



**PULLING APART AT THE SEAMS:
HOW THE SMUGGLING AND NARCOTICS TRADE
ARE HELPING TO RESHAPE GOVERNANCE
IN THE SAHEL**

Andrew Lebovich

12 January 2015

The jihadist takeover of northern Mali in mid-2012 caught many regional observers by surprise. For years, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and later the AQIM splinter group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO in French), were seen largely as smugglers, criminals, and “narco-traffickers.” This perception led to a curious process by which some analysts dismissed the risk posed by these groups, while others (chiefly, Western governments) developed a near obsession with the prospect that money from smuggling operations, particularly drugs, would finance jihadist activity in the Sahara and Sahel.¹ While regional experts have since aggressively critiqued the notion of extensive ties between Sahelian militant groups and smuggling, particularly in the narcotics trade,² it is nonetheless important to assess the extent of these connections and how they fit into a larger regional context.

The purported link between cocaine trade and militant groups gained traction among outside observers due to the appearance of both in northern Mali at approximately the same time. Cocaine first began circulating through and in northern Mali in the early 2000s, while the group that would become AQIM, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), achieved notorious renown in 2003 with the kidnapping of 32 Europeans in southern Algeria.³ Analysts also focused extensively on cocaine, despite the large circulation through and within the region of cannabis products, amphetamines, and other drugs.⁴

However, the rise of smuggling networks and economies in the region long preceded the arrival of jihadist militancy. As anthropologist Judith Scheele and others have noted, smuggling in northern Mali began in the 1960s and 1970s with the trade in foodstuffs, especially powdered milk and pasta produced in Algeria, which was then re-sold in Mali and northern Niger.⁵ In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, illicit or semi-illicit (grey market) trades emerged, including the smuggling of subsidized petrol from Libya and Algeria into the Sahara, as well as the two-way movement of weapons, counterfeit or contraband cigarettes, and people.⁶ This smuggling was itself part of an older process in a region that has always depended on the circulation of people and goods for survival.

As AQIM began operating in the Sahara, their commanders, especially Mokhtar Belmokhtar

¹See for instance “Africa Under Attack: Drug trafficking has acquired a whole new dimension,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, December 8, 2009. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/about-unodc/speeches/2009-08-12-africa-under-attack.html>; also see Dario Cristiani, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Africa-to-Europe Narco-Trafficking Connection,” Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, November 24, 2010. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37207#.VFvwohlawrw](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37207#.VFvwohlawrw)

²One particularly astute analyst of the relationships between various groups and illicit trade in the region is Wolfram Lacher. See Wolfram Lacher, “Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel,” West Africa Commission on Drugs, August 19, 2013.

³“German plea over Sahara tourists.” BBC News. 12 May 2003. BBC. Web 7 Nov. 2014 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3020131.stm>>

⁴Since October 2014, security forces in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania have reportedly seized several tons of cannabis, suggesting that at least some narcotics trafficking continues to operate in the region. Authorities in Niger also seized nearly 6 kg of cocaine at the main airport in Niamey, Niger in April and December 2014, as well as a larger amount of cannabis. See “Mauritanie: L’armée abat deux trafiquants de drogue près de la frontière algérienne,” Koaci, December 19, 2014. <http://koaci.com/mauritanie-larmee-abat-deux-trafiquants-drogue-pres-frontiere-algerienne-97313.html>; “Burkina Faso: Plus de 7 tonnes de chanvre indien saisis à la frontière du Mali,” Koaci, October 20, 2014. <http://koaci.com/burkina-faso-plus-tonnes-chambre-indien-saisis-frontiere-mali-97349.html>; Aishu Manga, “3,5 kg de cocaïne saisie à l’aéroport de Niamey,” Sahélien.com, April 15, 2014; Omar H. Saley and Maria Coulibaly, “Niger: La police a saisi plus de 2 kg de cocaïne à l’aéroport de Niamey,” Sahélien.com, December 23, 2014; Olivier Fourt, “Niger: Madama, base de la lutte contre les trafics,” Radio France Internationale, January 1, 2015. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150101-niger-france-madama-barkhane-le-drian-libye/>

⁵See Judith Scheele, “Circulations marchandes au Sahara: entre licite et illicite,” Hérodote, 2011/3 (n142).

