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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Azawad: A Parastate Between Nomads and Mujahidins?

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Abstract

As part of the collective work "Inconvenient Realities: Parastates, between Statehood and Frozen Conflict," this article discusses today's status of Azawad, a relatively remote parastate occupying the territories of northern Mali, currently entrapped in a low intensity conflict involving non-state actors, local security forces, and external interveners. By retracing the history and the development of Azawad, the article identifies the different and partly contrasting socio-economic and ethnic elements at the basis of Azawadian parastatehood, and it charts the dialectical process of co-construction, which have shaped and inextricably linked together the Azawad and the Malian state. Moreover, it underlines the complex and evolving relations existing between "nationalist" Tuareg rebels and jihadist groups, with the aim to problematize the classical distinction between secessionist and terrorist parastates. By showing the connections between parastate-hood, hybrid governance, patronage politics, and statelessness characterizing the situation in the Azawad, the article claims that the current condition of stalled conflict represents a temporary and unstable arrangement, which is paving the way for further parastatehood projects to arise.

Keywords: Azawad; insurgency; parastate(hood); stalled conflict; terrorism

Introduction: the Case of Azawad

Paraphrasing the French philosopher Alain Badiou, one could question *de quoi Azawad est-il le nom?* (what does Azawad mean?). The term "Azawad," can refer to a number of things at once, and its meaning changes depending on who speaks, when, and why. For the nomadic peoples of the Saharan savannahs, Azawad designates the concept of "basin," which can further be understood to be "bowl" on one hand, and irrigated "valley," on the other. In local geography, the term has been stretched to encompass the specific territory crossed by skimpy streams of water originating in the Kel Adagh mountains and flowing southwards to join in Niger River. Modern state boundaries have divided this area, which now straddles across the states of Mali and Niger. In neither case, however, has the territoriality of Azawad been granted an official recognition at either the administrative or political levels. In Niger, Azawagh is a mere geographic expression. In Mali, the status of Azawad has been a matter of harsh controversy. Mali's process of state-building has been punctuated by several armed insurrections of northern tribes which questioned the sovereignty of Bamako and the integration of Azawad within it. As a result, the sovereignty of Mali over the region of Azawad, while *de jure* undisputable, has been *de facto* quite shallow. The outburst of a civil war in 2012 worsened things further. Amidst endemic insecurity and longstanding negotiations, the Malian government eventually accepted in 2015 to sign the Peace Agreement with northern rebels, where the Azawad is defined as "a socio-cultural reality, both commemorative and symbolic:" slightly more than a mere natural feat, but still far from legal and political recognition.[1]

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However, persistent fighting among armed groups in the north of Mali has revealed the fragility of this compromise, and the status of Azawad within Mali remains contested. Contingent outbreaks of violence and individual military escalations do not change much the overall geopolitical equation, and the more this situation is protracted, the more the conflict in and about Azawad appears to be in a stalemate. On the one hand, the entirety of the international community has formally endorsed the principles of Mali's sovereignty and indivisibility. On the other, however, speculation suggests, and local informants agree, that the cause of Azawad's independence managed to attract some informal support from international actors.[2] And while Mali's nominal sovereignty is legally granted, its functionality falters, to the extent that today's Mali aptly qualifies for Robert Jackson's notorious definition of a quasi-state (Jackson 1990), a state whose sovereignty is legally granted, but functionally poor, to the extent that inherent state weakness makes instability rampant in Mali's peripheries. The obstruction of large portions of Azawad to Malian officers since 2012 is a clear indication that Bamako is unable to project its sovereign prerogatives across the whole of the territory. As a result, while it would be incorrect to argue that Azawad is independent in any sense, it is not entirely dependent either.

Drawing on this complexity, the present contribution aims to question the status of Azawad in today's phase characterized by contested sovereignty. Building on the conceptualization put forward by Michael Rossi and Jaume Castan Pinos (this issue), there is ample room to speculate whether Azawad amounts today to a parastate. On the whole, parastates are territorial entities with some form of sovereignty resulting from a political and/or military stalemate, but lacking formal international recognition as an independent polity vis-à-vis their host states. Moreover, local authorities exert their functions and their governing capacities in open opposition to the central state, and aim to create independent institutions in order to assert their territorial and political control. In this sense, some elements suggest the suitability of Azawad's inclusion within this specific family. The 2012 declaration of independence made explicit a quest for sovereignty and international recognition which characterize parastate projects (ICG 2012). At the same time, as we show in the article, the effective capacity of Azawad's self-declared authorities to control northern Mali's territory and to govern the inhabiting populations is in doubt. In a certain sense, Azawad should be considered as a "weak" parastate, within an even weaker host state. Irrespective of sovereignty claims, in fact, northern Mali has historically represented a rebellious and partly autonomous political subsystem, where parallel forms of informal/customary authority have fostered a *sui generis* form of hybrid governance (Boege et al. 2008). The weakening of the state capacity to steer hierarchically was first exploited by the Azawadian insurgents, only to backfire against the attempt to re-centralize authority in a secessionist state.

Even more interestingly, the case of Azawad contributes to problematizing the categories of this research framework, in as much as it blurs the lines between secessionist and/or terrorist parastates. Since 2012 at least, in fact, both ethno-nationalist and jihadist armed groups have contributed to eroding Bamako's sovereignty over the territory of Azawad, and put forward competing views of territorial rule. Moreover, both have been defeated militarily, by different actors leading to different outcomes. The analysis of the trajectory of Azawad's parastatehood, in its different forms, is likely to provide a unique case to sharpen our understanding of the dynamics of sovereignty building, contestation, and collapse. In this sense, the case of Azawad also defies the common assumption about parastates' trajectories, which see military interventions and the reconquering of lost territories by the central state as one of the few options for putting an end to the parastate project. The collapse of the short-lived Tuareg-jihadist parastate in 2013, in fact, has not resulted in the reestablishment of Bamako's effective sovereignty over the northern territories. The current situation, characterized by political instability, rampant religious extremism, and a multiplication of armed groups, leaves the door open to future secessionist as well as jihadist ambitions.

In order to illuminate the changing patterns of alliances, conflict, splinters, and overlaps among ethno-nationalist and jihadist actors with a fine-grained analysis, this article draws on extended fieldwork in Mali carried out by the authors since 2013, including a number of in-depth interviews

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with key informants. By casting a bridge with the literature dealing with state construction and deconstruction (including nationalisms, state-building, and state-fragility), our purpose is to contribute to the scholarly debates on the declinations of statehood in the non-Western world, and more specifically to analyze the possible relationships between parastatehood, hybrid governance, patronage politics, and statelessness in post-colonial Africa.

