

The 2012 Tuareg Uprising in Mali. An Analysis of AQIM's, MUJAO's, and Ansar Dine's Access to Moral and Socio-Organizational Resources Under the Resource Mobilization Theory

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Abstract

This article contends that the appropriation, cooptation and creation of resources was a key element for the jihadist success during the 2012 Tuareg uprising in Mali. Based on the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), the article states that AQIM, MUJAO and *Ansar Dine* successfully appropriated and coopted moral and socio-organizational resources that were previously controlled by the Tuareg movement and, simultaneously, self-produced new resources taking advantage of the abandonment of local communities by the Malian government. Firstly, this article studies how the jihadist movements coopted legitimacy resources from the MNLA Tuareg movement: these groups provided an alternative political project for the Azawad, joined the Northern families through marriages and spread new trafficking networks. Secondly, the article analyzes how the jihadist organizations developed social assistance programs that integrated them within the Northern Mali communities and facilitated the spread of their ideology. Finally, this article concludes that the emergence and spread of jihadism in the Azawad region can be better explained by applying a RMT approach, focused on how jihadist organizations produced, coopted and appropriated moral and socio-organizational resources.

Keywords

Mali, Azawad, jihadism, MNLA, Tuareg, Resource Mobilization Theory

Introduction

The Northern Mali region has a long history of failed uprisings (Cline, 2013). However, during the 2012 uprising, the Tuareg organization *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad-MNLA) successfully conquered the North of Mali, expelled the government forces, and proclaimed the new State of Azawad (Livermore, 2013). The collaboration between the Tuareg nationalist movement and jihadist organizations—*Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami* (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—AQIM), *Ançar Dine* (Ansar Dine), and *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa—MUJAO)—was key to the uprising's victory (Diallo, 2017).

However, growing tensions among these groups led to the expulsion of the MNLA from the main cities of the

region—Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal—and the start of a jihadist military campaign toward the southern part of Mali. After the jihadists conquered some Malian cities, a joint opposition formed by the Malian government, the MNLA, and foreign French forces managed to repel the jihadist offensive. Nevertheless, the relative success of jihadist organizations remains a relevant puzzle in Malian recent history (Skretting, 2022).

Consequently, the rising of jihadist organizations in Mali has received academic attention from several

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political science sub-fields, often studying its success through a myriad of possible explanatory variables, such as the Malian political crisis (Gonin et al., 2013; Thurston & Lebovich, 2013), the influence of the Libyan crisis (Cristiani & Fabiani, 2013; Solomon, 2013), or the nomad traditions of the Tuareg society (Bøås & Torheim, 2013). More complex approaches revolve around the effects of the failed military campaign in the Azawad region (Arieff & Johnson, 2013), the alliances among jihadist organizations and Tuareg clans (Walther & Christopoulos, 2015), the religious transformation of Mali (Tanchum, 2012), or the establishment of non-official authorities in the Azawad region through the support of illegal trafficking networks (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015).

Other authors have focused on the impact that these groups have in the conformation of social and political orders (Hüsken & Klute, 2015; Ladini, 2023; Lebovich, 2017; Mampilly, 2017; Weinstein, 2006). On the one hand, jihadist groups benefit from contexts of political instability and historic absence of governmental institutions. In this sense, the insurrectionist nature of their struggle leads to the confrontation with the institutional or customary authorities, even though some degree of tolerance and collaboration is not uncommon (Lebovich, 2017). For example, Molenaar et al. (2019) showed how, despite a general trend of repression, customary authorities can become partners in negotiating governance with jihadist groups. In Northern Mali, where the government for decades tried to consolidate its influence through the support of big men, jihadists groups alternated strategies of repression, cooptation and negotiation (Ladini, 2023).

