

HSPI Issue Brief Series

Northern Mali: Armed Groups, State Failure, and Terrorism

HSPI Issue Brief 20

May 30, 2013

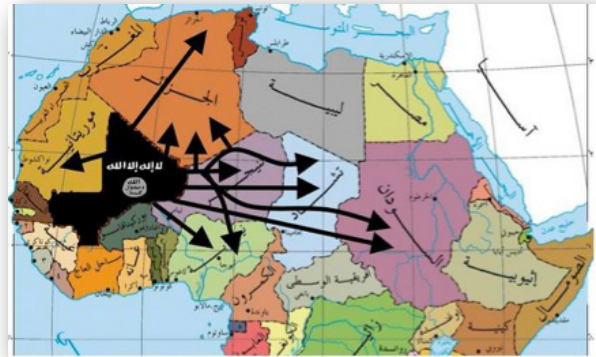
Rida Lyammouri

Lead Sahel Analyst, Navanti Group



One year ago an uneasy alliance of armed groups, including jihadists with ties to al-Qaeda, seized control of northern Mali, a landlocked region slightly larger than the state of Texas. From January to April 2012, this coalition began by attacking strategic military locations and moved on to major towns, chasing out the Malian army, state officials, and many of the region's inhabitants. By late July 2012, the jihadist groups, ostensibly led but not entirely controlled by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), instituted a harsh form of Sharia law and made al-Qaeda's greatest advances to date toward creating a jihadist state. AQIM combined with Ansar Al-Din (AAD), and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), managed to sideline the secular and secessionist National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNL) and secure a safe haven in northern Mali.

AQIM and its network of partners held on to this vast territory for months before its gains were largely erased by their own aggression. In January 2013, jihadist forces began initiating attacks into central Mali, and were poised to seize the military barracks at Sévaré – the last major installation before the Malian capital of Bamako.¹ In response, the French military, in collaboration with African and Malian



This figure of a Malian jihad spreading throughout the continent featured in a jihadist forum in 2012. Courtesy of Themoorndoor.wordpress.com.

¹ "Early Perspectives on the Mali Crisis from a Jihadist Forum (I)," The Moor Next Door, 22 December 2012, <http://themoorndoor.wordpress.com/2012/12/22/early-perspectives-on-the-mali-crisis-from-a-jihadi-forum-i/>. "Opération Serval: vers une zone tampon au Mali?" *Un regard averti sur l'Algérie et le Monde*, 12 January 2013, <http://7our.wordpress.com/2013/01/12/operation-serval-vers-une-zone-tampon-au-mali/>

forces, launched Operation Serval, which halted the jihadists' southern advance and liberated northern Mali's major cities in quick succession. French and Chadian forces then pursued AQIM and its affiliates into their refuges in the rugged and remote Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains to the northeast of the country.



Wreckage of a suicide attack, Gao, 09 February 2013 – Source: AFP at <http://actualite.portail.free.fr/monde/09-02-2013/mali-deux-jeunes-portant-des-ceintures-d-explosifs-arretes-a-gao/>.

Today, despite successful sweeps uncovering numerous weapons caches, the French and Chadian forces have reached a strategic stalemate, unable to account for all the fled jihadist fighters including some of the most dangerous leaders. Meanwhile, AQIM and its affiliates have shifted their operations to more insurgent and terrorist tactics, executing a series of suicide attacks in Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao, that are often coordinated with armed assaults.² Additionally, asymmetric shifts in the northern Mali battle have been most notably seen in the brazen attack on the In Amenas gas facility in southeastern Algeria by an AQIM faction led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

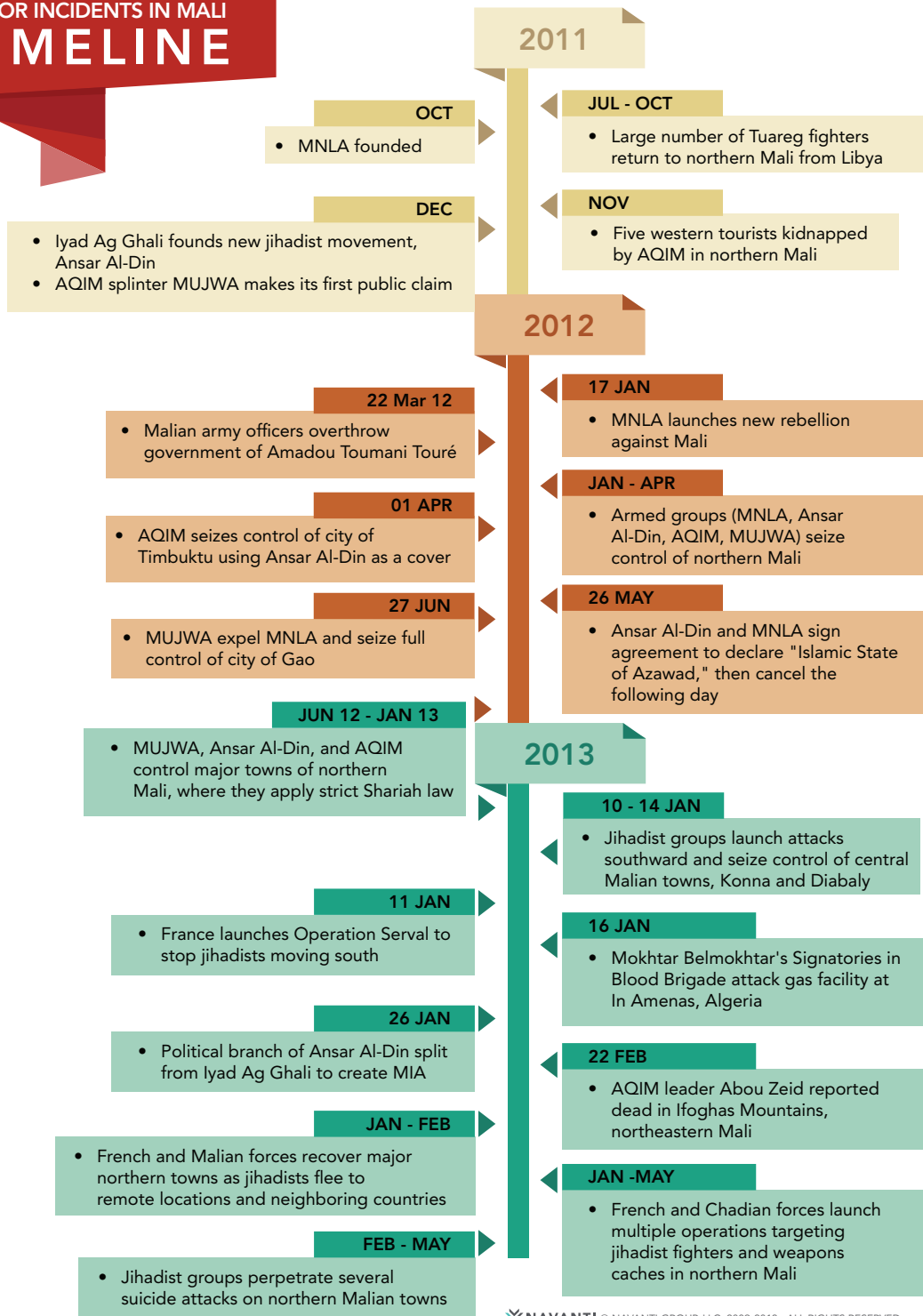
While the French have stunted AQIM's rise, the battle for the Sahel appears far from over. AQIM's tactical retreat has led to a strategic shift in which the terrorist group has expanded the type, target, and scope of its attacks. Likewise, little suggests that the Malian army and UN-sponsored African troops will be able to completely fill the void left by exiting French and Chadian forces once Operation Serval ends, suggesting the possibility of terrorist activity and disruption across the western Sahel's vast and porous borders for years to come. Finally, deep-rooted state corruption and long unanswered grievances among the population of northern Mali present a continued risk of instability and radicalization, and may ultimately spur more strategic alliances with and local recruitment to terrorist organizations within the region.