At the Origins of Azawad Nationalism

Even before the independence of Mali from French colonialism in 1960, the idea of a distinct Azawadian identity shaped the political character of local elites and big men (Bøås 2012).

Since 1951, French colonial advisers put forward the project of creating a Common Organization of Saharan Regions (*Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes*, OCRS) under French control, in order to preserve a political foothold in the Sahara. The idea gained political momentum when significant hydrocarbon deposits were discovered in the Algerian Sahara in 1956. Beyond the direct administration of the Sahara's subsoil resources, the plan would offer France an opportunity to limit the growth and expansion of an emerging Algerian National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale*, FLN). More than simply an act of *divide-et-impera*, the strategic position of a French-controlled OCRS would allow for the containment of a number of pan-Islamic Wahabi movements, whose threats against French influence in West Africa were notably feared by French secret services (Lecocq 2010).[3]

Almost every genealogical reconstruction of the long-standing disputes for sovereignty in north Mali earmarks the OCRS project as a virtual origin (Bourgeot 1995; Boilley 1999; Lecocq 2010). Prior to then, in fact, struggles for self-determination had been largely framed in terms of ethnic and personal status, not of territoriality (McDougall 2012). In late 1957, Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Cheick, a prominent Arab leader from Timbuktu, traveled throughout northern Mali to rally local support in favor of the creation of the OCRS as a separate entity from then *Soudan Français* (today's Mali). Having secured the signature of local notables, merchants, and traditional leaders, Ould Cheick addressed four different petitions to General Charles de Gaulle, drawing his attention to the unsettled Saharan problem. Stating a fierce opposition to the integration within a Malian state, the first letter is generally considered as a sort of manifesto of Azawad people's historical claims. A particularly meaningful excerpt from the letter states:

> If there exists a right to self-determination for a people, we would like to believe that we are allowed to make our aspirations known. […] We manifest our formal opposition to being integrated in an autonomous or federalist Black Africa or North Africa. […] We demand the incorporation of our country in the French Sahara of which we are part, historically, emotionally and ethnically.[4]

In many ways, the OCRS episode deserves the status of an "imagined" foundation of the Azawad community and its claims for statehood (Anderson 1983). Indeed, the OCRS project never actually took root. However, it has contributed to building up a cultural repertoire that articulates on a territorial basis the "ancient hatreds" of northern Mali's tribes, thereby shaping and constructing the geopolitical imaginary of local political claims (Dalby 2010). Interestingly enough, the OCRS project problematizes the rigid categorizations put forward in the literature on self-determination as much as it blurs the lines among the different—and sometimes competing—blueprints through which identity claims are usually articulated. While the prospect of independent statehood was only vaguely surfaced in Ould Cheick's call, his campaign stressed the alleged "cultural difference" distinguishing the *Afrique noire* (black Africa) identity of the black majority inhabiting *Soudan Français* from the perceived "whiteness" of Northern Malians. The construction of this dichotomy coalesced racial, ethnic, and religious arguments, with territoriality in the background. It emphasized the idea of a racially-based (or racially-biased) split of Africa, based on the perception of a

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natural boundary existing between a Northern—white—Africa, and a black, or "proper" Africa situated south of the Sahara; a stereotypification that draws on Medieval Islamic sources, and carries moral and political connotations (Hall 2011). Colonial "divide and rule" policies further entrenched this cleavage by fostering a *politique des races* that reconstructed and emphasized socio-cultural divides, including in the religious sphere: "The belief in the existence of a distinctively 'black' tolerant syncretic Sufi Islam [as opposed to the Arab Islam portrayed as dogmatic and intolerant] remained a colonial political and scholarly doctrine until well in the 1960s" (Lecocq 2015, 31).

One of the main reasons behind the failure of the OCRS project was the impossibility to trace, agree upon, and implement viable borders circumscribing a bounded space. French planners quickly came to realize that linear boundaries and exclusive territoriality would hardly fit the socio-economic specificities prevailing in the Sahara Desert. As historians of the Sahara observed, in fact, "Sahara was always a *borderland*, in the sense of a zone constituted by its multiple interactions with neighboring worlds, without which it would be unable to survive" (McDougall and Scheele 2012, 84, emphasis added). Building on these observations, it is illuminating to try and reconstruct the genealogy through which the claim of identity differentials—delineated according to the symbolism of blood, religion, and language—has come to encompass an explicit secessionist project struggling for independent statehood. In a quintessentially porous space like the Sahara Desert, the struggle for the identification, recognition, and imposition of borderlines as a cornerstone of statehood highlights the mutual imbrication of social practices and space, in line with the recent findings of human geography literature (Paasi 1996; Hudson 2014). This is a major shift worth analyzing if one wants to make sense of the specificities defining Azawad as a parastate, where ethnic and religious drivers overlap and intertwine.

The Place of Azawad in the State-Building Process of Independent Mali

According to Jeffrey Herbst, the creation and the consolidation of statehood in modern Africa has been affected by three main elements, namely the nature of the international state system, the nature of boundaries, and the costs deriving from the extension of power over distance (Herbst 2000). With regard to the latter, the colonial legacy strongly influenced cost-calculation by African state-makers, creating a structural divide between urban centers inhabited by citizens, and rural peripheries populated by "subjects" (Mamdani 1996).

These lenses are useful to interpret the different stages of the Malian state-building process. On the one hand, since independence central authorities in Bamako tended to reify the French distinction between a *Mali utile* and a *Mali inutile* (a useful Mali and a useless Mali), reiterating a logic of extractive economy and low institutional engagement vis-à-vis northern regions (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). On the other hand, the need to maintain within Malian boundaries a (self-) proclaimed distinct polity which was resisting integration, represented both a decisive challenge and a vital task: imposing statehood and a centralized authority over the north became key to the newly born Malian state. This oppositional relation contributed to forging and substantiating autonomous, self-conscious, and long-lasting political identities on both sides (Lecocq 2010).

