

Title: Militarizing Peace or Expanding Transnational Security Clientelism? Armed Group Counter-terrorist practices in Mali

Abstract: Practices to counter violent extremism in West Africa are transforming relations amongst global/local, state/non-state, and formal/informal actors. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso in 2016-2017 (and informed by fieldwork from previous years), this paper examines how Sahelian actors are drawn into transnational relations of security clientelism, and how these new relationships impact understandings of the legitimacy of using violent coercion to secure peace. The paper argues that non-state actor armed groups from the Sahel are becoming increasingly incentivized by global actors and discourses to think and practice forms of coercion that are premised on the categorical binary of terrorist/non-terrorist. While in practice such a binary is ephemeral, situational, and a function of international conventions distanced from the complex political-economies of security in the Sahel, transnational security clientelism is not *militarizing* security relations amongst Sahelian populations so much as sedimenting martial qualities long associated with the practical occupation of ‘living by the gun’ (Debos 2017) by reinforcing such categorical thinking. The paper examines two cases: the circumstances surrounding the murder of Cheikh ag Aoussa – a leading figure of the HCUA, and close associate of Iyad ag Ghali; and interactions between international actors and armed groups in Mali as the former seek to stay cases of violent extremism and to locate armed Islamist fighters by working through and with the latter. These cases demonstrate how appropriating and resisting attachment to such clientelist relationships come with significant risks of violence, and has the effect of breaking down the atmosphere of social trust between communities connected in spaces of intervention.

Introduction

The academic study of militarism and militarization has experienced a rebirth in recent years, notably after the attacks in New York and Washington D.C. the 11th September 2001 (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012; Bacevich 2013). This article contributes to debates on the politics of the War against Terrorism in Africa and its relation to the continent’s supposed militarization. Instead of examining Western actors’ influence on African governments to support counter-terrorism efforts, for example through the implementation of anti-terror legislation (Whitaker

2008), or its impacts on the ability and resilience of civil society organizations to resist state coercion and surveillance from new counter-terrorism measures (Lind and Howell 2010), I examine how global counter-terrorism discourses and practices shape the violent actions of armed groups on the continent. In doing so, the article also sheds light on an under-explored but critical aspect of the current conflict in Mali by examining relations of power amongst military interveners and different sets of non-state or para-state armed actors operating in the country's northern borderlands.

Militarization, as a qualitative and quantitative process whereby beliefs and practices of the utility of coercive violence and war are increasingly legitimated and sedimented in the social fabric of polities, can only be understood by taking into account the intersections of both global and local dynamics.

The article is divided in four sections.... This is followed by an empirical examination of rebel and militia groups in Mali

The Security-Development Nexus and 'Global Militarization'

Taking note of the geopolitical transformations that occurred at the end of the Cold War, and the development of new conceptual frameworks that arrived in tow, is crucial for understanding the renewed importance of security and militarism in the Post-9/11 world. Witnessing a peak in the incidence of violent civil war by the mid-1990s, simplistic narratives of looting bandits (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), violence originating in ancient hatreds between opposing cultural groups (Kaldor 2001), and general chaos captured the social imaginary, and became ubiquitous in international policy-making, even amidst the development of a rigorous scholarly consensus critiquing these views (Kalyvas 2001; Malešević 2008; Keen 2012). In this context, poverty was deemed to be the root cause of violence, civil war, and 'state failure,' in the Global South, resulting in a radical reinterpretation of how development work should be undertaken (Duffield 2001). Increasingly the foreign policy dealings of North American and European governments

with parts of Africa came to reflect this view: development-oriented work can now no longer be analytically, politically, or even practically disconnected from the lens of security and fear (Abrahamsen 2005).

