and gather more support. Many of these radical local actors that assisted in the implementation of fundamentalist Sharia were prominent or important members of Northern Malian society that had been previously radicalized by fundamentalist-Salafist groups like Jamaat ut-Tabligh.<sup>157</sup> Jamaat ut-Tabligh (JT) is an Indian missionary organization that espouses fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and played an original role in radicalizing the

local Tuareg population, notably members of prominent and important Tuareg families. Iyad Ag Ghali was radicalized by JT sometime in the 1990s, and his familial background made him an especially important asset to AQIM, as Ghali could help further the group's inroads into the local Tuareg community.<sup>158</sup> Ghali is from the Ifoghas clan, a notable Tuareg clan responsible for many of Northern Mali's insurrections.<sup>159</sup> Two sons of the leader of the Ifoghas clan were also exposed to JT's ideology, one even going to Pakistan to continue his study.<sup>160</sup> JT's interactions with prominent Tuareg families and clans helped create a subset of Northern Mali's population that was receptive to fundamentalist forms of Islam, like that espoused by AQIM.

Ghali's radicalization further assisted AQIM in its implementation of fundamentalist Sharia, and subsequently AQIM's last portion of success, as he and Ansar Dine actively participated in a variety of activities related to enforcing fundamentalist Sharia. In 2011 Ghali had tried to assume leadership of the MNLA, but his reputation of radicalization made the secular organization uncomfortable, and as a result he did not gain the position.<sup>161</sup> Ghali was then introduced to AQIM by Hamada Ag Hama, an ethnic Tuareg AQIM brigade leader, who helped further intertwine AQIM and its ally at the time, the MNLA, by inserting AQIM members even deeper into the Tuareg community via his familial contacts.<sup>162</sup> Instead of leading the MNLA, Ghali then turned to AQIM and created Ansar Dine, a predominantly Tuareg ally of AQIM that pulled directly from the ranks of the MNLA and the region's Tuareg population, radicalizing young boys.<sup>163</sup> Another prominent local individual who was radicalized and then assisted AQIM's implementation of fundamentalist Sharia was Oumar Ould Hamaha, who originally was a member of AQIM before assuming a leadership role in Ansar Dine.<sup>164</sup> Under the leadership of individuals like Ghali and Hamaha, Ansar Dine participated in the massacre at the Malian military base in Aguelhok, working alongside both the MNLA and AQIM to counter the Malian



government's presence in Northern Mali. Ansar Dine then eventually turned on the MNLA alongside AQIM and MUJAO and helped oust the MNLA from the region. Ansar Dine not only helped AQIM consolidate control of the entirety of Northern Mali, the group actively participated in AQIM's fundamentalist implementation — in the report regarding the destruction of Timbuktu's shrines and mosques, Ansar Dine is directly named as the sole organization responsible.<sup>165</sup> Ansar Dine was not simply following orders dictated to it by AQIM, it instead took an active role in implementing fundamentalist Sharia without necessarily being directed to do so.

Given that Western African Islamic traditions differ greatly from the Salafist or Wahhabist ideologies being imported from groups like Al-Qaeda and AQIM, the radicalization of local actors like Ansar Dine and Ghali was especially important to achieve AQIM's goals for the region.<sup>166</sup> The local population in Northern Mali does not have a cultural context for these strict interpretations of Islam, although the population in Northern Mali is predominantly Muslim. Fundamentalist groups like Al-Qaeda and ideologues like Osama Bin Laden and Zawahiri largely consider traditional and regional forms of Islam to be "impure."<sup>167</sup> For hundreds of years Wahhabists, Salafists, and a variety of other fundamentalist proselytizers have come to Western Africa in an attempt to convert Western Africans to the "pure," fundamentalist versions of Islam, while also simultaneously declaring the local and traditional forms of Islam to be incorrect, as these religions supposedly conflict with the teachings of the Quran.<sup>168</sup> Attempts to convert Western Africans to purer forms of Islam have historically been unsuccessful, as organizations hoping to spread these fundamentalist strains of Islam have historically irritated and offended local society.<sup>169</sup> Abdelmalek Droukdal himself stressed the importance of carefully navigating the application of Al-Qaeda's version of Sharia and converting the local population to this

ideology, being sure to consider the “gradual evolution that should be applied in an environment that is ignorant of religion, and a people which hasn't applied Shariah in centuries.<sup>170</sup>” The strong history of Western Africa’s tolerant Islam makes the implementation of fundamentalist Sharia all the more impressive, and the assistance of local actors ultimately ensured AQIM’s final portion of success.