On the other hand, jihadist organizations generally aimed at consolidating their presence, increasing popular support, and implementing their religious and political projects through the establishment of new social and political orders (Weinstein, 2006). The capacity of these groups to succeed in this task would rely on different factors, as the presence of the group, the internal structure of the organization, the strength of the governmental institutions or the demographic features of the population (Mampilly, 2017). In this sense, while some jihadists groups fail at undermining the governmental institutions and limit their action to antagonize the governmental forces, others can eventually succeed, replace the official institution by their own ones and consolidate their control over a territory. In some cases, they can even declare the creation of jihadist proto-states, like the Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, even though those decisions can also be directed to compete with other jihadists organizations or to gain international support (Lia, 2015).

In a complementary fashion, this article centers its inquiry on the relevance of resource control as a catalyst

of jihadist organizations' success in Mali. Through the application of the Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), the article argues that the unexpected success of these movements can be best understood with a resource mobilization perspective: the jihadist movement appropriated moral and socio-organizational resources previously controlled by the Tuareg movement and simultaneously produced new resources where the Malian government was practically absent in terms of providing public services. Although the RMT theory offers a varied account of resources and mechanisms of resources' access, this paper focuses on moral and socio-organizational resources' cooptation given their relevance on the issue under study and the availability of information.

The theoretical grounding of the paper relies on RTM as this theory has already been successfully applied in other contexts (Jima-González & Paradela-López, 2019; Mathieu, 2021) and contributes to a more integral comprehension of jihadist organizations' success in Mali, complementing the findings made by other—already mentioned—political and sociological approaches. The methodology employed consists of the revision of secondary sources, newspaper articles, academic articles and intelligence reports to trace how moral and socio-organizational resources were coopted and controlled by the jihadist movements in 2012.

On the one hand, the jihadist movement used cooptation mechanisms to appropriate the Tuareg movement's legitimacy in order to depict a more integrative image of the Azawad, establishing political alliances through marriages with Tuareg and non-Tuareg women of Northern Mali and taking control of the trafficking networks of the region. On the other hand, the jihadist organizations took advantage of the poverty and abandonment of the Azawad by the Malian government and used these grievances to develop social assistance networks within local communities. This assistance not only improved the perception that Northern Mali peoples had of the jihadist organizations but also led to more openness toward the jihadist discourse.

As a conclusion, this article argues that the jihadist spread in Mali can be best studied through the RMT. Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO progressively appropriated and coopted moral and organizational resources that Tuareg peoples used to control. The latter, vis-à-vis the establishment of social assistance networks, improved the perception that the Northern Mali peoples had of the jihadist organizations and of the Salafist version of Islam. This dynamic reveals the importance of understanding the interaction between the control of resources, political legitimacy, and social support for the success of armed groups. Additionally, this article suggests that future research should further explore the interactions

between these variables to better comprehend the success of jihadist organizations in Mali and other contexts.

Resource Mobilization Theory: Resources' Types and Resources Access Mechanisms

Prior to delving into the contextual facts of the paper, we will delineate, analyze, and underscore the potential of employing RMT (Resource Mobilization Theory) as a theoretical tool for enhancing the understanding of the 2012 Tuareg Uprising in Mali.

The emergence, consolidation and decline of social movements is commonly studied through different theoretical perspectives. More specifically, the Political Opportunity Theory (POT) highlights the importance of the context and political opportunities for political mobilization while Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) states that those groups with access to key resources would succeed on their agendas' consecution and those with less access to them would be short-lived. Complementary, New Social Movements Theory (NSMT) sustains that ideology configuration and collective identity formation are at the center of the explanation of why certain movements last over time and why others are transient organizations that eventually disappear (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Staggenborg, 1988; Tilly, 1978).

There are several attempts at understanding the dynamics employed by Islamist groups in order to establish their agendas and enlarge their zones of influence (Jabareen, 2015; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Schwedler & Clark, 2006). Nevertheless, the main analytical focus has often been directed at understanding these processes from a geopolitical point of view, undermining the importance of local mechanisms and processes that could better explain the dynamics within the spread of radical Islamism and jihadism. In this sense, the RMT offers a very useful set of tools to unravel this process and analyze how resources' distribution affects any given social movement (Cavatorta & Merone, 2017; Della Porta, 2013; Ouellet et al., 2014; Wiktorowicz & Kaltner, 2003).