AQIM, Kidnapping and Libya Weapons — A Lead Up to Mali's Fall

Vast, unforgiving, and sparsely populated, northern Mali's desert regions (and over 2,000 miles of Saharan borders) would be a daunting security challenge for any state, let alone a resource-poor country like Mali. In fact, several cases seem to indicate that state officials contributed to worsening regional

² See "French, Mali troops fight street battles with Islamist in Timbuktu," *AFP*, 31 March 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g0uB0jMjNk9vk4i6bpbTGJt7Gnww>.

MAJOR INCIDENTS IN MALI TIMELINE



NAVANTI © NAVANTI GROUP, LLC. 2009-2013. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

security, through corruption and participation in illicit trafficking, rather than improving it.³ State neglect and weak security presence invited the proliferation of armed non-state actors — whether ethnic militias, rebels, or criminals. Mali's contraband economy boomed over the last two decades. Profits soared exponentially with each new product added — first fuel and food, then cigarettes, and finally narcotics and arms.⁴ However, it would be kidnapping that proved most lucrative of all: the first kidnappings of westerners in the region, perpetrated in 2003 by members of AQIM's precursor GSPC (the "Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat" — in its original French, from which the acronym originates, *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*), netted over 6 million Euros in ransom payments from European governments.⁵ The prospect of further kidnappings for ransom, access to arms markets, numerous hideouts, and near impunity drew AQIM into the area.

Another major factor in northern Mali's current instability is the presence of many armed Tuareg with grievances against the government. Mali's Tuareg minority comprises about ten percent of the country's population, sharing the north with several other groups. Cultural, geographic and racial differences, and a long history of conflict, underscore feelings of distance separating them (and a smaller Malian Arab population) from the rest of the country. Qaddafi capitalized on their marginalization and hired tens of thousands of Tuareg into his military and security forces starting in the 1980s, providing them with arms, training in warfare, livelihoods, and nationalist ideology.⁶



Malian army displays weapons seized from Islamists, Gao, 24 February 2013 — Source: AFP at <http://www.directmatin.fr/monde/2013-02-24/mali-les-islamistes-ont-la-capacite-de-destruction-dune-armee-400122>.

The Libyan civil war created an unprecedented security vacuum in North Africa resulting in large outflows of weapons stocks from Libya. Rebels, militias, and criminal gangs looted Libyan arms caches

³ Lebovich, Andrew, "Mali's Bad Trip," *Foreign Policy*, 15 March 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/15/mali_s_bad_trip; Starkey, Jerome, "Mayor accused of sheltering two of Mali's most wanted," *The Times*, 14 February 2013, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/africa/article3687438.ece>.

⁴ For more on the history of trafficking and trade in Mali and Niger, see Judith Scheele, "Circulations marchandes au Sahara: entre licite et illicite," *Hérodote* 142 (Fall 2011), 143-162; for notes on the history of arms trafficking across the Sahara, see Baz LeCocq and Paul Schrijver, "The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25:1, 158-159.

⁵ UN Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, "QI.A.152.03. Saifi Ammari," 07 September 2010, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQI15203E.shtml>; Zerrouky, Hassane, "Aqmi: aux origines de la tragédie du nord Mali," *L'Humanité*, 14 January 2013, <http://www.humanite.fr/monde/aqmi-aux-origines-de-la-tragedie-du-nord-mali-512727>.

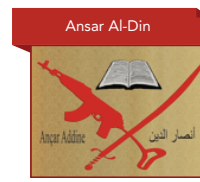
⁶ Vogl, Martin, "Tuaregs 'join Gaddafi's mercenaries,'" *BBC*, 04 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12647115>; LeCocq, Baz, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 231-237.

utilizing them for self-protection, fighting the Qaddafi regime, or sold them via the black market to armed groups. After Qaddafi's fall, thousands of armed Tuareg fighters, including several that were high-ranking officials in the Libyan military, came home to northern Mali.⁷ They brought with them not only many weapons from Libya, but the connections to acquire many more from their Tuareg allies still in southern Libya. Many of these fighters went on to join the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), a secular secessionist movement.⁸ Many others, however, allied themselves with nascent jihadist groups affiliated with AQIM. Although the MNLA officially launched the rebellion in the north in January 2012, Islamists and secular rebels colluded together to expel the Malian army from the country's north.