We distinguish three different phases within the process of state formation in Mali before the 2012 crisis: (1) independence and modernization (1960–1968); (2) authoritarian upgrading (1968–1992); and (3) the neoliberal state (1992–2012).[5] Every step had a direct consequence on the developing idea of an independent Azawad, as they re-shaped self-perceptions, political allegiances, and living conditions of northern populations. Therefore, to every phase of state formation a coinciding stage of the Azawad project can be identified: the first revolt (1962–1964); the *Teshumara* and *Tenekra* (around 1970–1991); uprising and secessionism (1991–2012).

The independent Republic of Mali was officially proclaimed on September 22, 1960, with Modibo Keita elected first president. Drawing on his socialist and pan-Africanist background, Keita started a process of state-building based on two main pillars, centralization and modernization. The administrative structure he aimed to establish from the ashes of colonial bureaucracy was

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meant to bypass traditional and customary leaders by imposing the authority of a "modern" state (Harmon 2014). On the other hand, Keita tried to build a modernizing social coalition open to the participation of those urban elites who shared a common intellectual and ideological background with him (Halpern 1963; Lecocq 2010). Aiming to integrate northern populations by changing their livelihood and living conditions, central authorities promoted the elimination of slavery—still practiced by Tuareg over the black Bellah—and a policy of "Mandefication" (the adoption of Mande languages as teaching languages in schools), forced civil labor, and sedentarization, perceived as a direct attack against the Tuareg identity and way of life (Harmon 2014; Lecocq 2005).

Tension between the newly-born Malian state and nomad populations exploded in open conflict in 1962. Between 1962 and 1964 the Tuareg *Ifoghas*—a ruling clan inhabiting the Adagh region—took up arms against the central government, launching the first Tuareg rebellion. Malian armed forces repressed the rebellion with extreme brutality, forcing thousands of Tuareg to flee Mali (Raffray 2013). However, one should stress that this rebellion was limited to the Adagh region, while the insurgents never made an explicit reference to the Azawad. The idea of an independent state was not formed yet, and the rebellion was more against Mali, than in support of an alternative political project.

In 1968, a military *coup d'état* overthrew Modibo Keita and inaugurated the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré (1968-1991). Even beyond political oppression, the events that definitely changed the relation between the Tuaregs and the Malian state are connected to the two consecutive droughts of the 1970s and the 1980s, which destroyed the pastoral economy of northern Mali, and caused the death of thousands of Tuareg. Humanitarian and relief aid proved to be inadequate, mainly because of the dysfunctional and corrupted management of external resources by central authorities. Tuareg openly accused the Malian regime of trying to realize an indirect "genocide" (Hall 2011; Lecocq 2010).

These events led to a veritable exodus of the Tuaregs, who fled Mali and created exiled communities in Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya. The massive migratory movement known as *Teshumara* must be seen as a real turning point for the Azawad for two main reasons.[6] Firstly, it is during this forced exile that the Tuareg managed to create links with their host regimes obtaining informal support for their political agenda. In particular, Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi built a considerable force of mostly Malian Tuareg called the Islamic Legion (ICG 2012). Secondly, going "global" encouraged various *Teshumara* leaders to theorize that the Tuareg should change their condition of a multinational ethnic minority, through the creation of a territorially-based, secularist, and socialist state in northern Mali (Harmon 2014; Lecocq 2004).The *Tenekra* "nationalist" movement for the irredentism of Azawad was born. At the beginnings of the 1990s, the seeds for a new uprising had already been planted.

The "neo-liberal phase" of the Malian state-building process coincided with the arrival of the so-called "third wave of democratization" in Sub-Saharan Africa (Huntington 1993). Since the late 1980s Traoré's regime was weakened by poor economic performances—linked to the demands for austerity dictated by the IMF's reform program (Herbst 1990)—and challenged by new social actors asking for political liberalization and the establishment of a multi-party democracy (Siméant 2014). Tensions lasted until 1991: in March the regime violently repressed a protest march in Bamako, causing the reaction of the militaries, who deposed Moussa Traoré. In less than one year a new Constitution was approved and new elections organized, leading to the appointment of Alpha Oumar Konaré as the third Malian president.

At the same time, a new Tuareg insurgency started in the north. This new revolt, mainly organized by Tuareg communities and fighters displaced in Libya and Algeria, lasted from June 1990 to March 1996, following different "waves" of violence and demobilization, that fragmented the rebel front and threatened to cause an ethnic-based conflict in the area (Straus 2015). It is still debated whether the second Tuareg uprising should be considered as a war of liberation or rather as a pro-autonomy and pro-human rights insurgency (Lecocq 2010). In this sense, divisions among the insurgent coalition were probably the expression of these different agendas and goals. It is during this uprising that for the first time the term Azawad was explicitly invoked by all the rebel

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groups. The nomadic state "officially" became a territorial and political landmark within the Malian political system.

The adoption of democratic institutions, the second Tuareg uprising, and the solutions elaborated to manage conflict in the north transformed both the international image and the nature of the regime in Mali. From 1992 until 2012, Mali became a "donor darling" (Bergamaschi 2014), widely perceived as a consolidated democracy and a good pupil of the international community's liberal recipes (Whitehouse 2012). The peaceful transition of power from President Konaré to Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) after the 2002 elections apparently confirmed this impression.

Central authorities showed their strong commitment in adopting a reformist agenda inspired by the recommendations of the international donors. For the sake of "good governance" Mali fostered a process of administrative decentralization that redefined the distribution of power and created hundreds of new *communes* (municipalities). This strategy was incidentally considered also as a viable solution for conflict management in the north (Seeley 2001). As a matter of fact, Malian democracy proved to be a "hollow showcase" (Harmon 2014, 76). While neoliberal policies eroded Mali's capacity to project its sovereign prerogatives over the totality of the territory, decentralization was turned into a strategy for co-opting customary leaders and big men—especially in the north—in order to include them within the patronage system that ruled Mali beyond and despite formal democratic institutions. The trading of political and economic privileges of clientelist politics contributed to ensuring the political acquiescence of unruly tribal leaders and former rebels.[7] The stick of the authoritarian regime was thus replaced by the carrot of the collusive suasion behind a smokescreen of good governance rhetoric. Corruption became rampant as the dominant coalition shaped and refined a predatory spoiling mechanism, which captured most of the external aid and national wealth (Chauzal and Van Damme 2015). Effects were particularly evident in the north, where despite strong investments and the creation of new development-focused agencies, both the extreme poverty rates and the quality of public services worsened in relative terms (Bergamaschi 2014). From this perspective, one could argue that, in a context of extreme state weakness, the mismanagement of development aid contributed to the establishment of a specific mode of governmental rationality which scholars qualified as "non-governamentality" (Mann 2014). In it, beyond the façade of humanitarian concerns and human rights rhetoric, a laissez-faire approach in politics and economics *de facto* translated into a fundamentally lax indirect rule, including through clientelism and widespread fraud, which further weakened Bamako's control over its northern territories. This ended up reinforcing grievances and distrust vis-à-vis the central state and local authorities, keeping the will for insurgency and secession alive within the Tuareg society. This context paved the way for the subsequent attempts to build alternative legitimacies and break with Bamako's rule.