RMT considers mechanisms of resource access as important as resources themselves. For example, the potential success of a movement would be more likely to occur if the movement produces its own resources or has material resources (i.e., money) to access new types of resources. On the contrary, if a movement does not own any resources and lacks the mechanisms for accessing them, their failure would be prone to occur (Edwards et al., 2018).

Following on this line of thought, RMT categorizes resources and mechanism of resource access as important elements to comprehend the dynamics experienced by

different movements and puts at the center of the analysis the interaction among resources and mechanisms for accessing them. Regarding the group's resources, their nature varies and could be affected by different mechanisms. The types of resources categorized under RMT are: moral resources (i.e., legitimacy—which is a contested notion, mobilized and captured in a local field of struggles—, integrity, solidarity, sympathetic and celebrity support), cultural resources (knowledge of specific tasks and production of key cultural products), human resources (i.e., labor, skills, expertise, leadership), material resources (both financial and physical capital), and social-organizational resources (infrastructures, social networks, and organizations) (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

These resources are not meaningful—at least entirely—on their own; they are affected, instead, by the facility or difficulty of accessing them. In this sense, certain mechanisms for resource access do play a key role. For instance, Mohktar Belmokhtar took advantage of the situation in Libya and accessed arms (material resources) for the jihadist cause, or partnered up with Arab communities and local traffickers (social organizational resources) in order to gain preponderance in the region (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015, p. 256).

According to Edwards and McCarthy (2004), mechanisms for resource access can be categorized as follows: self-production, aggregation, cooptation, and patronage. When these mechanisms for resource access serve to obtain key resources, a certain movement could reach a momentum or get deactivated if the group lacks them. Self-production refers to the capacity of the group to create its own resources, for instance when indigenous groups sell handicrafts in order to sustain the activities from their organizations, they are self-producing resources. It is important to note that self-produced resources are produced by the members of the organization and differ from social organizational resources, human resources or material resources, which are all types of resources (Molnár, 2014).

Aggregation refers to those resources that were primarily produced by an individual and that eventually become collective goods that contribute to a certain organization gaining prominence. For instance, aggregation occurs when local or isolated organizations create confederations or larger administrative bodies in order to upgrade the movement's status, that is, the formation of the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) in 2015 in Mali shows how individual jihadist efforts served to form a new organization that has resulted in a mix of ethnic mobilization and radical Islamism (Wing, 2016).

Patronage is a mechanism for resource access that employs the use of influence over the organization by an individual or an organization in exchange for material or

human resources. There are certain organizations specialized in patronage as well as some circumstances that make patronage prone to be employed. For example, some religious associations in Mali employ patronage networks in order to obtain services and infrastructure that the state does not provide (Schulz, 2010).

Cooptation and appropriation constitute a mechanism wherein resources previously owned or produced by other movements are repurposed into valuable assets for another movement (Burchell & Cook, 2013; Campbell, 2001). For instance, MUJAO strategically coopted leaders and cadre from AQIM, enhancing the organization's strength. Similarly, AQIM, as an Al-Qaeda subsidiary in Mali, appropriated legitimacy from Al-Qaeda, leveraging it to extend influence and pursue interests across the region (al-Ma'ali, 2012). In essence, the application of Resource Mobilization Theory as a conceptual framework to analyze the 2012 Tuareg Uprising in Mali complements and extends previous academic studies in this domain.