With conflicts like those in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sierra Leone in mind, the discourse of ‘state failure’ served as the problem for the ‘security-development nexus’ to answer. Policy responses ‘state failure’ cohered around the idea of implementing programmes to transform failed states through capacity-building initiatives (Hameiri 2010). The Global War on Terror exacerbated this policy rationale as the link between terrorism and poverty gained traction amongst policy elites and broader Western publics (Lancaster 2007). The security-development nexus expanded understandings of security to a wider array of potential concerns while simultaneously allowing for a broader set of actors to counter them (Abrahamsen 2018). Diverse government agencies working in conflict-prone countries in Africa, for example, now implement “whole of government”, and “comprehensive” approaches that combine development, diplomatic, and defence officials in statebuilding activities. US development policy since 11 September 2001 has taken on explicit security dimensions, so much so that through USAID activities in Sahelian countries are “now inextricably tied to counterterrorist priorities as defined in Washington” (Miles 2012: 45). In the case of Kenya, Bachmann and Hönke (2009) argue that U.S., U.K. and Danish counter-terrorism initiatives targeting both government agencies and civil society organizations have been justified as a requirement for contributing to developing peace and security. Since 2003, the U.S. Civil Affairs teams have implemented over 200 development-oriented projects to date, most from the military, with the objective of winning hearts and minds to counter violent extremism (Bachmann 2017). Even conservation initiatives in Africa funded by the EU and UN have been justified in terms of (in)security, counter-insurgency, and war, with arguments advanced that endangered species may provide a source of funding for armed groups and terrorist networks in Mali, Somalia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo (Duffy 2016; Marijnen 2017). This new security-focused approach departs substantially from past development rationalities.

As military actors become more involved in development activities, critics have posited that development and statebuilding initiatives in Africa amount to nothing more than a steady militarization of the continent - a situation which only worsens the possibilities for development, prosperity, and peace (see Besteman 2008; Otieno 2010; de Waal and Mohammed 2014).

Undoubtedly, development aid in Africa has been militarized if this means using as a minimal benchmark the quantitative increase of international military actors in development work, or African security and military institutions becoming aid recipients (see Branch 2011: 216-239). The continent *has* witnessed an observable increase in security-related development programming undertaken by a vast array of global and national security actors. In observing this trend, critics point to how the continent's militarization stems from the activities of major powers (especially the United States) undertaking 'shadow wars' in pursuit of their geostrategic interests in the international system (see Klare and Volman 2006; Turse 2018). Militarization is primarily portrayed as the result of global forces.

The global orientation that underpins the use of militarization as a concept is problematic. It gives the sense of an irrepressible process of increasing use of coercive violence driven by nefarious external actors. One is struck with the impression that behind the scenes of their veterinary or health service provision, Western military forces are secretly handing out weapons in every African village. Such a view obscures the local dynamics of violence that give the idea of security and militarism their content in specific political locales. As two geographers have noted, "militarization can be expected to unfold differently in different localities due to the ways in which these processes are mediated by unique local contexts" (Bernazzoli and Flint 2009: 404). Approaches focused on the global aspects of militarization only gain analytical purchase when they are specified by simultaneously foregrounding the practices of actors in diverse local settings that shape the meanings and practices of militarism and security.

From the view of many African government officials, for example, increasing the emphasis of security in relation to development, including the involvement of military institutions, is rather unproblematic. Fisher and Anderson (2015) show that authoritarian African regimes, many of which have a past in rebel movements, embrace and own the securitization of development challenges in their relationships with international development actors. Rwandan, Ethiopian, Kenyan, Ugandan, and Chadian regimes have all improved their leverage in donor relations by demonstrating a willingness to participate in the Global War on Terror, for example through troop contributions to stabilization missions in Somalia, Sudan, or Mali, or by crafting national anti-terror legislation, and intelligence-sharing policies (ibid.; Fisher 2012; Beswick 2014; Odinga 2017). International capacity-building initiatives have bolstered the security and military institutions of these governments, allowing them to implement militarized forms of

governance, and solidify authoritarian practices of rule. We see similar tendencies in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, where since at least the early 2000s, an assemblage of global actors has provided police and military equipment, training, and logistical support to willing recipients of capacity-building initiatives to tackle non-traditional threats the international community fears to be rooted in many parts of Africa (see Sandor 2016). Far from being the victims of global forces of militarization, many African governments and security institutions actively foster relationships of transnational security clientelism.