Libya's porous southern borders facilitated the transportation of weapons to all the armed militant groups operating in northern Mali, via routes through southern Algeria and northern Niger. Libya's collapse, therefore, directly benefited AQIM.⁹ In March 2012, cigarette smuggler turned terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, then emir of AQIM's Katibat Al-Mulathamain (which translates roughly to the Veiled Brigade), was reported to be striking weapons deals in Libya as AQIM was preparing to expand its influence in northern Mali.¹⁰ Weeks later, AQIM alongside other armed groups in northern Mali seized control of Timbuktu. Apparently, AQIM then thought itself stronger than ever: major AQIM leaders, including Abdel Hamid Abu Zeid, were spotted on the streets of a major city for the first time.¹¹

Armed Groups in Northern Mali

Northern Mali's complex and fluid mix of armed groups emerged out of an equally complex social and political context. Although these groups' messaging has made the conflict seem like an ideological battle between religious radicalism and self-determination, much more is at play in reality. Lines have been drawn within and between these groups according to ethnic and clan affiliations, personal loyalties, economic opportunity, and perceived pragmatism as much or more than ideological beliefs. In several cases, these



⁷ "President: Tuareg fighters from Libya stoke violence in Mali," *CNN*, 06 February 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/06/world/africa/mali-unrest/index.html>.

⁸ "Ex-Gaddafi Tuareg fighters boost Mali rebels," *BBC*, 17 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15334088>.

⁹ Basar, Eray, "Report Update: Unsecured Libyan Weapons – Regional Impact and Possible Threats," *Civil-Military Fusion Centre*, November 2012, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20121031%20Libya%20Weapons%20Update_final.pdf.

¹⁰ "AQIM chief buying arms in Libya: source," *AFP*, 12 March 2012, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ibUWS1Mdnm6r4Hv139ojjehMLRw>.

¹¹ "Mali: 'Abou Zeid est le shérif de Tombouctou,'" *TF1*, 07 June 2012, <http://ici.tf1.fr/monde/afrique/mali-abou-zeid-est-le-sherif-de-tombouctou-7342931.html>.

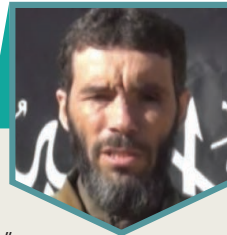
JIHADIST LEADERS IN THE SAHEL

AQIM Leader in the Sahara Djamel Okacha [aka Yahya Abou al-Hammam]



- **1978:** Born, Reghaïa, Algeria
- **1997:** Joined Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA in French)
- **1998:** Appeared with current head of AQIM Abdelmalek Droukdel during formation of Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)
- **1998:** Arrested. Released 2000
- **2003:** Reportedly moved into southern Algeria from northeast
- **2005:** Attacked Lemgheity military base, Mauritania
- **2009:** Suspected of killing an American aid worker, Nouakchott, Mauritania
- **2009:** Suspected of planning suicide attack on French Embassy, Nouakchott, Mauritania
- **2009:** Reportedly promoted to head of arms dealing for AQIM
- **2012:** Appointed governor of city of Timbuktu during jihadist occupation
- **2012:** Appointed Emir of AQIM in the Sahara by Droukdel
- Reportedly renowned for military skill and experience

Mokhtar Belmokhtar



- **1972:** Born, Ghardaïa, Algeria
- **1989:** Reportedly left to join jihad in Afghanistan
- **1993:** Reportedly returned to Algeria and joined GIA
- **1998:** Joined nascent GSPC
- Became key cigarette smuggler in region: nicknamed "Mr. Marlboro"
- Also became key arms smuggler for GSPC
- **2003:** Allegedly involved in negotiations for release of 32 European hostages kidnapped by GSPC
- **2008:** Responsible for kidnapping of Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler
- **2009:** Allegedly received 5 Million Euro ransom for release of 3 Spanish hostages
- **2012:** Founded Signatories in Blood Brigade
- **2012:** Allegedly linked to 11 September attacks on US Consulate, Benghazi, Libya
- **2013:** Signatories in Blood carry out attack on gas facility, In Amenas, Algeria
- Reportedly married to women of Malian Arab families with ties to smuggling

Iyad Ag Ghali's Relationship to AQIM



- **2003:** Reportedly involved in negotiations for release of hostages kidnapped by GSPC
- **2011:** Relationship to AQIM confirmed by founding of Ansar Al-Din
- **2012:** Ansar Al-Din's military dominance during jihadist occupation is likely evidence of AQIM support for Ag Ghali
- Ag Ghali is not known to have had the means or access to acquire the scale of weapons possessed by Ansar Al-Din other than through AQIM support
- Regional actors, including Algeria and Burkina Faso, encouraged Ag Ghali to break with AQIM, but without success
- Ag Ghali's charismatic leadership, combined with AQIM's financial support, seem key to swaying local support and recruits away from MNLA and toward Ansar Al-Din following onset of 2012 rebellion

factors have prevailed in determining relations between individuals as well as groups – seen most clearly between the secular MNLA and jihadist Ansar Al-Din, two Tuareg-majority groups. Within each group, an apparently solid façade has belied divisions amongst leaders. Additionally, as can be expected, the motivations, commitments and experiences of local foot soldiers have been quite different from those of the high-ranking leadership.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the most widely known armed group in northern Mali, and the Sahel region in general. The two most well known AQIM leaders in northern Mali were Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdel Hamid Abou Zeid. Both masterminded a series of kidnappings and killings of western tourists in southern Algeria, northern Mali, and northern Niger from 2003 to 2013. The actual size of AQIM is unknown because it is organized in regional cells, but estimate could be anywhere from 500 to 1,500. AQIM's political motivation appears to be the institution of Sharia law throughout the Sahel as well as the overthrow of secular governments in the region.