The Historical Backgrounds of Azawad

Like other African countries, Mali has experienced a long history of violence. After a repressive colonialist government, the Malian independence in 1960 marked the beginning of numerous internal conflicts. However, since 1957 we can trace back the beginning of the efforts of the northern part of Mali to achieve independence: in that year Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Cheick, a leader from Timbuktu, obtained local support in the region and asked for autonomy from Mali (in that moment known as *Soudan Français*) and the integration in the Common Organization of Saharan Regions (*Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes*, OCRS) (Baldaro & Raineri, 2020, p. 102). Even though this request never succeeded and the Azawad was included in the new state of Mali, it has been considered as the symbolic birth of the political project of an independent Azawad (Anderson, 1983).

Mali is a multiethnic country—50% Mande, 17% Peul, 8% Tuareg, and 7% Songhai—, and most of its population is established in the Southern regions where ethnic conflicts became frequent (Pavez Rosales, 2016, p. 65). In fact, even though the ethnic-based division between a northern “white” and a Southern “black” existed since the Medieval times (Hall, 2011), the French colonial promoted this division with the *politique des races*—including not only ethnic but also religious features—, thus aggravating the instability on the region (Lecocq et al., 2015). Indeed, Jourde (2017) analyzed how, resulting from this dynamic, Islamism still plays a key role in the politicization of ethno-racial identities in Azawad and Sahel. In addition, after the decolonization

process, political power was controlled by the majoritarian Mande group, generating unconformity among the rest of the minorities of the country.

One of the most relevant minorities in Mali were the Tuareg, a group of nomad people settled in the North. This deserts and poorly developed region that constitutes two thirds of the national territory was historically abandoned by the central government. Additionally, this Berber pastoralist group felt sidelined by the Arab and black majorities of the country (Flood, 2012). After the independence, the Tuareg peoples headed several uprisings against the Malian government, mainly consisting of guerrilla attacks to the governmental garrisons. More specifically, Tuareg's claims focused on three main demands: a political reform to recognize their political-administrative autonomy (a project envisioned under Tuareg's self-determination process), an increase on investment programs in the North and the entrance of Tuaregs in the Malian army (Lecocq & Klute, 2013). According to Núñez Villaverde et al. (2009), another relevant claim was the recognition of the *Tamashek*, the Tuareg language, as part of the official national languages.

The recognition of *Tamashek* as an official national language in Mali in 1992 was a significant achievement for the Tuareg people. However, according to Lameen (2020), the implementation of language policies in Mali has been slow and uneven and there is a need for more investment in *Tamashek* language education and media.

The identification of the causes of north Mali's previous insurgencies is not a settled issue and academics have developed several explanations. Before 2012 the Tuareg minority upraised three times against the Malian government: between 1963 and 1964, due to the political exclusion of Tuaregs and to the implementation of a land reform; between 1990 and 1996, as a result of a massive hunger, especially affecting the rural zones; and between 2007 and 2009, as a consequence of the violation of previous peace agreements, particularly concerning militia integration initiatives and political representativeness (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 121; Skretting, 2022). Despite obtaining support from part of the Tuareg population, all the uprisings failed, sometimes due to the military governmental repression, others due to the negotiation initiatives that led to peace agreements (Flood, 2012).

In fact, according to Baldaro and Raineri, (2020, pp. 103–104), the resistance of the Azawad can be better explained if put aside with the evolution of the Malian State: an initial socialist project aimed at assimilating the northern population between 1960 and 1968; a second period of dictatorship (1968–1991) that coincided with severe droughts in the region; and a third period between 1991 and 2012 of return to democracy and implementation of liberal economic reforms. This evolution affected

the northern communities as it implied different approximations from the central government, including assimilationist policies, massive repression, decentralization reforms and strategic cooptation of local leaders. However, Casola (2019) and Bergamaschi (2014) point out how the unrest in the North affected the stability of the country: “The demands for independence of the Tuareg movement contributed to the political and institutional collapse of the country, deeply weakened by limited state capacity and a neo-patrimonial system of governance based on political nepotism, patronage and corruptive practices” (Casola, 2019, p. 512).