⁶See for instance “Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future,” The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, January 2014.

and Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, forged close social and economic relations with local populations. Belmokhtar, an Algerian from the pre-Saharan city of Ghardaia, adapted particularly well to this environment, marrying a Bérabiche Arab woman from a prominent family in the Timbuktu region.⁷ Their groups additionally took part in the economic circuits of the region, ingratiating themselves by reportedly paying more than market price for goods, conducting outreach to local populations in the form of gift-giving, and even providing medical care on some occasions.⁸

These and other jihadist figures also integrated themselves into the local illicit economy, which was quickly growing distorted with an influx of new cash. Part of this influx was certainly from the drug trade, which grew significantly after 2004 and 2005,⁹ and may have reached its peak with the infamous “Air Cocaine” incident, in which a burnt-out husk of a jumbo jet was found in the desert north of Gao, having purportedly discharged a multi-ton cargo of Latin American cocaine.¹⁰ However, much of the cash influx can be attributed to ransom payments to AQIM (and after late 2011 MUJAO as well), with some estimates as high as \$100 million since 2003.¹¹ This money passed through the hands of local interlocutors involved in the negotiations process, many of whom were close to then-President Amadou Toumani Touré. In the latter years of his presidency, and especially after a renewed outbreak of the Tuareg rebellions in 2006, Touré delegated enormous governance duties in the north to local notables (some of whom later became rebels or returned to rebellion) as well as militias recruited on ethnic grounds. This strategy of “remote control,” to use the words of the International Crisis Group, when combined with the large amounts of money suddenly flowing into the region, weakened and destabilized governance in northern Mali in the years preceding the 2012 Mali crisis.¹²

AQIM, and later MUJAO, benefitted from this destabilized environment, which they also helped shape. In 2009, for instance, AQIM fighters murdered the Bérabiche Arab commander, Colonel Lamana Ould Bou, in his home in Timbuktu, supposedly after a failed arms deal.¹³ Ould Bou was a former rebel from the 1990s, and deeply enmeshed in narcotics trafficking. He was also very close to the then-head of Mali’s state security services, Mami Coulibaly.¹⁴

However, AQIM was far from the only factor in these economic circuits. Money from the growing illicit trades helped fuel electoral conflict in towns like Bourem and in the Gao region,¹⁵ propelling the rise of formerly subordinate or “vassal” Arab and Tuareg groups like the Bérabiche, al-Amhar (sometimes written as “Lamhar”) Arabs from the Tilemsi Valley in the Gao region, and Imghad Tuareg.¹⁶ This led to growing conflict in voter rolls and

⁷Morten Boas, “Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM’s Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali,” CTC Sentinel, April 28, 2014. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/guns-money-and-prayers-aqims-blueprint-for-securing-control-of-northern-mali>

⁸Martin Vogl and Rukmini Callimachi, “Candy, Cash, al-Qaida implants itself in Africa,” Associated Press, December 4, 2011; Author interviews with Timbuktu notables, Bamako, Mali, February 2013; author interview with former U.S. Special Operations official, March 2012.

⁹See “Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali”; on Air Cocaine, see Wolfram Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012.

¹⁰Tim Gaynor and Tiemoko Diallo, “Al Qaeda linked to rogue aviation network,” Reuters, January 13, 2010.

¹¹Imad Mesdoua, “Algeria: North Africa’s Reluctant Policeman,” African Arguments, September 26, 2014. <http://africanarguments.org/2014/09/26/algeria-north-africas-reluctant-policeman-by-imad-mesdoua/>

¹²International Crisis Group, “Mali: Avoiding Escalation,” Africa Report N189, July 18, 2012, pp. 7-8. <http://www.crisisgroup.org//media/Files/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation-english.pdf>

¹³Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict.”

¹⁴International Crisis Group 7.

¹⁵Ibid 4.

