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Prepared Statement of

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I would like to thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today at this important examination of the Tuareg revolt in the northern part of Mali and the military coup in the south that overthrew that country's elected government.

While I come to you today in my personal capacity, the analyses and views which I will offer being my own, it goes without saying that my perspectives were shaped by the twenty-one years I had the privilege of wearing the uniform of the United States Air Force, during which time I served in a variety of capacities, including Director of the Sub-Saharan Orientation Course at the Joint Special Operations University, Air Force Defense Attaché accredited to six West African countries, and, during the last six years before my retirement, as Africa

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Counterterrorism Director in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Between 2001 and 2003, I spent extensive time with the Tuaregs in Northern Mali, especially in Kidal, Tessalit, Timbuktu, Gao, and several other locations across the Sahara. During this period, the first kidnapping of European tourists by an extremist named Abdel Rezak Al Para took place, and in Kidal, Pakistanis activists—allegedly from Jamaat al Tabligh—made attempts to recruit young Tuaregs for activities abroad, possibly including militancy. As a native Arabic speaker, I had several opportunities to interview Tuareg leaders and local imams about these issues, and about their perspectives on 9/11, terrorism, and tribal beliefs. Subsequent work in the region through my company, White Mountain Research, has also afforded me many contemporary insights concerning the rapidly evolving security dynamics in this region. The testimony I will offer today is based on these experiences. Hence, while I am more than willing to answer questions insofar as I can regarding the coup in Mali, I will focus my testimony on the Tuareg revolt as this is the area which I believe I have the most unique knowledge and perspective to contribute.

Introduction: Contextualizing the Current Tuareg Uprising

The 2012 Tuareg uprising is not new. This conflagration should be viewed as a continuation of a half-century of conflict-promoting dynamics that historically have sullied relations between Tuaregs and the various states that attempted to subjugate or delimit their social, political, and economic practices. Understanding the current rebellion necessitates coming to terms with this history, which started long before Mali’s independence in 1960.

The following testimony—a snapshot of a rapidly evolving and complex problem set—provides this historical context, while shedding light on contemporary Tuareg social, political, and economic dynamics that critically impact security in the Saharan and Sahelian regions of Africa. Of particular interest to US policymaking is the complicated relationship between the Tuaregs and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the North African affiliate of Al Qaeda (AQ)—a relationship driven by a convergence of interests, not ideology. In the end, it will become evident that those seeking to promote stability in the region and confront violent extremism—including AQIM—should not ignore the Tuaregs given the integral role they play in regional security and economic growth.

The Tuaregs and decolonization

The Tuaregs are a semi-nomadic people that live in the Saharan and Sahelian regions of southern Algeria, western Libya, northern Mali, northern Niger and northeast Burkina Faso. They number approximately 1.5 million today, although actual census data is unavailable. Their worldview is constructed from a combination of Islam and traditional tribal practices that cannot be separated from their culture. They believe both in Allah and in spirits, differing from pure Islam, which teaches belief exclusively in a monotheistic God. All Tuaregs belong to one of three social classes: nobles (camel herders), vassals (goat herders), and black African slaves

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originally from southern ethnic groups (although slavery was officially outlawed by the French colonial authorities in the early part of the last century).

When decolonization took root across Africa in the 1950s, the peoples of the Sahara—especially the Tuaregs—pushed for political autonomy, often sparking conflict. During the colonial era, the Tuareg regions had been peripheral to, and thus isolated from, influence within the capitals. Over time, the colonial powers imposed a series of conventions regulating and limiting nomadic movements to specific territories for each federation, further restricting Tuareg movements and increasing their isolation from centers of power. Tuaregs repeatedly clashed with the French colonial authorities over these issues, but were subdued owing to French military superiority and tactics of divide and conquer, which turned the Tuareg tribes against one another.

