Pathways out of the Quagmire? Perspectives for al-Qaeda in the Sahel

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Using a conceptual framework developed by Audrey Cronin, this article applies six possible pathways of decline to AQIM and JNIN. The pathways blur in theory as well as in practice, but allow a structuring of insights on actors and relevant factors that contribute to the groups´ demise. The conclusions per pathway are as follows:

1. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation).

AQIM and its affiliates have transitioned from conducting a terrorist strategy to a large organisation fighting an insurgency. JNIM is now responsible for a large-scale insurgency in parts of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. As for transitions into organised crime, AQIM´s proceeds from the drug trade appears limited, while the group has probably received between € 117 million and € 125 million in ransoms for hostages since 2003.

2. Defeat and elimination by brute force (repression).

The recently terminated Operation Barkhane was not based on the principles of counter-insurgency, but encompassed a counter-terrorism approach of hunting armed extremist groups. Despite some tactical successes, AQIM and JNIM have continued to grow and expand their operations. Targeting errors and human rights abuses by local troops have fuelled AQIM's recruitment and undermined support for governments and international counter-terrorism operations.

3. Capture or killing of the groups´ leaders (decapitation).

Although academic literature is divided on the efficacy of this strategy, developments in the Sahel clearly indicate that leadership attrition has been a French policy (and will remain so), and that it has not managed to severely destabilise AQIM. After all, large and networked insurgent organisations can more easily replace leaders than small, clandestine groups conducting a strategy of terrorism.

4. Entry of the group into a legitimate political process (negotiation).

This option has been underexplored, in part because of a taboo on negotiating with terrorists, which is not the case for insurgents. France has ruled out talks with AQIM's leaders, while the Sahelian countries are keen to negotiate with both high- and low-level commanders. Local and bottom-up ceasefires have reduced violence in many areas, but risk benefiting AQIM and JNIM in the mid-term.

5. Implosion or loss of the group's public support (failure).

Many fighters have split from AQIM-affiliated groups to join the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Initially AQIM and ISGS cooperated, but when the relationship turned violent in mid-2020,

fratricide probably killed more fighters from both groups than Operation Barkhane did in the same timeframe. More research is warranted on how internal strife or the loss of local support can be provoked or leveraged to precipitate the groups´ decline.

6. Achievement of the group's aims (success).

It is unlikely that AQIM will again fully control a proto-caliphate (as in 2012). However, AQIM does not need to achieve its main goal for counter-terrorism efforts to fail. Although JNIM currently emphasises that it does not target mainland France, if the insurgency in the Sahel loses momentum, it is conceivable that the group could revert to a strategy of terrorism. Few indications point to al-Qaeda´s current decline, and it is time for renewed reflection on the effectiveness of established counter-terrorism efforts.

Abstract

This article focuses on counter-terrorism efforts against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), its main confederation of combat units. Using literature on how terrorist groups end, the article analyses perspectives for AQIM and JNIM. It describes the conceptual distinction between insurgency and terrorism, and structures insights along six pathways of decline, namely reorientation, repression, decapitation, negotiation, failure or success. JNIM is currently fighting a large-scale insurgency in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while policy responses remain grounded in the paradigm of counter-terrorism, not counter-insurgency. The search and destroy missions of recently terminated Operation Barkhane did not manage to secure areas, and tactical successes were offset by targeting errors and exactions, fuelling jihadist recruitment. Leadership decapitation – also a focus of future French counter-terrorist efforts - has proved ineffective. The option of negotiations merits further exploration, but France and the Sahelian countries diverge in their approaches. Bottom-up ceasefires have improved local security in some areas, but risk benefiting AQIM in the long term. Finally, violent conflict between AQIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has hurt both groups, and their vulnerabilities to internal strife and the loss of public support could be leveraged more in counter-terrorism efforts.

Keywords: Sahel, al-Qaeda, Operation Barkhane, Mali, counter-terrorism, six pathways, Cronin

Introduction

Despite successive French and international military efforts, the security situation in the Sahel has continued to deteriorate. The year 2020 was the deadliest year on record, with nearly 6,250 fatalities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, a 35 percent increase compared to the previous year.[1] The crisis started in 2012 when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), together with its offshoot *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) and ally Ansar Dine appropriated a Tuareg rebellion against central Malian rule, and established a proto-caliphate in northern Mali. The French Operation 'Serval', a conventional military onslaught, wrested control of the north from the Salafi-jihadist groups, who quickly reverted to irregular warfare. The jihadist landscape fractured further, with a group calling itself al-Murabitun breaking away from AQIM in 2014 – but staying loyal to al-Qaeda Central (AQC) – to return to AQIM's fold in late 2015. In March 2017, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (*Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*; commonly referred to by its Arabic acronym JNIM) was created. This umbrella organisation comprised al-Muribatun, Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina and AQIM's Sahara branch, all under the leadership of the Tuareg leader Iyad ag Ghali. Its leadership pledged allegiance to AQIM's emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Afghan Taliban's emir Mullah Haibatullah.[2] Within JNIM, Katiba Macina is particularly active, led by the charismatic Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa. It has established control of the river Niger's flooded inner delta (*zone inondable*) and has expanded into the non-flooded area (*zone exondée*) and beyond, including in Burkina Faso.[3] The patchwork of al-Qaeda affiliated groups remains diffuse, with different katibas (combat units) operating across Mali.[4] In addition, in May 2015 the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was created after a faction split from al-Murabitun, becoming a formal affiliate of the Islamic State.[5]

Given the current expansion of political violence, this article focuses on how the demise of terrorist groups can be facilitated – and applies insights from literature to AQIM and JNIM. Few current indications point to the groups' decline – on the contrary - but the question remains pertinent since all terrorist campaigns ultimately do end. The aim is to place current developments into historical perspective, and to investigate if (and how) certain factors can potentially be leveraged to accelerate the group's decline. This approach is novel for two reasons. First, most terrorism research focuses on the causes and beginnings of terrorism, rather than its decline.[6] Secondly, applying insights on how terrorism can end – through internal and external factors - necessitates a predominantly macro-level analysis. This contrasts with the micro- or meso-level focus of the bulk of current terrorism research. Research on terrorism has seen a significant increase in quality over the last few years, with more rigorous methodologies applied and less reliance on secondary sources.[7] Recent scholarship on AQIM and JNIM reflects this trend, with some excellent studies building on fieldwork and utilising primary sources such as jihadist correspondence

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1 'Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2021,' The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), February 2021, 35. https://acleddata.com/2021/02/02/ten-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2021/
2 Thomas Joscelyn, 'Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa', FDD's Long War Journal, 13 March 2017, //www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php.
3 'Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence', International Crisis Group, 9 November 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali.
4 For a rough overview of the operating areas of different armed groups, see: Andrew Lebovich, 'Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel', European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/.
5 Stig Jarle Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift: Fault-Lines of the African Jihad (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2019), 91–97.
6 Audrey Kurth Cronin, How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns, 1st edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.
7 Bart Schuurman, 'Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship', Terrorism and Political Violence (1 March 2018): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1439023.

andtheir statements in (social) media.[8] This article first provides a brief literature review on group desistance from terrorism, and then describes a conceptual approach developed by Audrey Kurth Cronin. She has identified six pathways how terrorist groups meet their ends, and this research applies developments, actors and factors relevant to AQIM and JNIM to each pathway. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications for the current counter-terrorism approach in the Sahel.

Literature review on group desistance from terrorism

Reflection on the potential demise of terrorists groups is contingent on several contextual and ontological factors. Despite the tendency to elevate terrorist groups to public enemy number one and to present a nation's military as the primary solution, terrorism is generally neither an existential threat to society nor its most pressing affliction. Arguably, the real problem of developing countries like Mali lies not in the presence of jihadist groups, but in a host of underlying social-economic fractures and political developments – many of which empower terrorist groups.[9] Questioning the centrality of the problem of terrorism should be followed by uncovering assumptions on its origins and (root) causes; factors that by deduction need addressing before reasons for decline can be identified. Analysts that place an emphasis on religion and ideology as a driver will naturally point to initiatives in the domain of deradicalisation and countering violent extremism; those that identify socio-economic grievances or other push-and pull factors will see remedy in addressing these.[10] The politics behind political violence - an often under-analysed aspect, according to Alexander Thurston – are equally important.[11] As such, jihadist field commanders can be considered political entrepreneurs embedded in particular socio-political constituencies; an analytical approach that generates different insights than treating them as actors who simply subjugate passive locals. This rhymes with Marc Sageman's dialectical understanding of political violence, where terrorism constitutes competition between the state and an 'out' group. The aggrieved group provokes the state into repressive actions, resulting in a circle of reciprocal violence. This can only be reversed through a policy of de-escalation.[12]

The literature on the decline of terrorism differentiates between individual disengagement and group-level desistance. More studies have been conducted on individual de-radicalisation, reintegration, and demobilisation than on group lifecycles and longevity.[13] Those on group desistance consist of quantitative and qualitative studies; the latter often inferring trends from comprehensive datasets. Jones and Libicki analysed 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, and found that most groups within the sample stopped using terrorism when they entered a political process (43 percent), or because the leaders were imprisoned or killed (40 percent).

8 Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771160; Vidar B. Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (24 September 2020): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1822593.
9 Sergei Boeke and Antonin Tisseron, 'Mali's Long Road Ahead', *The RUSI Journal* 159, no. 5 (3 September 2014): 32–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2014.969942.
10 Edward Newman, 'Exploring the "Root Causes" of Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (1 December 2006): 749–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600704069; Edwin Bakker, 'EU Counter-Radicalization Policies: A Comprehensive and Consistent Approach?' *Intelligence and National Security* 30, no. 2–3 (4 May 2015): 281–305, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2014.988442.
11 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 1–26.
12 Mitja Sardoc, 'Making Sense of Political Violence: An Interview with Marc Sageman', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 3 (2 April 2020): 670–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1726581.
13 Tore Bjorgo and John G. Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement,* 1st edition (Routledge, 2008).

Their data indicated that religious terrorist groups took longer to end than others; that larger groups achieved their goals more often and lasted longer than smaller ones, and that military force as a counter-terrorism policy was rarely effective.[14] Leonard Weinberg reached broadly similar conclusions, examining 268 groups and looking for central tendencies instead of single factors.[15] However, quantitative studies that categorise groups, code goals and judge outcomes remain fraught with difficulties. Specialists on terrorist groups dispute key coding decisions, and binaries cannot capture nuance.[16] At the same time, some findings are difficult to reconcile with broader, generational trends. There are limitations to comparing contemporary Islamist terrorism with terrorist campaigns from the 1970s and 1980s. The first three of David Rapoport's four waves of terrorism (anarchism, anti-colonial, new left, and religious) each lasted approximately thirty years before petering out.[17] Al-Qaeda, however, was founded in 1988 and still appears remarkably resilient.[18]

The most comprehensive account of the decline of terrorist campaigns is provided by Audrey Kurth Cronin, in her book '*How Terrorism Ends*'.[19] Her research was conducted in the twilight of the Global War on Terror, when many in academia questioned the feasibility of defeating al-Qaeda through military means. Cronin combines both a quantitative approach, examining the essential dynamics of 457 terrorist organisations active from 1968 to 2009, as well as a qualitative approach, using comparative case studies to illustrate trends and outcomes.[20] The conceptual framework investigates the dynamic relationship between three strategic actors – the group, the government and the audience – and integrates this in six patterns of decline that have emerged in the history of terrorism. The boundaries between these different endings or pathways are in many cases not distinct, with most case studies reflecting a combination of multiple dynamics that led to a group's demise. Cronin does not provide exact figures for the six different outcomes.