¹⁶On the complex and changing ethnic and social dynamics in northern Mali, see Charles Grémont, André Marty, Rhissa Ag Mossa, and Younoussa Hamara Touré, *Les liens sociaux au Nord-Mali: Entre fleuve et*

also in actual violence, as Imghad Tuareg increasingly challenged prominent members of the Ifoghas and Idnan clans, while Bérabiche and Tilemsi Arabs repeatedly challenged the Kounta people.¹⁷ Many of these conflicts, over politics, trade routes, and the past, were exacerbated with the return of Tuareg fighters from Libya, though the Libya conflict did not “cause” the rebellion in northern Mali as many suggested at the time.¹⁸

The leaders of these militias, all former rebels who had integrated into the army in the 1990s (Ould Bou, Colonel Mohamed Ould Meydou, and Colonel El Hajj Ag Gamou) were all rumored to be traffickers,¹⁹ though that is a common refrain when talking about prominent figures in northern Mali that rarely comes with evidence. Still, while Ag Gamou’s fighters would stay aligned with the Malian government during the 2012 rebellion, some fighters from Ould Meydou’s group and other Tilemsi Arabs quickly joined MUJAO, which was itself founded in part by Sultan Ould Badi, a man of partial Arab descent.²⁰ The presence within MUJAO of Ould Badi, known previously as a trafficker, as well as other reputed Tilemsi Arab traffickers like Cherif Ould Taher, led some observers to see the group as a front of sorts for economic activities.²¹ However, others have argued that the group’s behavior before and after the fall of northern Mali demonstrated a clear commitment to jihadist ideologies and methods,²² and Ould Badi’s fighters have been among the most present in the recrudescence of violence in northern Mali in recent months.²³

This brings us to two challenging issues regarding our understandings of militancy and trafficking in the Sahara-Sahel, and more particularly in northern Mali. On the one hand, militant groups like AQIM were deeply involved in some aspects of the illicit trade in northern Mali, benefiting from the trade as well as highly decentralized governance. However, despite many accounts of AQIM involvement in smuggling, few have ever been truly substantiated. Indeed, informed observers have suggested that AQIM’s involvement in smuggling was largely limited to taxation and possibly protecting convoys, rather than running drugs or even cigarettes themselves.²⁴ Indeed, Belmokhtar, nicknamed “Mr. Marlboro” in the press for his supposed involvement in the cigarette trade, vehemently rejected those charges in a 2011 interview.²⁵ Moreover, a recent book by the Mauritanian journalist Lemine Ould Mohamed Salem, who traveled extensively throughout northern Mali during the jihadist occupation of the north in 2012, argues that there is in fact no evidence to substantiate charges of his involvement in drug and cigarette trafficking, but rather that he was more closely involved

dunes (Paris: Karthala, 2004).

¹⁷Scheele refers to this series of conflicts as the “war between the Arabs and the Kounta” who are an Arabic-speaking group known for their religious leadership as well as prominence in trade. See Judith Scheele, “Tribus, États et fraude: la région frontalière algéro-malienne,” *Études Rurales*, 2009/2 (n184).

¹⁸For a thorough discussion of the Malian rebellion and its history and causes, see Andy Morgan, “The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali,” Think Africa Press, February 6, 2012. <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/causes-uprising-northern-mali-tuareg>

¹⁹Author interview with Malian security officials based in northern Mali, Bamako, February 2013.

²⁰On Ould Badi’s role and background, see Mohamed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma’ali, “Al-Qaeda and its allies in the Sahel and the Sahara,” Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, April 30, 2012.

²¹See Lacher, “Organized Crime and Conflict.”

²²Andrew Lebovich, “Trying to Understand MUJWA,” al-Wasat, August 22, 2012. <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/08/22/trying-to-understand-mujwa/>; also see Andrew Lebovich, “The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali,” CTC Sentinel, June 25, 2013. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali>

²³For instance, Ould Badi claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that killed four UN Peacekeepers in Mali in September.

²⁴Abdelkader Abderahhmane, “The Sahel: A Crossroads Between Criminality and Terrorism,” IFRI, October 12, 2012. <http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=7401>

²⁵The interview, conducted by the Mauritanian Agence Nouakchott d’Information in November 2011, no longer appears to be available online. However, I wrote about the interview in detail at the time, see Andrew Lebovich, “AQIM’s Mokhtar Belmokhtar Speaks Out,” al-Wasat, November 21, 2011. <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/aqims-mokhtar-belmokhtar-speaks-out/>

in smuggling fuel and foodstuffs.²⁶ Government officials have also suggested that in the past, as much as 90% of AQIM's finances came from ransom payments,²⁷ rather than trafficking, indicating significantly less militant involvement in illicit trade than many thought and continue to think.

