



Political nomadism and the Jihadist ‘Safe Haven’ in northern Mali: an entry point through Tuareg relational political dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Jihadist groups have found a ‘safe haven’ in northern Mali. They have managed this by operating strategically to establish themselves and to develop relationships with local communities, but characteristics of the environment have also facilitated their development and survival. In northern Mali, the political landscape is fragmented, and replete with competition between the central authority and various groups of local elites, who are themselves divided. I conceptualise this fluid environment as a context that incentivises ‘political nomadism’. Using the Tuareg communities as an entry point, I explore the complex dynamics between local and national political actors and jihadist groups in northern Mali. I argue that the jihadist ‘safe haven’ in northern Mali is highly relational and has been facilitated by the form of political nomadism practiced in the region since the 1990s. The article is based on eight months of fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2017 in Mali and Niger.

Keywords – Nomadism, Mali, Tuareg, elites, Jihad.

* The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments. He also wants to thank Dr. Leonardo Villalón and other colleagues from the Sahel Research Group for stimulating discussions during his postdoctoral stay at the University of Florida between 2019 and 2021, which helped polish this paper. The author would like to thank Mónica Villalón, Khalid El Saafien and Audrey Tremblay for copy-editing the different versions of this article. He thanks the *Chaire d’études maghrébines* and Dr. Francesco Cavatorta from the Université Laval for funding this research in the early stages of this article. He also thanks Dr. Cédric Jourde, Dr. Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim and Dr. Marie-Joelle Zahar for regularly sharing their thoughts with him on this issue.

By the mid-2000s, analysts were becoming concerned with the presence of a number of *katiba* (battalions) of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) carrying out attacks in the Sahel as local affiliates of Al-Qaeda expanded their area of operation beyond the Algerian desert. Some scholars, such as Schrijver & Lecocq (2007), initially expressed doubts about AQIM's ability to radicalise the communities in which they settle, particularly in northern Mali (Lecocq & Schrijver 2007). Meanwhile, jihadist groups joined the armed uprising during the Tuareg rebellion that began in 2012, surprising many analysts (Pellerin 2019). Indeed, Iyad Ag Ghali, one of the main leaders of the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s and 2006, created *Ansar Dine*, a jihadist group with which AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) joined forces.¹ It confirmed the concerns among some security analysts, who worried about the crystallisation of a jihadist 'safe haven' in northern Mali. However, since the beginning of the Malian crisis in 2012, Malian political elites have viewed the jihadist phenomenon as mainly exogenous. With the recent coup in 2020, the Malian military junta is regularly blaming French security forces to reinforce and help 'terrorist' groups. Even before the military coup d'état, there was already some confusion in the identification of jihadist groups by local and international actors. This analytical mist focusing on identifying jihadist fighters and not contextualising the phenomenon erases the level of responsibility of the various actors involved in the survival and development of jihadist 'safe haven' in northern Mali and its spread in the Liptako Gourma region.

Inspired by Campana & Ducol (2011) and Walther & Christopoulos (2015), I propose the jihadist 'safe haven' as a socio-political, mobile space made up of social, political and economic networks, thus viewing it as something that goes beyond a strictly territorial phenomenon. The interactions of the jihadist groups within the different socio-political contexts of northern Mali, particularly the different communities and local authorities, must be understood in order to grasp the establishment of the 'safe haven'. A 'safe haven' is constructed from complex relationships, and with occasional ideological alignment of certain fractions of these communities. There are also situational and pragmatic alliances that occur between some 'brokers' and jihadist groups (Thurston 2020). These relationships can lead to the passive complicity of certain communities, due to issues of co-dependency, or simply in order to survive these communities choose not to antagonise jihadist groups (Pellerin 2017).

This article takes this framework further by arguing that jihadist groups can be part of a bigger political arena between communities, local elites and the central authority. I argue that their survival and development in a socio-political mobile space can be facilitated by competitive actors in a very fluid environment and attempt to explain how jihadist groups are able to develop and survive in northern Mali via a focus on Tuareg communities. These communities serve as entry points for the argument, and provide insight into the complicated,

political ecosystem of this region. Other northern Malian communities will also be considered, particularly in their relationships and interactions with the Tuareg.

Following Reno (2019), who emphasises the importance of context in understanding armed conflicts, I provide an overview of the political situation in northern Mali to help analyse how jihadist groups have managed to settle in the region. The development of the jihadist 'safe haven' in northern Mali was facilitated by a particular form of political nomadism practiced by local and national elites. This political nomadism is characterised by these three elements: (1) the progressive institutionalisation of 'armed politics', (2) the control of the economic resources, for example, illicit goods or natural resources, and (3) the socio-political hierarchy within Tuareg communities.

The paper unpacks the form of political nomadism in northern Mali, and the three factors fuelling the tensions between local elites and the central authority. I present the main rivalries among the Tuareg political elites in this region since the 1990s as a background to understand the subsequent establishment of jihadist groups. The article then turns to the dynamics developed in the early 2000s between the jihadist groups and certain sub-sections of local communities. I describe the fluid and circumstantial alliances between certain Tuareg and jihadist groups during the northern Malian crisis in 2012. The focus will be primarily on the Kidal region, the epicentre of the Tuareg rebellion. Finally, this article will explain how rivalries within and between communities, notably among Tuareg in Menaka, played a role in increasing the power of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the broader Sahel.

The analysis presented in this article is mainly based on research conducted in Mali and Niger over a period of 8 months between 2016 and 2017. The core of the fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with Tuareg political elites (50 in Bamako, Mali and 40 in Niamey, Ingall, Tchintabaraden in Niger).² I also conducted discussions with analysts, local and international experts working in the mediation process and the security sector, as well as informal discussions and debates with other Sahelian communities and non-elite Tuareg individuals. This fieldwork was complemented with discussions in both France and Algeria with members of the Tuareg diaspora, as well as with scholars and experts. The data obtained in the field were triangulated with secondary sources, including local publications and media, international media, Wikileaks cables,³ research reports and ethnographic literature. Follow-up exchanges and discussions with my previous interlocutors were facilitated by social media (Facebook and WhatsApp).