The endings, or pathways as presented by Cronin, are summed up below.
1. Capture or killing the group's leader (decapitation)
2. Entry of the group into a legitimate political process (negotiation)
3. Achievement of the group's aims (success)
4. Implosion or loss of the group's public support (failure)
5. defeat and elimination by brute force (repression)
6. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation)[21]

This article applies Cronin's categories to AQIM & JNIM, analysing past events and perspectives for each pathway. As Sarah Marsden notes in her own comprehensive literature review of how terrorism ends, the downside of these pathways is that they conflate external and internal actions with political and organisational outcomes, making it more difficult to identify causal mechanisms.[22] Nonetheless, the pathways do offer a framework that structures insights on decline. To facilitate the specific narrative on AQIM the sequence of these six pathways has been changed. The

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14 Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, 'How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida' (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 3 August 2008), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG741-1.html.
15 Leonard Weinberg, *The End of Terrorism?*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011).
16 Clark McCauley, 'Group Desistance from Terrorism: A Dynamic Perspective', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 1, no. 3 (1 November 2008): 269–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/17467580902948158.
17 David C. Rapoport, 'The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism', *Current History* 100, no. 650 (1 December 2001): 419–24, https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2001.100.650.419.
18 Camille Tawil, *Brothers In Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists*, trans. Robin Bray, English edition (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 26.
19 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*
20 See Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends,* pages 207 - 222 for the statistical underpinning of the empirical data of the research.
21 Ibid., 8.
22 Sarah Marsden, 'How Terrorism Ends', in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, ed. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Gordon Clubb, and Simon Mabon (London: Sage, 2015), 199–225, https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/76173/.

article starts with reorientation – the transition into other forms of violence – and expands on the distinction between terrorism and insurgency; a central tenet of this piece. Repression – the most important element of current counter-terrorism policy – is the second category, followed by its subset of leadership decapitation. Within each pathway, this article structures the analysis differently from the book, using both more recent research on phenomena and new data on developments in the Sahel. Cronin's methodology is based on literature analysis and case-studies, but it is not always apparent how conclusions are inferred from the underlying data. This is in part inherent to the topic. It is, for example, very difficult to objectively measure the effects of counter-terrorism policies, as Beatrice de Graaf and Bob de Graaff argue, making the discourse and perception on its "performativity" more important.[23] Within these limitations, the pathways should therefore not be considered as independent theoretical constructs. They blur in both theory and practice, but still allow a structured reflection on which factors influence a terrorist group's decline.

The distinction between insurgency and terrorism – which is lightly applied throughout the book – remains fundamental for understanding these transitions, and the particular case of AQIM. From a conceptual standpoint, armed groups either conduct a strategy of terrorism or one of insurgency.[24] An insurgency ultimately aims to achieve political-military control of a territory and its population, requiring the population's tacit or explicit support at best, or submissiveness at worst.[25] The debate on the definition on terrorism includes many components – violence, fear, publicity, the targeting of civilians – but the goal of establishing some form of governance is certainly not one of them.[26] A *strategy* of terrorism can therefore be defined as pursuing political change through violence, ideally by provoking the state into overreaction.[27] The *tactic* of terrorism is generally used by groups following a terrorist strategy, but can also be employed by insurgents or even nation states. The strategy, however, determines essential characteristics of the group, such as whether it is small and secretive or constitutes a large parallel governance structure. Other features, such as the group's relationship with the local population, are fundamentally different for each strategy.[28] The conceptual debate remains relevant as policy responses to terrorism or insurgencies often involve different government departments, doctrines and dogmas. This is irrespective of governments and the United Nations labelling the group – in this case al-Qaeda – as an official terrorist organisation.

1. Transition from terrorism into other forms of violence (reorientation)

Terrorism sometimes ends when it transitions into other forms of violence or criminality. Cronin presents the campaign of the Algerian Group Islamique Armé (GIA) – a group from which AQIM and many of its senior commanders originate - as an example where terrorism transitioned into

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23 Beatrice de Graaf and Bob de Graaff, 'Bringing Politics Back in: The Introduction of the "Performative Power" of Counterterrorism', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (13 August 2010): 261–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2010.491337.
24 Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Mario Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism: Is There a Difference?', in *The Character of War in the 21st Century*, ed. Caroline Holmqvist-Jonsäter and Christopher Coker (London: Routledge, 2009), 27–41, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863312-9.
25 David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 1–10.
26 Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (1 January 2004): 777–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/095465590899768
27 Tom Parker, 'It's a Trap', *The RUSI Journal* 160, no. 3 (4 May 2015): 38–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2015.1054732.
28 Duyvesteyn and Fumerton, 'Insurgency and Terrorism'.

a full-scale civil war.[29] The subsequent transition back to low-level terrorism is unfortunately not analysed. A concept that encapsulates the potential transition from terrorism to insurgency is Stig Jarle Hansen's categorisation of territoriality. He has identified four categories of presence for jihadist groups: the clandestine network, accepted presence, semi-territoriality and territorial control.[30] In semi-territoriality, control is contested and can oscillate between government forces and the insurgents, while full territorial control is the ultimate achievement of the insurgency's objective. Where insurgents have territorial control or semi-territorial presence, local recruitment can quickly replenish losses incurred in combat. Territorial presence also greatly facilitates the generation of income. Taxes can be levied (such as zakat), and enterprises (like artisanal gold mines) can be run – with revenues in turn aiding recruitment.[31] Once a territorial presence is ensured, insurgent groups shoulder the responsibility of providing services, such as security, justice, energy, healthcare and education. Where Western doctrine prioritises security provision, jihadists – with Islam's strong focus on justice and righteousness as the ideal vehicle – focus on providing justice. There is ample evidence that both ISGS and JNIM are widely perceived by locals as effectively delivering justice and solving family, land, or cattle conflicts. State justice is considered slow, inefficient and corrupt. The provision of services does not need to be continuous or permanent, and can be highly mobile with motorcycles intermittently visiting villages.[32] Ironically, state provision of services is often just as sporadic.

In 2015, after Katiba Macina established a foothold in central Mali, it started an insurgency against the government. While AQIM conducted several terrorist attacks in 2015/2016, murdering civilians in hotels in Bamako, Ouagadougou and Ivory Coast, the bulk of its operations targeted security forces. Large-scale complex attacks were conducted against Malian security forces, UN MINUSMA peacekeepers and French Barkhane troops. Between February 2013 and September 2020 AQIM was responsible for 41 suicide attacks in Mali; nearly all avoided targeting civilians.[33] Statistics from 2020 confirm that AQIM and JNIM are prolific in using Improvised Explosive Devices, small arms and mortar attacks against security forces.[34] This points to a strategy of insurgency rather than terrorism; one that is confirmed by the contested nature of state presence. Already wholly absent in the north, the government now only exerts its authority in large cities in central Mali, with much of the rural area effectively controlled by JNIM.[35] This 'shadow governance' does not, of course, resemble their proto-Caliphate as established in 2012, but still significantly impacts public life. Hundreds of schools have been forced to close, state representatives have fled and access to humanitarian NGO's has been restricted – only those in the field health care are permitted.[36] In 2018 jihadists effectively prevented the Presidential elections from taking place

29 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 146–66.

30 Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 17–50.

31 See for example: David Lewis and Ryan Mcneill, 'How Jihadists Struck Gold in Africa's Sahel', Reuters, 22 November 2019, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/.

32 Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé, and Laouali Mahamane, 'Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?', *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 118–32, https://doi.org /10.1080/03932729.2020.1833567.

33 Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, 'Desert Drift, Declining Deadliness: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombings', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 2020, https://ctc.usma.edu/ desert-drift-declining-deadliness-understanding-the-evolution-of-aqims-suicide-bombings/.

34 NATO Strategic Communication - South, "Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures," Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST, September 2020, https://thesouthernhub.org/resources/site1/General/NSD-S%20Hub%20 Publications/20200909_NU_NSDS_HUB_ACSRT_Joint_Report_Terrorism_in_the_Sahel.pdf.

35 "Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-Terrorism," FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights, 20 November 2018, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-populations-caught- between-terrorism-and-anti-terrorism.

36 "Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists," Bruxelles: International Crisis Group, 28 May 2019, 19,_20, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward- dialogue-central-malis-jihadists.

in the Mopti area, forcing many polling sites to close.[37] In short, as Mathieu Pellerin concludes, JNIM is fighting an insurgency that is fuelled by micro-local societal realities rather than global jihadist aspirations.[38]

As for a transition into criminality, AQIM's involvement in organised crime defies simple categorisations. Northern Mali has traditionally formed an important crossroads in transnational smuggling networks for licit and illicit goods.[39] Local communities have long been intricately involved in the trade of (subsidised) fuel, cigarettes and foodstuffs, while drugs, arms and immigrants follow different routes and are managed by other networks. The narcotics trade is not only a source of revenue for armed groups, but also a driver of conflict. The primary beneficiaries in the narcotics trade, however, are not jihadists, but the armed signatory groups of the Coordination and Platform. Some have close links to influential individuals inside the Sahelian central and local governments.[40] Cocaine is smuggled from the Gold Coast through Mali to the north, but Cannabis from Morocco – transported on routes running anti-clockwise through the Sahel to the Mediterranean – constitutes the brunt of the narcotics trade and forms the most stable income for smugglers.[41] In the complex social landscape of border communities, jihadists, smugglers and state representatives co-exist, and sometimes cooperate when it comes to rights of passage.[42] In the broader context, the large sums involved in the drugs trade have both upended social structures within communities, and further strained traditional tribal hierarchies between, for example, the Ifoghas and Imghad (Tuareg) and the Kunta and Tilemsi-Lamhar (Arabs). Organised crime has an enormous impact on security and stability in the Sahel, but remains difficult to 'fight' as it is interwoven in local and informal structures. For AQIM, its primary revenues lie elsewhere.

Since 2003, an industry around kidnapping developed in the Sahel, with jihadist groups earning fortunes in ransoms.[43] A 2010 letter from an AQIM commander to AQC underscored the importance or ransoms, emphasizing that it was the organisation's only significant source of funding.[44] In turn, AQIM's leadership shura chastised one of their primary commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for only demanding the meagre sum of €700.000 for the Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler.[45] These ransoms would be subject to significant inflation in the following years. A recent case involved the release of Malian politician Soumaïla Cissé (who tragically died of COVID 19 a few months later) and three Western hostages in October 2020. JNIM supposedly received a ransom that was between € 10 million and € 30 million, and 200 JNIM fighters were released, many of which were capable commanders.[46] Several studies have attempted to estimate how much has been paid in ransoms to AQIM and its affiliates. Updating these figures leads to the conclusion

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37 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 148.
38 Mathieu Pellerin, 'Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?', Études de l'Ifri (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, November 2019), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_armed_violence_sahara_2020_okes.pdf.
39 Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (New York, NY Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
40 "Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali," International Crisis Group, 13 December 2018), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali.
41 Guillaume Soto-Major, 'Trafics et Trafiquants: Éléments Structurants Des Sociétés Sahéliennes', *Recherches Internationales*, March 2020.
42 Francesco Strazzari, 'Azawad and the Rights of Passage: The Role of Illicit Trade in the Logic of Armed Group Formation in Northern Mali' (NOREF, January 2015).
43 Rida Lyammouri, 'Kidnapping Remains a Big Deal in the Sahel' (Policy Center for the New South, October 2020), https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/kidnapping-remains-big-deal-sahel.
44 Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.
45 Mathieu Guidère, 'The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM', *Res Militaris*, 2014, 25.
46 Adlène Meddi, 'Algérie : révélations d'un terroriste sur le « deal » des otages du Mali', *Le Point*, 7 December 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-revelations-d-un-terroriste-sur-le-deal-des-otages-du-mali-07-12-2020-2404607_3826.php.

that the group has probably received between € 117 million and € 125 million in rasoms since 2003.[47] Of all countries that have paid ransoms, France – though not necessarily the state – has paid most. There is little information on how the jihadists have kept these large stashes of cash. According to some reports, money is invested through local businessmen who are allowed keep a part of the profit. In this way AQIM is financially integrated into local communities, ensuring local support and at the same time safeguarding investments.[48] In what has been labelled a 'boom and bust cycle', jihadists rule and tax in times of abundance, and can rely on their (illicit) business investments in times of hardship.[49]

AQIM has therefore been able to transition into other forms of violence. It has arguably fulfilled all four of Hansen's types of presence since its inception in 2007, shifting from a strategy of terrorism to one of insurgency (and back again) when opportunities arose or external actors forced it to. Each type of presence entailed a unique type of organisation, and transitions from one to another required organisational transformations and flexibility. JNIM's current semi-territorial presence and its choice of targets, conducting attacks on security forces rather than terror attacks on civilians – reflect a strategy of insurgency. Previous phases in AQIM's violent operations – such as the campaign of suicide bombings in Algeria between 2007 -2009 – were more indicative of a strategy of terrorism. It is possible that if AQIM or JNIM lose ground in their insurgency, that they will revert to spectacular attacks on civilian targets.

