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THE ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL AGENTS IN THE DE-STATALIZATION PROCESS: THE CASE OF MALI

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Abstract:

The thesis focuses on the current Malian situation, that observed a severe penetration of jihadist groups (transnational agents), and attempts to understand this phenomenon in accordance with a theoretical framework that accounts for the crisis of the concept of Westphalian state in contemporary international panorama. The analysis is structured on two levels, investigating the structural issues and the political and social mutations, both on the regional and on the state dimension.

Keywords:

De-statalization, Trans-national agents, Neo-Westphalinesim, Intermestic Reality, Mali, Northern Mali, Sahel, Jihadist Groups, AQIM, Tuareg, Smuggling.
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1. Introduction

The idea of this thesis originated from a personal interest about the concept of de-statalization (or de-nationalization), that I have had the possibility to develop during my academic curriculum. This term describes a disaffection with the concept of nationhood, born after Westphalia Peace and originated from the creation of which are usually called Westphalian states or Modern states, namely the state as we know it. It is characterised politically by a strong central power, spatially by precise and inviolable boundaries and ideologically by a common national sentiment.

The concept of de-statalization or de-nationalization is strictly linked to a new phenomenon known as Post-Westphalianesim, a process in which new realities, intended as communities who live in definite spaces and are equipped of administrative and political systems, arise, substituting the model of Westphalian or Modern states and creating new entities that elude the very nature of nationhood. I started wondering from a theoretical point of view what might have been the mutations in the International panorama and which are the causes and the agents that have led to these changes. I observed that are arising new important non state-actors in the International arena that, moving inside and outside national borders, are able to influence politically the states and to limit their power. I noticed that these agents are more effective where there are weak or unpopular state governments, and in areas characterized by huge changes on the regional level, as wars or the fall of a strong power able to guarantee stability. After examining the literature on the topic, I tried to identify in the contemporary scenario where this process is more visibly happening, and I noticed that it occurs mainly among states that suffered decolonization processes. Here, the non-state actors, that because their capacity to move freely in different countries are called trans-national agents, are more capable to obtain popular consensus and to constitute an alternative system to the state one.

I chose Mali as a case study, because I believe that it represents an emblematic case of de-nationalisation and it matches, both on the geo-political and on the historical level, all the characteristics that goes together with this phenomenon. Since we are dealing with a dynamic that ignore and reshape countries’ borders, it will be impossible to give a comprehensive account limiting the research to the state context; for that reason, my
thesis move back and forth from the regional, the state and the domestic dimension, trying to reveal the relational and causative continuum that links these dimensions together.

1.1 Case study
Mali is a country deeply fragmented: ethnically, politically and economically. More precisely, there is a big economic and developmental gap between the North and South of the country, caused by the geophysical aspect but also by political decisions and ethnic divisions. The history of Mali, since its independence, is dotted with several revolts, led principally by Tuaregs and aimed to obtain the independence of the Northern part, called Azawad. Other populations of the North were involved in the revolts: some of them on the side of the Tuaregs, like the Arabs (Tuaregs and Arabs feel closer to the Saharan populations and have closer relations with Algerian and Libyan governments than with the Malian one); others against, as the Shongai and the Fulani, who always backed the central government because of the fear that Tuaregs gain the control of the North). Many of the armed groups born during the Tuaregs’s uprisings were also involved in the Malian civil war started in 2012. The long-term consequences of the country division, exacerbated by the civil conflict, were mainly two: on one side, the economic difficulties led the Northern population to create an alternative economy, based on the previous commercial vocation of the area and evolved in the contraband of illicit goods, where terrorist organizations envisaged a fruitful source of profit; on the other, the numerous revolts, the carelessness of the central government, the lack of representation of Northern populations, led them to accept jihadist groups as a factor of stability and an economic opportunity.

1.2 Structure of the thesis
The thesis is divided in three parts. Chapter 2 offers a theoretical framework, which examines the recent literature on de-nationalisation and on the role of transnational actors in reshaping the International Relations studies and ever more the contemporary geopolitical reality. Chapter 3 and 4 try to give a comprehensive account of the case study. The first deals with the regional dimension: it analyses the political and economic changes in the Sahel that set the basis for the penetration of transnational actors, namely jihadist groups, in the area. The last chapter focuses on Mali, as the country where, because of its
instability and of the weakness of central government, the dynamics triggered by the transnational actors were mainly catalysed.

1.3 Objective

The objective of this thesis is to analyse, more generally, the role played by trans-national actors in the contemporary process of de-statalization and, more specifically, to understand how the jihadist groups that act as transnational agents in the Sahel, were able to infiltrate in the Northern part of Mali, thus creating an alternative welfare system to the state’s one. To achieve this objective, I examine the answers notable scholars give to the following research questions, accordingly I move on two levels of analysis: the region and the state.

1.4 Research Question

1) Which are the structural problems and the changes in the Sahel that permitted the creation of jihadist movements in the region?

2) Which are the responsibilities of the State and how did the weakness and the recklessness of the government lead to this situation?

3) Are there religious implications or are there mainly economic interests that subtend to the affiliation of the Northern Mali’s population with the terroristic groups?

1.5 State of Research

The thesis is based on different kinds of sources. The second chapter examines several works on the theory of International Relations devoted to some issues that are central in defining the conceptual framework in which the case study is set. Among these there are the two concepts, Neo-Medievalism and Post-Westphalianism, of which I tried to highlight the intimate relation. The former was delineated by H. Bull in his pioneering work *The Anarchical Society* (1977), where he defies for the first time the realistic current of thought, which saw the state as the only actor of the International Relations, and
interpreted the contemporary scenario as a neo-medieval landscape, characterized by the clash of different, also non-state, actors. Bull’s theory could be linked with the work of R. Falk, “Revisiting Westphalia. Discovering Post-Westphalia” (2002), that deconstructs the Westphalian state in its basic components (idea, event, process, norm) and envisages the end of this model, provoked by the phenomenon of globalization, as the opportunity for the birth of Post-Westphalian states originating inside the same old Westphalian ones. An interesting article by G. Anzera, “La sicurezza internazionale e l’avvento della realtà intermestica” (2017), focusing on the territorial implications of Post-Westphalianism, partly revises Falk’s theory, highlighting the link between the de-territorialisation process triggered by globalization and global policies, and the re-territorialisation operated by emerging actors, like the Islamic State. Trying to define the dimension in which these actors operate, he retrieves the concept of “intermestic reality”, coined by B. Manning in “The Congress, the Executive and Intermestic Affairs: Three Proposals” (1977), transferring its meaning from the governance domain to security theory. For the understanding of the transnational actors, a fundamental book was I. Saleyan’s Rebels Without Borders: Transnational Insurgency in World Politics (2009) investigates civil conflicts within the global context: the core thesis is about how a civil conflict could become global when international actors are involved in it, but the novelty is constituted by the attention put on the “rebels without borders”, international actors that can operate across national boundaries but also establish shrines inside national territories, creating in that way the conditions for the escalation of a civil conflict in an international one. I also found useful the work of D. A. Lake and D. Rotchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict” (1996), from which I took the concept of “security dilemma”, that the scholars use in studying ethnic conflicts, but that I believe that could be profitably applied also in order to understand the relations between transnational actors, local populations and central governments.

For the third and fourth chapter I used mainly articles, field researches and reports. Nevertheless, a book that help me to have a comprehensive overview both on Mali and on the Sahelian region, was Harmon’s book, Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: corruption, contraband, jihad and the Mali war of 2012–2013 (2014). The author gives an historical account on societies, economy and religion on the Sahel, and, at the same time, he frames Malian problematics between the coordinates of government
corruption, economic disparity and jihadist movements, in order to explain the causes of the conflict. Some reports helped me to circumstantiate the information given by Harmon. A very exhaustive one, centred on Mali, is Sidibé “Security Management in Northern Mali: Criminal Networks and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms” (August 2012) that stresses especially on economy (black market and smuggling) and on the disinvolvement of the government from the issues raised by Tuareg insurgency and the North-South gap. Di Liddo, “La perdurante instabilità della regione saheliana” (2018), Rosato, “Hybrid Borders and Organized Crime” (2016), Lounnas, “The Transmutation of Jihadi Organizations in The Sahel and the Regional Security Architecture” (April 2018) and “Jihadist Groups in North Africa and the Sahel: Between Disintegration, Reconfiguration and Resilience” (October 2018), and Laremont, “Al Qaeda in The Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the Sahel” (2011), focus mainly on the penetration of jihadist groups in the Sahel and on the history of the relations between different groups and their evolution. Cline, “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism” (2013) and Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?” (2016), are more centred on the connections between terrorist groups and local communities, especially Tuareg; the latter, in his field research, also investigates economical and commercial links. On the same line, it is also to mention the work of Bøås, “Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery” (2015), who devotes a report to topics such Malian economy, illicit traffics and the economic impact of non-state actor, and a paper that deal more generally on the problematics of Northern Mali. The contributions by Cristiani and Fabiani, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria’s Regional and International Relations” (2011), “From Disfunctionality to Disaggregation and Back? The Malian Crisis, Local Players and European Interests” (2013) and “The Malian Crisis and its Actors” (2013), appear essential for both their exhaustive analysis of AQIM and its affiliations, and because of the stress that they put on the “geophysical challenge to the Weberian state” represented by Northern Mali environment. About the political stability of the area, the works by Torelli-Vervelli, Il nuovo Jihadismo in Nord Africa e nel Sahel (May 2013) and Marchal, The coup in Mali: the result of a long-term crisis or spill over from the Libyan civil war (May 2012) help to understand the importance of the figure of Gaddafi in maintaining security and order. The discourse on religion was based, firstly,

These works, very interesting for many aspects, because of their different perspectives, fails, except for Harmon’s extensive study, to provide a comprehensive account of the relations between local, state and regional level and between the religious, economic and political dimensions. My contribution is to relate theories developed by different scholars (Neo-Medievalism, Post-Westphalianism, intermestic reality, transnational actors, Security Dilemma) to design a conceptual scenario that could give an account of a phenomenon like the creation, in Northern Mali, of political and territorial entities alternative to state, that counted on the collaboration between jihadist groups and local population. This work could be fruitful on both sides of the research. On the theoretical perspective, it contributes to include the Malian case as a specimen of the processes highlighted, and, as we believe, a very revealing one, that it would be useful to observe also in the future to better understand such dynamics. On the factual side, the theoretical framework offered a mean to itemize various phenomena, taking place both in the regional and in the state dimension as parts of a causative continuum.
2. Theoretical framework

“Historically, it is through the prism of the nation or the perspective of the state that international relations was seen as a discipline. The national prism refers to the unit of analysis through which the construction and the deconstruction of the distinction ‘inside/outside’ had made sense” (Sindjoun, 2001: 220).

The end of bipolar system, metaphorically represented by the fall of Berlin Wall, marked a change in the International scenario and the rising of a situation in which new realities and old dynamics cohabited in an increasingly globalized World. In fact, although states still continue to occupy a relevant position in the International Relations system, they have suffered an erosive process from below and from above, where the former is caused by the proliferation of supranational organizations and by trans-governmental relationships, while the latter is due to ethic-nationalisms and subnational entities’ explosion. Using the words of Idean Salehyan:

“The Leviathan is “caged” by international borders, whereas rebel organizations can and often do organize transnationally, evading state coercive power. Failed states, or states with limited control over their territory, pose international security risks, as militant groups often use their soil as a base of operations.” (Salehyan, 2009: 8)

“The Leviathan is caged” is an emblematic expression that perfectly frames the current international panorama in which the Westphalian nation-state’s classic definition is losing its empirical truthfulness. According to scholars, there has been a shift from a state-centric to a multi-centric model where the international arena’s actors are plural and various. They are the big economic corporations, the ethnic minorities, the transnational political parties, the NGOs and the terrorist groups: all these entities, beyond their peculiarities, share the capacity to limit and to influence state action (Aydinli, 2005: 101). Through the definition of “multi-centric world” scholars refers to a World in which there are not only states but a multiplicity of different agents that are free to operate inside and outside the state borders (Sindjoun, 2001: 225).

Bull gives an interesting contribution for a heuristic reinvention of the discipline. He reorganized the International Relations’ theories in a completely new paradigm that
challenged the State-centric perspective. He is the father of ‘New Medievalism’, a theory that resumes the contemporary scenario in which more and more non-state actors play a role. The Middle Age was a period that saw the proliferations of worker corporations, seigniories and municipalities. According to Bull, the contemporary scenario seems to re-enact similar dynamics in an increasing fragmentation of interests and powers.

“The image of “a new medievalism” expresses the plurality of actors and challenges to state actors. Historically, the Middle Ages were characterized by the crisis of authority of seigneury which ended when it was replaced by the state as a political institution; the finalist idea of the expression “new Middle Age” implies the end of the state. As any political institution, the state is not eternal”. (Bull, 1977: 245)

Asserting that the state institution is not eternal, Bull not only questions the current centrality of state structure in the study of International Relations, focusing on the emergence of new important actors, but also adds an important reflection about the end of the Westphalian concept of nation-state. There are two main topics, strictly connected to each other, on which is worth to stress on: the territoriality and the nationhood. The idea of modern state was born when monarchs started to use the concept of sovereignty to delimit territories and to redefine rules. The territorial power was acquired through agreements between local political administrators and monarchs who proposed themselves as guarantors of security by the expansionistic ambitions of neighbouring states. It was only after these negotiations that they imposed themselves as unique authority. (Breuilly, 2001: 61; Bartolini, 1997: 127). The territorial borders were at the same time geographical, military, economic and cultural and they generated a clear division between inside and outside. The concept of nation arose properly from this spatial recognition’s process of equality among people who lived inside borders and of diversity from to the ones outside. The nation sentiment was a direct consequence of a new political entity: the state as a new configuration of territorial powers. Through this process, the inside-outside opposition represented a key stage for the creation of national feeling (Geiger, 2002:49).