In terms of religion, Mali, a majoritarian “moderate” Muslim (Sunni) country, has been traditionally portrayed as “a peaceful republic with a pleasant air of democracy and secularism” (Holder, 2013); and Northern Mali in particular, where the majority of Tuaregs reside, has been depicted as “un-Islamic” (Scheele, 2021). This image adopted internationally fails to recognize that Islam in Mali is as diverse and “orthodox” as elsewhere. In fact, during the last two decades there has been a general rise in the number of “radical” Wahhabist adherents. In light of this heterogeneity, influenced by genealogical links, tensions between local and universal principles of Islam have emerged, especially as there is a growth in stigmatization of Wahhabist communities by ascribing them terrorist labels (Sommerfelt et al., 2015). Only when taking into account the latter, it is possible to nuance the image of jihadism as inherently alien to Mali, vis-à-vis its adoption by locals to reverberate their own interests.

The 2012 Tuareg Uprising and the Alliance with the Jihadist Movements

Despite the complex relationship between Tuaregs and the Malian government, the 2012 uprising was a completely different conflict. This time, the MNLA—the alliance of the main Tuareg movements—initiated an armed conflict for the independence of Azawad and the creation of a Tuareg State. In a brief period of time, the Northern forces conquered the three main cities of that region and expelled the governmental military forces out of Azawad. Some authors have exposed different reasons of this unexpected success: the internal conflict within the Malian government, that ended in a military coup (Arieff & Johnson, 2013); the arrival of heavily trained and armed Tuareg forces from Libya (Dörrie, 2012) or the demoralization of the Malian military army (Bøås & Torheim, 2013).

Nonetheless, there is an additional reason for this success. Since February 2012, rumors about the participation of non-Tuareg organizations in the revolution extended over the country (Nievas, 2014). More concretely, Tuareg separatist established a de facto alliance

with jihadist organizations (Desgrais & Lebovich, 2018, p. 666). With the combined forces of Tuareg peoples and jihadists, the weak and demoralized governmental garrisons in Northern Mali were quickly defeated and the allied forces could proclaim the independence of the Azawad region. As a consequence, on May 26, 2012 the MNLA, *Ansar Dine* and AQIM publicly reported a pact to constitute the Islamic Republic of Azawad (United Nations, 2014, p. 3): “We are all in favor of the independence of Azawad...we all accept Islam as the religion” (Agence France-Presse, 2012).

Despite sharing the animosity toward the Malian government and agreeing on the Islamic nature of Azawad, the alliance did not last long. The extremist implementation of the Sharia law, numerous abuses of the MNLA’s members over the population (Lecocq & Klute, 2013, p. 431; O’Lunaigh, 2019, pp. 8–9) and the will of unifying the region under “jihadism without borders” (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015, p. 262), led to clashes between the MNLA and the jihadist organizations and, by the end of August 2012, to the expulsion of the Tuareg organization from the main cities of Azawad (Walker, 2013). After that, the jihadist movements started to consolidate their control on the Azawad and initiate a military campaign against the Malian government, being eventually stopped only by the foreign military intervention headed by the French army (Wing, 2016).

To sum up, the Tuareg’s uprising in 2012 suggested three antagonistic views of Mali: first, the national liberation of the Azawad as a Tuareg independent State; second, the integration of the Northern Mali region under the Malian State; and third, the promotion of Salafism (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015). Under this crossroad, nationalists and jihadists temporarily joined in order to defeat the common enemy: the Malian government. However, once the alliance achieved victory, the internal differences around the ongoing conflict and the radicalism in the implementation of an extreme version of Islam in Azawad generated new conflicts between Tuaregs and jihadists.

Insurrectionist Groups in the Azawad

Even though the Tuareg society has a tradition of fragmentation around a tribal system where internal conflicts, competitions and animosities are frequent, the constitution of the MNLA provided some—minimum—degree of unification (Lecocq & Klute, 2013; Skretting, 2021). In this sense, the MNLA consolidated the “independent nature” of the struggle, in lieu of its recognition as an autonomous region within the Malian State. Complementarily, the MNLA also established itself as an organization to all peoples of Azawad (Casola, 2019). Hence, though Tuareg peoples effectively controlled the

MNLA, they claimed the representativeness of the entire population of the Azawad—to obtain the support of the non-Tuareg peoples of Azawad.