2. Defeat and elimination by brute force (repression)

Terrorist acts are meant to provoke, and human instinct is to retaliate and fight fire with fire. Nation states, in particular, have a long history of repression. Repression seldom succeeds because terrorists aim to provoke and use the state's strength against itself. There is a clear difference in fighting a small, clandestine terrorist group and a fully-fledged insurgency that has mobilised thousands of fighters. The first allows a counter-terrorist approach that, at least for its repressive element, relies on intelligence and policing. This is not the case for an insurgency, where a state finds itself fighting a guerrilla war. When foreign troops are deployed, these become favoured targets for insurgents.[50] The literature on counterinsurgency (COIN) is extensive, and it is and noteworthy that French officers such as Roger Trinquier, Hubert Lyautey and David Galula provided much inspiration for current Anglo-Saxon doctrine on the subject.[51] Current Western doctrine has made a population-centric approach the key tenet of COIN, with fighting rebels but a small component of a broader political, social and economic effort to address the causes of the insurrection. This follows Galula's argument that COIN is 80 percent political and 20 percent military.[52] Intervening states have, however, always struggled with the practical implementation of this political and civilian component. When in 2011 the US ambassador in Afghanistan remarked

47 Author's calculations based on two overviews and supplementary articles. See: Rukmini Callimachi, 'Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror', *The New York Times*, 29 July 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html; Camille Lafrance and Marie Toulemonde, '[Infographie] Maghreb-Sahel : le business lucratif des otages', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 February 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1116358/politique/infographie-maghreb-sahel-le-business-lucratif-des-otages/.
48 Olivier Dubois, 'Mali : la difficile traque des djihadistes de l'intérieur', *Le Point*, 17 January 2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-la-difficile-traque-des-djihadistes-de-l-interieur-17-01-2021-2409972_3826.php.
49 Aisha Ahmad, 'The Long Jihad: The Boom–Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, (23 January 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa048.
50 David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 1st Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
51 Bertrand Valeyre and Alexandre Guerin, 'From Galula to Petraeus: The French Legacy in the US Counterinsurgency Doctrine' (Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, 7 July 2010), https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/galulatopetraeus.pdf.
52 Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 63.

to General Kenneth Dahl that the civilian surge had reached its high-water mark, the reply was "[t] hat's great, I can feel it lapping at my ankles."[53] The conventional wisdom that good governance is an essential element of COIN is, however, contested. Jacqueline Hazelton has argued that there is no historical evidence that a 'hearts and minds' has been effective in the past, and that coercion and brute force were critical to success.[54]

The French military effort in Mali has been subject to much criticism in academia. Many authors ascertain that the approach is overly securitised, and correlate this to the deterioration of the security situation across the Sahel. Bruce Charbonneau argues that the response to the conflict in Mali has imposed a conceptual framework that does not align with the complex realities on the ground; a binary distinction between signatory armed groups and terrorists that has led to an international division of labour.[55] Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos questions French motives, its understanding of 'jihadism', the effectiveness of a militarised policy, and assesses that the war has already been lost.[56] Yvan Guichanoua argues that a depoliticised, bureaucratic logic is sustaining the French military approach, clashing with Malian sovereignty.[57] This is magnified on the international level, with a ´security traffic jam´ of barely coordinated policies by a multitude of different actors, compounding unintended effects.[58] There are a few positive notes. Contrasting with a history of unilateral action in its African sphere of influence, France's current efforts are more internationalised, expressing a desire (and need) for further Europeanisation and *Sahelisation*.[59] In a comprehensive analysis of the French military campaign in the Sahel, Michael Shurkin compares the modesty of French ambitions to the American propensity for thinking big, as illustrated by the nation building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.[60] But as French casualties rise and more doubts on the efficacy of Operation Barkhane surface in the media, popular support for the mission erodes in both France and Mali. Public opinion, after all, is a key factor in escalation and de-escalation processes in counter-terrorism operations.[61]

Although fighting an insurgency, current military operations are *not* based on the principles of COIN. Operation Barkhane, succeeding Operation Serval in August 2014, became responsible for counter-terrorism operations Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. These countries cooperate on security in the G5 Sahel.[62] At Barkhane's high water-mark, France deployed around 5,100 troops. It has deployed Special Forces in Task Force Sabre, and also leads the multinational Task Force Takuba, that incorporates Special Forces from Sweden, Estonia and the Czech

53 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 308.

54 Jacqueline L. Hazelton, 'The "Hearts and Minds" Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare', *International Security* 42, no. 1 (10 August 2017): 80–113.

55 Bruno Charbonneau, 'Faire La Paix Au Mali: Les Limites de l'acharnement Contre-Terroriste', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 53, no. 3 (2 September 2019): 447–62, https://doi.or g/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666017.

56 Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue: La France au Sahel* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2020).

57 Yvan Guichaoua, 'The Bitter Harvest of French Interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 895–911, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa094.

58 Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the Security Traffic Jam in the Sahel: Constitutive Effects of Contemporary Interventionism', *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (1 July 2020): 855–74, https:// doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa093.

59 Benedikt Erforth, 'Multilateralism as a Tool: Exploring French Military Cooperation in the Sahel', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 0, no. 0 (4 March 2020): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1733986.

60 Michael Shurkin, 'France's War in the Sahel and the Evolution of Counter-Insurgency Doctrine', *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2020/2021), http://tnsr.org/2020/11/frances-war-in-the-sahel-and-the-evolution-of-counter-insurgency-doctrine/.

61 Bart Schuurman, 'Defeated by Popular Demand: Public Support and Counterterrorism in Three Western Democracies, 1963–1998', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 2 (1 February 2013): 152–75, https://doi.org/10.108 0/1057610X.2013.747072

62 Sergei Boeke and Grégory Chauzal, 'Le G5 Sahel : une avancée de la coopération régionale pour la paix et la sécurité?', *Annuaire français des relations internationales* XVIII (3 July 2017): 569–79.

Republic. Although many operations are conducted with G5 security forces, the sheer size of this geographic space precludes traditional COIN operations where ground is held and secured after it is cleared (under the doctrine 'shape, clear, hold, build'). The exact strategy remained difficult to discern, but appeared to rest on Operation Barkhane hunting terrorists in the short-term; MINUSMA stabilising in the mid-term, and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) building capability so that the Malian security forces could take care of their own security in the long term.[63] French political discourse is rife with importance of three Ds (defence, diplomacy and development), and clearly recognises that there is no military solution to the problem. There remains, nonetheless, a disconnect between the military and civilian effort. As highlighted in the 2021 Senate debate, Operation Barkhane's cost around €900 million, while France only spent €85 million on bilateral development aid to Mali.[64] What is more, as admitted by Foreign minister Le Drian, development aid is not arriving in areas pacified by Operation Barkhane. As such, areas might be briefly secured, but if nothing outside cities and a few military outposts is held, then building anything lasting will remain impossible.[65] Rather than focusing on securing and stabilizing zones, French operations hunt jihadist groups in search and destroy operations.

The effectiveness of these search and destroy operations remains, however, difficult to measure. Despite many tactical Barkhane successes, the number of insurgent attacks continues to increase. The Pau Summit designated ISGS as the priority target, and while the group was significantly degraded by French strikes, statistics indicate that it nonetheless managed to increase the number of attacks it conducted in early 2021.[66] The French military recognise the temporary nature of kinetic operations, calling them 'mowing the lawn'.[67] For Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal remarked: "You can kill *Taliban* forever because they are *not* a *finite* number."[68] He argued that the nature of local grievances and the dynamics of revenge lead to 'insurgent math'; for every innocent person killed, ten new enemies are created.[69] The same applies to Mali, where Operation Barkhane has already inadvertently killed several innocent civilians over the years. A case in point is the airstrike that killed 22 people in Bounti, Mali, on 3 January 2021. Locals insisted that a wedding ceremony was struck, while France remained adamant that only jihadists had been targeted.[70] An elaborate report by MINUSMA concluded that three of the victims were armed members of a katiba affiliated with JNIM, but that 19 unarmed civilians were also killed.[71] France contested the report's methodology, conclusions and its interpretation of international law, but offered no evidence supporting its own version of events.[72] The killings at

63 Louise Wiuff Moe, 'The Dark Side of Institutional Collaboration: How Peacekeeping-Counterterrorism Convergences Weaken the Protection of Civilians in Mali', *International Peacekeeping* 0, no. 0 (14 October 2020): 1–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2020.1821364.

64 'Débat Sur l'opération Barkhane: Bilan et Perspectives', § La commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées (2021), http://www.senat.fr/cra/s20210209/s20210209_2.html#par_396.

65 Ismaël Fournier, 'Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Dynamics in Mali', *Canadian Military Journal* 21, no. 1 (20 November 2020), http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol21/no1/page4-eng.asp.

66 Marie Toulemonde, '[Infographie] Niger, Mali, Burkina : la stratégie de Barkhane a-t-elle atteint ses limites ?', *Jeune Afrique* (blog), 25 March 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1143167/politique/infographie-niger-mali-burkina-la-strategie-de-barkhane-a-t-elle-atteint-ses-limites/.

67 Thomas Hofnung, 'Djihadisme au Mali : la « pyramide » et le « gazon »', *Le Monde*, 5 December 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/05/djihadisme-au-mali-la-pyramide-et-le-gazon_5393195_3212.html.

68 Dexter Filkins, 'Stanley McChrystal's Long War', *The New York Times*, 14 October 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/magazine/18Afghanistan-t.html.

69 Michael Hastings, 'The Runaway General: The Profile That Brought Down McChrystal', *Rolling Stone*, 22 June 2010, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/.

70 Omar Ouahmane, 'Un carnage, deux versions : témoignages après les frappes meurtrières de Bounti, au Mali', France Inter, 2 February 2021, https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/le-zoom-de-la-redaction-02-fevrier-2021.

71 'Rapport Sur l'incident de Bounty Du 3 Janvier 2021' (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, March 2021), https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/rapport_final_bounty_bounty9.pdf.

Bounti illustrate the legal and practical problems of signature strikes, where the identity of the target(s) is unknown, but where behavioural patterns indicate potential involvement with armed groups.[73] AQIM exploited Bounti in its propaganda, and these events risk further undermining public support for Operation Barkhane.

As with many international interventions, strengthening local security forces constitutes an important element of the French exit strategy.[74] Malian security forces have been trained by France, the US and other partners for nearly two decades, but the results have been meagre. Since 2013, the EUTM has trained nearly 15,000 soldiers, with tactical proficiency improving. A recurrent problem, however, lies in the realm of logistics, human resources management and command relationships. These remain inadequate for sustaining operations, and Malians have successfully frustrated international attempts at reform. In part, the Malian military elite remain ensnared in corruption and nepotism, but their views on sovereignty and the kind of military that should be (re-)constructed diverges from donor expectations.[75] Most problematic, however, is the Malian army's historical tendency to mete out collective punishment. In the past, Tuaregs suspected of separatism risked extrajudicial execution; now Fulanis, perceived as aiding or abetting jihadism, suffer a similar fate. As documented by human rights organisations, the security forces of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have committed dozens of massacres.[76] Data from ACLED indicates that state security services have been responsible for more civilian deaths than jihadists, with communal militias third in terms of the numbers of casualties inflicted.[77] None of these abuses have led to convictions, and there are few indications that this impunity will change. The unwillingness of Western nations to address these abuses is part of a larger problem - undemocratic and corrupt practices at the heart of Sahelian regimes. Both the predatory nature of the state and exactions committed by security forces are strong drivers for jihadist recruitment. There is ample evidence that the killing or arrest of family members often forms the 'tipping point' for an individual to join a jihadist group.[78]

The final element in the toolbox of repression concerns militias. In the literature on civil wars this has been a neglected subject.[79] Jessica Stanton argues that governments often can and

72 Cyril Bensimon and Elise Vincent, 'L'armée française aurait bien commis une bavure au Mali, selon un rapport de la Minusma', *Le Monde*, 31 March 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/31/l-armee-francaise-aurait-bien-commis-une-bavure-au-mali-selon-un-rapport-de-la-minusma_6075044_3212.html.