2012: Azawad as a Secessionist State

Echoing the ignition of the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in late 2010, the widespread frustrations experienced by the Tuareg youth coalesced into the foundation of the National Movement of the Azawad (*Mouvement National de l'Azawad*, MNA). The framing of Azawad in terms of a nation reportedly raised enthusiasm among the Tuareg diaspora. A few months later, the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya represented a crucial turning point of this process (Morgan 2012). Several hundred Malian Tuareg diaspora members fled Libya's civil war and came back to Mali during the summer 2011. Some of them carried both light and heavy weaponry they used to fight beside the disgraced colonel, which Malian authorities proved incapable or unwilling to seize (ICG 2012).

The massive inflow of "Libyan" fighters seemed to provide an excellent opportunity to refurbish a Tuareg-led secessionist project. Thus, in mid-October 2011 a major conference was organized in the mountains of Kel Adagh, with a noticeable effort to stretch the meeting's constituency beyond the core identification with the ethnic Tuareg cause. Participants reportedly agreed that it was high

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time for northerners to secede from Bamako, and create an independent state of Azawad, leading to the foundation of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA, *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad*). By taking explicit inspiration from MNA's experience, the MNLA blamed Bamako's government for deliberately obstructing Azawad through the promotion of bad governance, informality, and nepotism. More importantly, the MNLA further stressed the secessionist tendency significantly adding the "liberation" endeavor. It immediately adopted classic "liberation-front" rhetoric, and announced "its intention to use 'all necessary means' to end Mali's 'illegal occupation' of 'Azawad'" (McGregor 2011, 10). In December 2011, the MNLA published a long announcement that many regarded as its political manifesto: "*Azawad, c'est maintenant ou jamais*!" (Azawad, it is now or never).[8] The call significantly called into question the African Union principle of the inviolability of borders inherited by colonial legacies, and made reference to the struggles for self-determination in Namibia, South Sudan, and Eritrea aiming to stress the view that an independent Azawad had become a realistically achievable goal. Interestingly, however, Iyad Ag Ghali, a prominent Tuareg leader from the ruling clan of the Ifoghas, immediately stood up against the creation and ambitions of the MNLA. Ag Ghali had been the charismatic head of the *Tenekra* insurgency, who eventually negotiated his surrender in exchange for a dominant position for himself and his clan in the decentralization process sponsored by Bamako (Lecocq 2010). As a result, the youth leadership of the MNLA considered Ag Ghali untrustworthy and pliable to Bamako's agenda. In spite of his prestige, the youth saw him less as the hero of north Mali's full independence and statehood, than as an informal agent of the hybrid governance of north Mali's parastatehood (Klute and Von Trotha 2004). In turn Ag Ghali, who in the meantime had converted to Islamic Salafism, criticized the MNLA's secular posturing, and claimed that a realist understanding of the power-relationship on the ground demonstrated the need to forge alliances more with the jihadist groups rooted in the north of Mali than with distant and unreliable Western partners.[9] As a result, Ag Ghali decided to boycott the MNLA and founded his own religiously inspired movement, Ansar-Dine (Morgan 2012).

Actions soon followed. In January 2012, the MNLA attacked and conquered the northeastern towns of Ménaka and Tessalit (see Figure 1). Without meeting much resistance from Malian forces, military installations and public buildings symbolizing the state were pillaged. In Anguel'hok, however, the Malian army resisted for about a week, then the town was eventually conquered with the crucial support of Ansar-Dine (and according to some reports of AQMI, Al-Qa'ida in Islamic Maghreb).[10] In subsequent months, military defeats prompted protests and demonstrations across the country against the perceived lack of accountability, responsibility, and resolve of the regime in Bamako, which eventually led to the toppling of Mali's then-President Amadou Toumani Touré on March 22, 2012. With the subversion of the military hierarchy and amid political turmoil, the remnants of the Malian army capitulated in less than one week. On March 30 the MNLA conquered Kidal, the Tuareg historic stronghold. On March 31 it was Gao, north Mali's largest city, which suffered a combined attack from the MNLA and Ansar-Dine. Timbuktu fell on April 1. With the conquest of the three regional capitals of Mali's north, and that of the district of Douentza in the region of Mopti on April 4, the territorial ambitions of the MNLA were fulfilled, while all expressions of Mali's state apparatus—including security forces, administrators, teachers—withdrew to the south.

On April 6, 2012, the MNLA solemnly proclaimed the formal secession of Azawad from Mali, by stressing peoples' right to self-determination sanctioned in the United Nations (UN) charter and building on the precedent of the OCRS project.[11] The whole *mise en scène* of the unilateral declaration of independence of Azawad, that was performed live that day in Azawad's alleged capital city of Gao, epitomized all the clichés of post-colonial rhetoric. Quite ironically, then, the MNLA secessionists emphasized their nationalist endeavor by re-enacting a frame of reference that echoed and mimicked the symbolic repertoire resorted to by Malian nationalists in the era of "Mandeification"—a trend frequently noticed by scholars in the transition from state governance to rebel governance (Mampilly 2011). The MNLA Secretary General, dressed up in Tuareg traditional suit, greeted the audience with the wishful image of the rising sun illuminating the new bright days