The nation-state’s population was in many cases assembled in fortuitous ways because boundaries divided ethnic communities and at the same time englobed new ones: the sovereign authority became the only link among peoples. According to Falk, the idea of nation was born as a from-above political process aimed to maximize national sentiment
for guaranteeing, on one side, domestic stability and, on the other, high efficiency in the international arena (Falk, 2002: 322). He identifies a breaking point of Westphalian nation-state concept starting by decolonization process and by the Westphalian model’s application to non-European contexts. The emergence of particularism and regionalism highlighted the failure of nation-state in these realities.

“The Westphalian approach to world order tends toward the fulfilment of its normative potential when governance at the state level is internally moderate, democratic, and observant of human rights (including economic, social, and cultural rights) and when leading states are externally dedicated to the promotion of global public goods as well as to the preservation of their specific strategic interests.” (Falk, 2002: 316)

Westphalian state, nationhood and territoriality coincide: the nation-state concept is the result of the overlap of nationality, understood as sense of ownership, and of territorial sovereignty. Therefore, the dynamic of de-nationalization that affects some current realities goes hand in hand with a de-territorialisation process that regards the end of the modern construction of the territoriality¹.

“(…) the emergence of transnational social movements creates the political basis for a global civil society that could over time generate a structure of humane global governance.” (Falk, 2002: 325)

According to Falk, we assisted to a passage from a Westphalian World to a post-Westphalian World, where collective identities moved outside state borders as a consequence of the disarticulation of a strong division between inside and outside that characterised the identity building process for centuries:

“The rise of transnationalism, the growth of human rights and associated ideas of criminal accountability of political leaders, and the role of international institutions

¹ Where for de-nationalization I mean the lack of a unifying force among citizens and for de-territorialisation I mean the loss of the state to exercise a sovereign power on its own territory, that led to a weakness of territorial and spatial aspect of the modern state.
might, if these tendencies persist, justify adoption of an ambivalent label such as “a Neo-Westphalian” scenario.” (Falk, 2002: 330)

The two phenomena highlighted by Falk have found fertile ground among scholars, who agreed on the fact that people started to re-identify themselves on the basis of other features that overcome nationhood:

“Under postmodern conditions, by contrast, collective identities are projected away from the nation; they are much more differentiated and they develop in ways that may weaken rather than strengthen the idea of the state.” (Sorensen, 2005: 90)

“Political participation and identification with a distant homeland, or what has been termed “long-distance nationalism,” creates a disjuncture between the physical boundaries of the state and the social boundaries of the nation.” (Salehyan, 2009: 33)

The globalization processes, as material, economic, information and people’s fluxes, furnish the ‘raw material’ for a restructuration of state contexts and imply an identity change both on the individual and the collective level.

In this perspective, recent studies show how also the territoriality’s issue, despite Falk thesis, is retaking ground (Kriess, 101:2001). Scholars prospect new scenarios in which Neo-Westphalian concept assumes new significance: the re-building of state unities, although not exactly such, alongside and inside the existing ones. This process consists of people’s re-organization in societies on the basis of communal features, discourses and interests, through the adoption of a specific form of governance in a definite space. The birth of the Islamic State in Syria provides an example that could be usefully compared to this thesis’s case study because of its similarity in the dynamics and in the objectives. In this case the IS group was able to establish a real state equipped with a territorial dimension, a central government and an administration, and to build an identity on the basis of a discourse founded on a rhetorical, but communal, ideology and on communal interests (Anzera, 42: 2017).

There are three main factors that generically occur conjunctly in this process: the weakness of the state government, the rise of transnational actors and the already mentioned internationalization of the state dimension.
1) The weakness of state manifests itself usually as imbalance of political representation and as inequality of resource allocation. In the cases in which the state is not able to arbitrate, the Security Dilemma’s phenomenon takes over. It consists in a collective fear among disadvantaged parts for their survival. In such context the state sovereignty will be challenged by new political powers, the domestic arena will increasingly resemble the international one and, through the intervention of external actors, it will end up coinciding with it.

“The core of the concept is that, in the absence of an overarching sovereign body, states will worry constantly about their future security and fight for survival. By definition, the state, as the ultimate authority within its borders, is supposed to provide security to its citizens and ensure the balance between various groups.” (Lake-Rotchchild 1996:48)

2) The transnational non-state actors, or, using Salehyan’s words, the ‘Rebels without Borders’, are new and increasingly important agents of international panorama: “Transnational rebels are defined as armed opposition groups whose operations are not confined to the geographic territory of the nation-state(s) that they challenge” (Salehyan, 2009: 14). They are able to move from a country to another and to integrate themselves into state contexts and challenge its political legitimacy both through warfare and welfare activities. Exploiting difficult situations, transnational non-state actors offer their support to the populations and propose themselves as security guarantors.

“In some of the poorest states where extensive infrastructure is lacking, government control does not extend very far beyond the capital because the state cannot project power into the periphery”. (Salehyan, 2009: 22)

3) The globalization processes generated a fluid context that challenges the unity of the state, because in and out continues to change. For the purpose of better explaining this magmatic scenario, I rely on the concept of ‘Intermestic Reality’ to describe a reality in which the internal and the external dimensions become blurred. The term ‘Intermestic’ appeared for the first time on the Foreign Affairs review in 1977 and it was coined by Bayless Manning referring to a governance where domestic and international dimensions, before differentiated, nowadays
merge each other. The principal actors of these processes are the policy makers that are compelled to act in the dual role of national and international political subject. (Manning, 1977: 306-324) According to Anzera, “intermestic” refers both to interdependency theories and to empirical reality, to a space without stable borders where the state becomes a permeable structure where non-state actors are free to move between inside and outside.

“(…) the international arena must deal with the consequences of the progressive decline of sovereignty and the shifting from a state-centric to a multi-centric model of global relations where non-state actors are emerging as brand-new providers of security in many parts of the world.” (Anzera, 2017: 35)

The theoretical perspective delineated in this introduction is aimed to frame the case study and to set the basis for its complete comprehension. The image of a “caged Leviathan”, a state increasingly trapped between domestic problems and international dynamics, could be assumed as a starting point for this work, since it perfectly represents Mali as political authority and gives account of the spread of non-state actors that are changing the geopolitical structure of the country and of the wider area of Sahel.
3. Regional Dimension: the Sahel

The Sahel presents, nowadays, a hybridization of different interests that leads to a delegitimization of the statehood in the eyes of the population: in this context, every actor seems to pursue his objectives. In fact, this area is increasingly affected by Islamic groups that “can exploit long-standing conflicts and traditional smuggling routes to North Africa and Europe to broaden their room for manoeuvre” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 7).

In this chapter I will analyse the instability of the region underlining different factors: the difficult environment, the fall of Gaddafi repressive government and the development and the growth of illicit activities. These were the main causes that have opened new routes to transnational groups that have been able to obtain popular support and to insert themselves in the state territories. In the last chapters, I will offer an overview on the principal terrorist organizations in the Sahel, with a special focus on the Al Qaeda in Maghreb emblematic case, on its birth, its evolution and its strategy.

3.1 The context

Figure 1. Sahel

Sahel is an ‘open border’, where the state limits seem uncapable of imposing themselves on the fluid nature of the economic and political relations that take place in the region. In a sort of way, it could be defined as a *limes* between two worlds, the Mediterranean and the Sub Saharan Africa (Diodato, Guazzini, 2014: 19).
In fact, for centuries, it was crossed by nomad populations and nowadays is a passage zone for several local and transnational actors, often linked with Islamic terrorism. For that reason, this area lately acquired a great geopolitical importance at international level. The Sahel comprises mostly desert lands, scarcely populated and insufficiently patrolled by the security forces (Harmon, 2014: 146).

That entails two aspects that are worth of emphasizing from the beginning, as they will recur systematically in the thesis, given their importance for understanding not just the Malian crisis but rather the relationship between civil society and terroristic groups: the geophysical features and poverty of resources.

“The region has been rocked by food crises, with the 2012 crisis affecting almost 20 million people. And yet, despite the pervasive food insecurity, the Sahel continues to experience rapid population growth. (...) in addition to the lack of civil and political rights, individuals do not have full social and economic rights, which means that they are unable to address their needs for food, health, water, and employment without fear of, or hindrance from, the state.” (Kfir, 2018: 346)

The two elements are inextricably linked. The first one refers to what Cristiani and Fabiani (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2013: 81) have named the “geophysical challenge” to the Weberian state, constituted by the difficulty of control of a territory due to its peculiar physical characteristics. In fact, the long desert stretches and the mountains hinder the full administrative and political control of the region. Secondly, the Sahelian area is characterized by arid climate and it is cyclically subjected to monsoons, extreme weather condition that hampers the economic growth of the area; in that perspective criminal activities “stems from the fact that there are few alternative activities that produce similar profits and rapid enrichment” (Lacher, 2012: 4).

These characteristics and the difficult transition to democracy of different countries in the region had led the Sahel to be a privileged field for illicit activities.

“West Africa, especially Saharan and Sahelian West Africa, has ideal conditions for contraband trafficking including porous borders, weak and corruptible institutions and pre-existing criminal networks.” (Harmon, 2014: 146)

The combination of criminality and smuggling that - as we will see - are entrenched in the local economy, attracted terroristic organizations. However, terrorist groups operating
in the Sahel act often in ways that are typical of criminal organizations: jihadist groups, arisen within state borders, had the capacity to expand their action to the regional dimension through their involvement in criminal activities and succeeded, consequently, to build a popular consensus.

3.2 Trade and Smuggling in the Sahel

Trade’s activity has always been a livelihood, in addition to pastoralism, for the people of the region. At the beginning, it consisted in basic commodities destined to Saharian and Sahelian populations. The trades could be dated back to the Middle Age, but it was only by the half of nineteenth century that they had an acceleration. After the Second World War trades become so intense that the post-War years were called the ‘Golden Ages’. During and after the de-colonization processes every type of unregulated trade were declared illicit; it was, thus, exactly in that period that smuggling became an important activity for the population in the region. Especially in some countries, as Mali, the Arab population and, mainly, the Tuaregs got deeply involved in the black market (Harmon, 2014: 11).

“Malian networks are frequently run by extended Reguibat or Kunta family cartels that specialise in certain routes where they have developed some degree of influence – particularly important in border zones and urban areas where the costs and risks of operating are higher. At desert-side entrepots such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, desert cartels (la mafia du sable) take over the transhipment, with assistance from a variety of protection specialists (ICG 2004:17). Camion (truck) caravans move goods through the desert, over terrain they know and have a degree of influence over, north to Algerian cities including Ghadames or into Morocco or Libya.” (Gutelius, 2007: 70)

From the 1970s smugglers began to use XIXth century caravans’ roads for contraband activities of different goods from Algeria and Libya to Mali and Niger.

“Long-standing commercial and social networks that are frequently based on families and communities specializing in trade are spread across trading hubs in different countries; those networks have been growing closer since decolonization in the 1960s. From the 1970s onward, the links that had survived the collapse of the long-distance caravan trade in the late nineteenth century began to expand, thriving
on contraband of subsidized Algerian and Libyan goods traveling to northern Mali and Niger.” (Lacher, 2012: 4)

The most important type of contraband was the cigarettes one, in large part with the blessing of the tobacco’s companies that thus circumvented the tax regimes. This traffic prepared the ground for networks survived until today: “Cigarette smuggling in particular has greatly contributed to the emergence of the practices and networks that have allowed drug trafficking to grow” (Lacher, 2012: 9).

The smuggling of illicit goods strengthened in the 1990s after the Algerian embargo on Libya. In the same years also irregular migration flows increased on the roads to Libya and Morocco, and it mostly interested the Gao region, in Northern Mali, where the practice of human trafficking has roots since the first colonial period, when it was led by Tamasheq e Bidàn tribes (Harmon, 2014: 154).

Furthermore, the conflicts arisen in Algeria, Mali, Niger brought a growth of illegal arms smuggling that, after the latest Libyan conflict, restarted in full swing (UNODOC, 2013). In the same years, the drug trafficking assumed relevance especially in the frontier zones between Mali and Algeria. The Malian smugglers over time laced important links and family bonds with the Algerian merchant class (Lacher, 2012: 4).

From the 2000s, the large profit guaranteed by the illicit market attracted several criminal organizations and terroristic groups. In some cases, these entities have experienced a hybridization process so intense that made possible to speak about “narco-terrorism”.

3.3 Trans-national jihadism in the Sahel: the terrorist-criminal hybrid organizations

Usually, speaking about terrorism, we refer to violence acts perpetrated by non-state actors for ideological reasons. Differently, the term “organized crime” refers to groups or organizations that are involved in criminal activities for the sole purpose to enrich themselves, without any political or ideological objective. In the Sahel case, however, the line between organized crime and terrorism is not so clear and these groups seems to be interchangeable in their modus operandi.

“It is possible to argue that it is becoming increasing difficult at times to distinguish between international terrorists and transnational criminals. They both share
operational and organizational commonalities and their actions appear to be increasingly more blurred.” (Alda, Sala, 2015:3)

Terrorist organizations seem to carry on different agendas, adapting strategies to the context and combining the profit’s level and the ideological one. They are Islam inspired groups, characterized by the compresence of ideological and criminal elements, and who are able to work on two lines: the profit sphere (black market, trafficking and smuggling) and the symbolic dimension of political, religious and territorial power.

“The Sahelian case clearly shows the closely knit and widespread connections between illicit trade and armed groups as well as their ability to structure themselves as hybrid orders.” (Rosato, 2016:111)

Obviously, the truthfulness of ideological inspiration is difficult to assess: often the ideological component represents, in large part, a propagandistic mean to get more followers.

“This is certainly the case for AQIM, with many governments and analysts arguing that its radical Islamist rhetoric merely serves as a cover for the group’s profitable criminal activities.” (Boeke, 2016: 927)

Besides, what is undoubted is that criminal activities as drug smuggling, human trafficking and the kidnapping of Western tourists, represent the main source of income for the jihadist organizations in the area. According to the data, the principal drugs routes are two: the first is the hashish route that from Mauritania runs through the Moroccan Rif to Europe; the second one is very profitable and regards the cocaine route that from Latin America arrives in West Africa.