Not all African government actors are capable of projecting their state's coercive and infrastructural apparatuses in remote territories, however (Mann 1986; Herbst 2000). While wars in Africa are experiencing a downward trend (Straus 2012), the wounds of past armed conflict, and remaining pressures from competing sociopolitical forces have tended to fracture and "atomize" post-conflict public spheres in Africa (Reno 2017). These circumstances could put African governments at a disadvantage. The less effective territorial control African regimes maintain diminishes the degree to which they are recognized as capable counter-terrorist forces by global security actors. In response to these constraints, African regimes buttress their existing capabilities and willingness to partner with global security actors by serving as brokers, connecting them with politically-influential violent non-state armed actors experienced in the *métier des armes* in geographical areas beyond their direct coercive control. Well-versed individuals in the *métier des armes* now provide localized textures of militarism and insecurity in many African borderlands.

The *métier des armes* in northern Mali

This article follows Debos' conceptualization of the *métier des armes*, meaning a practiced "non-institutionalized profession and a craft" whereby individuals come to participate in different guises in armed violence over time, and "who make a living from war and war-like activities" (2011: 411). The *métier* is connected to the insight that participation in acts of warfare can take on characteristics similar to temporary, informal, adaptable modes of labour (Hoffmann 2011). Using violence as a means of navigating an uncertain political terrain, where opportunities of social mobility are limited, is a frequent feature of African politics of insecurity (Vigh 2006; Christensen and Utas 2008). The *métier*, as it is conceived here, however, is distinct from *ad hoc*

violent labour. The *métier* is manifested as a practical orientation, or *habitus*, resulting from prolonged historical experience and participation in a violent life-world where the structural condition of being a target of violent coercion is commonplace (Bourdieu 1990).

The *métier des armes* in Northern Mali informs how militarism takes shape in this increasingly globalized space. Wielding traditional weapons follows a generational pattern embedded in Sahelian nomadic communities, especially the Tuareg (or Kel Tamacheq, as they refer to themselves).¹ In the Kidal region of northern Mali, for example, many young Tamacheq boys begin ‘rudimentary training’ in the use of the whip, staff, and sabre by the age of eight, taught by fathers, uncles and older siblings (Interview, Iradjanatan Notable, Bamako, 18 September 2017). The historical practice of using weapons has extended to the use of firearms, notably since the rebellions of the 1990s when AK-47s and less sophisticated artisanal firearms became more accessible and commonplace, and the Malian military (due to concessions made in the 1992 peace agreement) relatively less intrusive in northern social affairs. An official of the MNLA from Tessit (near the tri-border area connecting Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) states categorically: “learning how to use an AK-47 by the age of ten is a bit young. By fifteen, it is a certitude. And by eighteen, you buy the AK-47” (interview, MNLA official, Bamako, 30 September 2017). In the 1980s, Tamacheq and Arab migrants in Libya were recruited in large numbers to serve in Muammar Gaddafi’s foreign legion to fight in Palestine and Chad. Following a rebellion in 1990-1996, many Tamacheq and Arab men were integrated into the Malian Defence and Security Forces, and would subsequently leave ‘*en brousse*’ (in the bush) to support new rebellions, only to return again to their official institutions later - a pattern that has continued to this day. Unlike a “market of violence” (Hoffmann 2011: 49), the *métier des armes* in the Sahel is not only a function of advancing one’s socio-economic status through acts of violent accumulation, but also the result being raised in a space where not having a weapon increases the risk of being the target of violence, and where little recourse exists in turning to institutions of the state for protection or justice.

¹ I recognize that for Debos, there is a difference between ‘wielders of arms’ and those individuals that ‘make a living from war and war-like activities.’ I do not make the distinction here, since the life-worlds of individuals that I examine in this paper understand the wielding of arms as a sort of second nature that informs how they move in and out of participation in ‘war-like activities’ to sustain their lives.

Expressing the exercise of violence in settings of (in)formal, recurrent armed conflict as a *métier* signals two significant theoretical implications for helping understand the experiences of militarization, militarism, and (in)security in the Sahel. First, the lived experiences of a constant potential for violence for many communities in Africa breaks down the distinction commonly held in International Relations that times of peace can be neatly distinguished from times of war (see Keen 2000). This suggests that war itself cannot be conceived as a momentary exceptional break in normality, liberal politics, or the rule of law, but instead as a competitive social process involving multiple forms of violence that target diverse groups (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Richards 2005; Neocleous 2006). Conflict dynamics in northern Mali since the early 1990s, for example, indicate that moments of ‘war-fighting’ between the Malian military and armed insurgent groups, or amongst armed groups themselves, only punctuate more extended periods of pervasive violence and banditry that result from the zone’s consistent political and economic exclusion. This produces a social environment of only relative calm, but not peace. This is one reason why individuals from the country’s nomadic communities only refer to war as those intense moments of combat, or when coercive violence peaks between communities or rival groups: “*C’était la vraie guerre entre eux!*” A more common vernacular they use to describe the north of the country is that of a constant potential violence, and insecurity (see Debos 2011: 412). The sustained moments of neither war nor peace in this borderland are more accurately characterized as a life where experiencing violent action is perpetually in the offing, and where, for many, being close to, or a member of a armed group becomes “a new mode for survival” (Bøås 2015: 301).