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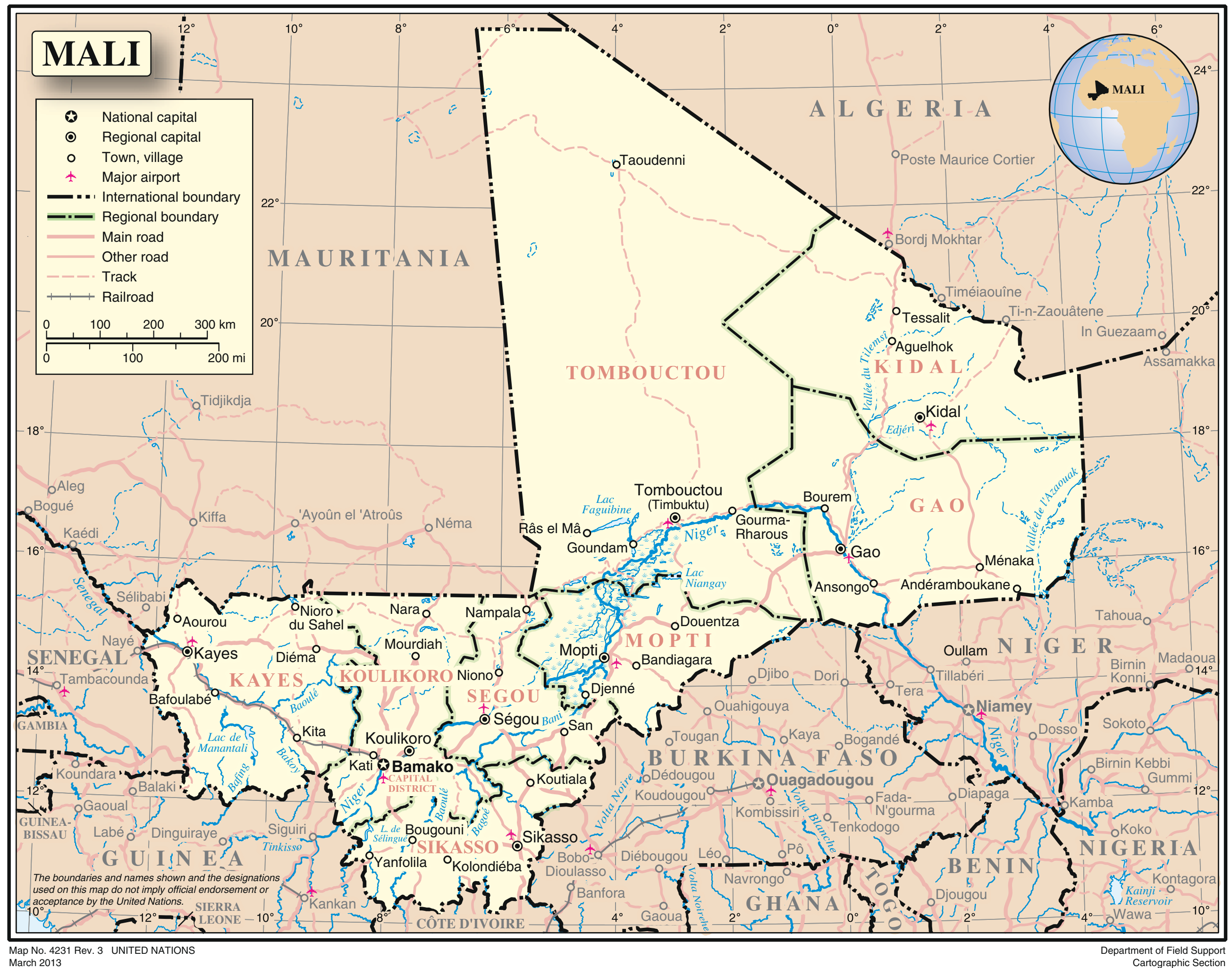

Figure 1. Map of Mali with main cities and administrative regions. Source: Map 4231 Rev. 3, Department of Field Support, Cartographic Section, United Nations, March 2013.

that the historical event was announcing: "Good morning Azawad!" He spoke Tamasheq, a language that only a small minority of Gao residents could actually understand, so that the idea of liberation from a foreign occupation initially appeared quite unconvincing to the audience. The frequent calls to peace that followed, and the repeated attempts to explicitly dispel any fears over a possible re-introduction of discriminatory practices along ethnic lines, did not reportedly contribute to reassuring the population about the intentions of the city's new masters.[12]

Although the Tuareg represent a minority of the overall population of Azawad, in fact, their dominance within the MNLA and the newly created state became immediately apparent. In spite of MNLA's stigmatization of Bamako's bad governance, the new authorities of the independent Azawad did very little to implement the social model they advocated for, apart from replacing the symbols of Mali's state and institutions in the north. And while the gulf between MNLA's rhetoric and practice became increasingly apparent, the flight of virtually all Malian authorities from the territory claimed by the MNLA did not leave the latter as the undisputed ruler. On the ground, in fact, MNLA's sovereignty was limited by the competition of powerful non-state armed actors deeply embedded into the local social structure, such as communal militias and jihadist groups. The fragility of this balance of power suggests that the MNLA's sovereignty of Azawad was far from functional, and most likely fictional. The lack of monopoly over the means of coercion seriously handicapped the MNLA's claim of independence, suggesting that, if secessionist Azawad was to be interpreted as a parastate, it most likely was a weak one. Within this context, the MNLA demonstrated a lack of capacity, if not willingness, to foster the protection of its own citizens and their economic activities. Instead, local observers reported that MNLA's militants were responsible for an uncountable amount of abuses, razzias and thefts, and that Tuareg leaders largely turned a blind-eye on such misbehaviors, stirring the impression that MNLA new masters had only replaced Bamako's authorities, but not the extractive and abusive nature of local governance.

Amidst rising chaos and indiscriminate violence, economic activities were particularly affected. While the MNLA proved completely incapable of protecting local business and promoting social life, the frequent overlap between professional, social, and ethnic groups exacerbated communal cleavages,[13] leading the MNLA's grip on power to falter across most of Azawad. To protect their own business interests, Arab communities in the region of Timbuktu formed the MAA (*Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad*, Arab Movement of Azawad). In Gao, the popular dissatisfaction with MNLA's mismanagement favored the build-up of the MUJAO (*Mouvement pour l'Unicité du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Movement for the Oneness of the Jihad in West Africa). Preaching the intransigent application of *shari'a* and boasting no interest in the creation of a new state, the MUJAO soon managed to attract several disenfranchised social groups, including Fulani pastoralists (ICG 2016), Bellah farmers (Lebovich 2013), and Arab traders and smugglers (Lacher 2012; Raineri and Strazzari 2015). By the end of June 2012, a popular uprising ridden by the MUJAO ousted the MNLA from Gao, and soon thereafter the MNLA was eventually evicted from all of north Mali's major towns.[14] In November 2012, the MNLA lost Ménaka, the last town still under its control, at the hands of the MUJAO and AQMI (AFP 2012). The window of opportunity for the establishment of the secessionist state of Azawad then seemed to be over.