“South America based cartels involved in the cocaine trade began diverting some of their flights from coastal West Africa to the Sahel, especially less populous and less policed Mali, which enabled the traffickers to evade enhanced police surveillance in West Africa.” (Larémont, 2011:251)

The relationships between the narco-traffickers and jihadist groups originated different hypothesis, especially after the alleged alliance between Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia. On this specific case, the New York tribunal has opened an investigation in 2009 but it decreed the inconsistency of a
transatlantic narco-terrorist conspiracy. Although the existence of important links between Sahelian terrorism and ‘narcos’ is unquestioned, they seem to share an opportunistic alliance devoid of an ideological base (Harmon, 2014: 153; Rosato, 2016: 129).

Alda and Sala explain the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and organized crime according to three different characteristics. Firstly, both occupy the same geographic space and operate in the same ‘market’. Secondly, they use the same strategy for their recruitment, operating in less populated contexts and relying on the youth dissatisfaction. Thirdly, they share mutual interests in activities and relations:

“Criminals will provide terrorist with whatever they require provided the price as right, and the proliferation of kidnappings for ransom across the Sahel shows that that includes hostages. Terrorists, in turn, are prepared to engage in, or at least tolerate, criminal activities if they serve their needs. This explains why criminals kidnap hostages and terrorists negotiate their ransom”. (Alda, Sala, 2014: 8)

What the two scholars underlie seems to be a hybridization in the *modus operandi* of the two types of groups, influencing each other because of spatial closeness and similarity of interests. Differently, Rosato claims that it is impossible to look to the Sahelian situation from a monolithic approach and she asserts that the terms ‘narco-jihadism’ is simplistic: it is not only terroristic groups or criminal organizations that are involved in the smuggling and black trade. Smuggling -as seen- represents an important part of the population’s income and constituted a way for the terroristic groups to penetrate in the context. It should be noticed that the terroristic groups are not directly involved in the smuggling but rather they obtain, through economic agreements with the local population, the control of the territories on which they impose passage taxes. As Gutelius asserts, the illicit activities are made possible by the control that different tribes’ leaders exercise on regional territory.

“Particularly since 2001, smuggling has become a major site of struggle between various interest groups, including national governments, and local authorities, as the main way (outside foreign donations or investments) for many leaders and their communities to remain self-sufficient and autonomous.” (Gutelius, 2007: 69)
Therefore, the activities of criminal organizations in the Sahel depends on different aspects: among them, an important key is to establish relations with jihadist groups, who have the control of the area.

“The success of criminal organizations depends on their ability to secure their territory to the greatest possible extent. In a context of conflict as complex as the Sahel, this goal largely depends on their success in three areas: first, using corruption to work their way into the state apparatus; second, establishing bonds with the local population by redistributing part of the proceeds from their trafficking activities; and third, by building exclusively instrumental relationships with the various armed movements that control the area, terrorists included.” (Rosato, 2016: 126)

Furthermore, Rosato stresses on other important factors that are vital for the survival of both jihadist organization ad narco-traffickers, as the corruption of the governments, the lack of state’s welfare and, more generally, the weakness of state’s structure. Provocatively, she affirms that narco-jihadism is a myth built to conceal other structural problems of the region.

“The only real function of the narco-terrorist myth in the Sahel is that of potentially obscuring the crucial role that corruption, especially in the political and business spheres of multiple countries in the area, plays in trafficking activities.” (Rosato, 2016: 128)

In a wider perspective, in fact, it is the weakness of state’s authorities and a lack of a coercive power (in the Weberian terms) that permit to these organizations to move freely in the region and to conduct their activities:

“Alliances between terrorists and organized crime are evident when states are failed or weak in that the new transnational terrorist formations enjoy more freedom of movement in areas where the local economy has long been under the control of entrenched organized crime groups.” (Rosato, 2016: 111)

Finally, although their involvement in the black trade, these groups seems not to lose the popular legitimacy, even among Muslims. This happens for two different reason: on one side, because an important part of the population is involved in traffics; on the other side, even more importantly, because terrorist groups are able to convert their richness in political influence and in military power. The smuggling’s income, in fact, are crucial for
the creation of the various para-state entities occasionally rising in Middle and West Africa as the Northern Mali case (Di Liddo, 2018: 3).

“In the face of a complete failure of the state, other more or less violent forms of social regulation make their way into society and spread out by activating opportunistic ties and constructing networks that are increasingly global in scope. Terrorism and organized crime are distinct in terms of their goals, motivations, and the ways they are enacted, but they have in common this ability to generate new forms of sovereignty by exploiting the gaps left by the state.” (Rosato, 2016: 130)

3.4 The spread of ‘Regional Islamic groups’

The terroristic phenomenon is wide and the groups are highly fragmented in a continuous shift of alliances and divisions. However, all the groups have some features in common: they act regionally, they ‘work’ in the illicit economy and, obviously, they appeal to the jihadist cause. In this scenario, the most important jihadist reality is the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s galaxy - on which I will focus in the next chapter.

“AQIM as the main organization responsible for terrorist attacks in the Sahel and as the ‘mother’ of several violent offshoots. These include MUJAO and Belmokhtar’s Al Murabitoon, which rejoined after a split lasting nearly two years. Ansar Dine and its leader, Iyad ag Ghali (Shayk Abu Fadl), are closely allied to AQIM and are in turn well connected to the newly formed Macina Liberation Front.” (Boeke, 2016: 915)

To make an analytical overview about jihadism in Sahel, it is necessary to start from June 2014, that represented the turning point in the African jihadist world.

In fact, in June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, few days after the proclamation of the Islamic State, asked to all the jihadist forces in the world to join him and his group. The biggest part of jihadist organizations in the Northern part of Africa were linked to Al Qaeda. These were AQIM, Al Mourabitoun, that were directly connected to the Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Ansar Al Din, arisen during the Mali’s war, that is ideologically close to AQ without effective formal links (Boubacar Ba, Morten Bøås, 2017: 21).
The Islamic State spread in Africa when a cell, called Jun al-Khilafah, came out of Al Qaeda and then joined the IS. Afterwards, other little organizations in Libya, Marocco, and Algeria followed (Lounnas, 2018: 4).

Nowadays, the groups present a more definite division in two main galaxies, Al Qaeda and IS; between them stands Boko Haram, that started as a nationalistic movement but signed opportunistical coalitions with both the parts (Anon, 2012: 122; Massoni, 2017: 27).

On quaedist side, in the March of 2017 the most important jihadist groups, Ansar al-Din, Al-Mourabitoun and The Front for Macina’s liberation (born in Mali in 2015 and formed by Fulani population) were unified under the name of Jama’a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin’, Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM). It represented an AQIM umbrella organization under the Iyad Ag Ghali’s leadership (Massoni, 2017: 28). This unification seems to have closed the factionalism phase that for long time had characterized the region and it gave birth to the most important group affiliated to Al Qaeda (Palmerio, 2019: 4).

The other faction is constituted by the Islamic State, or better ‘The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara’ (ISGS) under the leadership of Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, previously leader of Mujao, a detachment of AQIM which started to orbit in the IS galaxy from 2015.

### 3.5 The case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: origins and evolution of the organization

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was officially created in January 2007, from the alliance between Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda and the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), arisen as an evolution of GIA, an organization founded in Algeria by jihadis returned from Afghanistan’s war (Larémont, 2011: 243).

“From 1998, al-Qaeda’s internationalist agenda had increasingly attracted Algerians and other North Africans. Hundreds flocked to the training camps in Afghanistan, demonstrating the strong appeal of al-Qaeda’s internationalist ideology in the Maghreb. From 2003, many travelled to Iraq to join the insurgents in their fight against the American occupation and the new Iraqi state. In several cases, recruitment networks were traced in Algeria. While Algerians first seemed to have presented a minority among the foreign fighters, from 2005, the number of North
Africans in general and Algerians in particular rose substantially” (Guido Steinberg, Isabelle Werenfels, 2007: 411)

In the 2006, the successor of Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, declared the alliance between Al Qaeda and GSPC, and in the 2007 the organization took the name Al Qaeda in Maghreb under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdel. At the beginning AQIM was a recruitment’s basin of the jihadist forces for the Iraq war, but soon it acquired autonomy by the central core and became highly active.

Since its creation, AQIM was characterised by a series of internal division; however, the exact relationship between the major jihadist groups remains difficult to discern, also because many relationships and links between groups depend on the choices of individual chiefs (Larémont, 2011: 249).

In my attempt to trace in broad terms the evolution of the group, I rely on Valeria Rosato’s reconstruction (Rosato, 2016: 117-118). She divides the history of the movement in four phases to which I will add a fifth phase to update it to most recent times. The first phase lasted from 2006 to 2010 and it could be identified as the launch phase of Qaedaist objective in the Sahel, starting by the rise of AQIM. This phase was characterised by the global jihadist rhetoric and by an enlargement of communication channels outside Algerian borders.

The second phase, 2011-2012, is called centrifuge: in fact, the group suffered a phase of tensions that originated in several scissions and affiliations. AQIM’s fragmentation resulted clear from the rise of ‘The movement for the oneness and jihad in West Africa’ (MUJAO) in 2011, led by Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou. Among the numerous reasons, political and economical in nature, there was also a racial factor: in fact, AQIM has always had a discriminatory attitude towards black fighters; MUJAO, therefore, came as a group with a strong African connotation inside itself, which fought to apply shari’a in the whole region.

“The jihadists had varied ethic and social backgrounds, with the unit comprising fighters from all over the Sahel. The mainstay of the leadership cadre was Algerian, with ‘sub-Saharan Africans clearly second class in the eyes of AQIM’. According to analysts, this is one of the reasons that Mujao split away, recruiting more within Songhai and other black African communities.” (Boeke, 2016:920)
In the same period, another group, Al-Mourabitoun (The sentinels), arose under the lead of Belmoktar.

“(…) the third most powerful Salafi jihadi organization in the Sahel is Al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who pledged his allegiance to Al-Qaeda since its creation in 2013. Since its inception Al-Mourabitoun has been responsible for numerous attacks in the Sahel and thus has been the target of many French and American operations, during which many of its leaders were killed.” (Lounnas, April 2018: 3)

There are different thesis about the origins of this new cell and about its leader. According to Fabiani and Cristiani (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2013: 8) and Rosato (Rosato, 2016: 116), the new group was born by a fusion of a MUJAO’s detachment and of another group “Signatures in Blood” (Katiba al Mulathamin), likewise founded by Belmokhtar, who had been AQIM’s leader. According to Lounnas (Lounnas, October 2018: 12), he was the leader of GSPC since 1994 until 2005, when Droukdel took the control of the group. Since that time, and also after the rise of AQIM, because of the rivalry with Droukdel, Belmokhtar acted with total independence from the regional leadership.

“The tensions between Belmokhtar and the AQIM leadership continued to rise over the years, furthering the rift between him and the other brigade leaders. This was illustrated when Belmokhtar discreetly encouraged the formation of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), a splinter from AQIM.” (Lounnas, October 2018: 12)

Lounnas asserts that it was Belmokhtar himself that encouraged the born of MUJAO in 2012 without becoming its leader, and then he split from AQIM and “gave birth to Al-Mourabitoun, one of the strongest jihadi organizations in the region. The new group, immediately, pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus becoming the direct competitor of AQIM in the Sahel since their combined intervention in Mali. According to Larémont (Larémont, 2011: 244) and Cristiani and Fabiani (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 4), instead, Belmokhtar has always been one of the most important personalities of AQIM.

“The historical player in AQIM in the Sahel is Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He is the leader of a southern brigade of about 150 elements defined “el Moulathamoune”, literally
the “masked ones”. Man of many nicknames, the most famous is “Mr Marlboro”, given his experience in illegal trafficking and contraband. Mainly based in Mauritania, he has great operational autonomy, fuelling doubts on the effective control of the central leadership on his actions.” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 4)

While Droukdel acted in the North of Algeria, he coordinated in the South and led the group outside Algerian borders, thanks to his capacity to forging connections with local communities.

“The present leader of AQIM is Abdelmalek Droukdel (..) [who] has assigned Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid. (…) Belmokhtar has become particularly effective in the Sahelian region because he has married four women from prominent Tuareg and Bérabiche amilies from the area.” (Larémont, 2011: 248)

The figure of Belmoktar is amply discu ssed, despite his key role in the Sahelian terrorism is unquestionable, also because his links and alliances with some IS affiliated groups.

The third phase defined by Rosato covers the whole 2013 and it is called centripetal. The war in Mali and the French military intervention gave an impulse for a new union of the forces aimed to fight the common Western enemy. Signal about this change of course are evident by the efficacy of groups’ coordination. In this year, furthermore another group arose, Ansar Al Din, that was founded during the beginning of Mali’s war by Iyad Ag Ghali in the 2012.

“Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) is a Tuareg Islamist group formed in 2012 around Iyad ag Ghaly, the historic leader of the Tuareg uprisings of the 1990s. This group is based in northern Mali and its self-proclaimed goal is to impose shari’a law throughout the country. It includes more extreme fringe elements with ties to Al Qaeda.” (Rosato, 2016: 116)

Rosato identifies a fourth phase in 2014-2015 when a new scission emerged that gave birth to a new cell, Djound Al-Khilafa (The Caliphate’s Algerian Soldiers), that joined Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; afterwards, when Au Walid al-Sahrawi took the lead of the MUJAO in 2015, also this group joined the Islamic State creating ‘The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara’ (ISGS). “A spokesman for MUJAO announced the group’s allegiance to IS in May 2015, but this was quickly denied by other group members” (Boeke, 2016: 915).
In my opinion, nowadays, we assist to a peculiar centripetal phase that gravitates around two different centres. The first is the already mentioned Jama’a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin’ (JNIM), that includes all the historical and new cell of AQIM except MUJAO. In fact, as mentioned, nowadays Al-Mourabitoun came back under the Al Qaeda influence taking part to the new umbrella organization, JNIM.

“It is no coincidence that Belmokhtar has recently rejoined forces with AQIM: both are fiercely loyal to Al Qaeda’s leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri and they are facing increasing competition from the Islamic State (IS)” (Boeke, 2016: 917)

The other one is the ISGS that embraces the groups affiliated to the Islamic State.

### 3.5.1 AQIM’s Re-Branding and ‘Sahelization’ Process

AQIM experienced numerous transformations caused by internal and external pressures, but there are two strategic points that would be chiefly useful to analyse. The first is the ‘re-naming’ of GPSC in Al Qaeda in Maghreb and the second one is its shift from Algeria to Sahel, namely the ‘Sahelization process’ (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 5).