However, this strategy was not entirely successful. After an internal conflict regarding the leadership of the MNLA (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2012, pp. 12–13), Iyad ag Ghali founded *Ansar Dine*, a jihadist organization that aimed at implementing a radical view of *Sharia* law on Mali (Bencherif, 2016, p. 8). *Ansar Dine* was practically composed by Tuaregs—especially from the Ifhoga tribe—and consequently obtained the sympathy of relevant Tuareg leaders like Alghabass Ag Intallah, brother of Ifhoga's Amenokal; or Mohamed Ag Bibi, Tuareg Deputy in the National Assembly of Mali (Nievas, 2014, p. 132). Within the 2012 Tuareg uprising this group played a key role, first within the struggle against the Malian governmental forces and, later, against its former ally, the MNLA. In fact, *Ansar Dine* has shown a remarkable ideological evolution: depending on conjunctural strategic alliances, this organization would focus on the implementation of Salafism only in Azawad or, alternatively, in pushing its spread in the whole country (Albares, 2013).

Within the struggle between *Ansar Dine* and the MNLA for the control of the Azawad, the military support of AQIM was key for *Ansar Dine*'s victory. AQIM was founded in 2007 as a jihadist terrorist group from the former *Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat* (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat—GSPC). Under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukel, this group adhered to Al-Qaeda with the purpose of fighting the “apostate States” and spreading Salafism. Concerning Mali, AQIM mainly contributed with Al-Qaeda with the kidnapping benefits (estimated between 70 and 150 million euros) (Atallah, 2013, pp. 74–75). Later, this organization used this money as a form of investment in drugs' traffickers, with the dual purpose of obtaining benefits and reinforce bonds with local smugglers (Strazzari, 2015, pp. 3–4). During the 2012 Tuareg uprising, AQIM cooperated with the MNLA as a strategic move to destabilize the Malian government. After Azawad was finally conquered, AQIM supported *Ansar Dine* in order to fight against heresy and continue the religious struggle beyond the Azawad borders (O'Luanigh, 2019, pp. 8–9).

AQIM also suffered an internal division: one of its factions formed MUJAO in 2012—with ethnic, tribal and economic common roots—, and another faction formed *al-Muwaqifun Bil-Dima* (MBD) in 2012—influenced by political reasons. In addition, in 2013 MUJAO joined MBD to create Al Murabitun, a jihadist organization fragmented between those aiming to strengthen ties with AQIM (headed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar) and others prone to joining the Islamic State (Ib by Walid Abu

Sarhaoui). Consequently, Azawad became the ground of cooperation and competition between two international jihadist organizations separated by political and religious differences (Tinti, 2013). On the one hand, Al-Qaeda, currently the most powerful jihadist movement coordinated from Pakistan (Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2018). On the other hand, *Daesh*, a formerly Al-Qaeda organization in Syria and Iraq that in 2006 started a process of separation until the constitution of the independent Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in 2013.

All in all, the aforementioned dynamics and the eventual success of Salafism in Mali could occur as a consequence of the cooptation, appropriation and creation of key resources by the jihadist organizations. Hence, in following sections the article develops the theoretical perspective under which this process would be studied.

Jihadism in the Azawad?

Before delving into a historical analysis of the Azawad and its conflict with the Malian State, it is necessary to delimit the jihadist nature of different groups which played a key role in the 2012 uprising. However, this article does not aim to expand upon such a controversial issue and the authors explicitly recognize the methodological limitations that this implies. Rather, it only seeks to assess what the academic mainstream has argued about this topic.