To sum up, even if the MNLA's takeover resulted in only a short-lived experience of territorial control, we claim that the Tuareg-led Azawad hinted at all of the defining features of secessionist parastates: a (relatively) compact ethnic group who has officially issued a claim for its right to self-determination and independent sovereignty, and whose leaders have started to exert ruling power—albeit informal and unrecognized—over the territory that they had conquered to the host state. Nevertheless, poor governmental capacities and fragile legitimization among local populations have undermined the Tuareg attempt to create an independent Azawad since the outset, making the latter a case of a weak parastate. At the same time, the failure of Azawad as a secessionist state should also be linked to the presence of a competing and partly overlapping project, able to defeat its competitor by military and political means. In the following pages, the Azawad as a "terrorist" parastate is thus presented and discussed.

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2012 Part Two: Azawad as a Terrorist State?

The rebellion that effectively achieved a provisional semblance of independence was essentially the result of contingent events and catalyst factors. The Libyan crisis, along with the weaknesses of the Malian regime and the presence of well-established transnational actors, created an unexpectedly favorable context for the MNLA, who nevertheless showed their lack of preparation, when it had to deal with tasks such as ruling the conquered territories or building viable institutions (Lecocq et al. 2013). Moreover, and unlike previous Tuareg rebellions, various and extremely different actors joined the 2012 uprising, and eventually hijacked it from its original goals. As underlined by the recent literature on the fragmentation of non-state actors in conflict, the case of Azawad confirms the idea that insurgent fronts should not be treated as unitary and monolithic actors, but rather as composite coalitions where different and potentially contrasting interests and allegiances can affect rebel unity and influence the development of the conflict (Pearlman and Gallagher Cunningham 2012). In north Mali, the ephemeral alliance between groups pursuing very different agendas, such as the MNLA, Ansar-Dine, the MUJAO, and AQMI was kept together by the shared interest of defeating the Malian regime. When the aim was reached, the very reasons at the basis of the rebel coalition disappeared, leading to the reversal of the situation that took place in June 2012.

Following the ouster of the Tuareg secessionists, the whole territory claimed under the name of Azawad remained *de facto* under the authority of a diverse coalition of jihadist armed groups. Although the mujahidin coalition should not be considered as a unitary actor, goals, priorities, and constituencies of AQMI, MUJAO, and Ansar-Dine partly overlapped and followed a similar path.[15]And while it appears hazardous to affirm that all the representatives of the jihadist galaxy in Mali in 2012 were pursuing a common project inspired by a previously designed plan, the documents found by the AP in Timbuktu in January 2013 seem to suggest that AQMI played a fundamental—even if hidden—role in supporting and influencing the choices made by Ansar-Dine in Timbuktu and MUJAO in Gao (Combelles Siegel 2013; Guidère 2014). [16]

From June 2012 to January 2013 northern Mali presented most of the characteristics that define parastates, conjugated according to the needs of a "jihado-trafficker" agenda. Brynjar Lia and Or Honig and Ido Yahel suggest that the main elements defining "Jihadi proto-states" and "terrorist semi-states" include (1) the occupation of a portion of the territory of a weak state; (2) the commitment to effective governance and holding a credible monopoly over the means of violence; (3) the lack of international recognition; and (4) the advancement of strongly ideologically-driven and "anti-systemic" political projects (Lia 2015; Honig and Yahel 2017). Albeit short-lived, the experience of the Islamic Republic of Azawad encapsulated all these elements. This was proclaimed on May 26, 2012 by Ansar-Dine, based on a curious accord with the MNLA.[17] In spite of the alliance breaking, jihadist formations kept occupying and ruling northern Mali for at least another six months, benefiting from a complex political environment that paralyzed international intervention until early 2013.

Jihadist formations did not try to affirm their legitimacy vis-à-vis local populations by reproducing the same nationalist discourse proposed by the MNLA. Nevertheless, MUJAO, Ansar-Dine, and AQMI were able to affirm their authority over the territory under their rule, taking unchallenged decisions and imposing collectively binding rules. They implemented their own interpretations of order, justice, and rules, re-defining norms and governing principles in the area. Differently from the MNLA, they became able to exert a *de facto* sovereignty through the coordination of their actions, even if every group maintained a certain level of autonomy (Harmon 2014).

Accordingly, this phase of governance and order in the Azawad was built on three main pillars. Firstly, jihadist groups had to impose their monopoly over the means of violence, by expulsing challengers and controlling and/or co-opting all other groups owning coercive and security capacities. The partnership with trafficking cartels, who hold significant coercion capabilities and material interests in the north of Mali, is a case in point (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Secondly, they established a new judicial system based on *shari'a*. This allowed the mujahidins to redefine

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social norms and build new codes of behavior, both perceived as fundamental tools for fighting against corruption and impunity—the two defining and despised characteristics of the Malian regime. Thirdly, jihadists and smugglers also attempted to redefine boundaries and the socio-economic space of the Azawad, implicitly trying to go beyond the classical idea of territoriality, while proposing a more malleable notion of state space attuned to local customs and social practices. The shift from predation and coercion, which were the rule under the MNLA, to pragmatism and relative predictability, accompanied the rise of Azawad as a "terrorist" parastate. Albeit counter-intuitive, this remark corroborates recent scholarly observations about the different types of governance under secessionist or revolutionary rebellions (Suykens 2015).

With regards to the governance of security during the uprising, MNLA's rule had been characterized by a series of dysfunctional actions which fostered grievances and the demand for the re-establishment of some sort of order among local populations. While urban populations were subjected to crimes and abuses perpetrated by the "invaders," a recrudescence of armed violence started to affect the countryside. The three jihadist formations exploited this discontent: by posturing as the guarantors of order and security, they defeated the MNLA and took the control of all the major cities in the north, gaining certain popular support, at least during the first months (Harmon 2014). Both in Timbuktu and Gao, Salafists created Islamic polices and security guards, employing local unemployed people and youngsters, who proved particularly attracted by the wages and the possibility to boost their social status (Lecocq et al. 2013).[18] In some cases, they preferred to reach an agreement with local secular militias: in Douentza for example, the MUJAO initially opted for an informal co-optation of the Songhay militia Ganda Iso, which was ousted from the city only on September 1, 2012 (AP and Callimachi 2012). On the whole AQMI, MUJAO, and Ansar-Dine proved able to eliminate or to co-opt the main challengers in the security domain, while they tried to find their place in the patronage networks ruling territories outside the cities.