The second theoretical implication relates to the tensions and contradictions involved in how we conceive of militarism and militarization for a globalized space like the Sahel. Geographers, historical-sociologists, and gender theorists agree on the broad strokes of what constitutes militarism: ideological mindsets, attitudes, and social practices that normalize preparation for war and the use of violent coercion and military means as appropriate modalities for resolving conflicts (see Mann 2003; Shaw 2012; Enloe 2016; Bernazzoli and Flint 2010). Militarization, therefore, “refers to the qualitative and quantitative expansion and absorption” of militarism (Frowd and Sandor 2018: xx). Given these definitions, one could argue that nomadic communities in northern Mali are inherently militarized, and have been so for generations, since recourse to violent coercion is embedded in historical social practices over the *longue durée*. If

this logic holds, then global actors are not necessarily contributing to the *militarization* of northern Malian communities, but have instead have sought out relations with groups steeped in militarized logics: local social practices and beliefs historically involve the recourse to armed violence as a normal condition of possibility and political sociality. This poses a problem for analysts examining militarism and militarization in Africa as it risks presenting a misleading and Orientalist imaginary of innate violent ‘warrior cultures’ in borderlands. Nor does this assertion mean that international actors such as the French military force *Barkhane* and the wide array of other global interveners operating in the Sahel, are not expanding martial practices and mindsets in the country and region. *Barkhane*’s primary justification is to ‘neutralize’ terrorists, and to support the creation of a regional military cooperation force, the G-5 Sahel initiative that can one day take its place. What this tells us is that militarism and militarization exist in a web of contradictory meanings and practices undergirded by the politics of (in)security. The connecting and competing existence of the *métier* at the local scale, African regimes who appropriate the security and military dimensions of interventions at the national and regional scales, and the contradictory practices of global security actors themselves, suggests that the complex security assemblage in and across the Sahel is not militarizing Sahelian populations, *per se*, but is instead producing relations of transnational security clientelism that sediment actually-existing martial qualities long associated with the *habitus* of ‘living by the gun’, thereby reinforcing discourses and practice that constitute the Global War on Terror.

Incentives of global counter-terrorism, and its pernicious effects

Many rebel groups in Africa, constituted in large part by men living the *métier*, have modulated their organization of violence in terms of its justifications, strategies, and tactics to state their expectations in clear, measurable, and ‘actionable’ ways to international audiences seduced by the fear of the ‘failed state’ (Tull and Mehler 2004; Englebert and Tull 2008; Lombard 2017). In the unique geopolitical context of the War on Terror, war participants in remote borderland areas of the Sahel have become increasingly experienced in utilizing the discourse of terrorism in order to forge relationships of transnational security clientelism with global security actors.

Non-state armed actors have a variety of reasons for engaging in relations of transnational security clientelism. What is certain, the global discourse of counter-terrorism and

state fragility incentivizes participation of men versed in the *métier*. This pattern of seeking out a patron follows a historical pattern of political relations in Africa, where a client's social proximity to associates of a regime in power, coupled with promises of submission and support, enables the acquisition of resources (Chabot and Daloz 1999). While relations of dependence take on multiple forms and traverse spatial scales, they nevertheless rely on an expectation of being compensated in some way. With regard to the Global War on Terror, led by powerful Western governments like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, non-state armed actors expect their dependence on global security actors will result in significant dividends. This means being provided with weapons, cash, or other forms of logistical support like the provision of gasoline or ammunition. In the medium term, supporting counter-terrorism can result in promises of support in negotiations with an incumbent regime, or in the future establishment of a post-conflict governance order. As explored more fully below, acquiring the material and symbolic largesse of a global security patron can also provide non-state armed groups with the leverage they need to sideline rivals and dominate local fields of authority (Bayart 2000).