73 Rebecca Mignot-Mahdavi, 'Le Silence Des Agneaux: France's War Against "Jihadist Groups" and Associated Legal Rationale' (ICCT - the Hague, 15 May 2020), For the legality of French counterterrorism operations, see:, https://icct.nl/publication/le-silence-des-agneaux-frances-war-against-jihadist-groups-and-associated-legal-rationale/.

74 Sergei Boeke, 'Combining Exit with Strategy: Transitioning from Short-Term Military Interventions to a Long-Term Counter-Terrorism Policy' (ICCT, August 2014), https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Boeke-Transitioning-from-Short-Term-Military-Intervention-to-CT-Policy-August2014.pdf.

75 Denis M. Tull, 'Rebuilding Mali's Army: The Dissonant Relationship between Mali and Its International Partners', *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (1 March 2019): 405–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz003.

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

77 Ornella Moderan, Habibou Souley Bako, and Paul-Simon Handy, 'Sahel Counter-Terrorism Takes a Heavy Toll on Civilians', ISS Africa, 14 April 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sahel-counter-terrorism-takes-a-heavy-toll-on-civilians.

78 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment' (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), 73,74, http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf; Héni Nsaibia, 'State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results Is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians', *ACLED* (blog), 20 May 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/.

79 Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, 'Militias in Civil Wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (1 August 2015): 755–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576753.

do control militia behaviour, and that if these recruit from the same constituency as insurgents, themilitia will be less likely to target civilians.[80] Militias have been used during the Algerian civil war, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have recently been formalised in Burkina Faso and Nigeria.[81] The Malian state has a long history of using armed groups/militias as proxies as part of a divide and rule strategy in the north.[82] After Operation Serval, the government helped to set up a Tuareg Imghad militia – GATIA - to counterbalance those striving for more autonomy. France had also allied with armed groups to fight jihadists, such as the Tuareg separatist MNLA during Operation Serval; much to Bamako's distaste. Operation Barkhane cooperated with GATIA and MAA in 2015, and was widely seen as fuelling local tensions and contributing to insecurity.[83] The current ethnic conflict between Fulani, Dogon and Dassouak in central Mali has led to a proliferation of self-defence militias. The militia Dan Na Ambassagou, composed of Dogon, is accused of the massacre of Fulani at Ogossagou and was officially dissolved by the government. Its leader simply refused to disband.[84] Where the state is unable to protect its citizens, the active or passive support of local militias constitutes a Faustian pact that might provide short-term local security. At the same time, it empowers groups that are difficult to control, arms individuals who could drift into banditry (or the insurgency) and further proliferates small arms in a region already awash with weapons.

While the counter-terrorism operations of Barkhane and the G5 contained strong elements of military repression, their effectiveness was questionable. The operations were not modelled along COIN doctrine, and as widely recognised there was a large imbalance between the military and civilian components. Galula's 80/20 guideline has thus been inverted. A 2010 RAND study that analysed 30 different insurgencies identified successful and unsuccessful approaches.[85] Of the twelve 'Bad COIN approaches', most appear directly applicable to the Sahel. The first four include: the COIN force used both collective punishment and escalating repression; the primary COIN force was an external occupier; the COIN force or government actions contributed to substantial new grievances; militias worked at cross-purposes with the COIN force or government. Both the statistics of violence and the literature suggest that the current military strategy is not a viable one. This does not mean that France is stuck in a quagmire it cannot leave. President Macron's actions make it clear that French military presence in the Sahel is not an independent goal by itself, but is subservient to political objectives in France's broader Africa policy. Macron initially intended to announce a troop reduction during the N'Djamena G5 summit in 2021, but African leaders requested a delay in the military drawdown.[86] In return, Macron received a promise from the Malian government to implement the Algiers Agreement and the Chadian deploymentof 1,200 troops to the Tri-border region.[87] In June 2021, Macron announced the termination of Operation

80 Jessica A. Stanton, 'Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (1 August 2015): 899–923, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002715576751.

81 Aïssatou Diallo, 'Burkina Faso : « Armer des civils ne peut qu'augmenter le risque d'exactions »', *Jeune Afrique*, 24 January 2020, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/885838/politique/burkina-faso-armer-des-civils-ne-peut-quaugmenter-le-risque-dexactions/.

82 Grégory Chauzal and Thibault Van Damme, 'The Roots of Mali's Conflict; Moving beyond the 2012 Crisis', CRU Report (Clingendael, March 2015), https://www.clingendael.nl/pub/2015/the_roots_of_malis_conflict/.

83 Adam Sandor, 'Insecurity, the Breakdown of Social Trust, and Armed Actor Governance in Central and Northern Mali' (Centre FrancoPaix, August 2017), https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Sandor-english-Report.pdf.

84 Aïssatou Diallo, 'Mali : accusé du pire, le chef de milice Youssouf Toloba ne désarme pas – Jeune Afrique', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2019, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/773231/politique/mali-accuse-du-pire-le-chef-de-milice-youssouf-toloba-ne-desarme-pas/.

85 Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Rand Corporation, 2010), xvii.

86 Benjamin Roger, 'Sans Macron, l'avenir de Barkhane au menu du sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena –', *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1120673/politique/sans-macron-lavenir-de-barkhane-au-menu-du-sommet-du-g5-sahel-a-ndjamena/.

Barkhane, and a probable halving of the number of French troops that will continue to conduct counterterrorist operations.[88] As France had a large military presence across the Sahel even before Operation Serval, a complete withdrawal in the near future is unlikely. At the N'Djamena Summit, Macron had already explicitly mentioned that military efforts would concentrate on decapitating the jihadist organisations, and a further reduced French presence will put even more emphasis on these focused and less risky type of operations.[89]

3. Capturing or killing a group's leader (decapitation)

Governments often attempt to decapitate terrorist groups by killing or capturing their leader. The effects vary and depend on the commander's charisma (and whether a personality cult has developed around him), the availability of a capable successor, the nature of the group's ideology, and whether the leader was killed or imprisoned. Cronin argues that arresting a leader is more effective than killing him, especially if he is humbled before the media and prevented from communicating with his followers once in prison.[90] If however, a leader of a group with widespread popular support is killed, this either has no measurable effect or is counterproductive.[91] As the book was written in 2009, there is no mention of the demise of Osama Bin Laden and Abu al-Baghdadi, but the analysis of al-Zarqawi's killing in 2006 and its effect on al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is surprisingly brief. Another example that has been under-researched in decapitation studies involves Mohamed Yusuf, Boko Haram's leader, who was captured by the Nigerian army in Maiduguri in July 2009, and subsequently tortured and killed by the police.[92] Recognised by Nigerian officials as an enormous strategic error, Yusuf's extrajudicial execution led to the appointment of a new but equally charismatic and radical leader, Abubakar Shekau.[93]

There is a significant body of literature on targeted killing and leadership decapitation. Researchers, however, are divided on its effectiveness, with some arguing that it helps degrade terrorist groups by keeping the leadership on its back foot and others concluding that the tactic is ineffective at best or counterproductive at worst. Patrick Johnston's quantitative study indicated that decapitation increases governments' chances of reducing violence and defeating insurgencies, and using an extensive dataset (1970-2008) Bryan Brice found that the tactic increased terrorist group mortality rates.[94] In an equally comprehensive study, Jenna Jordan

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87 'Dans les coulisses du huis clos au sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena', *Jeune Afrique*, 16 February 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1122786/politique/dans-les-coulisses-du-huis-clos-au-sommet-du-g5-sahel-a-ndjamena/.

88 Fatoumata Diallo, 'Macron mise sur Bazoum et fait du Niger le cœur du dispositif français au Sahel', *Jeune Afrique*, 9 July 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1201242/politique/macron-mise-sur-bazoum-et-fait-du-niger-le-coeur-du-dispositif-francais-au-sahel/.

89 Le Monde avec AFP, 'Au sommet du G5 Sahel, Emmanuel Macron écarte toute baisse des effectifs militaires français dans la région « dans l'immédiat »', *Le Monde*, 16 February 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/16/au-g5-sahel-macron-appelle-a-renforcer-la-lutte-contre-les-djihadistes-et-au-retour-de-l-etat_6070141_3212.html.

90 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 14.

91 Ibid.

92 David Cook, 'Boko Haram: A Prognosis', 16 December 2011, https://bakerinstitute.org/research/boko-haram-a-prognosis/.

93 Marc-Antoine Perouse de Perouse de Montclos, *Une guerre perdue: La France au Sahel* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2020), 75–76.

94 Patrick B. Johnston, 'Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns', *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): 47–79; Bryan Price, *Targeting Top Terrorists: Understanding Leadership Removal in Counterterrorism Strategy*, Illustrated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Nichola E. J. Rew, 'Book Review of "Targeting Top Terrorists: Understanding Leadership Removal in Counterterrorism Strategy"', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2 July 2020): 500–502, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2020.1764791.

came to an opposite conclusion, arguing that "[o]verall, the evidence suggests that decapitation is not an effective counterterrorism strategy, that it is especially unlikely to be effective in the cases of bureaucratized Islamist organizations, and that it is especially ineffective against groups that have managed to amass popular support."[95] The debate on its efficacy is unlikely to be settled soon, complicated by issues of methodology (how to measure effect and causality) and the challenge of collecting and coding empirical data. Meanwhile, for over two decades al-Qaeda, Hamas and the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan have been subjected to a systematic and structured campaign of decapitation, but as organisations, they have adapted and survived. It has become clear that the military mantra of "cutting off the snake's head" simply does not work when it concerns networked organisations consisting of many decentralised cells or units.

In practice, decapitation efforts no-longer entail a focus on the single commander at the top of the pyramid (or as a central node in a network), but encompass targeting the whole leadership cadre of the group. Pioneered by Israel, adapted by general Stanley McChrystal in Iraq (Task Force 714) and later transposed to Afghanistan, this new way of war relied on detailed and real-time intelligence (specifically Signals Intelligence, SIGINT) to identify, locate and target individuals.[96] In Afghanistan, this worked on basis of a list of targets, called the Joint Prioritized Effects List (JPEL). John Nagl, a former advisor to general Petraeus, described the effort as "an almost industrial scale counterterrorism killing machine."[97] Academics argued that if neither top-level commanders or grass roots fighters provided al-Qaeda with sufficient strategic force on their own, then the mid-level commanders ('managers') also needed to be targeted to cause the network to collapse on itself.[98] Arrests generated new leads and individuals to kill or capture. Although dependent on intelligence, this so called 'daisy chaining' created a momentum of its own, with the military sometimes killing the very sources that intelligence was running.[99] In Afghanistan hundreds if not thousands of mid-level Taliban commanders have been killed during the past two decades, but that the insurgency has triumphed.[100] As counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency operations focus more on targeting key individuals in adversarial networks, the term leadership decapitation no longer appears accurate. It has become leadership attrition.

In Mali, France has long attempted to target al-Qaeda leaders. In March 2012, when AQIM and its partners were chasing the Malian army out of northern Mali, French intelligence located several commanders in Timbuktu but refrained from striking them, in part not to risk the lives of hostages held by the group.[101] Before Operation Serval was launched in January 2013, many targeting packages had already been prepared.[102] Weeks after combat started, Abu Zeid, one of the primary

95 Jenna Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation of Terrorist Organizations: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, Illustrated edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 186; See also: Jenna Jordan, 'Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes', *International Security* 38, no. 4 (1 April 2014): 7–38, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00157.Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes\\uc0\\u8217{}, {\\i{}International Security} 38, no. 4 (1 April 2014
96 Stanley Gen McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, Illustrated Edition (New York, New York: Portfolio, 2015).
97 Gretchen Gavett, 'What Is the Secretive U.S. "Kill/Capture" Campaign?', Frontline, 17 June 2011, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-is-the-secretive-us-killca/.
98 Peter Neumann, Ryan Evans, and Raffaello Pantucci, 'Locating Al Qaeda's Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 11 (1 November 2011): 825–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.611936.
99 Nada Bakos and David Coburn, *The Targeter: My Life in the CIA, Hunting Terrorists and Challenging the White House* (New York: Little, Brown US, 2019), 228–32.
100 Keith Patrick Dear, 'Beheading the Hydra? Does Killing Terrorist or Insurgent Leaders Work?', *Defence Studies* 13, no. 3 (1 September 2013): 293–337, https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2013.845383.
101 Isabelle Lasserre and Thierry Oberlé, *Notre guerre secrète au Mali: Les nouvelles menaces contre la France* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 23.
102 Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 'Operation "Serval": A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (19 September 2015): 801–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494.