A FORM OF POLITICAL NOMADISM IN NORTHERN MALI

Olivier de Sardan has noted that the political context of Niger since the 1991 *Conférence nationale* and the instauration of the multi-party system has been characterised by 'political nomadism', which he understands as the frequent circulation of militants and officers among political parties, perpetually

reconfiguring political alliances to gain or maintain power (Olivier de Sardan 2019). Even if Olivier de Sardan uses political nomadism to define the fluid dynamics of the Nigerien multi-party systems, he refers ontologically to the mobility of nomads as a political strategy of survival to maintain power or a balance of power between competitive groups. The lack of economic resources in the ecosystem of the Sahel and Sahara led nomads to develop strategies and political routines in the precolonial era. They were also shared by other nomadic groups outside the region. Understood literally, political nomadism can refer to the political acts regulating the moral economy in the nomadic world and the relations between nomads and other groups. For instance, raids (*ghazi* or *rezzou* in French) are a strategy to acquire some economic resources but these attacks are regulated in the nomadic world. Nomads can carry out a raid against another nomadic group, but Tuareg assailants avoid for example to humiliate or take all the resources of another Tuareg group (Boilley 2012). Tuareg upper social classes also have the obligation to protect the subaltern groups or allies (even non-Tuareg groups) in exchange for tribute payment. A form of sovereignty existed and still exists in the territories dominated by specific nomadic groups. Taxes must be paid by the travellers, when they cross the territory belonging to a specific group, to be protected and not attacked (Lefebvre 2019). These practices were quite disturbed in the colonial period. To fight for example *razzia*, French colonisers created units of nomadic fighters (Boilley 2012). Malian postcolonial state used the same strategy, arming militias, to fight hostile groups rejecting the central authority (Grémont 2010a, 2010b). Considering the layers of meanings, temporalities and interventions of external actors, political nomadism is not a static phenomenon and evolves and espouses multiple forms. Following Olivier de Sardan, I argue that political nomadism can be actually described as a political arena (with formal and informal institutions), spatially composed of nomads and other competitive or allied groups, notably state representatives. Extending its use is also a normative stance to acknowledge the role played by nomadic communities in the political routines in the Sahel and Saharan regions. In the Nigerien case, since the 1990s, political elites belonging to nomadic communities, particularly ex-rebel leaders, integrated the multi-party system and are in general privileging dialogue with the government and other groups to obtain political and economic resources (Saïdou 2014).

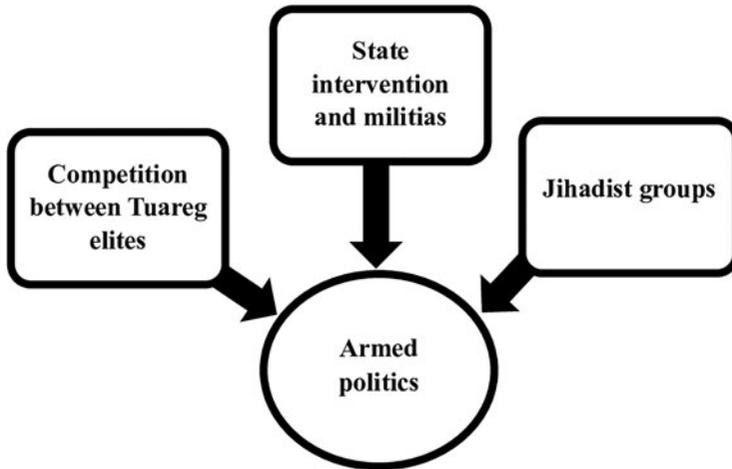
Despite undergoing democratisation in the 1990s, Mali has seen the progressive institutionalisation of a different form of political nomadism in its northern regions, seen through the competition between traditional and new types of elites, notably among Tuareg (Lecocq 2004), conflictual cooperation dynamics between Tuareg elites and the central authority involving ethnic and tribal-based militias (Grémont 2021) and facilitating the survival and development of jihadist groups.

Building on Staniland's work (2017), Campana (2018) considers 'armed politics' to be institutionalised in Mali since the Tuareg insurgency of 2012. In sum, 'armed politics' means that all the political actors accept the use of violence as

political leverage to negotiate with central authorities, other communities or even with actors within the communities themselves. While not the only tool, it is increasingly considered by all actors. In northern Mali, it seems, this institutionalisation started earlier, in the 1990s, and not in the recent Tuareg rebellion in 2012. As Lecocq and Klute remind us, decentralisation, and local disputes for power in northern Mali from 1990s to mid-2000 were locally called *demokalashi* (2013: 428). This play on words underlines the mixed political reality of local modern elections (*demo*) and violence (*kalash* as in kalashnikov). Various elites in competition were already using violence to win local elections, to contest them or to shape political alliances and constrain people to follow them.

If competition between local elites was institutionalised in the 1990s, the tensions between nomads and the central authority started at independence with the first exactions of the national security forces against the Tuareg revolt in Kidal in 1963 (Ag Baye & Bellil 1986). Since then, the relation between Tuareg and the central authority is structured in a blurred temporality oscillating between periods of armed conflicts and times of ‘no peace, no war’ (Bencherif 2018; Richards 2005). It led to the development of ‘armed violence as a professional occupation or a *métier*’ among Tuareg groups in Mali, in a very similar way as some men in arms in Chad (Debos 2011: 411). It started with the first generation of Tuareg rebels trained in the Libyan camps of Gadhafi in the 1970s and 1980s (Boilley 2012). After the fall of Gadhafi in 2011, the return of fighters from Libya in northern Mali and spread of weapons in the region contributed to the normalisation of this *métier* (Grémont 2021). Leaders of ‘men in arms’ can obtain social capital by triggering an insurgency and obtaining political gains through peace agreements or by supporting the central authority with their militias. The Malian regime creates or reinforces ethnic-based militias to govern the septentrional territories with them as proxies, being unable to control directly the region (Grémont 2010a, 2010b). By staying passive with the development of jihadist groups in northern Mali, the central authority can have the same ambition, weakening potential Tuareg rebellion. At the same time, Tuareg leaders opposed to the state can consider jihadist groups as a potential tool to weaken the central authority or a rival group or a way to structure an alternative political project (Graph 1).