Non-state armed groups present a diverse number of benefits for global security actors seeking out counter-terrorism partners. First, non-state armed groups are to varying degrees untethered from the command and control of formal state organizations, providing them with significant latitude in the way they organize and practice violence within a given territorial space, thus shielding official governments from international scrutiny (see Ahram 2011: 13-14; Carey *et al.* 2015). Second, supporting such groups can also serve an important “necropolitical” purpose for global security actors: when non-state armed groups are used in counter-terrorist interventions, it lessens intervener involvement in combat as non-state armed actors fight in their place. This mitigates the risks of intervener combat deaths, which Western publics hate (see Mbembe 2003; Byman 2006: 88). Global security actors can also justify their support of local non-state armed groups in counter-terrorism since they are ultimately the most concerned stakeholders affected by political violence since they live and experience that armed conflict directly.

Third, global security actors, even with sophisticated means and techniques of surveillance and investigation at their disposal, are at a disadvantage when it comes to pursuing counter-terrorist interventions in the so-called ‘ungoverned spaces’ of the globe. Their knowledge is necessarily incomplete and ambiguous, which provides an opening for savvy local

war participants to position themselves as experts with insider knowledge that global security actors require (see Lyall 2010). Simply put, they know more about ‘what is going’ locally than external actors. This may be in terms of geographical terrain, language capabilities, or the social and religious features of a particular region. In the context of global counter-terrorist interventions, this ultimately pertains to the identification of who is a ‘terrorist’ and who is not, and which segments of the population can be trusted, versus those that cannot. The need to identify enemies residing/hiding within suspect communities has been the primary security logic for colonial powers routing out anti-colonial rebels, and post-colonial military intervention counter-insurgency forces alike (see Branch 2007; Rigouste 2009; Kienscherf 2011; MacDonald 2013). Local non-state armed actors are capable of performing these tasks, and are sought after by interveners.

When interveners seek out men versed in the *métier des armes* in counter-terrorism interventions, however, it is not without serious consequences. For example, while non-state armed group collaborators can provide information that enable global security actors to undertake high value target acquisitions or other counter-terrorist operations, the nature of that information will be shaped by the latter’s own discourses. As Jourde aptly notes:

“Even if a government had substantial information about the domestic and foreign politics of another country, its understanding will always be limited by the representations it uses to interpret that information. It is limited by the very questions it asks about that other country and, perhaps more importantly, by the questions it does not ask, by the issues it emphasizes and those it ignores. These inherent weaknesses and limitations open the door for various framing strategies from the part of weaker... [actors]... vis-à-vis their hegemonic counterparts” (2007: 486).

As non-state armed groups offer up information to global security actors it can be radically simplified, potentially fabricated, or simply exaggerated, and framed in ways that support their social position at the expense of other competing local perspectives. Thus, even though the relationships of power between non-state armed actors and their global security counterparts may be highly asymmetrical, the former can still manipulate information and frame their key insider knowledges as a crucial resource that counter-terrorism international forces desperately need. When such information is provided, it nevertheless suits the purposes of local non-state armed actors who are engaged in competition for alternative local political stakes. It is arguable that when they give information to global security actors, it can profit them more than it does the interveners.

Non-state armed actors in Mali recognize the boundary construction inherent to the Global War on Terror. In practice, this means accusing one's political rivals to be aligned with terrorists or that they are terrorist themselves, regardless of the veracity of their claims. The categorical binary distinguishing identities as either citizen/terrorist, and associate forms of violence as either legitimate/illegitimate, therefore is not the only dividing category on offer (see Charbonneau 2017). Assuming that local non-state armed groups will prioritize the objectives interveners establish and pursue violence against alleged terrorists misreads the logic of violence in asymmetrical and civil wars. Grand master narratives, like the Global War on Terror, are rarely the most important cleavages informing the practices of war participants in settings of armed conflict. A pernicious effect connected to the incentive structures provided by the delegitimization of terrorist violence is the susceptibility of the citizen/terrorist master cleavage to map onto more intimate, micro-scale animosities that have historically divided local communities (Kalyvas 2006: 364-387). With intervener backing and trust that a selected non-state armed group 'knows the enemy', rival communities can be targeted for violent coercion in order to settle historical scores, to loot property and goods, to establish dominance within a village or at an important border post, or otherwise come out on top over any number of parochial concerns. Since local security clients are relied upon to demystify local politics and identify who is a terrorist and who is not, targeted groups lose any possible recourse for accountability or defence from a higher authority, having been labelled and subverted into the terrorist category.