The first post-independence Tuareg uprising began in 1962, barely two years after Mali gained its independence. Initially, this conflict featured small hit-and-run raids, but these escalated in subsequent years to include sophisticated attacks. However, the overall Tuareg effort lacked unified leadership and a coherent strategy. Nevertheless, the Tuaregs’ grievances were poignant enough to encourage some to take up arms. The sum of their concerns focused on three main issues:

1. Discrimination from southern ethnic groups, which governed Mali following independence.
2. Fear that land reform would threaten their privileged access to agriculture.
3. Concern that national elites would destroy Tuareg culture under the guise of “modernization.”

By 1964, Mali had crushed the rebellion and the northeastern part of the country became a no-go area ruled by martial law. The fledgling government’s heavy-handed approach alienated many Tuaregs who had not been supportive of the insurgents.

The 1970s and 1980s were decades of extreme drought and suffering in the region. This period saw many Tuaregs flee Mali and take refuge in Algeria, Libya, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso. Over-grazing combined with drought and a lack of response by the Malian government caused further deepening resentment among many Tuaregs. Younger Tuaregs were also lured by jobs in Algeria and Libya’s oil industries and moved there to earn a living. However, the collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s sent many of these Tuareg migrants back to their homes in Mali. Algeria expelled over 10,000, and Libya, which had created specialized military regiments composed of Tuareg recruits, disbanded most of them. This set the stage for the second Tuareg rebellion, which started in June 1990 and lasted until 1992. Iyad Ag Ghaly, current leader of the Salafist group, *Ansar El Dine*, led the second rebellion. Similar to the 1960s, the Tuaregs were not united as one insurgent group, although this time they were better organized and equipped.

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Then Malian President Moussa Traoré, to his credit, recognized very early after the rebellion started that a military solution was untenable, and accepted Algeria’s offer of mediation. In 1991, after serious discussions between the government and Tuareg leaders, the Accords of Tamanrasset were signed. Unfortunately, not all Tuaregs were represented at the table, especially those from Gao and Timbuktu who felt betrayed and left out of the deal. The Traoré regime refused to publicize the terms of the Accords, fearing that the South would interpret it as a capitulation. In fact, regime spokesmen even denied on national radio that there would be any “*Statut particulier*” for the North, although this was a key aspect of the deal. Such duplicity underscored the basic lack of trust that remains the impetus behind today’s continued conflict. Key provisions from the Accord included:

1. A cease-fire and exchange of prisoners.
2. Withdrawal of insurgent forces to cantonments.
3. Reduction of the Army presence in the north, especially Kidal.
4. Disengagement of the Army from civil administration in the north.
5. Elimination of selected military posts (considered threatening by the Tuareg communities).
6. Integration of insurgent combatants into the Malian army at ranks to be determined.
7. An acceleration of ongoing processes of administrative decentralization in Mali.
8. A guarantee that a fixed proportion of Mali’s national infrastructural investment funding (47.3 percent) would be devoted to the north.

Most Tuaregs feel that these commitments were never fully met by the Malian state and thus the failure to honor them has become the justification for seeking independence. In fact, Mali had a coup two months after the Tamanrasset agreement, ending President Traoré’s 23-year rule abruptly. In 1992, national elections took place and leaders from all the communities signed a “National Pact,” which addressed a wide range of issues, from integration of former insurgents into the Malian military, to the allocation of resources for national development.

One significant result of the Tamanrasset Accords was the formation of temporary security forces to garrison the North. These forces contained a mixed percentage of Malian Army and rebel combatants—both a confidence-building measure and a way to reduce the problem of unemployment of armed Tuareg youths. Promises of material benefits were also made by the government without having the resources in place to fulfill them. The result was a painfully slow application of the National Pact.

A third Tuareg rebellion took place in 2006 and lasted until 2009. This was led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga. Algeria once again stepped in to broker peace by restating demands made in the National Pact; however, the lack of trust by all parties kept northeast Mali in a state of uneasy peace. In 2009, Mali dispatched troops to stop Bahanga, and he was exiled to Libya that same year, where he remained until his return in the summer of 2011. Bahanga’s Libyan exile proved an important milestone on the way to the current Tuareg insurgency.