AQIM commanders, was killed when he was located through his satellite phone.[103] Mokhtar Belmokhtar, another important commander, was declared dead multiple times but managed to resurface each time.[104] While Belmokhtar has not been delisted by the UN or eulogised by AQIM, reports suggest that he was killed by a French airstrike in Libya in November 2016.[105] The largest coup was the killing of Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's emir (overall commander). He was killed on 3 June 2020, soon after he crossed the Algerian frontier into northern Mali.[106] American intelligence proved vital to the French operation, illustrating that decapitation strikes are often chance opportunities that arise when crucial intelligence is received, whether from one's own human or signal intelligence assets or from international partners. It took AQIM more than five months - as coordination had to be sought with other al-Qaeda affiliates - to name the successor, Abu Ubaidah Yusef al Annabi.[107] The new emir was a long-serving Algerian who was head of AQIM's "Council of Notables".[108] It will probably take a while before the effects of this leadership change can be discerned.

It is therefore clear that Operation Barkhane conducts a strategy of leadership decapitation. This has become a fixed element of counter-terrorism operations, and like in Iraq and Afghanistan, has evolved into the broader policy of leadership attrition. Traditional thinking behind decapitating terrorist groups has underpinned French policy, as emphasised by Defence Minister Florence Parly: "we are targeting [jihadists] at the top of the pyramid because it is the best way to weaken [their] base".[109] Since December 2019, French armed Reaper drones based in Niger also take part in targeting operations. From a military perspective these operations are an efficient use of resources, as strikes can be conducted without risks to own troops. As the table in annex 1 illustrates, many JNIM high-level commanders have been killed or captured during the past eight years, but violence on the ground has continued to increase. Even in the direct aftermath of the February 2018 Tinzouaten strike, which killed several high-ranking JNIM commanders the group managed to execute three of its largest ever complex attacks.[110] This is not indicative of a weakened organisation, and there is little chance that leadership attrition will significantly weaken AQIM and JNIM. Finally, it is important to note that two key figures on France's targeting list – Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa (who survived a strike but was declared dead by Minister Parly) – are precisely the ones the Malian government wants to start a dialogue with.[111]

103 Jean-Christophe Notin, *La guerre de la France au Mali.* (Paris: TALLANDIER, 2014), 466–68.
104 Timothée Vilars, 'Mokhtar Belmokhtar, le djihadiste aux mille et une morts', L'Obs, 28 November 2016, https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20161128.OBS1850/mokhtar-belmokhtar-le-djihadiste-aux-mille-et-une-morts.html.
105 Elise Vincent, 'Les confidences d'« Ibrahim 10 », djihadiste au Sahel', *Le Monde*, 25 February 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/25/les-confidences-d-ibrahim-10-djihadiste-au-sahel_5427750_3212.html.
106 Julie Coleman and Méryl Demuynck, 'The Death of Droukdel: Implications for AQIM and the Sahel', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - the Hague*, 9 June 2020, https://icct.nl/publication/the-death-of-droukdel-implications-for-aqim-and-the-sahel/.
107 Wassim Nasr, 'Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership', Newlines Institute, 8 February 2021, https://newlinesinstitute.org/al-qaeda/implications-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-new-leadership/.
108 Thomas Joscelyn, 'AQIM Names Veteran Jihadist as New Emir', FDD's Long War Journal, 21 November 2020, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/11/aqim-names-veteran-jihadist-as-new-emir.php.
109 Assemblée Nationale Française, "Questionnement au gouvernement 28/11/2018", La Chaine Parlementaire; quoted in (footnote 32, p.58): 'Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists'.
110 Targeting the Burkinabe military headquarters and the French embassy in Ouagadougou in March, the MINUSMA camp in Timbuktu in April and the headquarters of the G 5 Sahel force at Sévaré in June: Pellerin, 'Armed Violence in the Sahara. Are We Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?', 12.
111 Cyril Bensimon, 'Mali : la mort d'Amadou Koufa, un coup dur pour les djihadistes au Sahel', *Le Monde*, 3 December 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/03/mali-la-mort-d-amadou-koufa-un-coup-dur-pour-les-djihadistes-au-sahel_5392124_3212.html.

4. Entry of group into legitimate political process (negotiation)

Cronin's most extensive chapter focuses on negotiations with terrorist groups. The saying that democracies do not talk to terrorists - to avoid legitimising them - is not borne out by the facts. Here the distinction between terrorism and insurgency is relevant, as insurgents are deemed rational and political, while this is questioned for terrorists, rendering negotiations with them both undesirable and unfeasible.[112] A sociological experiment by Emily Pronin et al illustrated that the degree of rationality imputed to terrorists influenced people's choice of whether to bomb or negotiate with them.[113] Some countries, like the US, will not negotiate with groups that they have themselves designated as terrorist entities. The effects of proscription – the listing of terrorist groups – also extends to third parties (like NGOs), whose avenues for engagement are consequently narrowed.[114] Cronin's empirical data shows that a little less than one in five terrorist groups actually entered into negotiations, and these generally did not lead to an agreement and end of the conflict. In most cases, negotiations were long and drawn out, with continued violence from both sides during the process. Typically, negotiations were rarely the single factor in a group's desistance from terrorism, but contributed to a process of managed decline. [115]

Negotiating with terrorists and insurgents is not without risk for states. According to Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bart Schuurman, there are three paradoxes.[116] First, warring parties have often used negotiations to win time in order to recuperate and prepare the next offensive. Second, negotiations can provoke splits within parties, with hardliners promoting an increase in violence. Finally, the literature on civil wars indicates that negotiated settlements are more brittle than military victories, making a resumption of violence more likely.[117] As a result, some argue that the feasibility of negotiations should be explored before states embark on them.[118] Military force thus becomes the normative legitimate (and legal) counter-terrorism policy, with dialogue the controversial exception. This poses problems for mediators in armed conflicts, who are expected to incorporate liberal norms such as inclusivity in their approach, but must at the same time exclude terrorist groups.[119] This applies especially to Mali, where the aforementioned 2015 Algiers peace accord, under significant international pressure, specifically excluded the al-Qaeda affiliated groups as non-signatory armed groups. As Bruno Charbonneau emphasises, this artificial distinction is not only blurred in practice, but the dichotomy underpins the formal division of labour between the UN MINUSMA mission and the French-led Barkhane G5 counterterrorismoperation.[120] This, of

112 Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

113 Emily Pronin, Kathleen Kennedy, and Sarah Butsch, 'Bombing Versus Negotiating: How Preferences for Combating Terrorism Are Affected by Perceived Terrorist Rationality', *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (1 December 2006): 385–92, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_12.

114 Sophie Haspeslagh, '"Listing Terrorists": The Impact of Proscription on Third-Party Efforts to Engage Armed Groups in Peace Processes – a Practitioner's Perspective', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 6, no. 1 (1 April 2013): 189–208, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2013.765706.{\\i{}Critical Studies on Terrorism} 6, no. 1 (1 April 2013

115 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 35–72.

116 Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bart Schuurman, 'The Paradoxes of Negotiating with Terrorist and Insurgent Organisations', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 4 (1 November 2011): 677–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2011.615612.

117 Ibid.; Alexander B. Downes, 'The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars', *Security Studies* 13, no. 4 (1 July 2004): 230–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410490945893.

118 Daniel Byman, 'The Decision to Begin Talks with Terrorists: Lessons for Policymakers', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (1 August 2006): 403–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600703996.

119 Julia Palmiano Federer, 'We Do Negotiate with Terrorists: Navigating Liberal and Illiberal Norms in Peace Mediation', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 19–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1472727.

course, does not mean that the jihadist groups wanted or should have been included in the peace-process at that time; only that their exclusion has shaped the conflict in Mali since.

The taboo on negotiating with violent extremists is not as solid as it seems. After nearly two decades of combat operations in Afghanistan, the US embarked on negotiations with the Afghan Taliban.[121] The US has astutely continued to consider the Taliban as insurgents rather than terrorists, although the Taliban does not shy from using terrorist tactics, maintains ties with al-Qaeda and strives to establish a type of Islamic state that does not fundamentally differ from al-Qaeda's ultimate objective. Negotiations with the Taliban attempted to reach a power-sharing agreement, but the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops precipitated a Taliban victory. The original Doha agreement was conditional on the Taliban severing all ties with al-Qaeda, but it appears that they actually strengthened their relationship [122]. The process to start a dialogue in Mali has similarly needed time, with France ruling out any negotiations during the first years of tactical military successes. The classic government standpoint was described by Foreign minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in 2017: "They are terrorists. How do you negotiate with terrorists? This is a fight with no ambiguity".[123] President Macron has also repeated that France does 'not talk to terrorists, but fights them'.[124] The official stance on negotiations did soften, but during the 2021 N'Djamena G5 Summit, Macron emphasised that while community-level dialogue was fine, talks with al-Qaeda's top-level hierarchy were impossible.[125]

Both the Malian and Burkinabe governments support opening negotiations with JNIM. Burkina Faso, its territory only recently enveloped by terrorism, has rapidly accepted the option of opening dialogue with JNIM and welcoming back its *'fils égarés'* (wayward sons).[126] Mali's position on negotiating with AQIM & JNIM has taken longer to crystallise. Before the 2012 crisis, the Malian government was not overly concerned by the presence of AQIM fighters in the north – the Tuareg separatists were deemed the real threat.[127] Negotiations with AQIM did take place regularly to free Western hostages, often through Malian and Burkinabe government intermediaries, and notably Iyad ag Ghali (then still allied with the government). While the Algiers peace process excluded the three Salafi-jihadist groups, many key leaders in Ansar Dine switched to official signatory groups such as the HCUA and MAA. As central Mali descended into violence, the option of dialogue with jihadists resurfaced. In 2017 hundreds of delegates from all over Mali convened to promote peace and national reconciliation (*Conférence d'Entente Nationale*). In the final report they urged the government to engage in a dialogue with Iyad ag Ghali and JNIM.[128] This proposal was initially rejected by the Malian government. Only after the Pau Summit did IBK

120 Bruno Charbonneau, 'Intervention in Mali: Building Peace between Peacekeeping and Counterterrorism', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 415–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2017.1363383.

121 Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, 'White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations', *The New York Times*, 15 July 2018, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html.

122 'Letter Dated 19 May 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council' (United Nations Security Council, 27 May 2020), 13, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3862716?ln=en.

123 John Irish, 'Mali, France Rule out Talks with Jihadists after Attacks', Reuters, 7 April 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security-jihadist-idUSKBN1792NF.

124 Débat sur l'opération Barkhane: bilan et perspectives.

125 'Dans les coulisses du huis clos au sommet du G5 Sahel à N'Djamena'.

126 Sophie Douce, 'Négocier avec les djihadistes ? Au Burkina Faso, une option de moins en moins taboue', *Le Monde*, 10 February 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/02/10/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-au-burkina-faso-une-option-de-moins-en-moins-taboue_6069462_3212.html.

127 'New Algerian Ambassador to Meets with Ambassador' (Cable 10BAMAKO98_a; divulged by Wikileaks, 19 February 2010), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BAMAKO98_a.html.