“The new name not only underlined its submission to the hierarchy and agenda laid down by Al-Qaeda, a global organization, but also served notice of the regional aspirations of what was until then essentially an Algerian group in terms of its makeup, objectives and scope.” (Soriano, 2011: 279)

In the last decade the Qaedaist Islamic terrorism went through a deep structural transition. In fact, from a pyramidal structure it become a decentralized and horizontal organism. Nowadays, Al Qaeda’s organisation is formed by three elements. The first one is the top leadership which doesn’t control directly the operations of affiliated groups. These ones represent the second element: they act as independent organizations that operate in national or regional dimension. The third element are the small cells, sometimes composed by single individuals who has not any formal links with the central core but act alone on the same ideological framework (Torelli,Vervelli, 2013: 11).

Many scholars compare this new strategy to a ‘franchising’ operation, borrowing the term from the marketing jargon: “Al Qaeda has evolved from a centrally directed organization into a worldwide ‘franchiser’ of terrorist attacks” (Boeke, 2016: 922).
The core of the organization is still placed in the Middle East, but it allows the allies to use the name ‘Al Qaeda’ as a brand: it leaves the satellite groups to be free in their operations as long as they maintain the ideological layout.

According to Dowd and Raleigh, this dynamic is particularly transparent in the Sahel region:

“Recent developments in sub-Saharan Africa have reinforced a tendency to conceive of almost all violent Islamist groups as local manifestations of a single, global jihadist ideology or, in extremis, as individual cells in a single, though amorphous, Al-Qaeda network.” (Dowd, Raleigh, 2013: 501)

Al Qaeda in Maghreb perfectly expresses this new tendency: in fact, the GSPC, after integrating in Al Qaeda’s network, underwent to an internationalization process that caused major changes in the former Algerian group. According to Steinbeth and Werenfels, the use of a new name open to GSPC the possibility to face with international reality and, also, to became more attractive for the jihadists in the region.

“The GSPC’s decision to internationalize its strategy might have been an effort on its part to keep Algerian fighters from leaving their home country and to attract them to the fight against the Algerian government. Furthermore, stressing its transnational character by choosing the new name al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb could strengthen its credentials among non-Algerian North Africans and win them for its cause.” (G. Steinberg, I. Werenfels, 2007: 409)

Following the two scholars, Fabiani and Cristiani believe that GSPC affiliation with Al Qaeda is principally rhetorical and strategical since it does not appear to exist an effective logistic or financial relation between them: “the GSPC’s affiliation to Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda and its re-branding as AQIM should be seen more as a survival tactic.” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 6). What, instead, they highlight is an ‘imitation’ by GSPC of Al Qaeda’s strategy: AQIM started to conduct suicide-bombing attacks, that represents a change of direction from the previous GSPC’s action. In this perspective, the attacks in Algiers in 2007 attest the passage of AQIM to Al Qaeda’s galaxy. According to Steinberg and Werenfels, the behaviour of the group, however, is ambivalent: AQIM’s references seems to oscillate between its past and its new affiliation. On one side the organization started to adopt Al Qaeda modus operandi, on the other side it remains anchored to Algerian agenda.
On the contrary, Torelli and Vervelli notice that something in AQIM’s schedule has changed. In fact, the re-branding process was accompanied by an important spatial expansion in their activities. The ideological enlargement was followed by a regionalization of their message and actions. In the past, GSPC already moved away from the Algerian borders because the government’s pressure and had already begun to build sanctuaries in other countries; but it was only with AQIM that the ‘Sahelization process’ was achieved.

“The GSPC was in fact as much a nationalist as it was an Islamist organization. It explicitly confined its activities to Algeria where it aimed to topple the government and set up an Islamic state.” (G. Steinberg, I. Werenfels, 2007: 408)

The theatre of AQIM’s operations is the entire Sahel, more specifically the area that extends “from a region to the east of Algiers and continues eastward through the Kabylie toward Tunisia” (Larémont, 2011: 245).

The choice of expand their activity is not caused only by the repressive action of Algerian authorities but also by a change in the group’s objective. As said before, the goal of GSPC was to create an Islamic state in Algeria; instead, AQIM presents three main different objectives that are essential to understand the high impact that it has in the Sahel region. According to Larémont, the willingness to take-over Algerian government still remains, but, at the same time, the groups aims also to attack European powers, France, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, and Spain, through planned bombings by its affiliated members in Europe. The third objective, and the most important for the purpose of this work, is the creation of “a safe haven among the Tuareg tribes of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania wherein it can obtain refuge and where it can also encourage Tuareg rebellion against central states” (Larémont, 2011: 245) - point on which I will return better later in text.

By the AQIM objectives’ scheme designed by Larémont, emerges that the Al Qaeda affiliated group managed to combine two dimension, the global one (in reference to the global jihad) and the local one (in reference to the local jihad): “Al Qaeda in Islamic

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2 The GSPC presence in Mali stood since 2003, when the group escaping from Algerian security forces established bases in the Northern. (Thurston, Lebovich, 2003:46)
Maghreb is a good example of this dual nature, mixing local and global.” (Marret, 2008: 541) Its ‘glocal’ (global-local) feature makes AQIM a wide-open organization in the objectives and interests compared to GSPC.

3.5.2 AQIM and the population

The structuring of AQIM as a ‘glocal’ organization promoted the ‘Sahelization process’ and the group’s integration in the regional environment. The relation between jihadists and local community seems to have acquired a considerable relevance in recent times. In fact, gaining the popular support appears to be the favourite strategy of AQIM to increase the control of the area. According to Larémont, AQIM’s approach to the population in Sahel “is clearly reminiscent of Al Qaeda Central’s methods in Afghanistan and Pakistan where it was able to obtain refuge among the Pashtun tribes in that region. In both of these sanctuaries (Afghanistan/Pakistan and the Sahel), the local and central governments have had their effectiveness and capacity as governments diminished as Al Qaeda’s and AQIM’s have remained constant or have expanded” (Larémont, 2011: 247).

Boeke measures the AQIM’s relationships with population through different levels of freedom that the group has in the region: freedom of movement, freedom to build sanctuaries and freedom to control the population. According to the scholar, the freedom of movement is rather homogeneous in all the region because its natural conformation and because Sahel is a transition zone. Currently AQIM can move liberally from Mauritania to Niger and, southern, from Algeria to Burkina Faso.

The coexistence and the keeping good relations with any locals is the AQIM’s mobile cells favourite strategy because it guarantees them the capacity to move freely in all the area and to pursue their interests.

“Concerning freedom of movement, survival in the vast and arid plains of the Sahara is not an individual or group challenge, but a social and cultural undertaking. Many nomads and drivers habitually traverse the desert, and cordial relations with ‘locals’ are a required minimum to allow for an undisturbed travel or presence.” (Boeke, 2016: 925)

The region is an important hub for illicit activities that represent, on one side, an important income for the group (it is estimated that AQIM earned hundreds of millions dollars by
kidnapping), and, on the other, a way in which AQIM inserted in the social texture of the region. Al Qaeda is not directly involved in illicit market but rather acts indirectly in a way that recalls the Mafia Style with reference to Mafia’s manners (Torelli, Vervelli, 2013: 17). AQIM’s men make agreements with different local criminal organizations but also with tribes’ leaders and take possession of the territories in exchange for protection:

“AQIM demands taxes from local tribes, it renders justice on its own terms, it attacks representatives of the state including the police and the military, and it kidnaps foreign visitors for ransom in the region, either independently or in collaboration with the Tuareg or Bérabiche tribes of the region.” (Larémont, 2011: 248)

This is the way in which AQIM gains the consensus of the population to build sanctuaries that serve as headquarter to hide from security forces, to keep the kidnappings’ hostages and to coordinate local activities. Boeke asserts that the whole Northern Mali was the AQIM’s safe-haven since the French operation (Operation Serval) in the region.

“Within this vast area, they developed a mountainous redoubt in the Ametetai valley, an area of about 25 square kilometres full of caves, crevices, and valleys in the Ardar des Ifoghas. AQIM chose it because it was the only location that provided natural water sources.” (Boeke, 2016: 925)

AQIM’s penetration level in the population’s texture is various. In the broader Sahel there is strong movement’s freedom but AQIM is pretty isolated. In Timboktu zone, instead, the group detain total control of the population. AQIM’s interests in the local social texture emerges clearly by some documents discovered in properly in this area. In these documents the leader Droukdel underlies the mistakes made in Mali as the haste with which they imposed the shari’a law without considering the environment. This fact comported the religion’s rejection by a part of the population (Boeke, 2016: 927). With regards to religion, it is critical to underline that religious panorama in the Sahel is extremely various and also the Islamic scenario is divided. There are about 150 million Muslims in West Africa who could be separated in two categories. The first one is the moderate Islam that includes Sufi brotherhoods and other Islamic organizations. According to Laremont, Sufi leaders are ‘important counterweights’ to the spread of radicalism in the region.
“This moderation is linked to the Sufi model of individual spiritual development, as opposed to forced conformity to the group that is typical of radical movements of the Islamic heartlands. Islam is popular in West Africa partly because of the compatibility of aspects of Sufism with elements of traditional African spirituality including saint veneration and mysticism.” (Harmon, 2014: 112)

Sufism contributed strongly to the spread Islam in West Africa. It dates from the fifteenth century and it became more eradicated in the society in in the nineteenth.

“Having been an elite faith for centuries, Islam became a popular mass movement in modern West Africa partly because of the compatibility of Sufism with aspects of traditional African spirituality, including veneration of persons with perceived mystical powers.” (Harmon, 2014:36)

The other category is the radical Islam that includes reformist Islam and terrorist movements. These groups refer to the 1970s’Islamic revival begun in Egypt and then spread to Algeria and Sahel.

“West African reformists seek to purify Islam by opposing saint veneration and adopting Middle Eastern and North African elements like the veiling and cloistering of women, but they do not, generally, seek to impose an Islamic system of government.” (Harmon, 2014: 112)

Against the backdrop of such variety, religion does indeed retain an important role in the relationship with the population; nonetheless, other factors need to be taken into account. In addition to the aforementioned smuggling and illicit activities, scholars have indicated one last factor as a cause regarding the reaching of a popular consensus by Jihadists groups. Dow and Ralegh stress on the fact that, in the countries were ethncial differences are exacerbated and there is a lack of an equal political representation, people are more influenced by jihadist groups as AQIM. Who does not feel represented by politicians or in his nationhood see in the Islam and in the jihadism his identity.

“(…) often in countries where ethno-regional groups are the basis for both the allocation of, and marginalization from, power (…) excluded or dissident people have few alternative political identities, of which ‘Islamist’ is one.” (Dow, Ralegh, 2013:505)
3.6 Causes and geo-political challenges

Concluding the chapter, I would like to focus on the causes and the mutations in the regional dynamics that led to the current geopolitical configuration. According to the scholars, I identified four major topics which is worth to stress on.

The first reason concerns the widely mentioned growth of illicit market phenomenon. The contraband and the smuggling that characterised the region in the previous years, “laid the basis for the development of high profit activities” (Harmon, 2014: 11).

“Several factors make the Sahel attractive to organized crime and terrorist groups. First, what drives the Sahel is trade. A caravan trade route, an artery pumping life through the region, has long facilitated the movement of goods and people between the Mediterranean and West Africa. Today, technological advances—GPS, satellite phones, and four-wheel drive vehicles—facilitate desert travel like never before, as it has become possible to drive from Kidal in Mali to Tamanrasset in Algeria in about a day.” (Kfir, 2018: 347)

In this perspective the criminal activities not only serve as a source of sustenance for the organizations but also to consolidate a relation of domain-protection on the territory. In fact, this mechanism enforces the relationship with the population on the basis of economic interests and it helps jihadist groups to become even more rooted in the different territories.

Secondly, another important factor is religion. As seen, Islam is the main religion in the region from centuries and, as Kfir notices, it surely played a role in the diffusion of jihadism in the area, even if it does not represent the only cause and it is not completely applicable to all the contexts.

“Over time, Islam adapted to Sahelian cultural practices. Over the last few decades Islamist groups from the Middle East and South Asia have also penetrated the region, providing healthcare, education, and food. In return, these groups proselytize. The infusion of a Middle East/South Asian Islam has facilitated the emergence of two distinct identities: secularists and Islamists.” (Kfir, 2018: 348)

The third reason concerns the structural dimension, precisely, what I called, according to Fabiani and Cristiani’s definition (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2013: 4), the ‘geophysical challenge
to Weberian state’. It represents a significant element to understand the cause of the spread of transnational groups and it is a necessary condition for their survival.

“Sahelian states are traditionally plagued with: long and porous borders, extremely difficult to patrol; complex and unstable ethno-religious make-up; political instability; economic underdevelopment; and high levels of corruption.” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 8)

The political instability of the region and the weakness of central governments favoured the groups who are able to supply the needs of the population and to infiltrate in national context by a constant action from below thanks to their capability to create a strict connection between warfare and welfare, benefiting from the weakness of states in the region.

“AQIM has been able to exploit the security vacuum in the Algerian Sahara and the Sahel region, from where it has managed to establish a significant presence in Mali, Mauritania and Niger” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2011: 4)

Before proceeding to an analysis of the last factor, it is important to mention that, however, there are significant differences between different countries and governments. In fact, there is a distinction between the areas that are less controlled by the central powers and others where, instead, the security forces succeed in controlling their lands. Lounnas divides the regional state system in two big categories. There is a core of strong states able to control their territory and to contain every type of criminals; he numbers among them Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Instead, other systems constitute collapsed states uncapable to rule the territories, as Libya after the recent crisis and Mali (Lounnas, October 2018: 14).

The weakness of government and – as we will see in Malian case study – the corruption of army and security forces led these countries to be most permeable to the activity of criminal organizations.

The fourth cause refers to a mutation of structural dimension and concerns specifically the fall of Mu'ammar Gaddafi, who was a fundamental stabilizing factor for the region.