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During his time in Libya, Bahanga made contact with Tuaregs from his tribe who served in Muammar Gadhafi’s military. One of these was Mohammed Ag Najm, commander of Gadhafi’s elite desert units. In a 2011, interview with the Algerian newspaper *Al Watan*, Bahanga said, “The disappearance of Al-Qaddafi is good news for all the Tuareg in the region...His departure from Libya opens the way for a better future and helps to advance our political demands. Now he’s gone, we can move forward in our struggle.” While Bahanga was killed in a mysterious car accident that summer, his desire to spark another uprising and gain control of Northern Mali took root among many Tuaregs.

Bahanga’s vision was fulfilled later that autumn. In September 2011, when it was evident that Gadhafi’s regime was going to collapse, Tuareg fighters began to cross into Mali after emptying several Libyan arms depots. In October 2011, in the oasis settlement of Zakak, Mali, near the border of Algeria, Tuareg youth, intellectuals, Malian Army deserters, and Libyan-trained Tuareg soldiers merged two movements together—the *Mouvement national de l’Azawad* (MNA) and the *Mouvement Touareg du Nord Mali* (MTNM)—to form the *Movement National Pour La Liberation de l’Azawad* (MNLA), “Azawad” being the name of the Tuareg homeland. The France-based spokesman for the new organization, Hama Ag Sid’Ahmed (Bahanga’s father-in-law), elaborated on the significance of this new, more organized approach to Tuareg aspirations: “This year we have all the generations together.”¹ He elaborated on this novel Tuareg approach in a subsequent statement on the MNLA’s formation:

We talked about where things had gone wrong and tried to agree on a plan and on some common objectives. We created a ruling council, a military *état-majeur*, commanded and coordinated by Mohammed Ag Najim and other senior officers. There are about 40 of them. And we also created a political bureau, which set about analyzing and considering all the political aspects including how to raise awareness among the international community, especially regional powers.²

While this new Tuareg approach strengthened military strategy, enhanced tactical war-fighting capabilities, and generally augmented the Tuareg political thought, disunity remained their biggest obstacle.

Recent developments

In a period slightly longer than two months from mid-January until early April this year, the MNLA took control over an area greater than the size of France and called it “Azawad.” The word “Azawad” is an Arabic corruption of the Berber word “Azawagh,” which in the lexicon refers to a region that straddles Mali, Niger, and Algeria. However, at least its press

¹ Quoted in David Lewis and Adama Diarra, “Arms and Men Out of Libya Fortify Mali Rebellion,” Reuters, February 10, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/10/us-mali-libya-idUSTRE8190UX20120210>.

² Quoted in Andy Morgan, “The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali,” available at http://afrique-europe-interact.net/index.php?article_id=693.

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communications, the MNLA has been careful to define it as being the northern part of Mali in order to reassure neighboring states that expansion was not in the cards—at least for now—and thus to prevent a unified backlash from those governments. Unlike other tribal conflicts, the Tuaregs are not fighting for resources, fertile land, or geographical expansion of territory; they are fighting for culture, pride, and self-determination.

When Tuareg youth saw the world rally behind South Sudan’s struggle for independence, they hoped the same would happen for their people. However, history shows that the world did not react that way. To de-escalate potential retaliation against its newly formed organization and galvanize support, the MNLA made a public statement that it was not an extremist organization, but rather a secular representation of northern ethnic groups.³ The Executive Committee of the MNLA then asked the international community to “recognize, in a spirit of justice and peace, the independent state of Azawad.”⁴ This plea for support was overshadowed by the March 22 coup in Bamako and a list of plaguing questions, not least of which were “Why now?” and “How did this happen?”