### **Sharia as an Indicator of Success**

With the help of strategic alliances with local actors, AQIM was able to implement fundamentalist Sharia, an indicator of success for the Al-Qaeda affiliate’s efforts in Northern Mali. The Sharia’s implementation was the result of the AQIM’s zealous adherence to Al-Qaeda’s fundamentalist interpretations of both the Quran and Sharia largely. Unlike the abuses of the MNLA, which often involved a lack of control among the MNLA's ranks and the Tuareg's racism towards Northern Mali's other ethnic groups, the punishments carried out by AQIM were systematically executed. This systematic punishment is a part of living under the rule of an Islamic fundamentalist group, and AQIM’s implementation of its form of Sharia is both a facet and indicative of the group’s success in Northern Mali. In order to be able to enforce fundamentalist Sharia, AQIM had to first entrench itself in the local context by allying with important local actors and then consolidate power and eliminate competition across the region with its newfound local ally, Ansar Dine. Implementing and imposing Sharia is the last step in AQIM’s quest to control the region. By reaching this step, the group fully demonstrates its success in Northern Mali.

## **Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that the different components of AQIM's success in Northern Mali are three-fold and sequential. The group first endeared itself to the local population, including both the prominent actors at the top of Northern Malian society, like the MNLA, and the masses at the bottom. This allowed the group to begin entrenching itself in the region. Eliminating its competition from Northern Mali by expelling the MNLA then allowed AQIM and its affiliates to consolidate control. With sole control of the region, AQIM and its allies, notably Tuareg-led Ansar Dine, were able to implement their fundamentalist version of Sharia onto Northern Mali. These three steps composed and culminated in AQIM's success in the region, that success being defined as the group's eventual control of territory and implementation of its desired governance style.

## **Implications**

Understanding how AQIM was able to entrench itself and hold territory in Northern Mali is important to better understand how terrorist organizations entrench themselves in the social, political, and historical fabric of a specific context. While it is possible that not all terrorist organizations use similar strategies, AQIM's actions shed light on a potential avenue that terrorist organizations may choose to gain support from the local population. The assistance and support of local actors in the success of AQIM prompts the question of what can be done specifically in Northern Mali to combat local actor involvement in a terrorist organization's operations. Intersecting the findings from this research on the role of local actors with research on building community resilience towards violent extremists and terrorist organizations may be a beneficial

approach to better understand how countering the involvement of local actors in the activities of these aforementioned organizations may restrict their operations. Beyond research, for the relevant policy practitioners, helping create more resilient communities towards the recruitment and radicalization efforts of terrorist organizations may be a viable course of action in places like Northern Mali where terrorist organizations are prominent actors in the local context, and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future. Building more resilient local communities may be beneficial additions to current counterterrorism efforts, moving counterterrorism beyond just military action and towards a more comprehensive approach to addressing what drives local actors to become involved in terrorist organizations in the first place.

### **Factors for Success**

Specifically understanding what allowed AQIM to be successful in Northern Mali can assist counterterrorism and countering violent extremism practitioners in addressing the factors that allowed the group to entrench itself in the area in the first place, and potentially prevent similar incidences from occurring in Northern Mali and elsewhere. The large role local actors played in AQIM's success in Northern Mali could be a repeated phenomenon in other contexts, and additional research on the role of local actors in the success of terrorist organizations could be beneficial to discern whether or not this phenomenon is unique to AQIM and Al-Qaeda or more universal and demonstrated by other actors in other contexts. If local actors play prominent roles in the success of other terrorist organizations, then researchers and practitioners wishing to mitigate the threat of these actors may be inclined to look further at why the involvement of local actors is so important, and why these terrorist organizations so adamantly pursue the support of the civilians and groups they operate among – at least at first.

## **Future Research Avenues**

A potential starting point for additional research could include investigating whether the strategic alliances and the hearts and minds tactics are demonstrated across other Al-Qaeda affiliates. These other franchises and affiliates operate in a diverse set of contexts, all of which pose different problems to the group's attempts at gaining popular support. That being said, demonstrating a potential common behavioral trend among other franchises and affiliates would give further credence to the existence of this overarching behavior among Al-Qaeda as a whole. Potential affiliates and franchises that may be worth further research are Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Shabab in Somalia. Of particular interest to this research on entrenchment tactics is Al-Qaeda's newest franchise, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), founded in 2014.<sup>171</sup> As a new franchise hoping to grow its influence in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other South Asian countries, AQIS's need to entrench itself within the region poses an opportunity for researchers to observe how a new terrorist organization initially embeds itself. Comparing the actions of AQIS and AQIM may be additionally useful to determine if there are behavioral similarities between the two Al-Qaeda franchises.