“While the power vacuum created by the collapse of Gaddafi’s regime had distinctive implications in terms of localised conflicts in border areas, historically speaking it is a
fact that Libyan government was ever in control of its borders, especially in the South.”
(Strazzari, Tholens, 2014: 353)

Gaddafi, in fact, was one of the major local actors, beside the Algerian government, of the war on terrorism in North Africa. The absence of a strong power capable of arbitrating regional disputes created a condition on which new conflicts could emerge and it left room to the terrorist groups’ action: “Qaddafi was firmly opposed to Al Qaeda, and he was increasingly cooperating with the West on security matters” (Larémont, 2011: 257).

The Lybian War created a huge migratory flow that destabilized the region and an arms’ flow that generated even more insecurity, also because part of these weapons ended into jihadist’ hands.

“The widespread distribution of armaments from arms depots formerly controlled by the Qaddafi regime guarantees instability first in Libya and second in the neighbouring region of the Sahel for the foreseeable future especially, as it has been conceded, because armaments have fallen into the hands of AQIM”. (Strazzari e Tholens, 2014: 345)

Furthermore, it is necessary to take in consideration that Gaddafi became crucial for the definitive stability in some African countries over time, which he supported in the peacekeeping’s phases and also economically through specific plans of development. (Ronen, 2013). More precisely, in 1998 he founded the COMMESSA (‘Community of Sahelian and Saharan States’) that included Libya, Chad, Sudan, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso (Adamczewski e Jamin, 2011).

The causes mentioned above make the case of Sahel suitable with the theoretical framework delineated in the first chapter. The plurality of actors involved in the region and the increasing importance of transnational agents who by a continuous action from below were able to corrode and to evade the state borders led Sahel to be an example of Intermestic Reality where it is difficult to differentiate the inside and the outside. Summarizing all the factors discussed, it is possible to categorize the problems on three main different levels: physical, structural and economic, that interacted together in the region to make it a ‘perfect’ field for transitional non-state actors. On the physical level, the conformation of the land hinders an efficient control by the state governments of their territories. On the structural level, the lack of a strong power able to control the region
makes state borders more penetrable by external forces. Furthermore, the weakness of many state governments has contributed to pave the way to transnational agents. Finally, on the empirical level, the growth of illicit market, caused by the difficult environment in which Sahelian population live, could be considered the vehicle that permitted the connections between outside and inside: it attracted global capitals that encouraged the intervention of transnational agents.
4. State dimension: Mali

In this chapter, I will examine why Mali has been the country that more suffered the mutations and the new dynamics of the region.
Firstly, I will focus on Mali as political entity, emphasizing the structural problems of Malian democracy and the weakness of administrative and governmental apparatus. Then, I will move on the Northern Mali dimension, studying at first the economic, environmental and social issues, then investigating the Islamic background of the country. Finally, I will focus on the infiltration of jihadist groups in the region, stressing on the relations between them and the population in order to understand the causes behind their ‘complicity’.

4.1 Mali as illusionary example of democracy

“Mali’s political structure promotes stable, democratic institutions. There is a strong tradition of consensus in Malian politics and the country is considered one of the most politically and socially stable country in Africa”. (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007)

Literature agrees that until 2012, when the conflict broke out, Mali was considered a model of democracy in African context and an example of tolerance in the Islamic World as a “bulwark against radical Islam in Africa” (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2002). However - as we will see - radical Islam was already, present before 2012 and it had an important role also in the political sphere in Norther Mali. Civil violence has ever accompanied Malian history (Wing, 2013: 479). In fact, since Mali’s independence, rebellions and security crisis have always challenged the governments’ legitimacy and they have tested the unity of a still deeply divided country. Tuareg rebellions arose in the 1660s and acquired increasing force during the following decades, in 1990s and, again, in the early 2000s. The peace agreements after each revolt failed because lacked response’s unity among the populations: different governments remedied to the state’s crisis without take in account all parties involved (Sborgi, 2013: 6). The disarmament had involuntarily encouraged a condition of economic slump and a general discontent as in the North as in the South: the extreme fragmentation of interests continued to create disorders that have led to the 2012’s violence (Harmon, 2014: 91-108; Diodato- Guazzini,
Since its independence, the State was several criticised. The principal requests arose in the North: population called for development program and the single farming communities’ independence from Bamako: in particular, there was a demand to devolve land and resource rights and responsibilities to rural communities. The 1992’s free elections, in response to years of dictatorships and one-party system, opened a chance of welfare’s improvement: “This peaceful transition of power combined with a widespread liberty of expression led Mali to become a poster child for African democracy” (Benjaminsen, Ba, 2019: 4). However, the democratization’s has no more than led to a more fragmentation of interests. The democratic reaction to the third Tuareg rebellion was translated into a government’s complete disregard for Northern Mali situation that became a battlefield between local leaders and an easy prey for non-state actors (Bøås, 2015: 306; Chauzal-Vandamme, 2015: 34).

“Overall, the decisions made after the Tuareg rebellions paved the way for terrorist groups in the sense that they could act as a para-sovereign organisation or ‘substitute government’ in the north in the absence of a strong central state. The lack of reaction, and sometimes the complicity of some Malian political leaders, allowed these groups to prosper and contributed markedly to the deterioration of the security situation in the north.” (Chauzal-Vandamme, 2015: 34)

The history of independent Mali shows that the Western vision was sweetened and the recent events revealed that clearly (Benjaminsen-Ba, 2019: 2). In fact, the two main events that signed the Malian conflict, the military coup d’état in the South and the Declaration of Azawad’s Independence in the North are the expression of the Malian State’s dysfunctionality. The overthrow of Touré government underlies that problems did not affected only the Northern part of the country and that they did not concerned only the economic gap and the political representation’s disparity between the two regions. Many scholars underlines that Malian political activity has always been characterized by high levels of corruption. (Emerson, 2007: 670; Harmon, 2014; Thurston-Lebovich, 2013: 4).

Harmon, on the basis of the interviews collected during his field research, points out that corruption has always accompanied Mali’s democracy since the beginning, any governments excluded. He identified different types of corruptions in a range that extends from the lower to the higher levels of the state apparatus. The first one is which Malians
call *magouille* that concerns payments through little presents to functionaries that, even if they are of little value, have a big burden in a context where poverty rate is elevated. Beside that, Harmon places the off books payments that occur in the administrative offices and among military branches: they are usually used as instruments to obtain false documents, fake IDs and to make sure that officers overlook on little illegal activities. Lastly, on the top of the pyramid, Harmon puts the tangents: parties and political leaders pay large sums of money to maintain their positions and their status (Harmon, 2014: 74-93).

For the purpose of this study it is, however, necessary to focus on the highest levels of corruption in military and government’s apparatus that, on one side, have led to the last coup d’état and, on the other, to security forces’ inefficiency in responding to MNLA and jihadist groups’ attacks during the conflict. According to the scholars, police forces, moreover in the North, developed invaluable relationships of mutual interests with smugglers and criminals (Cristiani-Fabiani, 2013: 83; Harmon, 2014: 91; Karlsrud, 2016: 790).

Scholars argue that police officers and military forces’ collusion with criminals have influenced the coup d’état, behind which, with high probability, terrorist organizations’ members are concealed.

“He (Ag Ghali) was an ambassador for the Malian state in Saudi Arabia where he worked for Libya, and he (Refoulo) was an associate. Both (Ag Ghali and Refoulo) worked for Libya in the early 1970s. The conclusion is that the Malian leadership was involved in the coup d’état.” (Harmon, 2014: 92)

“Contraband of licit goods and irregular migration takes place openly and with the full connivance of the authorities. The former Malian leadership tried to use organized crime as a resource for the exercise of influence in the north by allowing its local allies to engage in criminal activity.” (Lacher, 2012: 6)

The role of Ag Ghali, Ansar Dine’s leader, is vital to understand how governments’ exponents were so much close to rebels groups’ activities. In fact, in 2007, he worked as ambassador for Malian State in Saudi Arabia where he came close to Reformist Islam but, mostly important, this role arrived after his ‘carrier’ as Tuareg rebellions’ leader (Cristiani-Fabiani, 2013: 85).
“Ghali manipulated the state power posing alternately as a peace maker, a diplomat, and a hostage negotiator before ultimately betraying the state (…) the manoeuvrings of Ag Ghali and other northern manipulators weakened the state institutions and fostered corruption.” (Harmon, 2014: 186)

This fact and the integration of ex-rebels in Malian state apparatus says a lot about the way in which the governments fixed country’s problems and conducted the Tuareg insurrections’ peace agreements.

“The leaders of the early democracy failed in their responsibility of maintaining the state and its functions and regulations” (Harmon, 2014: 77)

The politicians, in fact, after the last rebellion tried to remedy involving in the political and security affairs some of the most important members of rebel groups. In this corruption climate, scholars stress on the role of President Touré in managing the alarming signals of the crisis that shortly afterwards will spread.

“ATT contributed to this situation by making concessions to ‘northern intermediators’, letting them form part of government agencies and letting them commend militias.” (Harmon, 2014:186)

“President Touré’s behaviour over the last months was marked by his wait-and-see attitude and his reluctance to mobilise accessible international and regional support.” (Marchal, 2012: 2)

Furthermore, the first MNLA’s demonstrations and the violent action of jihadist groups concentrated outside Malian borders and this fact led the Mali’s Western allies to suspect about a non-aggression agreement between the State and them (Tankel, 2019:308; Harmon, 2014:92).

The framework drawn until now shows how Mali, as the perfect example of democracy, was only a sandcastle that the 2012’s wave of violence brought down. Basing on the scholars’ findings, the Malian State’s dysfunctionality could be explained by the combination of two elements. On the one side, there is the gap between North and South that could be seen as different countries: South represents the Mali’s State as a politically defined reality, instead the North –as we will see- lives a constant isolation and it is characterised by a lack of cohesion between the living populations. On the other, the
weakness of central power and the high levels of corruption have generated population’s discontent and have permitted to non-state actors to infiltrate in the territory and to build their sanctuaries.

“The presence of these criminal and terrorist groups in the north is ironically illustrative of the difficulties faced by the Malian state in its task to exercise effective political control over the entire national territory. (…) Weak state structures and difficulties related to the administrative division of the territory have facilitated the establishment of these criminal groups.” (Sidibé, 2013: 47)

4.2 Northern Mali’s context

Northern Mali (Azawad in Tuareg language) is a more desert region characterized by Saharan climate, condition that makes difficult an economic development. Northern lands largely depend on agriculture and this type of configuration led this part to be more subjected to endogenous shocks as droughts’ waves and thus famine that hit the region cyclically. (Cristiani- Fabiani, 2013: 81; Sidibé, 2012: 13; Benjaminsen-Ba, 2019: 11; Thurston, 2013: 46; Bøås, 2015: 302).

However, despite this drastic situation, the developing plans directed to Northern Mali failed because they have not been well managed by central governments and because they represent only a small part of state investments that were mostly spent for South’s development (Gutelius, 2007: 61).

The following maps (Figure 2, Figure 3) show where irrigations systems are placed and analyse the diffusion of cultivations in the region (FAO Data, OECD Data)
As we could see, the Northern part produces less than the Southern where the majority of irrigation systems are placed and rural villages are equipped with pumps. That depends surely by the geophysical conformation of the lands: the agriculture takes place near the rivers, which, as the Figure 2 shows, are concentrated in the Southern part of the country. However according to the scholars, despite physical conformation, the underdevelopment of the North was an ad hoc government’s strategy aimed to avoid an economic independence of this area that seems to dispose of important oil and mineral resources that could lift the country’s economy.
“According to a study conducted by the Authority for Oil Research (Autorité pour la recherche pétrolière, AUREP), a service created by the Malian government in 2005 and attached to Secretariat General of the Ministry of Mines, the subsoil of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu could contain around 850,000km of oil and gas.” (Chauzal-Vandamme, 2015: 27)

In addition, the economic depression is an important deterrence for a communal action of all peoples who live there. The government, in fact, has always frightened of losing a region that tried to detach from Malian central State on different occasions. The physical landscape of Northern Mali led this region to be isolated from the other part of State and the high fragmented society implied natural building of distinct identity communities.

“(…) decentralisation also intensified the internal struggles for power within northern communities, with winner-take-all outcomes in resource and aid access (…).” (Gutelius, 2007: 62)

Over the years the Tuareg insurgencies generated even more fractions between the Northern populations, which in order to contrast the possibility of a Tuaregs’control clustered in formations that survive nowadays. In fact, in addition to Tuareg MNLA, there are other ethnic based secular groups, namely, Ganda Iso, mainly composed by Fulani population, the Shongai movement Ganda Koy, and the Arabs Militias “Bérabiche Arab militia” that have been mainly formed during Tuareg rebellions (Fabiani-Cristiani, 2013: 88-89).

“The area is inhabited by the Tuareg, but there are also minority Arab populations, and further south toward the river Niger there are also populations of Songhai and Peul (aka Fulani) origin that together would constitute a majority of the population of the Azawad area” (Bøås, 2015: 308)

The multiple ethnicities and cleavages added to political exclusion led Northern societies to enjoy high levels of independency and to practice a sort of para-sovereignty essentially based on traditions and legislations codified over the century.

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3 Mali was hit by three Tuareg rebellions before the MNLA Declaration of Independence that led to conflict in 2012.
In fact, according to Sborgi, already during the French colonial period, relationships between North and South of the country were sporadic. Furthermore, the end of French colonialism marked the exclusion of these populations from the core of state political affairs and since the independence Northern tribes created personal and alternative ways for their territories’ administration (Sborgi, 2013: 4-6).

However, despite its isolation, because its central position in the Sahel Northern Mali has been always been an open door for external influences that contributed to make peoples, especially Tuaregs and Arabs, to perceive themselves too closer to the neighbouring Saharan populations than to the Malian ones because cultural and ethnical reasons (Keita, 1998: 107; Emerson, 2011: 671). It is remarkable to notice, furthermore, that Harmon underlines also a racist cause in the Tuareg reluctance to be part of Malian nationhood. According to him, it dates back to slave trade period during which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Tuareg were involved in human trafficking.