Originally known as the Algerian terrorist group Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), it changed its name to AQIM in 2007 after officially joining al-Qaeda. Under continuous threat and pressure from the Algerian authorities, AQIM moved south and established itself in northern Mali, where it managed to build close ties with local communities through marriages and common business interests.¹² Following the Tuareg rebellion launched in January 2012, AQIM took advantage of the security vacuum in northern Mali to establish the geographically largest al-Qaeda stronghold to date. Although AQIM members remained less visible than the other two jihadist groups on the ground (Ansar Al-Din and MUJWA), their presence and resources were noted by residents. Prior to the French military operation in northern Mali, Mokhtar Belmokhtar was reported to be residing in the city of Gao and working closely with MUJWA.¹³ Eventually, in December 2012 Belmokhtar announced the establishment of a new group called Al-Muwakun Bi-Dima (Signatories in Blood). Belmokhtar claimed responsibility for the attack on the In Amenas gas facility in southeastern Algeria in January 2013. More recently, Belmokhtar has also been allegedly linked to the attack on the US Mission in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, in which Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed.¹⁴ On 23 March 2013, the French

¹² "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria and Mali, Part 1," *Jihadica.com*, 19 February 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/primer-on-jihadi-players-in-algeria-and-mali-pt-1-aqim/>.

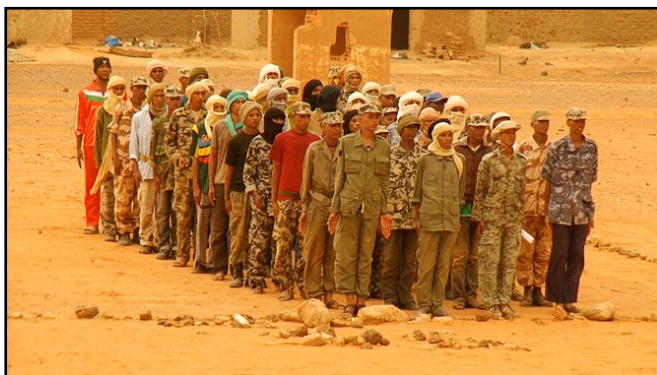
¹³ Haméon, Jade, "Exclusif: Au Mali, dans la maison du djihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar," *L'Express*, 09 February 2013, http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/exclusif-au-mali-dans-la-maison-du-djihadiste-mokhtar-belmokhtar_1218712.html.

¹⁴ Roggio, Bill, "Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying of hostages for al Qaeda," *Long War Journal*, 20 January 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/belmokhtar_claims_al.php. Cruikshank, Paul, Tim Lister and Nic Robertson, "Phone call links Benghazi attack to al Qaeda commander," *CNN*, 05 March 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/05/world/africa/benghazi-al-qaeda/index.html>.

government confirmed that Abou Zeid had been killed in the Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains in February 2013.¹⁵

The National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA)

The National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA) was founded in October 2011. Although the group has reported its ranks to be as many as 5,000, actual membership is suspected to be much lower – as demonstrated by its inability to contain the jihadist groups which emerged in its wake. Like previous Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali, the MNLA's platform accuses the Malian central government of repeatedly persecuting the Tuareg and failing to develop the north. The MNLA's ideological inspiration came from a generation of young Tuareg intellectuals. The idea of an independent Azawad (a historical name for part of northern Mali) was championed by the famous Tuareg leader, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, who led the Tuareg rebellion of 2007.¹⁶



The MNLA's forces were outmatched by jihadist fighters with better arms and equipment. – Source: Aljazeera at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/2012review/2012/12/20121228102157169557.html>.

The MNLA officially launched the rebellion against the Malian army in January 2012 by striking at strategic bases. However, the group did not have the strength to take complete control of the north, so it possibly cooperated indirectly with armed jihadist groups – notably Ansar Al-Din – in all the battles for major towns. In May 2012, the group convened meetings with Ansar Al-Din to discuss a potential reconciliation between the two groups, and both groups agreed on a short lived establishment of an Islamic State of Azawad.¹⁷ However, Ansar Al-Din's opposition to an independent, secular state, and its links

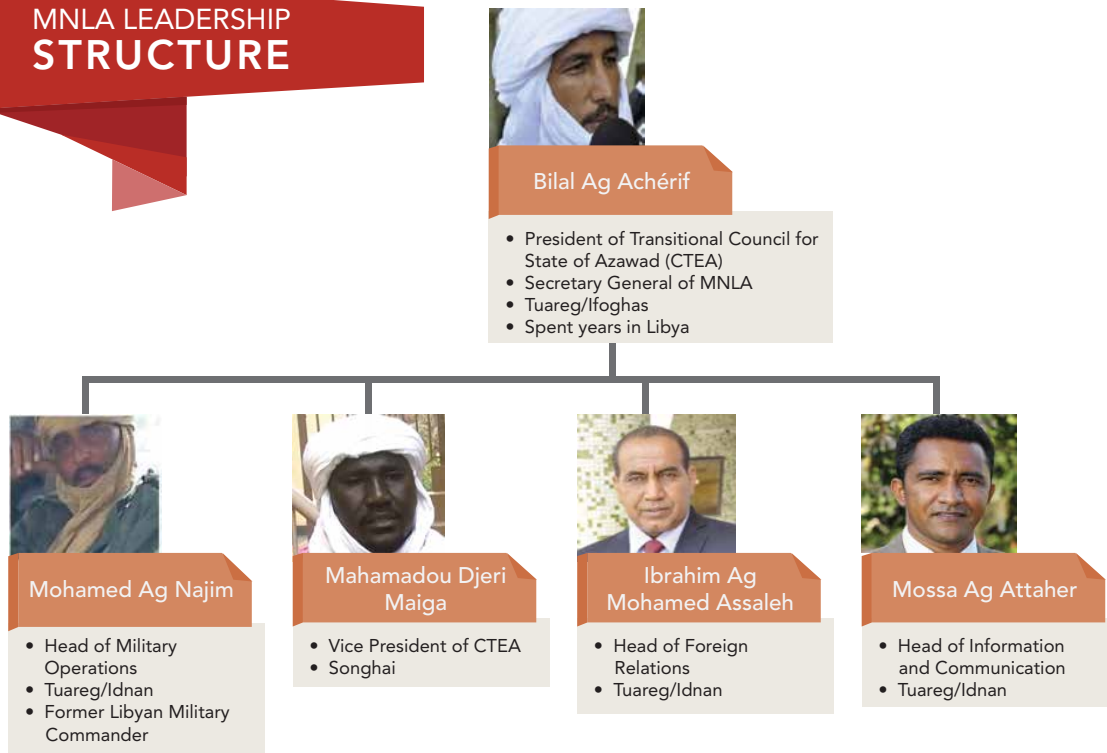
to AQIM were at odds with the MNLA's rhetoric and public positions. Over several months, the jihadists grew in power and engineered the support of locals, many of whom already viewed the MNLA as bandits bent on ethnic domination, to oust the MNLA from all major positions in northern Mali. In October 2012, with its power in decline, the MNLA reportedly renounced its secessionist goals in favor of regional