Despite recent military successes, the MNLA faces many challenges. First and foremost is the threat of militant Islamist dominance. However, this threat originates perhaps more from the ultra-pragmatic Tuareg desire to play for the “winning team” than it does from a worldview pre-disposed to violent extremism. According to reports from Timbuktu, some Tuaregs have sons that joined both Ansar Al Dine, the violent regional Salafist group linked to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, and the MNLA in hopes of having a family representative on a winning side. As one Tuareg said to a colleague, representative of wider confusion over these organizational dynamics, “They are two arms of the same body.” However, without Ansar El Dine putting a Tuareg face on AQIM, there would be more Tuareg resistance to the Salafist presence and broader support for MNLA.

Nevertheless, Tuaregs see flirtation with militant Islamism as temporary. There is broad resentment within Tuareg society, for example, to Salafist conceptions of a Shari’a ban on soccer, smoking, and unveiled women. And while Timbuktu has a long tradition as a devout Muslim city, residents feel that no one should tell them how to act or practice their faith. Nevertheless, the grievances that comprise the latest backbone of Tuareg insurgency push some into Tuareg Islamist factions, which share the same grievances and hatred for regional governments, especially those in Niger and Mali, but tap into a deeper Islamic frame to promote activism.

One contact that met with several Tuareg army officers last summer in Timbuktu described to me these grievances, which sparked the flow of Tuareg fighters coming in from Libya, and also

³ See Mossa Ag Attahar, Statement on Behalf of the Political Bureau of the MNLA, January 22, 2012, <http://www.mnlamov.net/english/101-they-are-not-mercenaries.html>.

⁴ Quoted in Michael Rundle, “Mali Unrest: British Embassy Staff withdraw by Foreign Office Amid Violence,” *Huffington Post*, April 6, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/04/06/mali-unrest-british-embassy-closed-foreign-office_n_1407825.html.

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predicted a new rebellion. These officers said that the lack of jobs, economic and infrastructure development, and decent paved roads in northern Mali topped their list. All had family members connected to trade and tourism, and most said the fact that the only paved road to the North ends in Mopti embodies the government’s betrayal of the people. Whether secular pragmatists or Islamists, Tuaregs do not trust the Malian government, which in their eyes has more than once sent forces to “cleanse” them. Tuaregs are quick to point out that since Mali’s independence there was never a full, independent investigation by the outside world of the atrocities committed against them.

Nevertheless, despite these grievances, Tuaregs in general do not broadly support the Salafists. They see them first as foreign interlopers and second as Arabs or Moors, both of which have long been their ethnic rivals for supremacy in the Sahara.

Iyad Ag Ghaly and Militant Islam

This year’s uprising saw the return of Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg leader who led the second rebellion in the early 1990s and started the third rebellion, which ran from 2006 until 2009. He is a seasoned 57-year-old warrior who embraced militant Salafism and is known to be unpredictable and manipulating. Ag Ghaly plays a key role in promoting conflict in the Sahel, and his manipulative, radical approach—not to mention his rolodex and connectivity to AQIM—is worthy of serious examination.

Ag Ghaly’s biography as a militant reflects a clear desire to play for the winners. In 2007, during the middle of the third rebellion, Ag Ghaly switched sides. He left his cause (fighting for Tuareg autonomy) to help negotiate settlements between the Tuaregs and the government of Mali. This was a move that, until this day, causes resentment among his tribesmen, many of which no longer trust him. In 2008, as part of his “golden parachute,” President Amadou Toumani Touré sent Ag Ghaly to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as Mali’s consul. However, his time was cut short when he was declared *persona non grata* by the Saudi government when it found that the alleged diplomat spent his time in the kingdom consorting with extremist elements tied to Al Qaeda. In October 2011, Ag Ghaly was asked by President Touré to head a delegation and bring Tuareg soldiers returning from the conflict in Libya back into the fold of Malian society. He returned to the North to resume his old role as leader of the Tuaregs, but the MNLA rejected him. He then formed his own group, Ansar Al Dine (“Defenders of the Faith”), and fought alongside his people until the territory of Azawad was taken.