“The Tuareg, especially the Ifoghas, maintained a narrative of betrayal of “whites” (Tuareg) by the “blacks” (Bamabara and Shongai) (…) Tuareg political elites had not wanted to be part of a Black African dominated nation state.” (Harmon, 2014:17)

All the causes mentioned lead difficulties in building a national sentiment among Malian society and they led this area to find his way to survive alone and it comported an increasingly dependency from regional actors.

There are two point on which it is worth to stress on, the first regards the special economic relationships whit Algeria and Libya (Sidibé, 2013: 39). During past forty years, characterised by multiple civil conflicts, Northern Mali has become an important competitive field for regional powers. Furthermore, the numerous droughts that hit the region caused huge migratory fluxes in the neighbouring countries where Northern Malians emigrated also as workers (Bøås, 2015: 310). Scholars especially stress on the links between leader Gaddafi and Tuaregs who, after their rebellions, find in Libya their personal heaven (Keita, 1998: 18-21; Cline, 2013: 619; Lounnas, October 2018: 3; Ronen, 2013). According to Fisher and Kohl, Gaddafi feel himself close to Tuareg population because his personal history.
“The attraction of Libya for the Sahelian Tuareg was further reinforced thanks to Qaddafi’s friendly attitude towards them: he respected the Tuareg’s nomadic way of life and often portrayed the Tuareg as ‘the Lords of the Desert’.” (Fischer-Kohl 2010: 143)

However, according to Ronen, this openness belongs to a strategic plan to maintain his status in the region.

“Whatever Qaddafi’s declared values and goals, his top priority had always been to remain in power. He shaped Libyan domestic and foreign policies first and foremost with this supreme priority in mind.” (Ronen, 2013: 553)

In fact, on one side, to address its country’s economic crisis, Gaddafi opened the doors to Tuareg workers and acted a legislative plans to permit them to receive Libyan citizenship. On the other, he hosted many rebels, which he integrated in his private army aimed to use them for his personal battles. Although he never furnished data and numbers about Tuaregs in the country (Ronen, 2013: 548-555).

The second point regards the parallel economy that spread in Northern Mali. The lack of infrastructures and the changes in an already hard environment caused enormous difficulties for the populations that managed to find new routes for their life hood. Furthermore, Sborgi asserts that the political decisions over the years comported that this area became a sort of ‘no-men’s land’, not patrolled by security governments’ forces, where everyone pursues his own interests (Sborgi, 2013: 6). As seen in the previous chapter, the Sahel region, moreover Northern Mali, has always been a crossroad for traders: “The Mali-Sahel periphery undoubtedly consists of relatively weak states and is a much-used route of passage.” (Bøås, 2015: 299) Following the regional trend, also Malian ex-traders get involved in black market, especially among Tuaregs, and it turned Northern Mali an important, may be the most important, hub for illicit activities in the Sahel.

“A major result of this lack of integration has been a situation that approaches a security vacuum in Tuareg areas. Banditry has been rife in the area, and cigarette, fuel and weapon smuggling is carried out by the population. Smuggling (or more politely, the “informal economy”) is ingrained among the Tuareg, as is true with some other groups in the area.” (Cline, 2013: 618)
According to Gutelius, this parallel marketing is deeply rooted in the society and it legitimated the wide spread of the activities that, on one side, permitted to lift the economic conditions of the population and, on the other, they became an important political and religious vehicle:

“Informal marketing activities include important social practices by which communities in northern Mali not only cope with environmental degradation and social change, but also shifting formal sector markets that continue to put northern populations at a disadvantage. Smuggling remains a long-cherished symbol of autonomy and control and an important part of both social practices (ideas of protection, blessing, or rite of passage) and shifting political alliances. (…) Here, religious authority and memory may be mixing in ways akin to the nineteenth-century Sahara when the Kunta, for instance, used their religious authority to legitimise the tobacco and slave trades, partly as a way of competing with reformist Massina leaders in the south. (…).” (Gutelius, 2007: 71)

4.3 Islam and political sphere in Mali

Usually Mali is described as a ‘secular state’. In fact, since the independence and, moreover, in the transitioning process to democracy in 1990s, Mali was declared a ‘secular’ nation. 4 Since 2012, Islamist groups started to impose the shari’a law in Northern region and it was the first time that Islamic theme preponderantly dominated a rebel rhetoric in the country. However, historically, Islam in the political sphere rooted in French colonial period and it expanded more since the 1991 when, after the coup d’état, the political elections were more diversified. According to Thurston, from the twentieth century there was an identifiable ‘Muslim policy’ that promoted good relationships with French: “Between favouritism and repression, French colonial rule in present day Mali was never secular in the sense of removing religion from public life or structures of power” (Thurston, 2013: 48).

4 The 1992’s Malian constitution invite Malian people “solemnly committed themselves to defend the republican form and the laicism of the state.” (Thurston, 2013: 50)
Colonial period intensified Islamization in Mali; in fact, under colonialism, many people moved from a place to another and it accelerated conversions to Islam. Furthermore, the individual conversion drastically affected ethnic groups claims to define the faith. In the last period of colonialism, in 1940s and 1950s, Muslim had an important presence in Malian politics, economy and society. In post-independence period, they enjoyed a significant role to democracy transition. However, in the early phase of independence, during Keita’s socialist regime, he made ‘Islam invisible’ and banned Islamic organizations by the political sphere: “(...) his homogenous vision of nationhood suppressed some of the very identities that are the most deeply contested in Mali today”. (Thurston, 2013: 49)

Under the Traoré’s administration, who overthrow Keita’s regime, attitude toward Islam changed a bit. In 1979, for example, the government promoted Arabic language and instituted a ‘Center for the Promotion of the Arabic language’ and in the 1980 created the Malian association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI).

“Numerous Malian Islamic organizations, many of them linked to the Sufi brotherhoods, had been brought together under a government-sponsored umbrella group called the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI). The Traoré’s regime created it to bring disparate Islamic groups under some form of state influence.” (Harmon, 2014: 36)

The growth of official and underground Islamic organizations in the 1980s made a step for the flowering of Islamic associational life in the successive years. The liberalization process actuated after democratization in 1992 permitted the expression of different Muslim identities and amplified the role of Islam in the public sphere: “the coexistence of ‘secular’ state with a vibrant Muslim civil society and media gave Muslim activists substantial opportunities to influence formal politics.” (Thurston, 2013: 50)

The voice of Muslims emerged through the associations that functioned as pressure groups in the political arena.

“ Better access to mass media outlets among Muslim leaders, especially radio and television, produced novel kinds of identity negotiation, helped spread diverse notions of normative Islamic practice and belief, and provided Muslim notables ways to contest and establish authority in the broader public sphere.” (Gutelius, 2007: 63)
Even if until now I referred to Islam in Mali as a homogenous entity, however the scenario is complex and various (Benjaminsen, Ba, 2019: 3).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will not investigate all different currents of Islam in Mali but I will proceed to analyse only the two main realities that diffused in the country. Muslims in Mali represent the 90/95 per cent of the population and it is mainly connected to Sufi tradition, that “stresses the concept of individual spiritual development, rather than the proselytization if Islamic fundamentalism (...) the Sufi brotherhoods have a reputation for resisting injustice, including social corruption, colonial rule and post-independence tyranny.” (Harmon, 2014: 36)

Reformist and Salafists are the minority among Malian Muslims and the first attestations of Reformism in Mali traced back to the ending colonial period.

“The presence of radical forms of Islam in Mali, beginning in the late colonial period with the arrival of Wahhabism at Bamako and continuing into the 1990s and 2000s with the emergence of Dawa al-Tabligh in northern Mali, contrasted noticeably with Mali’s tradition of moderate, tolerant forms of Islam.” (Harmon, 2014: 162)

Since 1940s, French colonies reported the presence of Reformists in Timbuktu and Gao zone, in the North.

“The emergence of a Salafi-oriented movement of reform in Mali (and in Guinea, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, northwestern Ghana and western Burkina Faso, that is, the greater Mande region) started in the mid-1940s and was associated with the network of Mande-speaking Juula traders in these countries.(...) These traders were not learned in the Islamic sciences, but pious Muslims and, at the same time, cosmopolitan, that is, part of a larger world of trade that extended far beyond local or regional contexts.” (Loimeier, 2016: 110)

According to Loimeier an important push to Salafism’s spread in the region was given, in addition to traders, by the students:

“An equally important pillar for the spread of Salafi-oriented ideas of reform was studying in Mecca and Medina and in Egypt (al-Azhar University): from the mid-1930s, the number of West African students in Egypt and Saudi Arabia increased considerably and after their return these students formed the core of the nascent Salafi-oriented movement of reform.” (Loimeier, 2016: 112-113)
In this part of the country they built their own institutions, mosques and associations through which they criticized and denounced practices and doctrines of other Muslim currents.

The situation in the South, instead, seems quite different. In fact, even if the Salafism is still present, it arose more slowly and it grew up in more recent times. The first Salafi school in Bamako was built in the 1950s but the first Reformist movements in the capital city led to a clash with Sufi tradition. (Loimeier, 2016: 114-118). In fact, in the 1950s in Bamako there were violent clashes between Reformists and Sufis or moderate Muslims. The main objectives of the disputes concerned ‘how to pray’, ‘when to celebrate’ and other specific doctrines that represent still today a cause of debate between different Malian Muslim communities (Thurston, 2013: 54-55).

After independence, Mali’s Salafist experienced a period of marginalisation under Keita’s socialist regime prohibited the practice and put their schools under the franco-arab schools. The consequence was the migration of many Reformist to other countries and a general radicalization (Hock 1999: 68). Contrary to the secularist tendency of the earlier period, the 1970s saw a Reformists’ doctrine taking ground:

“In Mali, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Burkina Faso, Salafi-oriented movements of reform prospered in the 1960s and 1970s and continued to grow in the 1980s. In particular, they expanded their social basis beyond students, functionaries and traders and started to gain support among middle-class groups” (Loimeier, 2016: 111)

Over these years, new schools were built among the country and pilgrimages and young Muslims restart studying in Egypt and Saudi Arabia which with Mali cultivated close connections. This climate of openness, according to Loimeier, is attributable to President Traoré’s political interests and it continued to the end of his regime in 1991: “the regime needed the ahl al-sunna as allies in its fight against the Sufi scholars who were seen as opponents of the regime’s policies of reform (Loimeier, 2016: 121).

According to Gutelius, instead, was only in the 1990s, as mentioned, that political liberation brought increasingly freedom in public expression of religion and opened the road to debates on Islam. (Gutelius, 2007: 63-64).

“The opening of media and civic life since the country’s political transition in 1991-1992, the growth of different kinds of Muslim schools in the country, and increasing
contact with other parts of the Muslim world (including through the implantation of Islamic non-governmental organizations or NGOs in Mali) have combined to create a rich “religious marketplace” in Mali.” (Thurston, 2013: 15)

In these period new Reformist movements arose and, according to the scholars, this phenomenon interested particularly the Northern region of Gao (Loimeier, 2016: 117). Here the prolonged difficult conditions of the populations pushed religious communities’ leaders to look in a hostile way the Southern institutions. “Through radio and pamphlets, northern Muslims called for Islamic reform, criticized the national government and criticized other Muslims over doctrine and practices” (Thurston, 2013: 57).

The terrible conditions caused by the droughts were exacerbated after the end of the second Tuareg rebellion, in 1996. The reluctance of government to improve Northern Mali’s conditions led the Kidal, Timboktu and Gao’s peoples to increasingly depend on the Muslim World.

This area became an important destination for Middle-east investments and missionary activities that constituted a crucial ground for a greater spread of Salafism. Thanks to these aids, new Quranic schools, Islamic radio stations and libraries spread among the region: “Foreign aid groups and Islamic missionary organizations competed with one another for projects and ‘converts’ in northern Mali” (Gutelius, 2007: 67).

Religious organizations and Islamic NGOs provided services wherever the government lacked and helped to rebuild Northern cities.

“Islamic NGOs (foreign and domestic alike) have in many ways been more successful and welcome because of the way that key northern leaders have helped insert them – symbolically and materially – into the fabric of a society that depends heavily on these informal markets.” (Gutelius, 2007: 71)

The Saudi influence laid the foundations for new Islamic organizations and the weakness of Northern context, in addition to all the causes analysed in the previous paragraph (insecurity, isolation and black market) made this land to become a front door for regional jihadist groups.
4.4 Infiltration of GSPC and AQIM in Northern Mali

It is quite hard to reliably attest the terrorist groups’ presence in Mali, but according to the scholars the first manifestations dates back to Algerian civil war (1991-2002). During this period some GSPC’s cells fled to the Adrar Des Ifoghas mountains, where then AQIM established most of its sanctuaries, in order to escape from Algerian security forces and started to insert themselves in the local social context.

“Already in 1998, AQIM members (then known as the GSPC) started to arrive in the Timbuktu region, and they approached the local population as honest and pious traders. In one example, when they wanted to buy a goat from the local population, they paid the owner double his asking price.” (Bøås, 2015: 312)

The choice of Mali region is due to the characteristics that I mentioned before as the geophysical aspect of the region, the mountains offering many huts, and as the liberty of movement caused by the lack of government. However, the decision to move away from Algeria seems to have also other explanations. On one side, we can observe the important role played by Algerian secret services, that tried to push away from Algerian boundaries rebels and terrorists (Whitehouse, Strazzari, 2005: 223). Algeria, furthermore, seems to have perpetuated his support to jihadist groups in the years, but the dynamics remain unclear and there is not reliable proofs of government involvement:

“AQIM e MUJAO received some logistic support from Algeria, especially fuel and supplies (...), though it is not clear what degree Algerian military government and its agency was responsible for this support.” (Harmon, 2014: 197)

On the other, the rhetoric of global jihad, that became stronger after the US invasion of Iraq, led GSPC to get outside of the national context: that could be seen as the first GSPC’s declaration, although unofficial, of membership to Al Qaeda galaxy. The first clear attestation of GSPC’s presence in Northern Mali dates back to 2003, when, after the kidnapping of 32 Western tourists, the group hid there. This episode marked the beginning of the relationships between Sahelian terrorism and Mali’s government, who started the tractates with GSPC to release the hostages (Benjaminsen, Ba, 2019: 6; Walther e Christopoulos, 2015: 499).
“Mali took credit for their release, thanks mainly to the mediation of Iyad Ag Ghali. In exchange the hostages’ takers obtained relative immunity on Malian territory.” (Africa Report n. 189, 2012: 5)

Before proceeding further, there are two points worthy to be highlighted in order to understand the relevance of this episode: the GSPC’s immunity on Malian soil and Ag Ghali’s role.