¹⁵ Erlanger, Steven, "France Confirms the Death of a Qaeda Leader in Mali," *New York Times*, 23 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/world/africa/france-confirms-death-of-abdelhamid-abu-zeid.html>.

¹⁶ Morgan, Andy, "The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali," *Think Africa Press*, 06 February 2012, <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/causes-uprising-northern-mali-tuareg>.

¹⁷ "Mali Tuareg and Islamist Rebels Agree on Islamist State," *BBC*, 27 May 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18224004>.

MNLA LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



NAVANTI © NAVANTI GROUP, LLC. 2009-2013. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

autonomy and “self-determination.”¹⁸ Following the French-led intervention, the MNLA retook several key towns in the northeastern Region of Kidal, Mali’s poorest and least populated region and a historic Tuareg homeland. At present, the MNLA occupies Kidal alongside Ansar Al-Din splinter group, Islamic Movement for Azawad (MIA). Negotiations between the MNLA and the Malian government are stalled, and the Malian army reports it is preparing for an imminent entry into Kidal; it seems that France’s troops, and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are stuck in the middle of this escalating standoff.¹⁹

Although the group lays claim to parts of northern Mali, anecdotal evidence suggests that many residents of the region, including many Tuareg, do not support it. On the one hand, the MNLA tried several times during its occupation to bring local leaders and ethnic groups into the fold to build its political platform for the north; on the other, its forces were accused of pillage and violent abuses against the population.

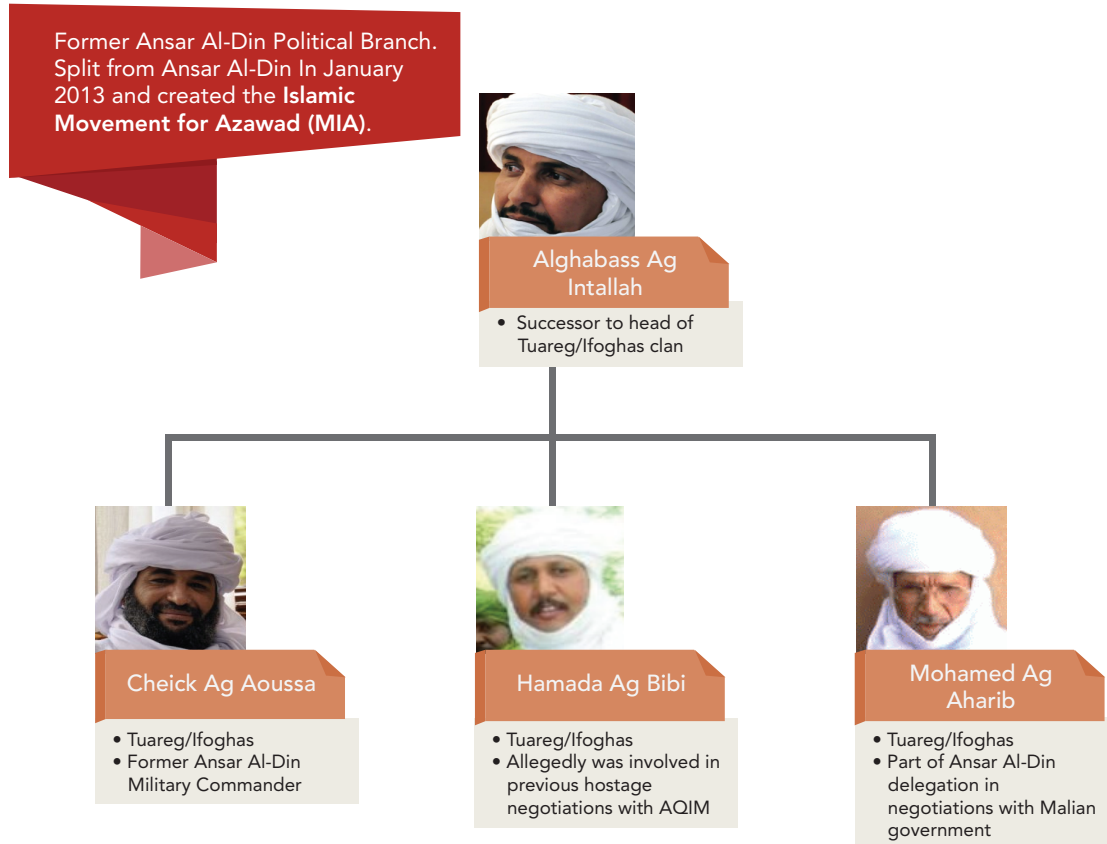
¹⁸ Boisvert, Marc-André, “Mali: What Now for the MNLA and Tuareg Community,” *Think Africa Press*, 24 October 2012, <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/what-future-tuareg-community-post-mnla-ansar-dine>.