In this sense, numerous authors have considered MUJAO (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019; Cline, 2023; Filiu, 2015; Jourde, 2017), AQIM (al-Ma'ali, 2012; Atallah, 2013; Hansen, 2022; Ouellet et al., 2014; Skretting, 2021), and *Ansar Dine* (Briscoe, 2014; Diallo, 2017; Onuoha & Ezirim, 2013; Raineri & Strazzari, 2015) as jihadist groups. More concretely, Skretting (2022, p. 2) summarizes the jihadist nature of these groups based on the following practices: “(1) the declaration of an Islamic state, (2) iconoclasm, (3) the implementation of Islamic law (4) non-cooperation with non-jihadist rebel groups, and (5) belligerence toward the outside world.”

Concerning these groups' agencies, different authors stated how these are characterized by their heterogeneity and dependence on the economic, cultural, religious and ethnic dynamics inside Azawad and the Sahel (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019; Briscoe, 2014; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022; Haugegaard, 2017; Thurston, 2020). Using this framework, Jourde studied the interaction between Islamism, ethnicity and status hierarchies in the Sahel, and observed how in Mali ethnicity, internal tensions and historic grievances played a key role when explaining the strategies and the development of jihadist groups—particularly true of the MUJAO, which benefited from the animosities between Fulani and Tuaregs.

Similarly, Thurston (2020) analyzed the interaction between the jihadist and not-jihadist groups and how those interactions influenced the configuration of their agencies. In this manner, this author remarks how jihadist groups had to face different dilemmas concerning their ability to address regional claims and their relations with local actors (Thurston, 2020, p. 105). In addition, he stated the relevance of “big men,” particularly influential figures with the capacity of determining the development of a movement. The religious transformation of Ag Ghali led to the creation of Ansar Dine, a new organization that strengthened the linkages between Tuaregs and Jihadism. In Casola’s (2019, p. 522) words:

“He (Ag Ghali) adopted a legitimation strategy based on the Salafi-jihadist ideology and the rhetoric of the violent struggle against state authorities and the Western powers, in a social environment where the growing influence of political Islam in the public sphere was ‘rooted in a call for better social justice and a will to reassert ethical values in response to growing corruption.’”

Therefore, the Azawad region constitutes a space where multiple actors, often with antagonistic and changing interests, relate to each other, exercise their own agencies, and try to improve their positions vis-a-vis the local population. Tellingly, Bøås (2015, p. 315) defines AQIM as “an armed group with a fine sense for the local context: a group that strategically makes use of a combined strategy of force, trade and the distribution of other benefits, and projecting honesty and piety in the eyes of local populations is in contrast to the corrupt local officials of the state whom they replaced.”

Resources and Mechanisms of Resource Access Analysis

Given the relevance of resources’ control within the consolidation and success of a social movement, this section develops an analysis of how key resources were coopted or appropriated by jihadist organizations, contributing to the jihadist success in Mali. More concretely, this section analyzes how moral and social organizational resources were employed by jihadists in order to strengthen their organizations and foster their own political and religious agendas. Although there are other types of resources categorized under RMT, the analysis is performed for social organizational and moral resources given the availability of information: as our object of study are Salafist organizations, it is not possible to access them given the nature of their activities and the limited contact they have with people outside their organizations. Consequently, cultural, material and human resources are not traceable given the violent strategies that the movements use to control resources.

Nevertheless, the following analysis provides the best-possible approach given the information constraints.

Moral Resources

The Azawad Nationalist Agenda. As previously explained, the Azawad is one of the less developed zones of Mali: a deserted and lowly populated zone with no relevant industry investment. In some sense, the nomadic nature of the Tuareg population settled in the Azawad justified its abandonment by the Malian national authorities. This status quo was challenged by the Tuareg peoples of Northern Mali, often demanding the increase of the economic investment and some degree of political autonomy (Baldaro & Raineri, 2020). This context generated several conflicts between Tuareg and government’s forces, alternating diplomatic agreements with violent guerrilla war processes. For example, the Malian government created *L’Agence de Développement du Nord—Mali* in 2005 and the *Programme Spécial pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement des Régions du Nord* in 2011 (Lecocq & Klute, 2013).