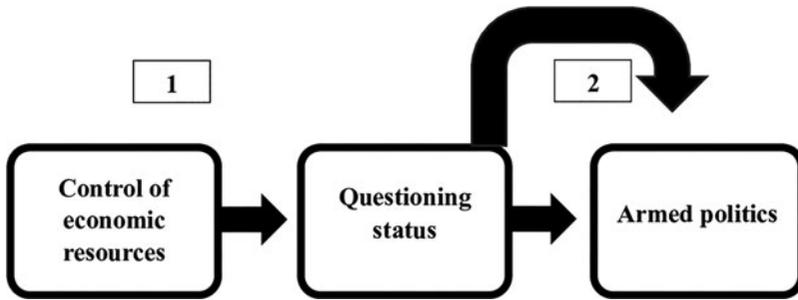
The second characteristic is the socio-political hierarchy within Tuareg communities. Since Malian independence, the traditional leaders, the *imenokalen* (sing. *amenokal*), their families and the upper social classes *imushagh* (sing. *amashagh*), more or less the ‘aristocrats’, have struggled to maintain their authority over the tribes considered inferior, as well as over the lower social classes (*imghad*, *imadan* and *iklan*).⁴ Because of the drug trade, the war economy of the Sahel since the fall of Gadhafi in Libya, and the rise of new notables in competition with tribal leaders, Hüsken and Klute suggest that the socio-political order in northern Mali is evolving towards an ‘heterarchy’ with various legitimacies in competition (2015). However, the ‘traditional’ socio-political hierarchy has already been in competition with alternative political orders since the 1990s. The last decade, following the recent Tuareg rebellion in 2012, amplified



Graph 1. Actors involved in the armed politics.¹⁶

rivalries between traditional dominant and subaltern groups. Jihadist leaders can use this competition between dominant and subaltern groups to propose alternative projects, for example, abolishing traditional hierarchies and recruiting among subaltern groups (Jourde 2011).

Finally, the third characteristic of political nomadism regards the control of economic resources. Although generally linked to spatial representations, these are not always exclusively territorial questions. The control of economic resources is embedded in the stories of different political groups dominating or being dominated within these political spaces (Whitehouse & Strazzari 2015). As said before, in the past, some Tuareg groups required tribute to be paid in order to traverse the political space under their control (Raineri & Strazzari 2015). Now, illicit smuggling is one of the main economic activities in this region. Smuggling is particularly lucrative when transporting weapons, cigarettes since the 1990s and drugs since the 2000s (Scheele 2011). Controlling the drug routes and key checkpoints now provokes disputes between different groups trying to protect their authority in their ‘traditional’ spaces for ‘traditional’ authorities and notables, as well as trying to extend it. Subaltern groups are also involved in the narco-smuggling or illicit smuggling in general and new *big men* are challenging the control of economic resources by traditional authorities. There are many actors involved in the illicit trading. They partake by asking for tribute (*‘droit de passage’*), by protecting drug convoys or becoming transporters and drivers (Raineri & Strazzari 2015). Occasionally, some of the drug smugglers arrive armed and refuse to pay, thus provoking attacks against their convoys. Not paying involves not acknowledging the local authorities. It is a form of revolution destabilising the political order because the various authorities of local traditional leaders, notables and sometimes complicit state operatives are questioned (Scheele 2009).



Graph 2. Jihadist groups involvement in the control of economic resources.

Furthermore, the protection of these illicit activities reinforces the phenomenon of ‘armed politics’ in the region, namely because by simply being part of these trade deals, any armed political group can increase the capacity to confront its rivals (Bencherif 2018, 2021). Additionally, the continuous clashes among competing actors for key sites or routes reinforce the ‘armed politics’ dynamics. Jihadist groups can be part of the various relations on the control of economic resources. For example, they can be involved in narco-smuggling and the protection of convoys (see 1 in the second graph). Because of the new balance of power caused by the control of economic resources by a rival group, a leader can be tempted to have their followers join a jihadist group to fight their rivals (see 2 in the second graph) (Graph 2).

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT SINCE THE 1990S: COMPETITIVE ELITES IN MOTION

The relationship between the Malian government and northern communities is an ambiguous one, involving the use of local brokers to indirectly manage those territories (Lecocq et al. 2013). This is the case with the Tuareg communities in the Kidal region, at the epicentre of the Tuareg rebellions. Although since independence Mali has not officially recognised traditional chiefs, since the 1990s, the government has used both ‘traditional’ authorities, and former Tuareg rebels as unofficial proxies in the effort to maintain peace. Despite these relations, these individuals retain a certain degree of autonomy, leading to a phenomenon which Klute describes as *parasovereign power* (Klute 1999).

The *amenokal*⁵ of the *Ifoghas*, one of the most influential Tuareg traditional leaders, indirectly exerts sovereignty over the Kidal region with his family, although this relationship is informal and not publicly displayed (Lecocq et al. 2013). The *amenokal* of the *Ifoghas* is also an elected member of the Malian parliament, like the *amenokal* of the *Iwellemmedan* in the region of Menaka. What is interesting is that despite this official, political representation, the *Ifoghas* community is also thought to have been at the heart of the Tuareg rebellions in

1963, the 1990s and in 2006, particularly because some *Ifoghas* notables, including Iyad Ag Ghali, were among the main leaders of the various insurgencies (Klute 1999). The relationship between the *Ifoghas* and the Malian state is characterised by a conflictual cooperation which is constantly being renegotiated by the supporters of the traditional chiefdom, or by other notables and political and military leaders of the *Ifoghas* (Bencherif 2019: 13). This ambiguous relationship is not only on display in the moments of insurrection. Tensions can also be observed between the various deconcentrated administrative structures attempting to impose themselves in northern Mali, in parallel with inter- and intra-community conflicts regarding electoral issues and following the implementation of decentralisation at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s (Klute 1999; Grémont 2009).

Many Tuareg elites shared the perception of new balances of power playing out under the regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) from 2002 until 2012. The traditional leaders and many Tuareg *cadres* (a generic term for elites), from northern Mali believe that the ATT regime sought to weaken traditional Tuareg chiefdoms (*Afaghis* 2017 int.; Kel Ansar traditional leader 2017 int.; *Iwellemmedan* chiefdom family 2017 int.). The phenomenon is, however, more complex and starts with internal dynamics within these communities, whereby 'emerging' elites entered into competition with the traditional authorities, and increasingly challenged their political role (Klute 1999). These emerging elites can be broken down into several subgroups which occasionally overlap.

New political figures from northern Mali are progressively emerging, creating new groups of non-traditional elites. These new actors are generally educated in francophone systems and often stand against 'traditional' power relations. Some of them are from a lower status in the traditional socio-political hierarchy.