The other problem is the very complexity of social and economic relationships in the north, especially as it relates to trafficking. In addition to being a necessary form of economic activity, trafficking has licit and illicit cargoes, while also allowing individuals or groups of people increased social, economic, and political independence.²⁸ Moreover, the ubiquity of trade and different ways of understanding in northern Mali mean that traders and traffickers do not always carry the same moral weight as Western audiences give them. In her anthropological work in northern Mali on the smuggling trade, Scheele noted that while the trade in drugs is seen as haram in ways that other trades are not, traders still move easily between "licit" and "illicit" smuggling.²⁹ She also recounts the interaction between a trafficker and his cousin, another "businessman" known for his religious values. When the latter explained to Scheele why the former was not "beyond saving," he argued, in Scheele's words, that "Drug smuggling is thus a crime against humanity, whereas not praying is a crime against God, and thus infinitely worse."³⁰ This latter point provides insight into the overlapping identities present in the region, and the ways in which someone could perhaps be an observant Muslim, or a jihadist, as well as a smuggler or "criminal" in Western parlance. We should thus proceed with caution in making anachronistic or skewed judgments and analyses of events and allegiances in very different cultural and political environments.

Borders drawn across the Sahara disrupted old trade routes, and gave rise to others. However, the centrality of smuggling and cosmopolitan travel and trade to the economy and social fabric in northern Mali present immense concerns and potential pitfalls for policymakers. It is important for analysts to gather as much information as feasible on these networks so as to avoid past mistakes, when aid, governance responsibility, and lucrative contracts fell into the hands of "businessmen" who sped the rot of governance in northern Mali. These concerns are particularly important amid ongoing peace talks in Algeria between the Malian government and the country's armed groups.³¹ It is also vital that regional and Western military actors, especially the French Armed Forces, understand the complexity of these networks, so as to avoid killing civilians who find themselves in or near militant or smuggling convoys.³² This

²⁶ Walid Mebarek, "Dans les coulisses du terrorisme sahélien," *El Watan* (Algeria), October 18, 2014. http://www.elwatan.com/international/dans-les-coulisses-du-terrorisme-sahelien-18-10-2014-274717_112.php; Lamine Ould M. Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara: Sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2014).

²⁷ Jemal Oumar and Bakari Gueye, "Ransom payment behind aid worker's release, terrorists say," *Magharebia*, July 20, 2012. http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/07/20/feature-01

²⁸ See for instance David Lewis and Adama Diarra, "Special Report: In the land of 'gangster-jihadis,'" *Reuters*, October 25, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/25/us-mali-crisis-crime-idUSBRE89O07Y20121025>

²⁹ Judith Scheele, "Garage or Caravanserail: Saharan Connectivity in Al-Khalil, Northern Mali," in James McDougall and Judith Scheele, eds., *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012) 230.

³⁰ Ibid 231.

³¹ For an in-depth discussion of the stakes and background of these talks, see International Crisis Group, "Mali: Last Chance in Algiers," *Africa Briefing N104*, November 18, 2014. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/west-africa/mali/b104-mali-last-chance-in-algiers.aspx>

³² In mid-October, the government of France announced that an airstrike and raid in northeastern Niger targeting a "terrorist convoy" had killed a number of militants. However, local notables have claimed that the raid inadvertently killed at least two civilians, a claim that the French military had not acknowledged at the time of writing. See Mohamed Diop and Claude-Olivier Vol-luz, "Niger: des habitants accusent l'armée française de 'bavure,'" *Le Courrier du Sahara*, November 2, 2014. <http://www.lecourrierdusahara.com/index.php/alaune/1509-niger-des-habitants-accusent-larmee-francaise-davoir-commis-une-bavure.html>

is not an idle concern; the establishment of French military bases across the Sahel under the auspices of Operation Barkhane, including in Madama in northeastern Niger near the smuggling hub of southern Libya, appear to be aimed at least in part at targeting smuggling networks.³³ As Saharan populations have suffered enormously due to conflict and instability in the region, everything possible must be done to prevent a deterioration of the situation.

About the Author: Andrew Lebovich is a PhD Student in African History at Columbia University. His doctoral research focuses on religion, politics, and society in 19th and 20th Century North Africa and the Sahel, and he has conducted research in Senegal, Mali, and Niger.

³³Fourt, “Niger: Madama, base de la lutte contre les trafics.”