Counter-terrorist violence, as a result, has an indelible effect on identity construction for local groups. Armed non-state actors in Mali, like other rebel organizations, "invoke group labels as part of a concrete ideological project to justify a specific political course of action and to mobilize popular support"; in this case, warfare against terrorists (Malešević 2008: 107). In reaction to being targeted, armed Islamist groups respond by targeting non-state armed groups and individuals that have sought out global security patrons (or are assumed to have). When discovered, the identity of the armed Islamist fighters is subsequently categorized as being from a particular tribe or community, and the latter is accused of being infiltrated with terrorists. That community is marked for non-state armed actor perpetrated violence, which can be directly supported by interveners. As members of targeted communities, marked as terrorists, look for sources of protection, to settle scores, or to regain one's lost honour from having been the victim

of violence by non-state armed actors representing rival tribes or ethnic groups, they develop relations with armed Islamist groups. The communities that non-state armed groups have over time come to represent are targeted in turn by armed Islamist groups, reinforced by community rivals. It is precisely the co-constitution of identities through armed counter-terrorist violence, therefore, that consolidates a process of amalgamation. A vicious circle is produced as non-state armed groups enact violence on rival communities to establish local hegemony of the borderlands, and the latter seeking alliances with armed Islamist groups to regain lost power, territory, and to reclaim justice through violent contestation.

MNLA

The MNLA has been the armed movement in Mali most targeted by armed Islamist groups. This is not only due the movement's long history, being the armed group in Mali to have initiated the rebellion in late 2011. MNLA members are also targeted because of their vocal declarations in support of eradicating terrorist groups like AQIM, which the group's political cadre extensively communicate to international media sources. MNLA Secretary General, Bilal Ag Acherif, Chief Military Commander, Mohamed Ag Najim, and spokesperson Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed have all insisted that the MNLA would eradicate terrorism in their territory on condition that the international community recognize Azawad as a sovereign state (Interview, MNLA Official, Ouagadougou, 22 July 2012). In addition to such discursive practices, the MNLA created its own dedicated anti-terrorist combat unit in May 2012 following the loss of their would-be Azawadian capital, Gao, to AQIM and MUJAO jihadist fighters with whom they had initially taken control of the north of Mali earlier that year. Since the arrival of the French military in January 2013, the anti-terrorist unit increased its military operations in the north of the Kidal region near Tessalit, Aguelhok, Boughessa, and Abeibera, the latter being Iyad Ag Ghali's territorial fief (Interview, MNLA military commander from Kidal, Bamako, 5 February 2017).

The counter-terrorism discourse and practices of the MNLA aggravate the violence it experiences because of its global security relationships. Since its creation it has shown a persistent willingness to forge transnational security relationships with international actors, especially the French military. This strategy was partly in order to gain the upper hand against the armed Islamic groups responsible for their ouster in mid-2012. Upon the arrival of the French

military intervention, Serval, MNLA cadres hoped to demonstrate their capacities to govern the north of Mali and to maintain security once their Serval counterparts had levelled the playing field by decimating jihadist forces. It was their hope that governing the territory and protecting it from any renewed incursion of armed Islamist groups could increase their political credibility with international partners, and possibly help them to acquire economic resources needed for achieving their political objective of establishing an autonomous, if not sovereign state (Interviews with MNLA representatives, Bamako and Ouagadougou, January and May 2017). As a result armed Islamist groups in the Sahel mark the MNLA as traitors to Islam, and its members are regularly threatened and targeted for assassination.