There are also the former Tuareg rebel leaders and *cadres* who have symbolic capital and significant prestige within some Tuareg communities, especially in the region of Kidal, such as Iyad Ag Ghali. Some of these Tuareg rebels went to schools, are integrated in the Malian administration and remain relatively independent from the traditional chiefdom. These two distinct emerging elites do sometimes get entangled with stakeholders who are linked to drug trafficking or ransoms from Western hostage-taking.

While maintaining these diverse relationships with other political actors, the emerging elites are also in competition with each other. In this competition, the tribal affiliation can still determine the interpretations of the local actors. This is the case when looking at the rise of El Hadj Ag Gamou as a military commander in Kidal since 2005. Ag Gamou is an ex-rebel leader who had already clashed with the *Ifoghas* in the 1990s. He belongs to the *Imghad* community but is not from the Kidal region.⁶ Furthermore, after the 2006 rebellion, the Malian government allowed him to create a militia in order to weaken and subdue armed attacks conducted by Ag Bahanga who rejected the peace agreement (Bamako 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d).

For many Tuareg interlocutors, this was proof that the Malian government sought to promote new local balances of power in Kidal and to weaken the

Ifoghas community, considering it ‘too rebellious’ or ‘independent’ (*Shamanamas* political leader 2017 int.). In interviews, members of other Tuareg communities often explain that the *Ifoghas* are fighting for their ‘survival’, given the strategies employed by the government to weaken them (*Shamanamas* political leader 2017 int.). However, this resistance also came with a refusal to be part of a democratic electoral process and to participate in the sharing of power in the Kidal region.

Local elections in the regions of Timbuktu and Gao confirm the new trends in inter-community balance of power (Lacher 2012). The revenues generated by ransoms from Western hostages and drug trafficking appears to be a driving force for these new inter- and intra-community balances of power. Some traffickers, using their newly acquired economic capital, have succeeded in gradually becoming respected, local notables in northern Mali. They have, in some cases, managed to get themselves elected by relying on the financial windfall from their various trafficking activities, especially in the local elections in the 2000s (Tuareg officer from Timbuktu 2016 int.). Trafficking has been affecting the balance of power in communities since the late 1990s. The involvement of the *Tilemsi* Arabs in the various illegal trades contributed significantly to the reversal of power relations with the *Kounta* Arabs who were ‘traditionally’ dominant in the socio-political hierarchy (Scheele 2009).

Since the most recent Tuareg rebellion (2012–2015), some of these trafficking networks have maintained connections with jihadist groups, with Tuareg rebels, and with pro-government militias such as that of Ag Gamou. But these traffickers, acting as ‘brokers’, can change their alliances and even ally themselves with several groups to protect their economic activities (International mediator 2017 int.). This political nomadism, structured by the competition between elites for power is advantageous for jihadist groups who can play within this fragmented landscape in order to position themselves and constitute their ‘safe haven’. Some key brokers also gain from this association, and as a result have more leverage against their rivals.

THE JIHADIST ‘SAFE HAVEN’ IN THE 2000S: PRAGMATISM, TENSIONS AND INTERPENETRATION

The form of political nomadism practised by the elites helped AQIM develop its networks in Northern Mali, and thus integrating into the environment, allowing the creation of this ‘safe haven’. The three defining features of political nomadism play a role. Both Arab tribes and some Tuareg individuals, such as Iyad Ag Ghali, had, and continue to have, shared economic interests with the jihadist groups. Hierarchical status also played a role. AQIM didn’t have to face a united coalition of Tuareg fighting against them. Some stayed passive or complicit to maintain their domination, while others sporadically clashed with the jihadist group in the 2000s. Finally, armed politics remained the regulatory tool regarding the relationship between the state and local elites, and between Tuareg and Arab rivals.

In the early 2000s, AQIM, which was then called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), was weakened in North Africa, and thus made efforts to move into the Sahel. By using socio-economic connections, the group rapidly strengthened its networks in northern Mali. AQIM participated in the pre-existing illegal trafficking (through convoy security, or taxes upon entry to the territories under their control), developed networks of subcontractors used for kidnapping and had local intermediaries to negotiate the release of hostages. By investing and redistributing their financial gains within the local communities, they were gradually tolerated or even accepted within the communities, at times even working with members of the community, and benefitting from local and logistic support networks. AQIM also avoided attacking local communities so as to not jeopardise their acceptance (Daniel 2012).

AQIM's *katiba* operating in the Sahel, especially the *katiba* of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, quickly created ties with certain *Berabiche* Arab tribes in the Timbuktu region (Pellerin 2017). Some *Berabiche* 'brokers' appeared to be working as negotiators to release the Western hostages taken in the early 2000s (Daniel 2012). Similar relationships have been constructed in the Gao region, particularly between the MOJWA, select local leaders and narco-traffickers among the *Tilemsi* Arabs (L'Express 2013). The ex-rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali, whose position at the centre of the political arena in northern Mali was threatened by the growing power of Arab tribes, is said to have fostered closer ties with his cousin Abdekrim el-Targui, and Abu Zaid, both emirs of AQIM (Tuareg officer from Timbuktu 2016 int.). For Iyad Ag Ghali and some Arab tribes, the collaboration with the jihadist groups was shaped by the will to control the economic resources. The new economic gains obtained with this pragmatic alliance helped Iyad Ag Ghali maintain and even reinforce his power in the northern political arena.

By triggering the 2006 Tuareg rebellion, Iyad Ag Ghali and other *Ifoghas* figures intended to strengthen their positions with respect to the central authority and the chiefdom leaders (Bøås 2012). On 23 May 2006, they founded the Democratic Alliance for Change (ADC). They confronted AQIM on two occasions in 2006 (Bamako 2008a). Nevertheless, despite the conflicts, some Tuareg were still providing supplies to jihadist groups (Bamako 2008a). Furthermore, it is also claimed that Ag Ghali did not give the order to attack AQIM in October 2006 when a violent clash occurred between Tuareg and jihadists (Bamako 2006). During this incident, some non-*Ifoghas* tribes from Kidal disobeyed Ag Ghali and followed AQIM members in Timbuktu, into the area of *Berabiche* (Bamako 2008b). Tuareg who were killed in these clashes were mainly from *Taghat Mellet* and *Idnan* communities (Bamako 2008b). Some Tuareg believed then that *Ifoghas* and *Berabiche* had a pact of non-aggression with AQIM (Tuareg administrator from Kidal 2016 int.; Young Tuareg from Kidal 2017 int.). These dynamics have helped *Ifoghas* and *Berabiche* remain dominant players in northern Mali. Competitive groups, such as *Idnan*, clashed with the jihadist group first because of an ideological opposition to the group, but

also in order to position themselves as ‘anti-terrorist’ groups, a title used to gain political leverage with the Malian government and in the West (Bamako 2007, 2009).