¹⁹ “Mali: Vers une Fusion Entre le MNLA et le MIA?” *Radio France International*, 23 April 2013, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130423-mali-mnla-mia-vers-seul-mouvement>.

Ansar Al-Din

Ansar Al-Din is a militant Tuareg movement that was founded in December 2011 by charismatic former Tuareg rebellion leader Iyad Ag Ghali. Little is known about the size of the group though it is suspected to be in the hundreds. Ag Ghali created his own Islamist group following a failed bid to become the leader of the MNLA, whose leaders rejected him due to his ties to AQIM. Through most of 2012, Ansar Al-Din maintained partial or full control over major population centers in the Timbuktu and Kidal Regions.²⁰

In contrast to the MNLA's more secular direction, Ansar Al-Din adopted a Salafi ideology calling for the implementation of a harsh version of Sharia law in territories under its control. At the start of the rebellion, Ansar Al-Din maintained a low profile. However, videos released in March 2012 showed that the group played major role in fighting and defeating the Malian army in battles in the towns of Tessalit, Aguelhok, and Kidal.²¹ While the group has been able to capitalize on its local networks, Ansar Al-Din



NAVANTI © NAVANTI GROUP, LLC. 2009-2013. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

²⁰ Arieff, Alexis, "Crisis in Mali," *Congressional Research Service*, 14 January 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42664.pdf>.

²¹ "New Video Message From Ansar Ad-Din: The Conquest of Azawad," *Jihadology*, Updated 06 January 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2012/07/10/new-video-message-from-an%E1%B9%A3ar-ad-din-the-conquest-of-azawad/>.

appears to rely heavily on AQIM's financial support and weapon supplies to maintain its dominance over Tuareg populations and be an effective adversary against the Malian army.²²

Ansar Al-Din's leadership structure seemingly consists of two branches: military and political. The military branch was composed mostly of Tuareg and Arab Malian army deserters, who joined the group more for their loyalty to Ag Ghali rather than a commitment to jihadist ideology. Leaders from the Ifoghas tribe, a Tuareg noble clan, who joined the group in order to maintain the clan's power in the Kidal Region, dominate the political branch. These political leaders — including Alghabass Ag Intallah, heir to the leadership of the Ifoghas — are also known to be largely moderate and pragmatic.

The political branch was involved in negotiations with the Malian government throughout 2012. It is worth noting that certain Ansar Al-Din leaders first aligned themselves with the MNLA, then, defected to Ansar Al-Din after it became clear that the Islamists had the upper hand in northern Mali. Also, although the two groups' attempt at reconciliation broke down in May 2012, they both passed up many opportunities to engage in direct combat, a sign that ethnic and political affiliations trump their respective differences. Following the French military intervention, the political branch under Alghabass broke away from Ansar Al-Din and created its own movement, the Islamic Movement for Azawad (MIA). Alghabass claims the MIA is moderate and willing to combat extremist groups in northern Mali. The MIA and MNLA both occupy Kidal, where they issued a joint statement of cooperation on 13 March 2013.²³



Ansar Al-Din members, Timbuktu, 2012. Jihadist fighters as young as fifteen years old have been captured or killed during the French-led intervention. — Source: Aljazeera at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/20131139522812326.html>.

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA)

The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) is an AQIM splinter group. MUJWA is led by Hamada Ould Kheirou (Hamad el Kheiry), a Mauritanian national.²⁴ Little reliable information is available regarding the size of the group. Reportedly, members of MUJWA broke way from AQIM because of

²² "Mali: Timbuktu Heritage May be Threatened, UNESCO Says," *BBC*, 03 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17596831>.

²³ "Mali's Ansar Dine Islamists 'Split and Want Talks,'" *BBC*, 24 January 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21180766>. "Mali: des Membres d'Ansar Dine Font Sécession et Créent Leur Propre Mouvement," *Radio France International*, 24 January 2013, <http://www.rfi.fr/afric/20130124-mali-membres-ansar-dine-font-secession-creent-leur-propre-mouvement-mouvement-islamique-azawad>

²⁴ "Nord-Mali : le chef du Mujao prend ses aises à Gao," *Jeune Afrique*, 03 July 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2686p008-009.xml0/>.

internal leadership struggles and disputes about the division of ransom income. Additionally, MUJWA reportedly questioned AQIM's commitment to jihad and application of Sharia law.²⁵ The group's activities have been based in the city of Gao, with a presence throughout the Gao Region and parts of Kidal Region, particularly along the Algerian border.

MUJWA maintains a political ideology consistent with Salafism. For instance, prior to the French military intervention in January 2013, MUJWA established an Islamic Police force in Gao. This arm of the group was meant to enforce its version of Sharia in each town it controlled and was composed mainly of local youth and foreign recruits. MUJWA is suspected to be benefiting from the financial support of narcotics traffickers from Gao Region.²⁶ Initial reports suggested that the group's leadership structure is composed mainly of Mauritians and Malian Arabs from Tilemsi valley in Gao Region. The group has overtly publicized its other foreign members. Fighters from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco (Western Sahara) and Egypt were named as heads of different "ministries" governing Gao and other towns under its control, and men from Niger and Benin were named as brigade leaders.²⁷ Nevertheless, it was suspected that the group still maintained relations with AQIM and Ansar Al-Din.

The group made its first public appearance in December 2011 when it claimed credit for the kidnapping of three European aid workers in Tindouf, Algeria. The three workers were kidnapped on 23 October 2011, and released on 18 July 2012 through the mediation efforts of the government of Burkina Faso.²⁸ It is likely that European governments paid a ransom to MUJWA in exchange for the aid workers.

Social Transformations within the Tuareg Community

The Tuareg society is extremely hierarchical. Since the time of French colonization in 19th and 20th century, noble Tuareg tribes such as Ifoghas, have played all their cards to maintain supremacy over the other tribes, such as Idnan and Imghad. Similar to French colonial policy, different Malian administrations encouraged that supremacy, assuming that divisions within the Tuareg community in particular, and within (and between) all the ethnic groups in northern Mali, would weaken them and lessen the threat of Tuareg uprisings to the central government (Tuareg uprisings are not new – the first was against the French in 1914).