At the same time, the jihadists fostered the application of *shari'a* in the territory under their control.[19] The authority of this new polity should have been built on new pillars, inspired by Islam. From August 2012, Islamic law replaced the French-inspired civil and criminal law: while women were forced to veil and "Western pleasures" were banned, Islamic courts were created, and "criminals" started to be punished through amputation, lapidation, or other forms of sanctions in accordance with the Salafist interpretation of *shari'a* (Combelle Siegel 2013; Harmon 2014). The main strategic aim of this controversial choice was to replace the previous order with a new one, free from the impious influences of both foreign traditions and pre-Islamic local customs. To this end, the jihadists "dismantled the state bureaucracy and destroyed the archives of the civil administration," and "targeted symbols of secular francophone administration" (Lecocq et al. 2013, 10). These actions were allegedly aimed at getting rid of all the legacies of Western colonialism that were portrayed as responsible for Mali's corruption and bad governance during the previous decades. Even the destruction and/or the desecration of Sufi monuments in Timbuktu followed the same reasoning, as they represented a corrupted and deviated form of Islam, prone to cooption within Bamako's nepotistic governance.

The creation of a new judicial system, the establishment of new administrative corps and the destruction of the former bureaucratic system showed the will of the rulers to impose a new form of political order.[20] In this sense, even another fundamental dimension of statehood, namely territoriality (Kratochwil 1986; Paasi 2009), was contested and shaped by Salafists.

In a certain sense, the structure of space and borders pursued by jihadist rulers represented an attempt to create a viable synthesis between two hardly compatible projects of social and territorial organization. On the one hand, concepts such as nomadism, connectivity, statelessness, and borderless spaces capture the socio-economic arrangements that historically defined power and livelihood in northern Mali (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Cross-border exchanges and transactions have been at the basis of the cultural identities and economic interests across Saharan borderlands, where categories such as private property of the land would have hardly planted their seeds. On the other hand, the creation of territorial states strongly affected the organization of local societies,

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reshaping intercommunity allegiances and economic functions (McDougall and Scheele 2012). Within this complex framework, jihadist rulers tried to propose their own vision of a nomadic state. Implementing a move that was both ideological and strategic, they eliminated custom fees and informal trespassing taxations—in particular on pasturelands—while they started to create an embryonic form of a welfare state. These initiatives were justified as actions taken in accordance with Islamic law, but they appeared also as a way to gain support among economically dynamic but hierarchically subordinate communities, in particular traders, traffickers, smugglers, and pastoralists (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Hence, while explicitly rejecting the system codified by the Western state, jihadist rulers contributed to redefining the relationship between authority and space, and to forging a new social pact based on the re-elaboration of traditional practices, Islamic-inspired norms and modern tools of government. By explicitly diverging from the Westphalian template, the peculiarities of the jihadist parastate of Azawad highlight the inadequacy of concepts that insist on functional equivalence and institutional normativism to describe alternative forms of statehood, and justify instead the attempts to provide a fine-grained description grasping of local rationalities and practices of governance.

The experience of the Islamic Republic of Azawad did not last much longer than its secessionist predecessor. In both cases, a military intervention put an end to their rule—one of the solutions to the parastate stalemate indicated by Rossi and Castan Pinos in their article. Noteworthy, the ambiguous attitude vis-à-vis territoriality eventually proved fatal. At the beginning of January 2013, the jihadist coalition attempted to stretch its territorial grip further south toward Konna, Mopti, and Sevaré, considered as the last bastions before Bamako. Even if the effective reasons behind this choice are still debated (Marchal 2013), and it remains unclear whether the jihadists actually aimed to capture Bamako, this move triggered the immediate response of the international community. On January 11, 2013France launched its operation Serval, a military mission requested by the Malian interim government and approved by the UN Security Council. In a few months the French army and its African allies re-conquered northern Mali's main towns, apparently putting an end to independent Azawad. Nevertheless, the current situation seems to suggest that the Azawadian parastate has not disappeared, but it has been fully transformed into a stalled conflict.

Conclusion: Azawad as a Conflict in Stalemate?

The present article has tried to demonstrate that Mali's sovereignty over its northernmost regions has been harshly disputed, not just in the past few years, but over the last few decades. As non-state actors progressively expropriated key state functions and fostered a hybrid form of governance, scholarly works resorted to the notion of parastatehood to designate Azawad since the mid-2000s (Klute and Von Trotha 2004). Lately, however, the complete expulsion of all representatives of the Malian state has put an end to the fiction of Bamako's functional sovereignty, while the quest for international recognition and legal independence has further entrenched Azawad's status as a parastate.

Noteworthy, the multiplicity of groups and interests involved in the rejection of Bamako's authority suggests that the distinction between a secessionist and a terrorist phase in Azawad's parastate-building process is somehow problematic. It is not possible to propose a clear-cut categorization of the various rebel groups, distinguishing between "purely nationalist" and "essentially terrorist" actors. Ansar-Dine is a case in point, as both its declared goals and its constituency lay somewhere between the MNLA and AQMI (Morgan 2012; Solomon 2015). Ansar-Dine's leader Iyad ag Ghali, for instance, has been able to build his own patronage network by leveraging at the same time on his ethnic background, rooted in the secessionist Tuareg clan of the Ifoghas, and on his Islamist credentials (Bøås 2012). Since March 2017, he became the alleged chief of the unified jihadist front in the Sahel, where Ansar Dine appears as the leading organization (Mémier 2017). As this case shows, the diverse actors involved in the Azawad project could present multiple identities and agendas, which in turn affect and "hybridize" governing priorities and ruling principles applied in the conquered north.

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If the foreign-backed military operation halted the consolidation of an independent state of Azawad since 2013, whether secessionist or terrorist, it did not mean that the state of Mali recovered its undisputed territorial control in its northernmost regions. International initiatives, in fact, did not ultimately defeat the main challengers of Bamako's sovereign prerogatives, quite the contrary. By posturing as a loyal local ally in the struggle against transnational terrorism, the MNLA managed to get the confidence of the international community, and made a spectacular comeback in the north of Mali since early 2013. At the same time, most of the jihadists preferred to avoid a direct military confrontation against superior military forces: in line with a standard script of terrorist organizations, they dispersed, went underground for a while, and soon regrouped into smaller, less detectable, cells. Benefitting from social entrenchment and exploiting local resentment vis-à-vis the Malian state, refurbished armed Islamists have since re-started conducting hit-and-run operations, IED attacks, and ambushes from inaccessible hideouts in the vast and unmonitored countryside of north and central Mali.