As for the ATT regime, it prioritised weakening the Tuareg insurgents in Kidal by creating and supporting armed Tuareg, and Arab militias to fight against them, including the *Imghad* militia of Ag Gamou (Bamako 2007, 2008c, 2008d, 2009). The ATT regime mobilised pre-existing rivalries that were based on hierarchical status between certain *Imghad* who supported Ag Gamou and the *Ifoghas*. They allowed Ag Gamou to create his militia, which opened the door for revenge of the *Imghad* against the *Ifoghas* who won their fratricidal war in the 1990s. At that time, the regime had sided with the *Ifoghas* against the *Imghad*. In the 2000s, they switched alliances, and helped the opposite side, the *Imghad*, in order to weaken the influence of the *Ifoghas* in northern Mali. The regime maintained a passive, or even complicit, attitude with respect to the jihadist groups, and essentially created an informal ‘pact of non-aggression’ (Dulas *et al.* 2010). Armed politics regulated rivalries not just among Tuareg, but also between Tuareg and the central state. Because all the actors were trying to maintain a level of influence or power in northern Mali, this led to a form of collective passivity, and sometimes complicity, in regard to the jihadist groups. AQIM’s ‘safe haven’ was relational and circumstantial and shaped by this form of political nomadism.

It emerged that the tactical choice made by the central authority to allow AQIM to develop networks in the region was counterproductive. The alliance between Iyad Ag Ghali and the jihadist groups during the 2012 conflict made that evident. A rapprochement with the jihadist groups, fostered by an ideological change, which had been initiated a few years earlier by Iyad Ag Ghali, was inevitable. In the late 1990s, Iyad Ag Ghali and his closest allies, namely former companions in arms, *Ifoghas* or members of other tribes under his influence, joined the *Jamaat’ Tabligh* preaching movement (also called *Dawa* in Mali) (Pellerin 2017: 17). Although conservative, this movement did not fall under the category of Jihadist Salafism, and considered jihad as a last resort (Lecocq *et al.* 2013: 8). For some Tuareg, it seemed Ag Ghali’s disillusionment, caused by the failure of Tuareg nationalist movements in the 1990s, led to his eventual adherence to the movement. Most of my Tuareg interlocutors praised the fact that he was one of the charismatic leaders and heroes of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s but lamented that he had become a jihadist. Many Malian and Nigerien Tuareg told me that the jihad led by Ag Ghali since 2012 was likely the only solution he found to unite the Tuareg in Mali. For some of them, it is possible that Ag Ghali considers a global ‘jihad’ intended to unite the Tuareg and other communities of the *Azawad*. In both cases, it has served as a way to remain at the heart of the political arena of Kidal. For example, in early November 2009, Ag Ghali came back from his diplomatic posting in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to Kidal and organised a *Dawa* meeting.⁷ Many Tuareg feared that Ag Ghali was hosting this

Dawa meeting in order to maintain his leadership in the region.⁸ Political Islam seems to be both a strategic tool, and also Ag Ghali's new political vision for the Tuareg communities. After having been rejected by the young rebels of the MNLA who didn't want him as leader, Ag Ghali decided to fight in the name of Islamic values.⁹ One key leader of the Tuareg rebellion in Niger in the 1990s even offered a warning to Ag Ghali on the eve of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. This ex-rebel leader told him that his 'jihad would lead the Tuareg to defeat, because the Westerners will not be on your side'.¹⁰

Thus, Ag Ghali's rapprochement with AQIM may have been a pragmatic strategy, focused on a unifying Islamist project that he progressively built for the Tuareg and the other communities of *Azawad*. However, as the Malian conflict advanced, the group radicalised further, eventually being confused with other Salafist jihadist groups. Ag Ghali merged *Ansar Dine* with *Al Qaeda* affiliates in March 2017 and created the *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (JNIM). However, it is unclear if it was truly a radicalisation in ideology, or a strategic choice by Ag Ghali because his options were dwindling after having been labelled a terrorist by the international community. Many Tuareg elites seemed to consider both of these hypotheses viable. Some of them developed conspiracy theories affirming that Ag Ghali was trapped between the French and Algerian 'games' in the Sahel and the competition between their 'intelligence services'.

In 2007, when speaking with an American diplomat, Ag Ghali revealed that the armed rebellion of Ag Bahanga would never side with AQIM, except if Ag Bahanga was cornered by all other actors in northern Mali.¹¹ This claim revealed much in regards to his own understanding of politics. He was speculating on Ag Bahanga's moves based on his own understanding of strategy which *a posteriori* was confirmed by his alliance with *Al-Qaeda* affiliates in the northern Malian conflict in 2012. Ag Ghali considers jihadist groups as a potential player to help him stay at the heart of the northern Mali political arena through armed politics. This understanding of political nomadism shaped, at least partly, Ag Ghali's radical alignment with jihadists in the armed conflict in 2012.

Political Islam seems to be both a strategic tool, and also Ag Ghali's new political vision for the Tuareg communities. After having been rejected by the young rebels of the MNLA who didn't want him as a leader, Ag Ghali decided to fight in the name of Islamic values (Think Africa Press 2012). Thus, Ag Ghali's rapprochement with AQIM may have been a pragmatic strategy, focused on a unifying Islamist project that he progressively built for the Tuareg and the other communities of *Azawad*.

THE TUAREG REBELLION OF 2012: SITUATIONAL ALLIANCES, INTERNAL RIVALRIES AND POWER STRUGGLES

At the beginning of the Malian conflict in January 2012, observers believed that it was simply another Tuareg rebellion, largely due to the strong media presence of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). At the

beginning of the conflict, the MNLA and the jihadist groups had a military alliance (Young MNLA leader 2017 int.). However, AQIM, MOJWA and *Ansar Dine*, which all remained discreet in the first few months, quickly asserted their authority and confronted the MNLA, gaining control of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. *Ansar Dine*, which was created by Iyad Ag Ghali and comprised mainly of Tuareg from the Kidal region, received support from AQIM at the beginning of the conflict to expand their ranks and armament (Bencherif & Campana, 2017).