Once this happened, Ag Ghaly began to show his cards. He agreed to work with the MNLA, but on condition that Azawad would follow strict Shari’a. On June 16, 2012, he rejected MNLA independence and publicly announced, “Ansar Dine wants the unity of all brothers and sisters in Mali around Islam, which is the foundation of our life.”⁵ For now, he appears resolute in his

⁵ Quoted in Adama Diarra, “Mali Islamist Leader Rejects Independence,” Reuters, June 16, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/16/us-mali-crisis-ansardine-idUSBRE85F0MD20120616>.

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long-term goals to capture the Tuareg leadership and institute rigid Salafism as the Tuaregs’ brand of Islam. The MNLA leadership rejected Ag Ghaly’s June 16 pronouncement and reaffirmed its claim to secularism. Despite the impasse over the fate of Azawad, some members of the MNLA favorably consider Ag Ghaly and his Ansar El Dine members to be Azawadis, a perception that is not shared about AQIM.

Ag Ghaly has a long history of successfully playing all sides of the Tuareg conflicts. In previous years, he was easily influenced by Algeria and Libya, which successfully “managed” him. However, Ag Ghaly’s patrons, if any, are unidentified at this point. In this current stalemate over the fate of Azawad, Ag Ghaly seems to be methodically undermining his MNLA tribesmen. The question is, why? There are many unanswered questions, especially about the source(s) of his funding. Further, did Ag Ghaly know about the rebellion and plan to undermine it? Is a state, organization, or individual behind his success? Indeed, the MNLA has no money or outside support other than Tuaregs living abroad that want an independent Azawad. Ansar Al Dine, on the other hand, has funds and is well equipped, in addition to possessing the ethnic and tribal makeup to be successful. Ag Ghaly, who is no stranger to GSPC/AQIM because of his initial involvement with the group in 2003, also seems to have full support of Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, one of AQIM’s leaders in Northern Mali. Taken together, Ag Ghaly’s streamlined success does not square.

In summary, against the backdrop of the current crisis, Ag Ghaly has positioned himself very well. He managed to get MNLA bickering, and now formally has AQIM’s southern fighters and resources under his command. His approach to undermine Tuareg leaders opposed to his rule began in April, after MNLA declared the independence of Azawad. Looting, rape and abductions in Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu broke out, and according to Human Rights Watch reports, MNLA rebels were responsible for the crimes. However, those accusations were denied by the organization, which put the blame on escaped prisoners and criminals. Eyewitnesses said that Ansar El Dine responded by taking protective measures to insulate the population and curb crime. Since, Ansar El Dine has been proselytizing door-to-door and implementing Shari’a on the population. Overall, Tuaregs are confused about Ansar El Dine, but are quickly learning the truth about the organization. Just this week, a friend conveyed to me the following report from a Tuareg family in Timbuktu:

Ansar El Dine is recruiting local boys as young as 11-12 years-old with promises to give them food and cash if they work in their camp at Fort Bekaye, the old Malian base inside the city. The boys are being told to do odd jobs. One Tuareg man found out that his 13-year-old son had gone to the camp to work so he went there to talk to his son at the base. He asked him why he had joined Ansar El Dine, and the boy told his father that he was only suppose to work for one month. So the man went to the Ansar El Dine leader in charge of the base and said respectfully that he would like his son to leave with him, that he was needed at home. The head of the base told the father that his boy couldn’t leave, that he was now permanently part of Ansar El Dine and that the family could have his

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body back after he had fulfilled his duty to Allah and that he should be proud of him for bringing Muslim honor to his name.

It appears that this is not an isolated case. Two other families have relayed similar stories. People without money rely on handouts from Ansar El Dine, which in return demands that they send their sons to newly militarized *madrasas* (Islamic schools). One man described how his old mosque is now home to one such *madrasa* where all the boys are forced to dress exactly alike, are taught to fire Kalashnikovs, and indoctrinated with a harsh interpretation of Islam. In sum, Ag Ghaly’s determination seems to be slowly forcing the population to submit to his rule, leaving the future of Northern Mali in the hands of extremists and the fate of the Tuaregs in question.