²⁵ Lebovich, Andrew, "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria and Mali, Part 3: Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa," *Jihadica*, 22 January 2013, <http://www.jihadica.com/primer-on-jihadi-players-in-algeria-and-mali-pt-3-movement-for-tawhid-and-jihad-in-west-africa/>.

²⁶ "Serge Daniel, Spécialiste du Sahel : «Il faut arrêter de payer les rançons»,” *El Watan*, 25 April 2012, http://www.elwatan.com/international/serge-daniel-specialiste-du-sahel-il-faut-arreter-de-payer-les-rancons-25-04-2012-168172_112.php.

²⁷ "Nord Mali : Les islamistes gouvernent Gao par un conseil executive de cinq ministères,” *Alakhbar*, 18 December 2012, <http://fr.alakhbar.info/5563-0-Nord-Mali-Les-islamistes-gouvernent-Gao-par-un-Conseil-executif-de-cinq-ministeres.html>.

²⁸ Bonkougou, Mathieu, "Freed Italian, Spanish hostages head for Europe,” *Reuters*, 19 July 2012, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSBRE86I0JQ20120719>.

Thus, in the Adrar des Ifoghas, the Ifoghas tribe has served as the government's "partner" in the region since Mali's independence in 1960. However, in the 1990s, the Malian government was not expecting a new emerging class of Tuareg, the "Ishumar" or adventurers.²⁹ This referred to young Malian Tuareg that had left the homeland – and with it, the old mentalities – in search of opportunity. As explained above, a great many went to Libya; others went to the cities of West Africa and North Africa, and a few went to Europe. As they returned, the Ishumar brought their experiences and ideas, including new political ideologies, and soon began to make new demands from the Malian government. Additionally, many returning Ishumar also wanted to challenge the hierarchy within their own society; notably, a considerable faction emerged from the non-noble Imghad who wanted to challenge the power of the noble Ifoghas.

The Malian state failed to anticipate this transformation, and assumed it would be able to manage the "Tuareg problem" using the same methods of ethnic division and favoritism as in the past. After counting on the Malian government's support as its preferred partners for decades, Ifoghas leaders gradually became isolated from the Malian central government. The administration of President Amadou Toumani Touré (known as ATT) realized the Ifoghas were no longer effectively keeping the threat of Tuareg rebellion at bay. Instead, the tables turned and the Ifoghas were seen to be leading rebellions against the central government. For instance, in 2006 and 2007, the Malian government engaged Imghad and Arab militias to counter northern Malian uprisings. Furthermore, the central government in Bamako reportedly attempted to weight its presence in the north by allowing its allies to engage in criminal activities. As a consequence Mali lost further control of the north.³⁰

Key Questions for the Future of Northern Mali

Although armed jihadist groups were driven from northern Mali's major cities in a matter of weeks, the current security situation and their evolving insurgency tactics will allow them to continue to pose a threat to the region. Notably, Mali is not the only country in the Sahel with vast desert



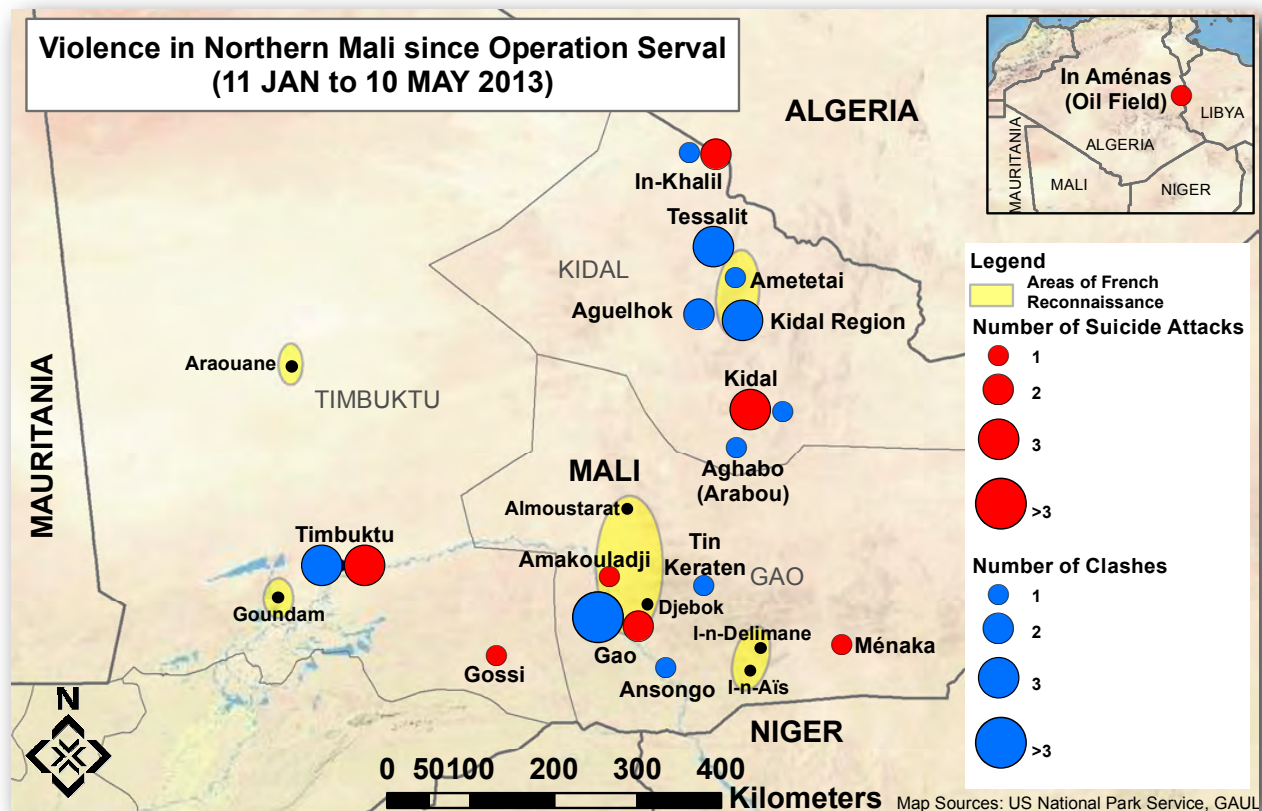
Mbera refugee camp across the Mauritanian border is currently home to more than 70,000 of the 400,000 people who fled the conflict in northern Mali – Source: Tamoudre.org at <http://www.tamoudre.org/geostrategie/resistance/rebellions/lazawad-ou-nord-mali-brave-encore-une-fois-les-defis.html/attachment/3refugies-mbera>.