The agreement with Mali’s administration paved the way to an advancement of the group and its successor (AQIM) in the country, and it suggests that the hypothesis made about a possible collusion of the government with jihadist forces have some reasonable basis. Walther and Christopolous, furthermore, notice that it was properly in that period that GPSC started to weave relationships with the populations; relationships that AQIM will deepen.

“In 2003, under pressure from the army and Algerian intelligence, terrorists from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) fled to the Malian desert (…) These extremists were tolerated by the government of Mali and began to build political and familial alliances with the Tuareg and Arab tribes.” (Walther, Christopoulos, 2015: 499)

The involvement of Ag Ghali in the negotiations is equally emblematic of the relationships that Malian government had with Tuareg rebels (Cline, 622: 2013). Ag Ghali, in fact, was one of the most important leaders of Tuareg uprising. Furthermore, although Ghali’s conversion is interpreted as consequence of his experience as ambassador in Saudi Arabia, his participation in this affair is indicative of his previous closeness with jihadism and it could explain the events that would have happened years later, namely the foundation of Ansar Al-Din and, after, of the AQIM’s umbrella group Jama’a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin’.

“The manoeuvrings of Ghali and other northern manipulators weakened state institutions and fostered corruption: ATT contributed to this situation by making concessions to northern intermediators, letting them form part of government agencies and letting them command militias.” (Harmon, 2014: 186)
Coming back to the point, GSPC presence in the region increased after its evolution in AQIM (Benjaminsen, Ba, 2019: 6). AQIM was more able than GSPC to benefit from security’s lack in the area and used it as a base for its operations (Cline, 2013: 628). The *katibats*, the groups of Islamic fighters, of AQIM established in Mali for many years before the conflict’s outbreak.

“The presence of terrorist groups affiliated to AQIM in some countries of the Sahel region constitutes a serious threat to peace and security in the sub-region. AQIM takes advantage of the lack of state presence in the region to establish operations in various countries. They operate over a vast area of the region, covering thousands of kilometres from the eastern part of Algeria to northern Niger through to eastern Mauritania, and to Mauritania’s border with Senegal.” (Sidibé, 2012: 31)

Here AQIM has carried on its criminal activities as smuggling, human trafficking and kidnapping for ransom, that increased after 2008 (Boeke, 2016: 927). That was made possible by the relationships that AQIM had weaved in the years with the different populations of the area, especially – as we will see in the next paragraph- among Tuareg, Moore and Arabs. What is important to notice for now is the large presence that AQIM acquired in the region; according to Sidibé, before 2012 AQIM group included 800 fighters and its manifestation in Northern cities was increasing.

“The movement is currently made up of up to 800 fighters scattered all over this vast desert area. It is divided into several sub-groups, which are particularly mobile, capable of rapidly moving from one country to the next to evade security services. Elements of AQIM have become increasingly present in cities of Northern Mali.” (Sidibé, 2012: 31)

From the end of 2011 the situation rapidly changed because of regional and state reasons that intertwined in a causative *continuum*. The Lybian leader’s fall marked an important destabilizing factor in the region. On one side –as seen- Gaddafi committed himself for long time to contrast terrorism, and his death created an important *vacuum* in the Sahel in this sense. On the other side, the Libyan war generated an important flow of arms, especially through the Fezzan region. The scarce level of security in Northern Mali and its borders’ permeability permitted a massive arrival of weapons many of which ended up in the jihadists’ hands (Di Liddo, 2018).
“The arrival of experienced fighters and the widespread access to weapons, ammunition and money were likely triggers to the conflict. Little was done in Mali – in contrast with what happened in Niger – to control the flows of refugees and disarm the former Libyan soldiers who were crossing the Malian border.” (Marchal, 2012:2-3)

The significant flow did not regard only the arms but also former Gaddafi militias, including many Malian Tuaregs, that returned in Northern Mali. These events affected the Malian situation, already destabilized by the coup d’état in the South and MNLA’s declaration of independence in the North. In this period of struggle, in fact, new local groups of fundamentalist inspirations were formed: Ansar Al-Din, MIA and Macina Liberation Front.

Ag Ghali founded Ansar Al-Din (The defenders of religion) as a consequence of his conversion to jihadism and of his ideological closeness to AQIM and MUJAO. Scholars, however, argue that his choice depended also by MNLA’s rejection of him as its leader. Initially MNLA and Ansar Al-Din cooperated on the basis of communal interests (the liberation of Northern Mali). However, the divergences on MNLA leadership and, moreover, on the respective objectives (MNLA was a secular organization, whereas Ansar Al-Din is strongly religious) led to a breakup, because Ghali aimed to impose shari’a in the region and to create a Malian Islamic state.

MIA (Islamic Movement for the Azawad) was founded in January 2013 as a detachment of Ansar Al-Din. In fact, it is a more moderate wing, led by Ag Intallah, a noble Tuareg already active in Kidal region. However, MIA laid down its arms in short time and joined France Forces against MNLA (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2013: 89-91).

The Macina Liberation Front (FLM) was the last group to emerge, in 2016, with the objective of the liberation of Macina, a vast area that includes Mopti region, from the Malian government. This movement is led by Hamadoun Koufa, who after joining Jamaat Tabligh movement, became an important ‘jihadist entrepreneur’ and started to translate global jihad discourse into local context (Benjaminsen- Ba, 2019: 10).

Benjamisen and Ba, on the basis of field interviews from December 2016, assert that there is no village in Northern Mali without jihadists and that the same jihadists are partly funded by villagers who secretly pay ‘une dime’ (a tithe). (Benjaminsen- Ba, 2019: 16)
Nowadays, Ansar Al-Din, AQIM and the Macina Liberation Front clustered under the name of Jama’a Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimin’ (JNIM), the most important Al Qaeda affiliation still present in far Northern Mali region (Lounnas, October 2018: 2).

4.5 Relationships with the Northern populations

“Communities living in the north of Mali are considered to be both the victims of the army’s efforts to track down criminals and terrorists, and the accomplices of rebellions, trafficking and Islamic terrorist activity.” (Sidibé, 2013: 75)

Sidibé’s words give the idea of a fluid context in which the alliances are fragile and the relationships between jihadist groups and populations depend on personal and communal interests.

It is difficult to discern the causes that underlie the Northern populations’ acceptance of these transnational organizations; however, all the scholars agree on the fact that AQIM has been able to build a sort of state inside the state.

“AQIM deliberately made use of existing social systems in its attempt to build an alternative system of governance, and the only way we can understand how processes of crime, coping, and resistance collude but also come into conflict with one another is precisely to approach this as an example of “governance in areas of limited statehood.” (Bøås, 2015: 512)

The terrorist groups replaced the absence of the Malian government, providing an alternative welfare to the populations who live there. GSPC before and then AQIM with its affiliations presented themselves as saviours and the precarious economic conditions of the region led the populations to accept them without reluctance.

“AQIM, therefore, should not be viewed merely as an invading external force but as an actor that, over time, has managed to integrate into local communities through a combination of appropriating local grievances and emerging as a local service provider in an area with dysfunctional overlapping and competing networks of governance.” (Bøås, 2015: 513)
Sidibé, during his research field, collected numerous interviews among peoples in Northern Mali and he discovered that the majority of them do not look at these groups as terrorists but rather as ‘brothers’ that take care of them.

“Local communities feel abandoned by the State, and demand better living conditions (drinking water, health infrastructure, education, etc.). They also need water and grazing pasture for their herds. Nomadic communities live in extreme poverty and their precarious living conditions explain their frustration and engagement in criminal activities, considered to be the only viable alternative in this forgotten region. Faced with the negative impact of the insecurity issue on the economy and development of the region, some local awareness-raising initiatives have emerged to educate the population about the dangers of these criminal and terrorist activities.” (Sidibé, 2013: 79-80)

The part of Sidibé’s interview reported above offers a detailed framework of the Northern Mali and gives some reference points for a wide reflection about relationships between jihadists and the regional population.

Firstly, it points out that the absence of a strong central power, which takes care of people, could be seen as the triggering factor of the situation described. AQIM and other groups, in fact, did not just furnish the essential commodities, but they have proposed themselves as guarantors of security in an area characterized by several internal struggles and by high levels of uncertainty. By the beginning of the conflict, this situation has exacerbated and jihadist groups seem to have taken full advantage of it, getting increasing support from the population. They have started to distribute green numbers to call in case of rebels’ (MNLA/ Ganda Iso/ Ganda Koy) incursions, to allocate arms and to patrol the villages.

“After the MNLA offensive, AQIM continued to make good use of this strategy by, for example, offering locals protection. In Timbuktu, AQIM communicated a “green” cell phone number to people that they could call if they were harassed by MNLA members or ordinary bandits. The AQIM strategy was therefore a careful and gradual one of integration and penetration into local communities based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic, and humanitarian means. The latter part was clearly facilitated by the money that AQIM leaders had at their disposal due to their involvement in smuggling and hostage-taking.” (Bøås, 2015: 312)
AQIM’s strategies have led the population to look at the rebels groups with hostility; in
the zones under MNLA’s control, this organization “had become unpopular through
widespread pillage and instances of rape in the towns they occupied, was not supported
by the non-Tuareg majority, and lacked the finances of the jihadists” (Boeke, 2016: 920).

Furthermore, the predatory action of rebels and the situation of distress created by the
conflict generated a wave of collective fear and discontent that provoked, in the territories
occupied by MNLA, a nostalgic regret for the terrorist groups:

“In some areas in the north, there is apparently even less electricity than during the
time the jihadists were in control, provoking nostalgia among some for the
occupation by AQIM.” (Boeke, 2016: 926)

It is important to point out, however, that jihadists obtained the control of population not
only by economic and propagandistic means but sometimes also by threat and by the use
of force:

“During 2015–2017, more than 30 community leaders in the Mopti region were
assassinated by armed men arriving in villages on motorbikes. This has quickly
become one of the signature actions of jihadist groups in the region, giving a clear
message to local leaders not to cooperate with the army or the state administration.”
(Benjaminsen- Ba, 2019: 16)

Another point that can be drawn from Sidibé’s interviews regards the Northern
populations’ involvement in criminal activities, that according to Sidibé represent the
livelihood for the majority of the population, especially among those who live in Kidal
and Gao regions.

“In fact, people involved in trafficking are known by a large majority of the local
population, For instance, there is a district of Gao called ‘the cocaine district’, referring to
its residents. Some big villas on the main road leading to Kidal airport belong to well-
known drug and cigarette traffickers.” (Sidibé, 2012: 29)

These activities are a key factor to understand the relationships between terroristic groups
and Northern Mali’s people. They found fertile ground in a general environmental distress
and they are favoured by the government’s welfare absence.
“In this region of ecological and economic distress, AQIM within its southern theatre has found a mean of surviving by linking economically and symbiotically with local Tuareg and Bérabiche tribes that collaborate with AQIM in the clandestine trafficking of various products (most often cocaine, cannabis resin or hashish, and counterfeit tobacco).” (Laremont, 2011: 249)

According to the scholars, smuggling and other practices took root mainly among Tuaregs, Arabs and Moors, who became increasingly linked with AQIM since its settlement in Northern Mali (Walther-Christopoulos, 2015: 515).

“AQIM mainly recruits from amongst the Tuaregs, Arabs, and Moors because of their excellent knowledge of the desert. However, it is possible to find people from sub-Saharan Africa among the fighters. Many young Tuaregs and Arabs are manipulated and used by terrorist groups as informants. Criminal groups such as drug and arms traffickers, and cigarette smugglers, also exploit young people’s knowledge of the terrain. Young people are used as drivers, guides, trackers, informants etc.” (Sidibé, 2012: 31)

Jihadist groups, on one side, recruit these populations as guides, because of they are experts of the desert, having been practicing trade for a long time, and take advantages from the youth distress guaranteeing them high sums of money: “by providing information a local in Mali can earn around €750. In a country where the minimum wage is less than €50 a month, the temptation to work for or with AQIM can be considerable” (Boeke, 2016: 924).

On the other, they appeal also to an ethnic communal root. As said, in fact, especially Tuaregs perceive themselves closer to Saharan populations than black Africa’s one:

“According to the Malian army chief, these individuals take advantage of their ethnic and cultural affinities with populations living in the Sahel area to transfer state-of-the-art weapons, ammunition, and equipment.” (Sidibé, 2013: 55)

A more controversial theme, not considered by the Sidibé interview but that deserves however to be discussed, is the influence of religion in shaping the alliance between jihadist groups and local population. All the scholars agree on the fact that it is impossible to generalize the role that religion had in instituting of a favourable environment for the people’s acceptance of jihadism. According to Bøås the first phase of AQIM’s penetration
in the area, in continuity with GSPC’s campaign, was more characterized by gaining the favour of population through economical means like the distribution of money and benefits; this tactic was, though, gradually integrated with an increasing pressure in imposing their own interpretation of Islam. This objective was pursued mainly through an alliance with local marabouts (religious teacher).