AQIM in Northern Mali

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is very active in northern Mali, despite a very tenuous relationship with the Tuaregs. Algerian nationals run AQIM, but its fighter composition is made up of Mauritanian, Moroccan, Libyan, Malian and Nigerian nationals. From 2003 until present, AQIM gradually took advantage of Mali’s weak security infrastructure to supplant itself in the northern part of the country. This created an economic development shift in which tribal elements (particularly the Arab tribes and to a lesser degree, the Tuaregs) had no other alternative but to do business or join the organization, as it is flush with cash (estimates vary from 70 to 150 million Euros in total). This money originates from ransoms paid for the release of kidnapped Westerners. Over the years, the local Arab-Tuareg population slowly learned to tolerate its presence, in part due to the organization’s ability to develop the local economy and provide basic services in an impoverished region that felt abandoned by its host government. Local leaders forged business relationships with AQIM that mutually benefitted the two. These relationships were cemented through marriages to local women. One such example is Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an influential AQIM leader from the group’s southern zone *katiba* (battalion), who took a Tuareg wife from Timbuktu.

Although AQIM seems to impact the local population for the better with respect to quality of life, the reality is the opposite, especially over the long term. The organization exerts a negative influence on the economic development of the whole region and promotes the growth of organized crime, especially among the Tuareg and Arab people. AQIM is responsible for spreading violent extremism to countries like Nigeria, where the radical organization Boko Haram dramatically stepped up its attacks over the last year against Christians and government targets. Over the years, the government of Mali’s feeble response to AQIM’s attacks and kidnappings decimated the smallest positive economic developments in the poorest region of a country where 77 percent of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. Violence and insecurity deterred NGO’s, outside investors, and tourism in critical areas plagued by chronic under-development, drought, and extreme poverty.

Despite AQIM’s gains, the Tuaregs remain traditionally moderate and are not lured by the

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Salafist brand of Islam. Their identity lies with their dialects of Tamashek (a southern Berber language) and not in religion. The autumn of 2006 saw multiple clashes between Tuareg and AQIM fighters, which resulted in distrust and animosity between the two sides. Some MNLA members continue to discuss the idea of driving AQIM out of the region because it is considered an outside influence that corrupts Tuareg traditions and way of life. For this reason, Iyad Ag Ghaly took center stage and now has AQIM’s undivided attention and support. His ethnic make-up as a Tuareg allows AQIM to operate while he manages the negative Tuareg rhetoric. Despite significant differences and a history of animosity towards radical Islam, Tuaregs are opportunists. The allure of money is their sole attraction to AQIM to keep them relevant in the region.

Because Tuaregs are vehemently opposed to Salafism, and to win popular support, Abdelmalek Droukdal, the emir of AQIM, told his followers to gradually impose Shari’a on the people of northern Mali and create the first Islamic State in the region.⁶ Like Iyad Ag Ghaly, he does not want to lose control of the situation. Maintaining a strong grip on Northern Mali provides AQIM the resources it needs to remain effective and expand.

Conclusion: Implications for the United States

Although the international community would likely never entertain the idea of recognizing the independence of Azawad, efforts need to be made to support MNLA and Tuaregs who oppose militant Salafists in the region, including AQIM. Tuaregs are masters of their environment; they can play a key role in stabilizing the Sahel by driving violent extremist groups out—and they have a will to do so—but they cannot do without assistance.

Unfortunately, the present situation in the region is bleak. Time is not on the Tuaregs’ side and Northern Mali is becoming a magnet for foreign Islamist fighters that are now helping train recruits. Further, violent extremists have an ideal environment in which to move weapons, bring in more foreign fighters and make money from drugs and other contraband, given the large quantities of Gadhafi’s arsenal in their possession and control over airstrips near the towns of Gao, Timbuktu, Tessalit, and Kidal. This region is becoming a strategic nightmare for the US and its European allies.