In 2012, internal debates were occurring inside the Tuareg political landscape, and jihadist groups were one of the main points of contention. Tuareg communities who followed *Ansar Dine* wanted to offer protection to AQIM, their main allies in the ‘armed politics’ in northern Mali (Bouhleb 2019). Rebels from the MNLA rejected this possibility because of their ideological disagreement. Some MNLA members also tried to use this moment to challenge the ‘traditional’ political order and weaken their tribal rivals within *Ansar Dine* (Bouhleb 2019).

The French intervention in January 2013, following the advancement of jihadist groups towards the centre of Mali and the interruption of the mediation process, led the group to be considered as a ‘terrorist’ organisation by the international community (Seniguer 2013; Charbonneau 2017). In order to not be branded as terrorists, many Tuareg quickly left the group. Alghabass Ag Intallah, the son of *amenokal* Intallah Ag Attaher, left *Ansar Dine* and created short after the Islamic Armed Movement (MIA), which was integrated rapidly in the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) (Bencherif & Campana 2017: 125).

After the split, interpersonal relations between HCUA and *Ansar Dine* members were frequently confirmed (Tuareg security expert and ex-rebel 2020 int.; de Koning *et al.* 2019). The tribal links between *Ifoghas* were pre-existing and more entrenched than any belonging to jihadist Salafism. Adhesion to the jihadist Salafism is still subsumed within the political nomadism in Northern Mali. Many *Imghad* who were opposed to the *Ifoghas* stated that Alghabass used the jihadist groups as a means of putting the *Ifoghas* back at the head of the Kidal region, fighting against their gradual loss in influence to the *Imghad* since the 2009 municipal elections (Imghad 2017 int.). Since those elections, the *Imghad* have politically dominated (and militarily with Ag Gamou) the region. Some interlocutors said that Alghabass left Kidal before 2012, pledging to come back only if the *Imghad* are removed from Kidal (Tuareg from Kidal 2017int.; Tuareg from Kidal 2020 int.). This may be one of the reasons for Alghabass entering into conflict with the Malian state, and his tacit or formal alliance with the jihadist groups.

A story narrated by a former close friend of Iyad Ag Ghali, who cut all ties at the beginning of the Malian conflict in 2012, summarises the competition between elites and the form of political nomadism in the Kidal region:

Before the beginning of the conflict, Iyad Ag Ghali contacted Alghabass knowing his ambition for Kidal. He called him in order to have a meeting with the leaders of

AQIM. Alghabass came with Ag Ghali to the meeting. AQIM leaders told him they didn't want a conflict with the Malian state, but they would help if Tuareg communities were starting a new rebellion. Alghabass replied that for him the most important thing is to regain power in Kidal. They accepted his demand but told him that they wanted the Sharia implementation in the Azawad, and to have 30% of the material and weapons taken from the Malian army. They then closed the deal. (Tuareg from Kidal 2017 int.)¹²

Even though it is impossible to know if this story is accurate, it is true that Alghabass had at the beginning made an agreement with the jihadist groups. However, it was broken and re-evaluated by him and his supporters with his withdrawal from *Ansar Dine* after the French military intervention in 2013. It reveals once more how political nomadism shapes actions and leads to a constant repositioning, regardless of considerations of religiosity or radicalisation.

TUAREG RIVALRIES IN POST-PEACE AGREEMENT PERIOD AND JIHADIST SURVIVAL IN THE CONSTANT REALIGNMENTS

While the Tuareg rebellion officially ended in 2015 with the signing of the Algiers Accord, the violence has continued in northern Mali. A conflict which started in 2014 between the *Imghad* of the *Groupe autodéfense Imghad et alliés* (GATIA) and the HCUA led by the *Ifoghas* was reactivated in July 2016. As previously stated, the rivalry between *Imghad* and *Ifoghas* has regularly been reactivated since the 1990s. However, it was not only tribal rivalry and socio-political hierarchies that caused the most recent conflict. A Tuareg high official summarised what many Tuareg used to say: 'The conflict between *Imghad* and *Ifoghas* was in part caused by drug smuggling and in part by the tribal and hierarchical order' (Tuareg, High official in the Malian government 2017 int.). Moreover, in this context, the jihadist groups also became part of the rivalries within the different communities.

Indeed, in 2014, Colonel Ag Gamou, with support from the central authority, reactivated and reinforced his militia and formed the GATIA. This paramilitary force became one of the main armed groups of the Malian conflict. The Arab Movement of Azawad pro-Bamako (MAA pro-Bamako) was among the main allies of the GATIA. Created to safeguard the economic interests of the Arab *Lamhar* communities, the MAA aimed to 'officially' distance themselves from their previous allegiance to MOJWA (Desgrais *et al.* 2018: 673). Considering their economic interests and the threat to the balance of power under the occupation of Tuareg rebels in 2012, many *Lamhar*, including influential businessmen with close ties to the central authority, chose to support, and temporarily ally themselves with MOJWA (L'Express 2014).

When the GATIA was created, the MAA-pro Bamako financed them. The paramilitary force was supported by Arab businessmen involved in illegal trafficking who sought to protect their economic activities against the Tuareg rebel groups. However, these Arab businessmen could withdraw their funding

at any time, and even finance the Tuareg rebels to consolidate their dominion over trafficking activities through other networks of stakeholders. In early 2017, following the instability created by constant clashes between the HCUA's *Ifoghas* and the GATIA's *Imghad*, rumours began circulating about the withdrawal of their funding of the GATIA (Ex-official in Kidal 2017 int.; International mediator 2017 int.). This helps to explain, in part, the decrease in the intensity of the conflict between the two parties in 2017.

At the same time as the conflict between the HCUA and the GATIA inched toward a resolution, JNIM extended towards Menaka and the centre of Mali. In these regions, the jihadist groups were able to recruit and mobilise young Fulani individuals by mobilising narratives regarding local realities relating to the distribution of resources (Cisse 2018: 181). In those areas, access to grazing land is based on fragile inter- and intra-community agreements between herders and farmers, and between and within ethnic groups, such as the Fulani and the *Dawssahak* (Brossier *et al.* 2018; Grémont 2019).