128 'Actes de La Conférence d'Entente Nationale' (Bamako, April 2017), 62,89, https://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/files/RAPPORT-Confe%CC%81rence-d27Entente-Nationale.pdf.

state that he was open to dialogue with JNIM.[129] In December 2020 the transitional government affirmed that dialogue with terrorists was the desire of the Malian people, and that this would becomplimentary to continuing military strikes on the group.[130]

There are two ways parties can negotiate: a top-down or a bottom-up approach. Within the top-down approach the objective can be strategic – political accommodation and/or the cessation of hostilities – or tactical, such as securing the release of hostages. Top-down negotiations are not only difficult for governments to consider; terrorist groups must also be open to the idea. Some categorically rule out negotiations, such the Algerian GIA, that had the slogan *no agreement, no truce, no dialogue* inscribed on every communiqué.[131] Based on a study of the magazines Inspire and Dabiq, issued by al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State respectively, Seth Cantey argues that both organisations are more receptive to dialogue than assumed.[132] AQC has, for example, recommended that affiliate AQAP seek a truce with Yemen's President Saleh, so that it could focus on defensive operations and preaching.[133] Droukdel also requested AQC for advice on whether AQIM should enter into a non-aggression pact with the Mauritanian government; a ceasefire notably proposed by the Mauritian side.[134] In March 2010 AQC concluded that it was doctrinally permitted, suggested a one year trial subject to renewal, and proposed that the Mauritanian government should release all AQIM prisoners and pay 10 to 20 million euros annually in exchange for the ceasefire.[135] While it is remarkable that no terrorist attacks occurred after 2011 in Mauritania, the government has denied any deal with AQIM, and there are no indications that the group's demands were met.[136] However, there are some reports suggesting that Burkinabe President Blaise Compaoré agreed to a temporary truce with AQIM. Al-Qaeda therefore appears practical and not dogmatic on the issue of dialogue. On 8 March 2020, JNIM released a communique indicating its willingness to negotiate with the Malian government, on the precondition that the French military 'occupation' would end.[137] It was rapidly followed by a statement from AQIM urging Sahelian governments to pursue serious talks with the group.[138]

There have been several developments on bottom-up agreements in the Sahel. During the November 2020 elections in Burkina Faso there was a clear lull in violence, with a reduction

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129 Benjamin Roger, 'Au Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta prêt au dialogue avec les jihadistes, au risque de négocier avec le diable', *Jeune Afrique*, 25 February 2020, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/900111/politique/negociation-avec-le-diable-au-mali-quand-ibk-se-dit-pret-a-ouvrir-le-dialogue-avec-les-jihadistes/.

130 Marc Perelman and David Baché, '"Le dialogue avec les terroristes est une volonté des Maliens", assure le Premier ministre du Mali', France 24, 3 December 2020, https://www.france24.com/fr/émissions/l-entretien/20201203-le-dialogue-avec-les-terroristes-est-une-volonté-des-maliens-assure-le-premier-ministre-du-mali.

131 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Revised edition (London: I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), 266.

132 Seth Cantey, 'Beyond the Pale? Exploring Prospects for Negotiations with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 10 (3 October 2018): 757–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1348096.

133 'Three Stages Letter' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, ODNI, January 19, 2017), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Three%20Stages%20Letter.pdf; 'Give the Tribes More Than They Can Handle' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, ODNI, March 1, 2016), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Give%20the%20tribes%20more%20than%20they%20can%20handle.pdf.

134 Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.

135 'Letter about Matter of the Islamic Maghreb' (document recovered at Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, translated and declassified by ODNI, March 1, 2016, n.d.), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Letter%20about%20matter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Maghreb.pdf.

136 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 290–92.

137 'Echoing Taliban, JNIM Expresses Openness to Negotiations with Malian Government If France, UN Withdraws' (SITE Intelligence Group, 9 March 2020).

138 'AQIM Leader Urges Sahel Governments Pursue "Serious Talks," End French Military Presence' (SITE Intelligence Group, 16 March 2020).

in both terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism operations.[139] This bucked the general trend of an increase in terrorist violence as election dates move closer, and stands in contrast to JNIM's prevention of voting in Central Mali during the 2018 Presidential election.[140] Local leaders affirmed having been in touch with jihadists but the extent of government involvement remains unclear. Some locals deplored the lack of guidance from above, aware that the act of talking to one party could precipitate a death sentence from the other.[141] Local ceasefires have been agreed in Djibo (Burkina Faso) and around Mopti and Ségou (Mali), with public life starting to resume.[142] Although positive in that they reduce violence, these agreements also have downsides. The negotiations reflect the balance of power on the ground, and JNIM has imposed some of its demands on the locals. In Koro, for example, locals are forbidden from carrying weapons, drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Jihadists, however, are free to preach anywhere.[143] These truces could allow JNIM to solidify its grip on different communities, if (local) governments miss the opportunity to reinvest in governance and development. This would constitute a classic example where insurgents use negotiations to consolidate power, rearm or prepare for their next attack/expansion.

The issue of negotiations with JNIM remains a complex and sensitive topic. Several studies detail promising avenues for dialogue, such as a discussion between religious scholars and JNIM intermediaries to find areas of compromise.[144] An option is to involve the preacher Mahmoud Dicko, one of most influential actors in Malian politics. He had reached out to Iyad ag Ghaly when Ansar Dine occupied northern Mali, and also tentatively in 2015 and 2016, to explore avenues for dialogue.[145] Malians explicitly name Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa as potential interlocutors, while France rules them out – this would cross Macron's red line of talking to al-Qaeda's top-level hierarchy. In a surprisingly political speech in February 2021, the director of the French Intelligence Agency DGSE elevated Iyad ag Ghali to France's primary enemy, calling him the "spiritual son of Osama Bin Laden" and "not someone who just thinks terrorism, but someone who practices it on a daily basis."[146] While the avenue of dialogue is worth exploring, there will be opposition from states, victims organisations, militias such as Dan na Ambassagou and NGOs concerned that implementation of Sharia law will undermine human rights.[147] Although Cronin argues that negotiations rarely end terrorism in the short term, they are:

> "*best thought of an essential element in a broader range of policies to marginalize a group, as conciliatory gestures or proposals that change the dynamics of support; to*

139 Aïssatou Diallo, 'Burkina Faso : « Face à la menace terroriste, nous ne faisons que colmater les brèches »', *Jeune Afrique*, 2 February 2021, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1114980/politique/burkina-faso-face-a-la-menace-terroriste-nous-ne-faisons-que-colmater-les-breches/.

140 Lindsay Shorr Newman, 'Do Terrorist Attacks Increase Closer to Elections?', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 1 (1 January 2013): 8–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.733247.

141 Diallo, 'Burkina Faso'

142 Olivier Dubois, 'Mali : dans la région de Mopti, une « paix » précaire avec les jihadistes', *Jeune Afrique*, 4 October 2020, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1052437/societe/mali-dans-la-region-de-mopti-une-paix-precaire-avec-les-jihadistes/; David Baché, 'Mali: cessez-le-feu temporaire entre jihadistes et chasseurs dozos dans le cercle de Niono', RFI, 16 March 2021, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210316-mali-cessez-le-feu-temporaire-entre-jihadistes-et-chasseurs-dozos-dans-le-cercle-de-niono.

143 Dubois, 'Mali'

144 'Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists', 24–26.

145 Nicolas Normand, 'Négocier avec les djihadistes : une solution pour le Mali ?', *Le Point*, 8 December 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/negocier-avec-les-djihadistes-une-solution-pour-le-mali-08-12-2020-2404709_3826.php.

146 Elise Vincent, 'Au Mali, les djihadistes « réfléchissent à des attaques en Europe », selon le patron de la DGSE', *Le Monde*, 2 February 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/02/au-mali-les-djihadistes-reflechissent-a-des-attaques-en-europe-selon-le-patron-de-la-dgse_6068492_3210.html.

147 Olivier Dubois, 'Mali : voyage en Pays Dogon au cœur de Dan Na Ambassagou', *Le Point*, 11 March 2021, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/voyage-en-pays-dogon-au-coeur-de-dan-na-ambassagou-11-03-2021-2417325_3826.php.

exploit differences, hive off factions, and enable members to leave or constituencies to turn elsewhere; to provide crucial information about how a group functions; and to reduce the degree and intensity of attacks over time, as groups lose momentum or make errors."[148]

5. Implosion or loss of group's public support (failure)

Terrorist groups, like armed insurgencies, often start in a fractured fashion and struggle to unite. As David Cunningham et al have illustrated, intrastate conflicts do not necessarily involve a dyadic relationship between the state and the opposition, and rebels often fight each other more than the government.[149] There has been increasing scholarly attention for the factors that cause rebel fragmentation and its effects on violence, but much research is based on nationalist or separatist movements. Some argue that terrorist groups can 'outbid' other factions by conducting moreattacks, and thus last longer.[150] Charles Mahoney assesses that the relative membership size at the time of the division is a determinant factor for the groups' duration. When groups splinter, the bigger group survives longer, whereas a schism into roughly similar size groups will lead to other factors such as strategy coming into play.[151] Next to internecine competition and conflict, terrorist groups can be self-defeating in many other ways. Cronin identifies four typical scenarios for group implosion: failing to navigate the transition between generations, succumbing to infighting among members, losing operational control and accepting amnesties or other exit pathways on offer.[152] Marginalisation is also a permanent risk, where the group loses public support. This can be through its ideology becoming outdated or irrelevant, a detachment from its grassroots sympathisers or targeting errors.[153]

The relationship between AQC and its affiliate is crucial factor. After all, if the insurgency disassociates itself (or is prized away) from al-Qaeda and its brand, more avenues would open in the field of dialogue and negotiation. Much has been written on AQIM's global versus local agenda, but a close review of Abbottabad letters indicate that AQC had a greater influence on AQIM than initially thought.[154] This appears to be corroborated by the French analysis, publicised after Droukdel's death, that the late emir was the third deputy to Ayman al-Zawahiri and a member of al-Qaeda's management committee.[155] Despite the rise of Islamic State, core AQIM and JNIM commanders have stayed loyal to al-Zawahiri, and the current structure appears solidly embedded in al-Qaeda. The new emir al-Annabi is an old hand and a strong proponent of the link to al-Qaeda, having personally announced the GSPC's allegiance to Bin Laden and his organisation on 25 January 2007. In an interview with journalist Wassim Nasr (nearly two years before he became emir), al-Annabi explained:

> *"JNIM is a non-dissociable part of AQIM, which in turn is a non-dissociable part of al-Qaeda central....Regarding the geographical reality and the military pressure on its*

148 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 71.
149 David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, 'It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (1 August 2009): 570–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709336458.
150 Joseph K. Young and Laura Dugan, 'Survival of the Fittest: Why Terrorist Groups Endure', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (24 April 2014), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/334.
151 Charles W. Mahoney, 'Splinters and Schisms: Rebel Group Fragmentation and the Durability of Insurgencies', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 2 (17 February 2020): 345–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1374254.
152 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 95.
153 Ibid., 111.
154 Skretting, 'Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara'.
155 Thomas Joscelyn, 'AQIM Emir Reportedly Killed by French Forces in Mali', FDD's Long War Journal, 6 June 2020, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/06/aqim-emir-reportedly-killed-by-french-forces-in-mali.php.

leaders and commanders, al Qaeda had to adapt with flexible command and control, therefore giving general and strategic guidelines, and then tactically it is up to each branch to reach toward achieving those guidelines depending on their realities…"[156]

From an internal perspective, fragmentation has been a central tenet of AQIM's development in the Sahel. There have been frequent personality clashes between jihadist commanders based far from the organisation's central command and free to conduct operations as they deem fit. Before Operation Serval, AQIM was beset by competition between Abu Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, which Alex Thurston has labelled a 'broken triangle' (with the leadership shura at the apex).[157] Ethnic divisions have been another factor, with MUJAO splitting from the Algerian-heavy AQIM cadre to establish a less Maghrebian organisation.[158] The ethnic focus of Katiba Macina could also pose a strategic dilemma for Koufa. Initially he focused on fighting the Malian state, and his rhetoric emphasised the multi-ethnic composition of Katiba Macina. Since becoming part of JNIM, Koufa has called for the Fulani in neighbouring countries to rise up in jihad, but excessive involvement in the cycle of interethnic conflict risks alienating non-Fulani fighters in his unit.[159] Nonetheless, as the defender of Fulani interests he competes directly with ISGS. The construct of JNIM as a loose federation of units probably allows AQIM to better absorb interethnic tensions, with each katiba free to recruit in the communities it operates in. It is difficult to gauge group dynamics in JNIM, but there are indications that responsibilities are clearly delineated. For example, in reply to informal probes exploring avenues for dialogue, Amadou Koufa referred his interlocutor straight through to his emir, Iyad ag Ghali, saying that if he wanted peace he needed to talk to the leader himself.[160] As a federation of katibas, JNIM has not yet suffered from fracturing, although defections to ISGS are a serious concern for the organisation.