What is the end game for Ansar El Dine and AQIM? According to regional experts, Ag Ghaly wants to be the leader of the Tuaregs, and he will use any means necessary to obtain this position. However, AQIM’s long-term goals are different and more in-line with AQ’s plans for North Africa. Analysis by West Point’s CTC of the declassified Abbottabad letters shows that AQ’s leadership desires to take advantage of the “Arab Spring” to convert jihadi activities into missionary activities, the primary objective being to regroup and come after the United States.⁷

⁶ See “Rencontre entre groupes islamistes du nord à Tombouctou,” AFP, May 28, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/actu/20120528T200938Z20120528T200936Z/>.

⁷ See The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?” available at www.ctc.usma.edu.

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To accomplish this goal, it has to rely on its regional affiliate, AQIM. However, the setbacks AQIM has suffered over the last few years are significant. Its ability to recruit from North African countries is down to zero. Internal ideological disagreements that started in 2006 when it swore allegiance to Al Qaeda continue to challenge the organization. Further, effective counter-terrorism measures taken by the U.S. and its allies have been very damaging. To survive and remain effective, AQIM needs money and soldiers. The Sahel has become an ideal ground for both, and the Tuaregs function as collateral. In a way, AQIM has hijacked the heart of the great Saharan trade routes, which is the indispensable lifeblood of economic growth along a vast 3,400-mile belt stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Red Sea in the East, where goods and commodities move between Europe, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Left unchallenged, terrorists and drug dealers will exploit these routes for their long-term gains using the only people who know how to navigate the harsh terrain, the Tuaregs.

Recommendations

Until now, Mali’s military has been ineffective and unable to control the North and drive out AQIM. The international community and Mali’s neighbors should not support the current unelected regime in Bamako—one in which the leaders of the recent coup still exercise not insignificant influence—to conduct a military intervention in the North. This will be counter-productive and will alienate any local support against Ansar El Dine and AQIM. Instead, regional governments need to work together to address economic and social needs across the Sahel. This will protect livelihoods and create opportunities that will keep Sahelian communities, especially the Tuaregs, from falling victims to Salafist groups.

The best approach to counter the current crisis in Northern Mali is to create a buffer zone around the areas where the Salafists operate. This buffer zone should restrict movement by air or ground of illegal goods entering the area. On a larger scale, a systematic regional approach aimed at targeting illegal drug trafficking, tobacco and weapons should be addressed to curb terrorists’ access to money. Diminishing cash flow will dry up funds to recruit and expand.

Further, an effective information operation (IO) campaign is indispensable to discredit AQIM and Ansar El Dine, and reinforce local distrust of their motives. This IO campaign should be aimed not only at Northern Mali, but the Sahel as a whole to discredit all militant Salafist groups and activities. However, direct intervention by Western states will only reinforce the extremists’ *raison d’être* and exacerbate the crisis. A solution must be brokered by regional actors, and guided by regional experts.

There must also be greater support for border control and counterterrorism programs for Niger, Mauritania, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. These states still lack for sustainable and effective coordination on these matters, and regional intelligence collection and sharing requires significant improvement. Further, Sahelian states do not have the ability to respond to security threats in remote areas distant from the capitals. This is the reason why Mali has been ineffective at maintaining control of the North. Although AQIM’s southern zone *katiba*

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(battalion) is no more than 300 strong, the vast operational area makes it very difficult to find and target individuals absent regional state collaboration.

Addressing poor governance, corruption, and poverty issues, especially among the Tuaregs and other peoples of the Sahel, is also a must. Initiatives that improve food and water security, health care, education, and employment will incentivize the population to resist militant Salafist groups and refrain from working with them. In the case of the Tuaregs in Northern Mali, better infrastructure and effective security is something that remains at the heart of their grievances. This must be addressed head-on to support their economy and preserve their way of life—a culture at odds with militant Islam.

Finally, effective Western and local intelligence sharing and regional coordination to root out Salafist activities are top priorities that must take center stage to reverse the threat that plagues this region.