Amidst a multi-layered, low-intensity conflict, sudden military escalations and rampant criminality, insecurity is on the rise across the whole of the country, while Bamako's control is more theoretical than ever. In this framework, the governance of security has become so fragmented and unpredictable that armed actors seem to devote most of their resources to their mere survival, while refraining from any attempt to impose unilaterally their political views and state templates projects. Put otherwise, armed movement remains present and well-rooted, but none of them has the force (and the will) for enforcing their own monopoly of violence over the whole of Azawad, let alone the whole of Mali. Recent examples, in fact, suggest that—in spite of the existing structural incentives toward fragmentation—a unitary opposition can quickly coalesce around anti-hegemonic alliances. For instance, the MNLA and Ansar-Dine proved to be able to overcome deeply-seated animosities and fight on the same side when, in May 2014, Mali's prime minister attempted to reach Kidal and reassert Bamako's sovereignty. Malian armed forces were severely defeated and forced to quit Kidal, alongside all representatives of the state. On the other hand, Bamako authorities have been keen to provide covert support to military actors allegedly linked to jihadism and/or drug trafficking, with a view to balancing the MNLA's secessionist ambitions (Sandor 2017). For their part, powerful foreign actors are increasingly abiding by stabilization-oriented strategies, which trade a long-term and boots-on-the ground engagement with short-term tactical alliances, light footprint anti-terrorist operations, and progressive disengagement. The hesitations of the UN peacekeeping operation in Mali, the replacement of Operation Serval with Operation Barkhane by France, and the labored launching of the G5 Sahel alliance provide ample illustration of these trends (Raineri and Baldaro 2019).

As a result, each armed actor's ambition to ensure norms compliance over a well-defined territory is characterized by a negative cost-benefit ratio. In Mali, both state and non-state actors retain a significant nuisance capacity, but at the same time none of them seems able to enforce a coherent and unitary rule in the north. Given the incapacity to achieve their own goals, all actors seem to prefer to keep the current stalemate of the conflict, refusing to recognize the situation on the ground but refraining from actively trying to address it. And while the recovery of Mali's sovereignty is not in sight, this very unstable balance is quickly eroding the functional shell of all possible forms of statehood, and provides instead a fertile ground for further parastatehood projects to arise.

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Notes

1 See the text of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers Process, May 2015.

2 The MNLA has been able to secure active political contacts in Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Algeria and even France. On the other hand, some observers suggested that members of the

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Saudi regime could have played a role in supporting the inception of Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar-Dine (ICG 2012).

3 While Wahabism properly designates a specific current of Salafism spreading from Saudi Arabia, in the 20th century the term was used (and abused) by colonial authorities to refer to a broad set of beliefs rooted in radical political Islamism seen as opposed to a supposedly less rigorous "African traditional Islam" (Lecocq 2015).

4 *Le Télégramme de Paris*, 23/12/1957. In: Lesourd, M., 1958. *Black and White.* Manuscript, fonds privées, Papiers Lesourd, Carton 1.SHAT – 1K297.

5 This categorization partly makes reference to and re-elaborates the distinction proposed by Raymond Hinnebusch concerning the different phases of state formation in North Africa (Hinnebusch 2015).

6 The word comes from the French *chomeur* (unemployed), and it is used to describe the culture of exile elaborated by displaced Tuareg communities.

7 Interestingly, Georg Klute and Trutz von Trotha describe this situation through the conceptual lenses of para-sovereignty, defined as the emergence of a clientelistic tribal chieftancy who had gained a remarkable power position through the mediation of violent conflicts and through alliances with armed militias during the so-called Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s (Klute and Von Trotha 2004). We build on this approach, but emphasize that the hybridization of authority and sovereignty in north Mali was one of the steps leading to the articulation of a secessionist project, whose ambivalent status currently qualifies Azawad as a parastate.

8 See: http://www.toumastpress.com/autres/analyse/196-azawad-maintenant-ou-jamais.html, accessed February 15, 2018.

9 Interview with MNLA leaders, Bamako, December 2017.

10 A video showing the defeated Malian soldiers being slaughtered by the insurgents circulated in the following weeks. It stirred emotions and resentments in the country, as according to widespread rumors Malian foot soldiers were sent to fight with inadequate equipment against brutal enemies with vastly superior weaponry.

11 See: http://www.mnlamov.net/component/content/article/169-declaration-dindependance-de-lazawad.html,accessed on February 23, 2018.

12 Interviews with Gao residents and eyewitnesses, Bamako, November and December 2013.

13 Information confirmed in the framework of several interviews with key informants from the regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Ménaka, conducted in Bamako in November 2013, November 2014, and May 2016.

14 MNLA's Secretary General was reportedly evacuated by helicopter to Ouagadougou by French special forces, thereby raising widespread speculations about the movement's international connections (Survie 2013).

15 For a matter of space it will not be possible to discuss here all the elements that lie behind the development of terrorist and criminal formations in Mali and the Sahel. Nevertheless, we remark that in a certain sense Ansar-Dine and MUJAO express the two main factors—the ethnic and the "economic" respectively—that drove to the inception of "glocal" terrorist groups.

16 In the days following the re-conquest of Timbuktu by the French army in January 2013, two Associated Press journalists found different letters and a sort of "manifesto" mainly written by Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. These documents proved that the leader of AQMI was present in Mali during the occupation, and suggested that the local branch of al-Qa'ida invested most of its efforts in the enterprise. Moreover, the letters helped to shed light on the complex relationship between the different local jihadists leaders, and in particular with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the most important emirs in the area (Guidère 2014).

17 By July 2012, in fact, the MNLA was evicted out of Timbuktu and of the rest of northern Mali http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18224004, accessed on March 3, 2018.

18 Interviews with Gao and Timbuktu residents, Bamako, September-October 2015.

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19 However, the leader of AQMI accused his fellows of having been too severe and too fast in applying *shari'a* toward a population that, instead, should have been fully "convinced" to accept jihadist rule in first place.

20 As a matter of fact, the latter was never substituted by the jihadists during their period in power, leading to disastrous effects for the local civilian populations: in particular inter-community tensions were revamped by the absence of any form of state mediation, a situation that led to violent clashes especially in the countryside (Lecocq et al. 2013).

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