An important split, not schism, concerns the establishment of ISGS. The group was established by one of the founders of MUJAO, after a leadership struggle in al-Murabitun erupted when its emir al-Tilemsi was killed by a French strike in December 2014. Adnan Abu Walid Al-Sahraoui pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State in May 2015. His oath was not recognised by Islamic State for a full fifteen months.[161] Other al-Murabitun commanders reaffirmed their loyalty to al-Qaeda, and the rise of ISGS probably triggered the establishment of JNIM in 2017. JNIM and ISGS initially cooperated, jointly conducting attacks against security forces in the broader Sahel, including the ambush of US Special Forces at Tongo Tongo in Niger. They also jointly attacked GATIA and MSA.[162] In summer 2019 the relationship soured and descended into open warfare.[163] Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss identified several drivers that led to conflict, including longstanding ideological differences between the two groups.[164] This was exacerbated in March 2019 when ISGS officially became a regional subunit of Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), situated

156 Nasr, 'Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership'.

157 Thurston, Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel, 75–85.

158 Perouse de Montclos, Une guerre perdue, 185.

159 Koufa specifically mentioned Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Benin and Cameroun (but not Mauritania & Guinee, where many Fulani also live). See also Benjamin Roger, 'Mali : Amadou Koufa, le visage peul d'Al-Qaïda', Jeune Afrique, 20 November 2018, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/665565/politique/mali-amadou-koufa-le-visage-peul-dal-qaida/.

160 'Speaking with the "Bad Guys": Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists', 15.

161 Hansen, Horn, Sahel and Rift, 91–97.

162 Caleb Weiss, 'Analysis: Conflict within a Conflict in Mali's Northern Menaka Region', FDD's Long War Journal, 4 May 2018, //www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/05/analysis-conflict-within-a-conflict-in-malis-northern-menaka-region.php.

163 Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida Finally Came to West Africa', Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 13, no. 7 (July 2020), https://ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/; Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali', The International Spectator 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 69–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1833566.

164 Nsaibia and Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly'.

in Nigeria, and Islamic State Central (in Syria) took over its media output. Continued defections from JNIM to ISGS also drove competition.[165] According to data from ACLED, violence between the two groups cost the lives of at least 600 fighters, from the start of hostilities until mid-2020.[166] Bearing in mind earlier mentioned disclaimers on insurgent numbers and fatality counts, this implies that JNIM and ISGS have probably lost more fighters to fratricide than to counter-terrorism operations since hostilities broke out between them. [167]

Al-Qaeda is acutely aware that its own movement can be self-defeating. Two examples are frequently referenced in its own historical narratives.[168] The first concerns the GIA, which was not at the time officially part of al-Qaeda, but considered kinsmen in jihad with many Arab Afghans. As a federation of different armed groups, like JNIM, it disintegrated violently into internal purges and fratricide. Already known for brutal violence, this became wanton in 1997 when whole villages were massacred. When the GIA subsequently condemned all the Algerian people for impiety, the propaganda outlet Al Ansar bulletin withdrew its support, as did last remnants of Algerian population.[169] A decade later, similar development befell al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under the leadership of al-Zarqawi. A large-scale and very violent insurgency developed in the Sunni heartlands around Faluja. Al-Zarqawi provoked a civil war with the Shia and fought American troops. Al Zawahiri, then Bin Laden's second in command, reminded his commander in Iraq that the main battleground remained the media, that support of the population was essential and that the "Mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve". This included 'unpalatable' scenes of slaughter (such as Al Zarqawi's videotaped beheadings of hostages) that alienated support.[170] These instructions were ignored, and al-Zarqawi's movement was defeated during the 'Anbar Awaking' by a combination of Sunni tribes (militias) that were turned against al-Qaeda (negotiation), leadership attrition (targeting & decapitation) and operational overreach.[171]

AQIM has been diligent to avoid mistakes (such as internal organisational splintering) and alienate the local population. When AQIM took control of northern Mali, Droukdel instructed his commanders not to rush the implementation of harsh Sharia punishments, as the population was not ready for them. At level of AQC, this policy was continued in the September 2013 General guidelines for the work of jihad. These stipulated avoiding killing and harming civilians, the targeting of mosques and markets, and avoiding confrontation with Christians, Sikhs and Hindus in Islamic countries.[172] Amadou Koufa has continued this policy. Although Katiba Macina's initial expansion was predicated on killing local leaders and intimidating the population, Koufa has been careful in his choice of targets, predominantly focusing on Malian security forces, and French and international troops. After a deadly attack on a market near Mopti, JNIM denied the

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165 Baldaro and Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception'.

166 Nsaibia and Weiss, 'The End of the Sahelian Anomaly'.

167 Defense analyst Michel Goya estimates that Operation Barkhane killed around ten fighters a month in 2017-2018, around 40 in 2019 and nearly 80 in 2020 (of which were 40 percent attributed to armed drones); see: Xavier Frere, 'Michel Goya, spécialiste des conflits armés : "Barkhane ne peut plus durer plus de deux ans"', Le Républicain Lorrain, 12 February 2021, https://www.republicain-lorrain.fr/defense-guerre-conflit/2021/02/09/michel-goya-specialiste-des-conflits-armes-barkhane-ne-peut-plus-durer-plus-de-deux-ans.

168 J. M. Lacey, *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 140–45.

169 Kepel, *Jihad*, 273.

170 'Letter from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Released by the ODNI on 11 October 2005)', 9 July 2005, https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/.

171 Andrew Phillips, 'How al Qaeda Lost Iraq', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 1 (1 March 2009): 64–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357710802649840; Brian Fishman, 'Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from al Qai'da in Iraq' (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 16 March 2009), https://ctc.usma.edu/dysfunction-and-decline-lessons-learned-from-inside-al-qaida-in-iraq/.

172 Donald Holbrook and Cerwyn Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*, 1 edition (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–57.

strike, stressed that it only targeted 'occupying forces' and disavowed any attacks against Muslim masses, and also against Christians and churches.[173] Another statement justified JNIM's choice not to implement Sharia based punishments for crimes, arguing that during war this does not serve the greater interest of Muslims and can push people into the arms of the enemy.[174] When more than 130 civilians were killed in Solhan, Burkino Faso, ISGS accused JNIM of responsibility for the massacre, which was strenuously denied by the latter.[175] Although in this case indications do point to JNIM involvement – and could be due to a loss of control of the (child) fighters – JNIM and ISGS follow a different approach.

While all terrorist groups carry the seeds of their own destruction, the Islamic State and its affiliates are particularly prone to self-defeating actions. This is inherent to both their ideology and the means employed to further their goals. Like the GIA and AQI before them, Islamic State doctrine resembles takfirism. This radical current within Salafi-jihadism, labels Muslims apostates (rather than just sinners) if they do not adhere to certain aspects of Islamic law, and subsequently judges that they have forfeited their right to property and life.[176] This uncompromising theological approach impacts how ISGS interacts with the local population, but also how it treats dissenters within its own ranks (and competes with factions such as JNIM). It elicits a natural predisposition to tyranny and internal purges, with dissenters risking the takfir label and its lethal consequences, as illustrated by the GIA and AQI. While there is no evidence yet of violent internal ISGS purges, the language towards AQIM is uncompromising, accusing them of blasphemy.[177] This stands in stark contrast to al-Qaeda's more reconciliatory tone vis-a-vis its upstart, keeping the door open for compromise and defectors to return.[178] Second, hardline policies can antagonise and alienate the local populace, whether it involves a brutal implementation of Sharia - going against the cultural grain in many communities - or the upending of traditional power structures like the Djowros, the statutory Fulani upper class. IGSG has also instigated a policy of collective punishment against civilians, with scores killed in different villages.[179] Wanton violence instils fear but also repels, and where al-Qaeda instrumentalises violence, IS glorifies it. ISGS is more 'extreme' in many aspects than AQIM or JNIM, making both compromise impossible and increasing the chances of the movement derailing into tyranny and barbarism.

From a policy perspective, it pays to investigate how terrorist groups can be nudged into self-defeat and implosion, rather than expending all effort in trying to militarily ground them down. For the Sahel this leads to two questions. First, can internal strife and internecine conflict be exacerbated by selective targeting? At the 2020 G5 Pau Summit, the coalition decided to focus on fighting ISGS, and only in November of that year shifted its efforts to combating JNIM. But the US considers JNIM a greater long-term threat to US and Western interests, arguing that it possesses a more numerous and effective fighting force that has pushed ISGS out of Mali and into other regions in the Sahel.[180] It is unclear on which factors the G5 based their decision to

173 'JNIM Denies Attack on Dogo Market, Disavows Strikes on Churches' (SITE Intelligence Group, 26 February 2020).

174 'JNIM Religious Scholar Dispels Notion It Ignores Punishments Required by Islamic Law' (SITE Intelligence Group, 30 January 2020).

175 'IS Accuses JNIM of Solhan Massacre in Burkina Faso Despite Denial, Distributes Printed Copies of Naba Newspaper in Afghanistan' (SITE Intelligence Group, 25 June 2021).

176 See for example: Eli Alshech, 'The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism : A Historical and Doctrinal Analysis', *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 4 (22 September 2014): 419–52, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-00214p04.the foundation of many of today's (most notorious

177 Baldaro and Diall, 'The End of the Sahelian Exception'.

178 Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 99.

179 'Niger: les attaques de masse contre les civils, nouvelle méthode sauvage des jihadistes', RFI, 24 March 2021, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210324-niger-les-attaques-de-masse-contre-les-civils-nouvelle-m%C3%A9thode-sauvage-des-djihadistes.

prioritise ISGS, and whether they included the hypothesis that the group is more prone to self-destruction in their decision. Second, there are a myriad of ways to ferment group division, stoke internal dissent and stimulate jihadist fratricide. Their targeting mistakes can also be publicised and amplified. Traditionally, these activities lie in the realm of intelligence and covert action. This is a separate academic discipline, and there is little open source information on whether and how AQIM and JNIM are being manipulated in this way. Academia currently has much interest in the drivers and effects of al-Qaeda and Islamic State competition, but ideally this would be combined with more historical research in cases where terrorist groups were successfully manipulated.