In recent decades, the *Dawssahak* became financially profitable, economically dominant and politically influential in Menaka, and had elected members in the different municipalities (*Dawssahak* leader 2019 int.; *Dawssahak* leader 2017 int.). At the same time, Fulani groups at the border between Mali and Niger were marginalised by *Dawssahak* groups who limited their access of soil, and were economically oppressed by the state representatives and their own traditional authorities (Grémont 2019). Thus, some young Fulani allied themselves early with the *katiba* of MUJWA to fight Tuareg rebels, notably *Dawssahak* in Menaka (Fulani scholar specialised on the dynamics in central Mali 2020 int.). They clashed with *Dawssahak* communities in 2015 and 2016. For some *Dawssahak*, the fact that some *Fulani* joined the MUJWA and targeted them legitimised a need to create their own militia. The GATIA was also threatening the *Dawssahak* community because of their alignment with the *Ifoghas* and the HCUA. Some Fulani and Arab communities, who had allied with the MUJWA in the past, sided with the GATIA and fought the *Dawssahak* in Menaka (*Dawssahak* 2016 int.; High official from Kidal 2017 int.).

In this oppressive context, surrounded by enemies, some fractions among the *Dawssahak* community realigned themselves. Indeed, *Dawssahak* leaders, notably the most influential and traditional dominant fraction of *Igueretine*, asked Moussa Ag Acharatoumane (spokesman and key *cadre* of the MNLA) to join them and to create a political-military group to protect their interests (Grémont 2019). In the summer of 2016, Moussa became the leader of the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA-D)¹³ and quickly started an alliance with the GATIA to fight the 'terrorist' groups (Chebli 2022).

For a *Dawssahak* leader:

No one was protecting our community [i.e. *Dawssahak*]. We helped the *Ifoghas* in Kidal when they were fighting the GATIA. However, they didn't do anything to protect us against the GATIA and the other armed groups when they were threatening us or attacking us. That's why the elders of the region called Moussa Ag

Acharatoumane in 2014 and asked him to leave the MNLA. They wanted him to create and lead a *Dawssahak* militia to protect our family and farming. (...) They called him because of his verbal skills and his symbolic prestige in the MNLA. He was also known by international actors, notably French, and he was capable of protecting the community. (*Dawssahak* leader 2017 int.)¹⁴

Together the GATIA and the MSA-D, in their alliance, fought jihadist groups in Menaka and Gourma regions in Mali as well as in the Nigerien border areas in 2017 (Bouhleb 2019). These regions that border northern Burkina Faso are more frequently referred to as the 'Liptako-Gourma'. During this time, they committed multiple attacks against Fulani, often confusing jihadists and civilians (Jeune Afrique 2014). Their counterterrorism operation with the French military operation Barkhane hid local disequilibrium of power between Fulani and *Dawssahak* (Le Monde 2016). Since 2017, some young Fulani have joined the *katiba* of Al-Sahrawi, which became the 'Islamic State of Great Sahara' (ISGS), in order to defend themselves against GATIA-MSA-D and the military forces who were framing them as 'terrorist' (Grémont 2019).

There are also internal rivalries within the *Dawssahak*. They were not all at first following Moussa Ag Acharatoumane. Some of them stayed in the MNLA and the HCUA and are rivals of MSA-D. Some conflicts between HCUA and the MSA-D occurred partly because of personal rivalries between *Dawssahak* (Security expert on 'jihadist' and 'criminal' groups in Mali 2020 int.). Furthermore, *Dawssahak* communities are 'traditionally' under the authority of the *Iwellemmedan*. The *Dawssahak* following Moussa seemed to also undermine the 'traditional' socio-political hierarchy with their new regional role. They challenged the power of the *Iwellemmedan* and altered the internal hierarchy within *Dawssahak* communities.¹⁵ The governor of Menaka and Moussa tried to include all the local leaders, notably the *amenokal* of the *Iwellemmedan*, in the governance of the region of Ménaka in 2016. However, I clearly noticed personal resentment when I interacted with some *Iwellemmedan*. In their narratives, they focused on Moussa's lower status within the *Dawssahak* group, and thus didn't perceive him as a legitimate politico-military leader for Menaka.

The growing importance of Moussa, who used his proximity with French Barkhane military operation, and in general with French and Western authorities, threatened the traditional dominant family among the *Dawssahak*, the *Igueretine* (Grémont 2019). The latter realigned themselves with the HCUA of Alghabass. It is alleged that some members of the family maintain close ties to some jihadist groups, such as the ISGS. Despite having asked for help from Moussa in 2014, they sided, at some point, with the opposing armed groups, notably jihadist groups (Grémont 2019; Security expert on 'jihadist' and 'criminal' groups in Mali 2020 int.). Some *Dawssahak* explained to me before this fratricidal *Dawssahak* conflict: 'Moussa will be put away if he does not serve the interest of the community' (*Dawssahak* leader, Niamey 2017, int.; *Dawssahak*,

Bamako, 2016). Some *Iwellemmeden* underlined: ‘he was chosen because of his connections, not because he comes from an important lineage in the *Dawssahak* tribe’ (Iwellemmeden chiefdom family 2017, int.). However, due to the use of ‘armed politics’, Moussa has become a major player within this community, partially reinventing the hierarchical internal status. The *amenokal* of the *Iwellemmeden*, Bajan Ag Hamatou, clashed with *Dawssahak* cadres through WhatsApp because of his will to restore his leadership and the traditional socio-political hierarchy (Grémont to be published). Despite tensions in 2019, a reconciliation occurred in 2021 between the *amenokal* of the *Iwellemmeden* and the *Dawssahak* following Moussa (Document de retour aux sources Vade Mecum. Idaksahak – Imajaghane 2021).

Finally, in 2018, multiple conflicts occurred in the region between HCUA and MSA-D for the control of a key municipality for economic illicit smuggling (de Koning *et al.* 2018). In 2019, jihadist groups mainly attacked the GATIA and MSA-D alliance in this specific region (de Koning *et al.* 2018). Some Tuareg consider that jihadist groups are trying to weaken the rival groups of the HCUA and then the *Ifoghas* (Tuareg from Kidal 2019 int.; Tuareg security expert and rebel 2020 int.). They are actors of these armed politics and are weakening the emerging power of the *Dawssahak* and the *Imghad* of Gamou. By doing so, they are maintaining the traditional hierarchy with the dominance of the *Ifoghas*. Simultaneously, they are helping the HCUA (and the *Ifoghas*) to take control of the key checkpoints of illicit smuggling in Menaka, asserting their control over their *Dawssahak* rivals. Once again, the three elements of the political nomadism intertwined in Menaka, making jihadist groups actors in the pre-existing, and constantly re-shaped rivalries between communities and their leaders in Northern Mali.