More broadly, it may be pertinent to investigate whether these same tactics are used by other terrorist organizations outside the realm of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The Islamic State's initial behavior in Iraq and Syria suggests a much different approach – one cemented in fear, intimidation, and brutality. Analyzing the entrenchment tactics of the Islamic State, or lack thereof, compared to those of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates would serve as a useful comparison between the nature of the two groups and the ways in which they gain support from local and international populations. Similarly, comparing the behaviors and ideologies of the original Islamic State in Syria to those of Islamic State affiliates like the Islamic State in the Greater

Sahara (ISGS), the Islamic State in the Philippines, and Boko Haram, may demonstrate common trends of behavior between affiliates of international terrorist organizations that are not connected with Al-Qaeda. The implications of this research involve understanding how a powerful regional terrorist franchise embeds itself into an area, the possibility of a continuity of behavior among organizations belonging to the same network, and how overall different terrorist organizations interact with local actors in the contexts they operate within.

## **Epilogue**

While AQIM was successful by the definition utilized by this research, this success was not long-lasting. On January 10, 2013, AQIM and its allies launched a southern offensive towards Central Mali, attacking the town of Konna.<sup>172</sup> Just 48 hours away was Bamako, and AQIM's proximity to the capital began to worry international actors.<sup>173</sup> This offensive catalyzed French involvement in the Malian conflict as the French, US, and other European powers were concerned AQIM would attempt to take Bamako. The French additionally feared for the safety of the over 6,000 French citizens located in Mali at that time, so in response to this Islamist offensive, Operation Serval was launched.<sup>174</sup>

Operation Serval originally involved simply protecting southern Mali from further Islamist movement by acting as a barrier between the North and the South.<sup>175</sup> Eventually, however, Operation Serval changed from a defensive to an offensive operation to directly take back the north from AQIM and its allies in the region.<sup>176</sup> The French deployed airstrikes against AQIM and its allies to stop any further southern advances, and then began to retake Northern Mali's major cities. By the end of January 2013, the same month AQIM launched the original southern offensive, the French military had taken control of all three of Northern Mali's regional capitals,

Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal.<sup>177</sup> The French were eventually joined by an African Union peacekeeping mission, which in July 2013 turned over its authority to a new UN mission deployed to Mali — the Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA.<sup>178</sup>

The French intervention in Mali proved disastrous for AQIM and its Islamist affiliates, as they were scattered across the Sahel and largely expelled from the country. In the words of General Bernard Barrera, the leader of France's intervention, the French "broke Al-Qaeda's neck."<sup>179</sup> But despite the disastrous losses inflicted on AQIM in January 2013, within recent years the Sahel, and notably Northern Mali, has experienced a major increase in the number and severity of terrorist attacks. MINUSMA, the UN mission deployed in 2013, is now the deadliest UN mission in the world — since its deployment in 2017, 118 peacekeepers have been killed.<sup>180</sup> In 2017 and 2018, Mali experienced more than 200 different terrorist attacks, which are quickly becoming deadlier, especially as Northern Mali's Islamist groups improve their knowledge and usage of IEDs.<sup>181</sup> Much about the context of Northern Mali has changed in the wake of Operation Serval and the destruction of AQIM's hold on the territory. That being said, the presence of terrorist groups in Northern Mali remains a facet of the region.

Not only have these groups remained in Northern Mali, but new groups have formed, either as splinters from existing organizations or as entirely new actors to the region. Corresponding with this rise in terrorist activity is the arrival of these new Islamist groups operating in Northern Mali. The Islamic State, originally from Iraq and Syria, is now operating in the Sahel and West Africa, creating more competition for AQIM. In late August of 2018, France reportedly killed Mohamed Ag Almouner, a top official of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).<sup>182</sup> Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of AQIM's emirs, eventually joined forces with remnants of

MUJAO to create the group al-Mourabitoun, which later went on to kill a number of miners at the French Areva uranium mine.<sup>183</sup> Eventually, however, the three remaining jihadist groups in Northern Mali not including affiliates of the Islamic State – Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM -- joined together to create the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims," otherwise known as JNIM.<sup>184</sup> Currently, the two main terrorist organizations in Northern Mali are ISGS and JNIM.

Operation Serval was devastating to AQIM's efforts in Northern Mali. The group is no longer one of the sole organizations operating in Northern Mali, and instead is now part of the terrorist organization coalition JNIM. While AQIM was demonstrably weak against international forces, the group is a persistent presence in Northern Mali, even among a coalition of various other terrorist organizations. The three-fold, sequential path to success outlined in this research demonstrates how AQIM came to control Northern Mali originally. AQIM has taken control of Northern Mali before, and in the face of escalating terrorist activity, it is possible that the group will follow a similar blueprint again.



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