The French, meanwhile, had a limited understanding of the geography of the north of Mali, and even more so its complex socio-political dynamics. Having the support of local population of Kidal was crucial for the French intervention in order to make the delicate question of ‘who is a terrorist and who is not’ more legible for counter-terrorist operations (Interview, MNLA official, Ouagadougou, 24 May 2017). The MNLA worked very closely with the French Serval intervention in 2013 to track down jihadist fighters, and have continued to do so. In an interview with *Le Monde* in November 2013, one of the movement’s founders stated that the French military was in their debt for having welcomed and installed them in the Kidal region, for providing them with GPS coordinates to conduct aerial bombardment of jihadist positions, and for sending local MNLA guides on helicopter scouting missions (Follorou 2013).² MNLA fighters, especially those that speak fluent French, initially lent their services as translators and guides to French defence and intelligence officials (Interview, 3 MNLA officials, Niamey, 14 July 2016; Interview, 2 MNLA officials, Ouagadougou, 25 May 2017). Both collectively as an armed group, and as individual members and associates, the MNLA has sought out opportunities for transnational security clientelism by mobilizing their participation into available counter-terrorism discourses and practices through the French (and other) military interventions.

Senior MNLA military commanders state that by February 2017 some 177 of the armed group’s fighters have been killed in combat or assassinated by jihadists, 33 of which were killed in nine attacks (Interview, MNLA military commander from Kidal, Bamako, 5 February 2017). In late December 2015 twenty kilometres south of the Algerian border, Sidi Mohamed Ag Sarid

² Follorou, Jacques. 2013. “Le MNLA a les moyens de retrouver les assassins des deux journalistes français.” *Le Monde*, 14 November.

(alias ‘Trois-Trois’), chief of the MNLA anti-terrorist unit, lost over 20 men (including Ag Acherif’s brother) in one attack most likely committed by AQIM’s Al-Ansar katibat (Interview, MNLA military commander from Kidal, Bamako, 5 February 2017; see Ahmed 2016³). The deadly attack has caused many members of the MNLA to use as a cautionary tale of working too closely with French intelligence and counter-terrorism forces: “Trois-Trois worked worked in lock step with the French... look what happened to him” (Interview, 3 MNLA officials, Ouagadougou, 25 May 2017). The case of MNLA lieutenant for Ber (Timbuktu Region), Efad Ag Arafek provides a similar example.

GATIA/MSA

The MNLA is not the only armed group that has forged transnational security clientelist relationships. Pro-government militias like the *Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés* (GATIA) (un/semi-officially led by General El-Haji Ag Gamou), and the *Mouvement du Salut de l’Azawad* (MSA) (led by Moussa Ag Acharatoumane) have also courted international partners, stressing their dedication to the war on terrorism in the Sahel. Since September 2016, both groups have mobilized their own coercive resources for purposes of counter-terrorism, in addition to actively seeking out counter-terrorism resources from global actors. In their attempts to consolidate military and economic positions in north-eastern Mali, both GATIA and the MSA have subverted the terrorist/non-terrorist categorical division global security actors insist upon, in order to establish their own local hegemony through violent coercion at the expense of local tribal and ethnic rivals.

Led by close associates of General El Haji Ag Gamou, GATIA’s primary political objective is to ensure the political advancement of the Imghad community, who they argue have historically been dominated by the Ifoghas Tuareg nobility, historically close to the Malian central state. Having fought in Gaddafi’s foreign legion in Chad and Palestine, being one of the most prominent participants of the 1990s anti-Mali rebellion and subsequent intra-Tuareg armed conflict, only to serve in the Malian Armed Forces and being deployed to several UN peacekeeping missions, Gamou provides a demonstrative example of an individual well-versed

³ Ahmed, Baba. 2016. “Nord du Mali: la guerre est déclarée entre le MNLA et Iyad Ag Ghali.” 22 January. Available at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/295976/politique/nord-mali-guerre->

in the *métier*. Gamou commands the Standing Battalion of Gao, one of Mali's two elite military combat units. Its auxiliary force, 'Delta Force' is composed entirely of Imghad fighters, which obscures the separation between the Malian Armed Forces and the pro- government militia (see Lecocq 2013: 62). Since 2015, GATIA's ranks have swelled as more young Imghad men have been provided with automatic weapons, ostensibly by Gamou, with the objective of mobilizing his tribe to sideline his rivals in the CMA, especially its Ifoghas component.