CONCLUSION

This article has used the notion of political nomadism to conceptualise what is behind the context in violent settings. A specific form of political nomadism characterised by three factors (armed politics, control of economic resources – notably illicit trafficking and socio-political hierarchy) has been a common aspect of the conflicting communities and their respective elites in northern Mali since the 1990s. The various elites (traditional leaders, armed leaders, notables and even state representatives) either establish pragmatic and situational alliances with jihadist groups or confront them, depending on the existing power dynamics the groups have with the central authority and between communities. My main argument was to explain that the survival and development of jihadist groups are not only the results of strategic actions and adaptation of jihadist groups to their environment but also produced by the complex, intertwined and fluid dynamics by various competitive groups in a political arena. It is an invitation to decentre our attention on jihadist groups when we are studying these groups. It is about theorising the (often) forgotten context in the analysis of political violence phenomenon, as suggested by Bosi *et al.*

(2015). This relational ‘safe haven’ in northern Mali, which expands into the Liptako-Gourma – the three borders region – is highly contextual and is based on socio-political relationships between key brokers and their respective communities. This article has explained the development and the resilience of jihadist groups in the region through a relational approach by using Tuareg communities as an entry point. Other research avenues could focus on the other communities present, to expand upon different interrelations and competitive narratives in an attempt to nuance the limited, portrayal shown in this article.

In the early 2000s, AQIM developed itself through its relationships with key Tuareg brokers in Kidal and Arab Berabiche in Timbuktu. Even if the group was only tolerated at the beginning, jihadist groups progressively became part of the local political arenas and were used by communities to reorganise the balance of power. The rivalry between the *Imghad* and the *Ifoghas* partly explain some of the local support for Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda affiliates in the region of Kidal. In a similar way, in Ménaka, the rivalry within the *Dawssahak* tribe and the *Ifoghas* and the *Imghad* helped the JNIM, who was weakened after the military operations in the region, maintain power. The ISGS grew and became particularly powerful, notably because of the antagonism between *Dawssahak* and Fulani. These dynamics are, of course, still evolving and other research avenues could focus on the relations between jihadist groups in the Sahel, and more specifically these two particular coalitions.

Indeed, even if the two coalitions, JNIM and ISGS, seemed to collaborate in armed attacks against military camps, clashes have also occurred between them, partly because of local, community-based rivalries. In 2022, JNIM and other groups, such as the HCUA from the CMA and the MSA-D seemed to have coordinated attacks against the dominance of ISGS in Ménaka (*Jeune Afrique*). Exploring the internal rivalries between and within jihadist groups as the product of the political nomadism practiced by various elites is thus a potential avenue to study in order to shed light on the evolution of jihadist groups in the Sahel.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT. THIS WORK WAS SUPPORTED BY THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL OF CANADA UNDER THE DOCTORAL GRANT [767 2015 1494] AND THE POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP [756 2019 0594].

NOTES

1. Mid-2000s AQIM was composed of jihadist fighters from North Africa, especially from Algeria. The jihadist group gradually attracted Sahelian fighters, more particularly in the military unit led by Hamada Ag Hama (aka Abdelkrim al-Targui) between 2010 and 2015. Created in 2011, MOJWA is a splinter group of AQIM. The group was, at the beginning composed, of Arab tribes from the Sahel, mainly Lamhar. In 2012, militants of Ansar Dine are mainly Tuareg fighters from Kidal and are following Iyad Ag Ghali. The recruitment and composition of these groups are not static and depend on the local contexts. If jihadist fighters were probably mainly foreigners mid-2000s, it is not anymore, the case in Mali (Bouhleb 2019; Thurston 2020).

2. These Tuareg elites were traditional leaders, members of the various armed movements, the Malian government or the civil society.
3. Wikileaks cables reveal emails written by diplomats and employees of the Embassy of the United States in Bamako. They contain many details on the Northern Malian political context from 2006 to 2010. Some emails summarise meetings and interviews with key Tuareg leaders, especially with Iyad Ag Ghali.
4. Often portrayed in the media as a tribe, the term *Imghad* refers to the statutory category of 'vassals' in the 'traditional' Tuareg political order. *Inadan* (sing. *enad*) refers to 'blacksmith', notably known for their free speech. *Iklan* (sing. *akli*) refers to the former class of 'slaves' who are now emancipated.
5. The *amenokal* of the *Ifoghas* is very influential in the region of Kidal. Mohamed Ag Intalla is the current *amenoka* of the *Ifoghas*.
6. To explore the historical conflict between the *Ifoghas* and *Imghad* in the 1990s, see Georg Klute, 'From Friends to Enemies: Negotiating nationalism, tribal identities, and kinship in the fratricidal war of the Malian Tuareg', *L'Année du Maghreb*, VII (2011), pp. 163–75.
7. 'Dawa Meeting in Kidal Not Much to Talk About', Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Mali Bamako, 21 December 2009), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/ogBAMAKO822_a.html.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Andy Morgan, 'The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali', *Think Africa Press* (blog), 6 February 2012, <https://thinkafricapress.com/causes-uprising-northern-mali-tuareg/>.
10. Interview with a former leader of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s in Niger, Niamey, 22 March 2017. After years of conflict and the end of the French military operation *Barkhane*, it is interesting to observe that Ag Ghali found a way to stay one of the key actors in the northern Malian political arena.
11. 'Rebel Leader Iyad Ag Ghali on Bahanga, Algiers Accords and Aqim.'
12. This quote is from a former close ally of Ag Ghali, an actor knowledgeable in the political realities in Kidal. This meeting seems very plausible, considering that the armed groups met and negotiated multiple times at the beginning of the conflict to evaluate their potential alignment (Bouhleh 2019).
13. Initially, Moussa allied himself with the *Shamanamas* and created the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) in 2016. However, they split shortly after that to defend the interests of their respective communities.
14. Moussa Ag Acharatoumane was nominated coordinator of the *Dawssahak* fractions in 2015, despite not having a familial traditional legacy for the leadership. Ag Gamou was also nominated coordinator of the *imghad* fractions in 2015 (Chebli 2022: 110).
15. This logic observed within *Dawssahak* communities can be applied to other ethnic groups, such as Fulani rival groups.
16. We can even consider international intervention as an actor in the armed politics of the Sahel, through its direct effects such as counterterrorism operations and practices reinforcing armed violence (Charbonneau 2017) and its indirect effects through the 'strategies of extraversion' developed by some Malian elites (Chebli 2022).

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