6. Achievement of the group's aims (success)

According to Cronin, Europeans generally build their reasoning on the assumption that terrorism does not succeed in the long run, while Americans, still traumatised by 9/11, often consider that the uniquely dangerous phenomenon generally succeeds.[181] The truth is somewhere in the middle, as some terrorist movements have achieved their goals. Success remains dependent on perceptions and the set objectives, with a group's goals often differing on the tactical, operational and strategic level, with achievements on one level potentially contradicting other goals and leading to ultimate failure.[182] Max Abrahams conducted an empirical study on the achievements of all 28 terrorist groups listed on the US Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) list. Data suggested that they rarely achieved their policy objectives, with those attacking civilian rather than military ones systematically failing to achieve their objectives.[183] In a follow-up piece, he argued that escalation to terrorism leads states to dig in, and not concede.[184] Many academics thus conclude that terrorism is not a particular promising avenue for change, and Cronin's data points to less than 5 percent succeeding in fully achieving their aims (by their own standards).[185] Nonetheless, a too strict reckoning whether groups fully achieve their stated objectives is unfair; most political actors seldom do either - unless they are remarkably unambitious. The criteria for success differ significantly for insurgencies and groups following a terrorist strategy. For jihadist insurgents the goal is to govern territory, but as Hansen acknowledges, "in Africa (full) territorial control by a jihadist organization has always resulted in a foreign intervention, as regional powers and in some cases international actors simply do not tolerate territorial control by jihadists."[186] Nations remain wary of sanctuaries forming magnets for foreign fighters and constituting staging areas for terrorist attacks on their homelands.[187] The consequences of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan will undoubtedly also figure in the debate to reduce troops in the Sahel. From this perspective, ultimate success for jihadist insurgents will probably remain elusive. For a strategy of terrorism, objectives are more modest, with terrorist attacks meant to provoke political change. Since its inception, AQIM has been unable to execute a terrorist attack outside Africa, despite repeated statements identifying France as its main enemy and AQCprioritising the

180 Warner, 'A View from the CT Foxhole'; 'East Africa Counterterrorism Operation; North & West Africa Counterterrorism Operation' (Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 1 July 2020), 48.
181 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 73.
182 Sarah V. Marsden, 'Successful Terrorism: Framework and Review', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4, no. 2 (1 May 2012): 134–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2011.582705.
183 Max Abrahms, 'Why Terrorism Does Not Work', *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 42–78.
184 Max Abrahms, 'Does Terrorism Really Work? Evolution in the Conventional Wisdom since 9/11', *Defence and Peace Economics* 22, no. 6 (1 December 2011): 583–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/10242694.2011.635954.no. 6 (1 December 2011
185 Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends*, 81.
186 Hansen, *Horn, Sahel and Rift*, 37.
187 Sergei Boeke and Daan Weggemans, 'Destination Jihad: Why Syria and Not Mali', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - the Hague*, 10 April 2013, https://icct.nl/publication/destination-jihad-why-syria-and-not-mali/.

'far enemy' over the 'near enemy'.[188] The prevention of terrorist attacks at home remains, after all, an important argument underpinning the French intervention in the Sahel. It is unclear why AQIM has not conducted attacks on mainland France, while its predecessor GIA, did. Was AQIM unwilling or incapable? Despite numerous reports (unverified) of foiled attacks in the West, there have been no high-profile court cases or convictions. JNIM statements have recently played on this theme, noting that no terrorist attacks occurred in France, that the group only opposed the French military 'occupation' in the Sahel, and that both sides should let each other live in peace.[189] This, however, does not rhyme with a statement released by AQIM two months earlier, accusing President Macron of blasphemy. It called upon all Muslims to kill those who insult the Prophet and lauded the actions of the Chechen 'martyr' who beheaded French teacher Samuel Paty.[190] While JNIM might appear preoccupied with its insurgency against the 'near enemy', AQIM still wants to terrorise the 'far enemy'.

Conclusion

Despite strong state commitment to repression and decapitation, AQIM and JNIM do not appear on these pathways of decline. JNIM has clearly transitioned to a fully-fledged insurgency and semi-territorial presence, but the policy response does not follow conventional COIN doctrine. Hunting 'terrorist' groups through search and destroy operations and leadership targeting might bring tactical successes, but the continued growth of AQIM and JNIM's operations necessitate a reassessment of the strategic effects attained by these operations. Perhaps JNIM has not expanded despite the military operations targeting it, but rather as a direct result of them. McChrystal's 'insurgent math' indicates that abuses and collateral damage generate new grievances and fuel local resentment. As such, targeting errors and Malian exactions have undoubtedly boosted jihadist recruitment. Furthermore, as Cronin noted, in prolonged wars four common patterns play out: means become ends, tactics become strategy, boundaries are blurred and the search for a perfect peace replaces reality.[191] This applies also to Mali. Sahel scholars resist comparisons to Afghanistan, rightly identifying fundamental contextual differences.[192] For war scholars, however, the conceptual parallels are important. In both cases, the foreign intervention has propped up a state that has traditionally struggled to impose its authority across its territory, and supported a government widely perceived as ineffective and corrupt. Many counterinsurgency lessons can be learned from Afghanistan, although it will always remain debatable whether failure was caused by bad policy, good policy implemented badly, or the intractability of the problem at large. Military strikes against AQIM and JNIM undoubtedly remain necessary to keep some pressure on the groups, but if the soldiers' crude metaphor of "mowing the lawn" is not accompanied by policies that de-escalate and remove grievances, it is an activity without end. The French recalibration from Operation Barkhane to a new operational setting offer a unique opportunity to reflect on lessons identified and adapt the strategy accordingly.

There are currently no indications that the Sahelian states are able to reduce their insurgencies

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188 Sergei Boeke, 'Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 914–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208280.
189 'JNIM Claims Suicide Bombing, Rocket Attack in Retaliation for French Drone Strike on Alleged Wedding Party in Mali' (SITE Intelligence Group, 14 January 2021).
190 'AQIM Demands Physical Violence and Death over Economic Harm to France in Revenge for Prophet Insults' (SITE Intelligence Group, 2 November 2020).
191 Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'The "War on Terrorism": What Does It Mean to Win?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 2 (23 February 2014): 174–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.850423.
192 Romain Malejacq and Adam Sandor, 'Sahelistan? Military Intervention and Patronage Politics in Afghanistan and Mali', *Civil Wars* 22, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 543–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1813405.

to a manageable level, let alone accommodate or defeat them. The termination of Operation Barkhane and the French troop reduction will undoubtedly be portrayed as a success by and for the jihadists. Of the Sahelian countries, only Algeria and Mauritania have avoided a (recent) jihadist insurgency and have managed to keep terrorist violence low.[193] AQIM has not given up in Algeria, as many of its public statements support the enduring protests against the government and attempt to 'keep the flame of jihad burning'.[194] Nonetheless, despite sporadic attacks against army patrols and installations, the level of violence has reduced enormously since a wave of suicide attacks – some 34 in total - between 2007 and 2012.[195] In a 2017 interview with AQAP magazine INSPIRE, Droukdel discussed the issue of recruitment and admitted "the Algerian front suffers from a rarity – and at times a complete absence – of those willing to support and assist, whether nationally or internationally".[196] The Algerian government's counter-terrorism policy has evolved significantly since the country's brutal civil war, when two opposing factions within the military regime – éradicateurs and *dialoguistes* – exemplified the policies of repression and negotiation. Although Algeria espouses a repressive counter-terrorist stance – with no room for dialogue - it has at times successfully included reconciliation and amnesty policies. A comprehensive analysis on Algerian counter-terrorism policies – including the controversial role of the DRS – would provide useful insights for the Sahelian countries currently struggling with terrorism.

The pathway of negotiation has still been underexplored by France and the Sahelian states. The jihadists' association with the al-Qaeda brand and organisation makes it difficult for states for negotiate – although al-Qaeda appears prepared to do so. On the French side, the fight has from the beginning been framed in absolutist terms, emphasizing that one fights terrorists and does not talk to them. Even the military do not identify their adversaries as insurgents or violent extremists, but call them GATs - *Groupes Armés Terroristes*. The taboo on strategic talks with AQIM and JNIM will likely remain, with strong international pressure to resist negotiations. If, incidentally, all countries extended this taboo to tactical negotiations and paying ransoms for hostages, this would severely curtail AQIM's revenues and financial staying power. The Sahelian states' open attitude to bottom up negotiations has significantly reduced violence in several districts in Central Mali and Western Burkina Faso. But without a coordinated follow-up by governments and NGOs – in the field of governance, justice and development – these truces risk cementing the jihadists' control over local communities. On a strategic level, al-Qaeda remains wary of laying down its arms and being drawn into 'the rotten game of democracy', to then be thrown into prison just as "they did with the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt."[197] Still, although negotiations alone are unlikely to solve the conflict, dialogue – behind the screens - could de-escalate and lead to a better understanding of where potential solutions lie.

Historically, many terrorist groups have suffered from infighting, internal distrust and strategic mistakes. Violence between JNIM and ISGS has already weakened both organisations, and in concert with military strikes and dialogue, this could contribute to their decline. Nudging them further in this pathway is difficult and inherently political, requiring a detailed understanding of the local context. Western governments already struggle with the political aspects of their assistance to Sahelian countries – both military and civilian – preferring a technical, apolitical approach. In addition, governments have to contend with their own pathways. Institutions, procedures and-

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193 Malek Bachir and Akram Kharief, 'ANALYSIS: The Slow Death of al-Qaeda in Algeria', Middle East Eye, 2 February 2018, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-slow-death-al-qaeda-algeria.
194 'AQIM Official Confirms Group's Continued Existence in Algeria, Reiterates Support to Algerian Protestors' (SITE Intelligence Group, 29 November 2019).
195 Warner, Chapin, and Weiss, 'Desert Drift, Declining Deadliness'.
196 'Interview with Abu Musab Abdul Wadood (Droukdel)' (INSPIRE Media publications, 13 August 2017).
197 From the writings of al-Zawahiri: Holbrook and Moore, *Al-Qaeda 2.0*, 266.

cultures form inconspicuous but often insurmountable rivets that channel decision-making.[198] Western security and development organisations appear ill-suited to understand the micro-local political complexities of the insurgencies in the Sahel and too stove piped to be able to formulate an integrated policy response. For their part, Sahelian governmental bureaucracies - a fraction in size of their Western counterparts – cannot deliver the 'good governance' that donors and partners hope will provide the solution to the crises engulfing the Sahel.[199] As the US commander of AFRICOM heard from an African leader, 'a drowning man will accept any hand'. It is clear that the hand offered constitutes a security-heavy counter-terrorism approach, but that AQIM and JNIM have only grown in strength. It is therefore time to reflect on the viability of other pathways, since AQIM and JNIM's current trajectory does not point to their decline.[200]

198 Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, 'The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses', Studies in Conflict & Terrorism (29 March 2019): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/105761 0X.2019.1592356.
199 Alex Thurston, 'The Hollowness of "Governance Talk" in and about the Sahel', Text, ISPI, 12 April 2021, https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026.
200 'Statement of General Stephen J. Townsend, United States Army, Commander United States Africa Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee', 30 January 2020. https://www.africom.mil/document/32925/2020-posture-statement-to-congress.

Appendix 1

Individuals targeted by counter-terrorism operations

Name	Role/position	Date captured or killed
Abdelhamid Abou Zeid (Mohamed Ghadir)	Commander AQIM Katiba Tarik Ibn Zaid	Killed, 25 February 2013
Omar Ould Hamaha	Head military Operations MUJAO	Killed, 8 March 2014
Abubakr al-Nasri (Abu Bakr al-Masri)	Leader al-Muribatun	Killed, 10 April 2014
Haroun ag Saïd (Abu Jemal)	Leadership cadre Ansar Dine, confidant Iyad ag Ghali	Killed, 24 April 2014
Ahmed al-Tilemsi (Abderrahmane Ould el-Amar)	Co-founder MUJAO, Leader al-Muribatun	Killed, 11 December 2014
Malick Ag Wanasnat;	(former col FAMA), close ally Iyad ag Ghaly.	Killed, 14 February 2018
Mohammed Ould Nouini (Abu Hassan al-Ansari)	Leader Al-Muribatun	Killed, 14 February 2018
Sidi Mohamed Ag Ougana (Abu Habib)	Preacher	Killed, 14 February 2018
Abdallah Ag Oufata (Abou Oumar)	Former Mayor of Boughessa	Killed, 14 February 2018
Cheikh Abou Ahmad al-Fullani	A commander in katiba Macina	Killed, 14 February 2018
Attaher Ag Ihadou	A commander of Ansar Dine	Arrested, 24 November 2016
Djamel Okacha (Yahya Abu Hammam)	AQIM second in command	Killed, 21 February 2019
Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (Seifallah Ben Hassine)	Founder Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia	Killed, 21 February 2019
Yehya Abu al-Humam	AQIM commander	Killed, 21 February 2019
Abu Abderrahmane Al-Maghribi (Ali Maychou)	JNIM second in command	Killed, 8 October 2019
Abou Yahia al-Jazairi	JNIM chief of operations	Killed, 6 April 2020
Mohamed el Mrabat	Local commander ISGS	Arrested, 19 May 2020
Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud)	Emir (overal commander) AQIM	Killed, 3 June 2020
Bah Ag Moussa	Ansar Dine second in command	Killed, 10 November 2020

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About the Author

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