In mid-May 2017, Gamou, Acharatoumane, accompanied by Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, Alhamdou Ag Ilyene (the Malian Ambassador to Niger), and contested *Amenokal*⁴ of the Kel Ansar Tuareg confederation, Abdoul Magid Ag Mohamed Ahmed dit 'Nasser', travelled to Paris to participate in in high-level security meetings with French military and intelligence officials. ...

The leader of the *Mouvement du Salut de l'Azawad* (MSA), Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, was recently threatened by Adnan Abu-Walid al-Saharaoui, former MUJAO commander who declared fealty to Abubakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State (Journal du Mali 2017) Since February 2017, Ag Acharatoumane has been making several declarations about al-Saharaoui on social media, asserting the local Daoussahak tribal community does not welcome al-Saharaoui's men in the Ménaka borderlands. Following an attack in early June 2017 on a Nigerien Armed Forces base in Abala, Niger by supposed al-Saharaoui's Islamic State fighters, MSA and GATIA contingents in Ménaka, in coordination with Barkhane forces, attacked the assailants, allegedly killing 15 (ibid.). While several interlocutors doubted the initial veracity of the threat, delivered by letter in Arabic and subsequently translated in French and disseminated over social media, al-Saharaoui then delivered an audio message repeating his accusations against Ag Acharatoumane, in which he called him a 'Pharaoh', his movement as servants to the French, and threatening to exterminate the Daoussahak. Former CMA associates of Ag Acharatoumane assert that the MSA is composed of several fighters that had been close to al-Saharaoui in 2012-2013, who now takes them for traitors (Phone interview, HCUA militant from Ménaka, 5 July 2017). On 5 July 2017, two unidentified actors on motorcycles conducted a grenade attack on the offices of the MSA in Ménaka. Armed Islamist groups, therefore, practice violence against any leader or community that they assume to challenge their rule in rural borderlands they seek to control.⁵

[declaree-entre-mnla-iyad-ag-ghali/](#)

⁴ 'Chief.'

⁵ **Where do I put you???** Frustrated by their community being ostracized and the lack of concern by Bamako elites, many Fulani youth have been successfully recruited to the ranks of

This is not to say that MSA discourses that extol the virtues of the war on terrorism are disingenuous. ...

Following Abu-Walid al-Saharaoui's threats on Ag Acharatoumane and Gamou and the attack on the MSA offices in early July 2017, GATIA and MSA fighters have conducted numerous raids on bandits and potential terrorists in the Ménaka region. Attacks near Taglalt-Anderamboukane and Infoukaretane, in which the MSA has claimed to have killed 30 men and recuperated weapons and ammunition, are some of the most recent....

Cheikh Ag Aoussa...

Conclusion...

several armed groups since 2012. These include what can roughly be classified as 'identity/community based' groups like the Alliance Nationale pour la Sauvegarde de l'Identité Peule et la Restauration de la Justice (ANSIPRJ) and Ganda Iso, or armed Islamist groups like the former Front de Libération du Macina/Ansar Dine Macina, now called the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) ('Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims'). Just as common is the formation of unnamed/unknown informal self-defence militias. The first mass recruitment of young Fulani to armed Islamist groups commenced in 2012 as Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) militants actively courted disenfranchised communities south of the Niger River delta and in the Arabanda borderlands to be more involved in their takeover of northern Mali. Fulanis that joined MUJAO procured weapons, combat training, and money, all of which increase an individual's social status and recognition within nomadic communities. One rationale for Fulanis joining MUJAO was due to their frustration with Tuareg communities from the Hayré and adjacent Gourma regions, who they accuse of livestock theft, or the latter's purported direct support or complicity of the MNLA during the rebellion (Bagayoko et. al. 2017). Historic rivalries and tensions between Fulani and Tamasheq herders (more specifically the Daoussahak tribe), dating from the 1970s droughts in the Mali-Niger borderlands, were also absorbed into the larger cleavage that developed between the Tuareg independence and jihadist movements in the Ménaka borderlands. Many Fulani from that region joined MUJAO to seek redress for a long history of Tuareg cross-border banditry and cattle theft, to protect themselves from 'exactions', and to advance their social position (Interview, Nigerien Fulani leader, Niamey, 26 July 2016; see Guichaoua 2016).