²⁹ The word comes from the French *chômeur*, unemployed, referring in part to the bouts of unemployment and underemployment they faced during their urban migrations. A good introduction to these Tuareg migrations and their social and intellectual implications is Baz LeCocq, "Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The *Teshumara* Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society," *International Review of Social History* 49 (2004), Supplement, 87-109.

³⁰ Lacher, Wolfram, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," *Carnegie Papers*, September 2012, 11-13, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/13/organized-crime-and-conflict-in-sahel-sahara-region/dtjm>.

borders that is it at pains to patrol: groups with knowledge and contacts can evade along the Sahara's branching trails to end up in any number of places, as reports of fighters reaching Darfur via Libya attested.³¹

More importantly though, none of the long-term problems which allowed this unstable situation to arise seem any closer to being resolved. Northern Mali remains deprived of infrastructure and economic opportunity. As the southern Malian press makes clear, all the country's groups have grievances against the central government; no one is satisfied with the way the country has been run; the most commonly expressed public sentiment is one of betrayal; and ethnic tensions are at an all-time high. Reports of the Malian military's rampant corruption and abuses of the civilian population continue to emerge. While some Malians talk of getting democracy right this time, many are already settling back into fatalism as they see the same group of elites reshuffling for power. The most positive outcome of the elections planned for July, if they happen, may be that they fulfill the requirements for renewing the international



³¹ "JEM rebels 'sight' Malian rebels in north Darfur," *Sudan Tribune*, 18 February 2013, <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article45564>. Although these reports were not verified, fleeing Tuareg fighters took this route early in the last century: see Andrew McGregor, "The Hunt for Mali's Missing Islamists: Have Tuareg Rebels Returned to Darfur?" *Aberfoyle International Security Special Report*, 13 February 2013.

aid flows upon which the national budget depends. Meanwhile, over 400,000 refugees and internally displaced people who fled the conflict are wondering when they might go home, and if they do, what they might be coming home to: herds and fields have been left untended, homes and shops have been looted, and the economy shut down.

If northern Mali is to be secured, its people must be reintegrated into the nation and its infrastructures restored. For that to happen, the following questions may be points to examine for understanding the future security of the Sahel.

Mali's Internal Issues:

- Although the major towns of the north appear to have been secured, what about the rural regions?
- How does the Malian government end the standoff in Kidal and address the grievances of the MNLA?
- How can the Malian government address longstanding ethnic and racial tensions brought to the surface by the conflict?
- How can Mali engage in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former members of all armed groups?
- How will Mali address truth, justice, and reconciliation for the war crimes committed by all armed groups, including the MNLA, jihadist groups, ethnic militias, and the Malian military?

Implications for the Region:

- What are the short- and long-term consequences of a continued violent extremist threat in the region?
- How can US and Western partners collaborate to manage the conflict in a way that Malian and other African partners can later govern effectively?
- How will the continued presence of extremist groups and increased military presence impact licit and illicit trafficking, some of which provides northern Mali communities with much-needed resources?

US and Western Action:

- What type of role should the US and Western countries play in containing or eradicating extremists from the region in the future?

page 15 of 17

- How can the US and Western nations more effectively assess the situation on the ground and respond with long-term solutions in mind?
- How can the West assist in long-term investments needed in the north and be sure that project funds are not embezzled?
- How can the US and Western nations gain a more comprehensive intelligence picture from which to structure operations and to steer dialogue?
- What will be the by-products of continued US and Western involvement in the region? Will there be targeted terrorist attacks in the US and Europe as retribution?

In the short term, it is imperative that international partners deter the Malian government from entering Kidal and dealing with the MNLA through armed force; this will only escalate tensions and sow the seeds of the next rebellion. The conflict's refugees and IDPs also must be assisted to return and start their lives over. In the longer term, within northern Mali, adequate security controls need to be put in place to combat illicit trafficking and trade; at the same time, development opportunities need to be provided at a local level to ensure that illicit trafficking is not the most lucrative option. Additionally, the problem of border control needs to be addressed regionally through international cooperation, made all the more difficult by Libya's weak state and militia control, and Algeria's ambiguous position.³² Finally, the process of national dialogue and reconciliation, which is off to a stutter start in Bamako, must be inclusive and allow all grievances to be heard – even those of young, marginalized teenagers who joined jihadist groups to gain power and feed their families.

Rida Lyammouri is Lead Sahel Analyst at the Navanti Group.

Northern Mali: Armed Groups, State Failure, and Terrorism represents the third brief in a Special Issue Brief Series: ***African Security Challenges***. The series is a collaborative project from the **Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI)** and the **Navanti Group**. The first and second briefs in this series, ***Pardon the Pivot, What about Africa?*** and ***Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: No Easy Fix***, can be found on HSPI website.

³² Dekker, Stefanie, "Libya's heavy arms being funnelled across border," *Aljazeera*, 25 March 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ln3P-Rommuw>.

*Founded in 2003, The George Washington University **Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI)** is a nonpartisan “think and do” tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.*

***Navanti Group** specializes in professional services using social media, indigenous researchers, and expert analysts to solve complex communications, development, and irregular warfare challenges. Navanti combines analytical prowess and technological savvy to pull together new and innovative solutions to difficult global problems.*



The opinions expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author's alone.