“AQIM’s penetration of the Timbuktu area has therefore been underway for more than a decade, but its tactics also gradually changed from distributing money and small benefits to also arguing strongly for its interpretation of Islam. To achieve this, AQIM also established alliances with local marabouts (religious teachers) and made them preach their version of Islam.” (Bøås, 2015: 312)

This change of strategy is parallel to a change in the objectives of AQIM, which expanded its operation toward a regional jihad with the aim of creating an Islamic state in the Sahel. Even if this tendency, that could be regarded as general, it is important, however, to notice that the importance of religion varies in different local realities according to the different leaders of the communities involved in the relationship with AQIM and its affiliated groups. For example, the relationship between MUJAO and Fulani in Gao region is mainly based on reciprocal interests:

“This is also true for MUJAO. The group undoubtedly gained some local support in and around Gao as it quite cunningly appropriated local grievances concerning land rights, taking the side of Peul (aka Fulani) pastoralist groups in a local land rights conflict.” (Bøås, 2015: 304)

Benjaminsen and Ba focuses on the speeches of Hammadoun Koufa, the most important exponent Jamaat Tabligh movement in Mali. They comment his speeches highlighting that the religion is an important theme in his rhetoric even if he does not limit to it. In fact, beside religious issues, he stresses on the people's discontent in order to attract also non-believers. He mentions the European economic exploitation, the corruption of the government and makes people to look to French intervention (Operation Serval and MINUSMA) as a new attempt to colonize Northern Mali. Reporting his words:

“Mali has been aggressed for some years by European invaders, in particular the French, who came to help the Malian army at Konna and attack jihadists who intervened on Allah’s soil on this land. We are convinced that this implies a re-
colonisation of Mali by white people. It is necessary to fight them with all means based on jihad to stop them from establishing themselves [on this land]. Their intervention in Mali justifies our jihad. These white people exploit our resources and profit from the rent of everything that is sold in Mali such as gold, cement and fruits. They profit from the weakness of the state and of our leaders to destroy this country. These are our adversaries and number one enemies. I repeat that our main enemies are France, MINUSMA and the Malian army. There should be no free gifts for these three categories of actors. We should not spare them and we should use every means to destroy them or kill them when there is an opportunity.” (Benjaminsen-Ba, 2019: 10)

However, Sidibé notice that local political authorities with a secular tradition are much less vulnerable to the influence of radical Islamist groups. He reports the examples of Ménaka, a town next to Kidal, where “traditional secular chiefs have not welcomed the Jama’at Tabligh with such enthusiasm” (Sidibé, 2012: 79).

The influence of individual leaders is outlined also by Sidibé, who focuses on the case of Dawa religious movement. This group have had strict relationships with GSPC, that have increased more after the creation of AQIM, and its impact in Malian context increased after the 9/11 attack. Dawa’s preachers particularly tried to come close to Tuaregs, especially Ifoghas and Kuntas tribes: “The Dawa’s influence extends to the religious authorities of the Ifoghas and Kuntas. In Kidal for example, the Ifoghas chief is also known as the Amir al Mouminine (leader of the believers)” (Sidibé, 2012: 79).

Also the case of the relationships between Tuareg and radical Islam could be put in this framework. In fact, the role Ansar Al-Din leader Ag Ghali, as both a Tuerg leader and a jihadist chief, is emblematic of this phenomenon.

““We found that Islamists and rebels were interconnected through powerful brokers who, as Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of Ansar al-Dine, have passed from the rebellion to radical groups. These findings contradict the widely held view that Tuareg are reluctant to engage into extremist religious activities.”” (Walther e Christopoulos, 2015: 516)

More generally, it is possible to observe that, even if Tuareg “began to push the issue of religion a bit more than the group had done previously”, probably for practical more than
ideological reasons (Cline 2013: 625), “the role of the Tuaregs is at best unclear, particularly as certain clans appear to have fought against AQIM, in an ever-changing political and tribal environment” (Cristiani, Fabiani, 2013: 9).

If we can draw some conclusion from this review, we can assert that the hostility of the environment, the country division and the carelessness of the central government paved the way for the penetration of jihadist groups, who have proposed themselves as guarantors of security and economic prosperity. These were the real triggers of the alliances between jihadists and local population. Collocating the case study in the theoretical framework drawn in Chapter 1, it could be possible to assert that Mali embodies impeccably the two concepts of Security Dilemma and of Post-Westphalian state. The lack of security and resources, the multi-ethnicity, the disinvolve of the central government from Northern problems, and moreover the absence of plural representation in the political arena, provoked fear in the Northern Mali populations, who consequently came to rely on transnational agents that presented themselves as their lifeline. Here, through the networks and relationships with the populations, these actors (jihadist groups) have been able to supply the state’s welfare and to create their Post-Westphalian state inside the state borders.

Furthermore the weakness of government apparatus characterized by high levels of corruption and the instability of the country that has been always affected by several domestic disputes and revolts, led Mali to be most influenceable by regional shocks and mutations.
5. Conclusions

The theoretical framework delineated in Chapter 2 of this thesis on the basis of International Relations theories shows how the state, as a political structure characterized by a strong power and by rigid and inviolable borders, is constantly challenged by the rising of new actors. This new current of International Relations, as seen, is called Neo-Medievalism to describe a World in which the agents are plural and various: among the states, there are financial companies, NGOs and, also, unconventional non-state actors. They are able to move freely inside and outside states’ boundaries in what, following scholars’ definitions, I have identified as ‘Intermestic Reality’. This term represents the acting space of these subjects, that, properly because their capacity to evade the states’ borders, are called ‘transnational agents’. These have become essential in the studying of International panorama, which is suffering a deep resettlement: we are assisting to a restructuration of the Modern World through the re-creation of new, Post-Westphalian, state-realities inside the borders of already existent states.

For the purpose to give answers to my research questions, I have moved on two lines: the regional and the state one. What I highlighted in relation to Mali case study and, more generally, to Sahel region is that the transnational agents that I identified as jihadist groups are able to fit into the state dimension in order to obtain territories for the creation of new types of state.

1) Which are the structural problems and the changes in the Sahel that permitted the creation of jihadist movements in the region?

Studying and comparing scholars’ literature and geo-political analyses, I identified different causes that allowed jihadist agents to integrate into the Sahelian panorama: the physical conformation of the Sahel, the political instability of regional states, the growth of illicit activities, the religious background and the Gaddafi’s fall.

Firstly, the physical environment, specifically what Cristiani and Fabiani call ‘the geophysical challenge’ to the state power, referring to Sahel’s physical landscape, characterized by desert stretches and the mountains, hinder the full administrative and political control of the region.

Secondly, the problematic democratic transition of the countries in the region, local struggles as Tuareg uprisings, Algerian war in the 1990s and Lybian civil conflict in
more recent times led to a very fragmented panorama. All these factors created new possibilities for transnational agents who profited of the difficulties of an exhausted population, of their disaffection for their own governments and of the large voids left by some regional states.

Thirdly, the hard climate conditions, the arid lands and the cyclical waves of draught led people to find new ways to survive. The trade has represented an important income for people of the region, which for centuries has been crossed by traders. During the decolonization period, however, regional governments’ protectionist policies aimed to improve single countries’ economy, have brought to the rise of black market that, during the decades, developed in the trade of illicit goods, especially among some populations. The large increase of illicit activities in more recent times attracted the organized crime and the jihadist groups, who saw in the illicit goods’ market, on one side, the possibility to finance their activities and, on the other, a mean to weave relationships with local populations and to take control over new territories.

The fourth cause I identified, even if it could be not see as the most important because it is not completely applicable to every context, is religion. Islam has been the main religion in the region from centuries and it surely played a role in the diffusion of jihadism in the area.

Lastly, the Libyan war and the consequent fall of Gaddafi created an important vacuum in the regional security. The Libyan leader, in fact, has always been in the front line in fighting terrorism and represented a factor of stabilization in the region: he did not just offer his political and economic aid to states’ governments as mediator in the civil struggle or through enormous financial investments for different countries’ economic developing, but he also gave his support to some ethnic communities proposing himself as the protector of minorities and giving them refuge in Libya. The civil struggle and the Gaddafi fall provoked several consequences. The Sahelian governments lost their investor and, at the same time, their mediator in local conflicts, the majority of people once emigrated in Libya, especially Tuaregs, returned to their country generating a significant migratory flow and jihadist groups exploited the absence of their fiercest enemy obtaining even more liberty of movement across the region. Furthermore, Libyan war caused also an important weapons deal, many of which fall into rebels and jihadists’ hands.
According to the theoretical framework delineated in Chapter 2 the causes pictured above eroded the coercive power of the states on some part of their territories, namely the Sahel area, thus, compromising a major feature of the Westphalian model of state. The Sahel case shows clearly how the state is not any more the only actor of the international, or, in this case, regional, arena, but an ensemble of different actors compete with his role, shaping a feudal situation comparable with the Neo-Medieval paradigm. These actors are able to influence economically, politically and territorially the regional system, already affected by long-lasting structural problems.

These same factors, moving from the regional to the state dimension, are those that fuelled the advance of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Mali, as described in chapter 4 the terrorist group, in fact, has been able to create in Northern Mali an alternative welfare to the state’s one. In this sense, the theoretical framework helped us to understand and to deepen the analysis of the case study.

2) Which are the responsibilities of the State and how did the weakness and the recklessness of the government lead to this situation?

In the course of the thesis, I highlighted how Mali’s political structure suffers of different problems. Even if the International Community has looked to Mali as a successful example of democracy among countries that have experienced decolonization processes, the scholars’ field research and the events occurred over the years in Mali demonstrated how this vision was distorted.

I stressed on the dysfunction of Malian government, on the corruption among its functionaries and on its incapacity of providing an equal welfare to the whole population. On the basis of interviews conducted by the scholars, I investigated the weakness of the Malian State from inside. What emerges by the material they collected is that the level of corruption in the government and in the administrative system are very high, and that has a huge impact on the country functioning. The lack of security, that permitted the jihadist infiltration in the Northern region, is due, for the great part, to the army’s collusion with little smuggler, organized crime and, of course, terroristic groups.
Furthermore, since its independence, Mali went through four civil conflicts that did not concern only the Tuareg tribes, but rather have affected all the parts of the population, especially in the North. However, the various governments have never fixed these problems in a permanent way, but rather they have always remediated hastily by secret arrangements with Northern local and rebel leaders, giving them administrative power and government or military positions. What emerges by these considerations is that the central state has always looked in a reckless way to Northern part of the country, where communities, strongly divided because ethnic reasons, continue to live in very precarious conditions. Availing on several official reports, I collected a series of data that I used to investigate the disparity between the North and the South of the country. I have analysed, also through the maps’ rendering inserted in the text, these data, that show clearly how the Southern part of the country enjoys a most advanced economic development. For example, I highlighted how the irrigation systems are more concentrated in the South than in the North, where the agriculture and livestock have represented the most important source of income for the populations over the centuries. According to the literature consulted, this development’s gap is not just due to the physical and climatic characteristics of the area, but it is rather caused by a strategical government’s plan aimed to divide Northern populations in order to avoid a communities’ compact front and a communal insurrection against the central State. The soil of this area, in addition, according to the studies conducted by the Authority for Oil Research, seems to be rich of fuel and it represents, therefore, an important source for Malian State for lifting country economy: loosing this piece of land could represent a huge loss for the government. For the reasons described above, this part of the country became increasingly involved in the illicit market, so much that, nowadays, it represent the primary income for Northern Mali’s inhabitants.

The weakness of Malian political structure, the recklessness by which the governments have always looked at Northern problem (Tuareg uprisings \textit{in primis}), the growing corruption and collusion among any ranks of administrative system and army, the disparity between the two regions and, finally, the economic and political isolation of the North, led Mali to be increasingly susceptible to regional problem and mutations. Furthermore, all the factors discussed above paved the way to transnational agents,
namely terrorist groups, that has been able to integrate in the context, to build their sanctuaries and to establish relationships with local populations, thus exploiting the instability of the ‘Intermestic Reality’ represented by both Sahelian region and, moreover, Northern Mali, and creating a Post-Westphalian state inside the old state borders. In this context an important role has been played by what is called the Security Dilemma: Northern Mali population, abandoned by Malian government on both economic and political/security levels, started to fear for their own survival and, for this reason, accepted the ‘aid’ of transnational actors.

3) Are there religious implications or are there mainly economic interests that subtend to the affiliation of the Northern Mali’s population with the terroristic groups?

This last question needs a premise. As I mentioned on several occasions in my work, communities in Northern Mali is highly ethnically fragmented and their interests are plural and various. The literature agrees on the fact that it is impossible to make generalizations speaking about religious issues in Northern Mali, because the influence of religious factors depends mainly by singular individuals and singular communities’ leaders. What I can certainly draw from my research, which for this section relies mostly on scholars’ field interviews, is that answering in an exhaustive and at the same time comprehensive way to the question might result incorrect and tautological. Scholars agree on the fact that religion represented in many cases a more persuasive and subtle type of coercion than the use of the force; but, at the same time, it was possible to observe that in Northern Mali radical Islam penetrated gradually and did not spread largely among populations. It had its ‘apex’ only after events that have dreadfully weakened the communities, as civil struggles and natural disasters, like waves of droughts that caused famine and even greater poverty. In this context of economic depression and political instability, religious organizations, NGOs and private benefactors have exploited the difficult conditions of Northern populations in order to exert a cultural influence. On the heels of these ‘charitable’ activities also jihadists groups, GSPC before and then AQIM and its affiliations, placed themselves. They benefitted of a dramatic scenario and introduced themselves to Northern Mali’s communities through aids. According to the data about these groups presence in Mali,
to reports and to scholars’ field interviews, in fact, the religious campaign of AQIM started only in a second moment, when the group had already established economic agreements and relations, based on reciprocal interests, with locals. In all the cases mentioned in chapter 4 it appears clearly how economic interests were the trigger of the contacts between jihadist groups and local population: Fulani, for instance, accepted the protection form MUJAO because this group provided them economic benefits linked mainly to their farming activities.

In addition, the growth of illicit trade represented an important channel for the development of relations between transnational actors and Northern Mali communities. It is particularly true in the case of Arabs and Tuaregs, who have been involved in smuggling for long time and started to make commercial agreements since GSPC period with jihadist groups.

Sometimes ethnic affinity and personal relationships could intermesh with economic and political interests, raising even more doubt on the jihadist ideological ‘varnishing’ of some agreement. An emblematic case is again that of Tuaregs, who, having always practiced, for the most, a moderate form of Islam, established an alliance with AQIM based on commercial common interest, favoured also by ethnical closeness, and got in some cases to the point of joining the jihadist group Ansar Al-Din, because following the lead of the former Tuareg chief Ag Ghali.

On a general level, we can argue that religion, firstly of secondary importance respect to economic interests and having become a major factor only after the penetration and settlement of transnational groups in the area, could have played the role of an identity-building element, from the jihadist groups’ perspective, to consolidate the new Post-Westphalian entities established by them.
Bibliography