Within this conflict, the constitution of the MNLA was a milestone for the Tuareg cause, as it achieved the unity of the *Mouvement National de l’Azawad* (National Movement of Azawad—MNA) and Ibrahim Ag Bahanga’s *Alliance Touareg Niger-Mali* (Tuareg Alliance of Niger-Mali—ATNM). Being a historically fragmented society, divided in tribes with their own alliances and animosities, this Tuareg movement had an unprecedented success (Heisbourg, 2013). This new unity provided a much more effective structure for the Tuareg guerrillas, improving coordination strategies and the number of combatants. Nonetheless, the Tuareg society kept its internal divisions: on the one hand, several Tuareg figures—that is, General El Hadj Ag Gamou—and groups—that is, most Gourma and Imageghane clans—kept loyal to the Government and even confronted *Ansar Dine* and MNLA; on the other hand, several Tuareg groups joined and participated in jihadist movements, like Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) or AQIM (Desgrais & Lebovich, 2018)

In addition, the MNLA failed to provide a more inclusive political project for the non-Tuareg peoples of the Azawad. During the previous Tuareg uprisings, these peoples (Songhay, Bambara and non-Tuareg Berbers), despite conforming the majority of the Northern Mali population, played secondary roles in the insurrectionist processes (Nievas, 2014). The Azawad struggle was led by the Tuareg people, the independence armies were mainly composed of Tuareg fighters, especially after the arrival of well trained and armed Tuaregs from Libya in 2011 (Ronen, 2013). In fact, Libyan Colonel Mahamed Ag Najim became MNLA’s top military commander and

brought heavy machine guns on four-wheel drive vehicles, anti-tank and anti-aircraft rockets as well as light weapons (Lewis & Diarra, 2012).

In this sense, even though the MNLA considered itself as representative of the entire Azawad population, non-Tuaregs' claims were systematically ignored. In addition, during the uprisings these communities were often put in a crossfire between the two sides in conflict—the MNLA and the Malian government. In short, non-Tuaregs—and a relevant part of Tuaregs—in Northern Mali felt increasingly disappointed with the Azawad project, as they suffered the repression derived from a conflict for a cause they did not identify as theirs. Therefore, the Azawad project was not perceived as a regional independence movement, but as an ethnic project led by a foreign movement, the MNLA (Gaasholt, 2020).

As a result, during the 2012 Tuareg uprising, jihadist organizations became key allies for the non-Tuareg communities. After the previous conflicts, these communities were afraid of the repression of Tuaregs and Malians. Hence, joining jihadist organizations could provide them with protection from the other combatant groups. In fact, this phenomenon was not new, as non-Tuareg militias were created in other rebellions to protect communities from Tuareg attacks and support the government (Mercy Corps, 2017).

In addition, jihadist organizations proposed a more inclusive project for the Azawad. As the main factor in the struggle was religion, non-Tuareg peoples could join jihadist organizations (especially AQIM and MUJAO) and become part of the construction of a new State beyond Tuaregs and governmental forces. This occurred due to a utilitarian logic: if they accepted jihadists' radical view of Islam, Songhays, Bambaras or Berbers could integrate these organizations and even assume responsibilities on logistic and strategic aspects (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022). This acceptance was favored as jihadist organizations donated food and medicines and reduced taxes in the zones they were conquering as a part of the "jihadism without borders" ideology, thus initially hiding the most extremist aspects of their thought (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015, p. 262).

Relatedly, these organizations took advantage of the internal divisions and conflicts in the Northern Mali society to improve their legitimacy and establish strategic alliances. As during the last decades the historic hierarchic relations among clans and tribes were jeopardized by the cooptation politics implemented by the Malian government, jihadist organizations saw the potentialities of benefiting from the existing internal conflicts among clans and tribes to gain support and cooperation—what Baldaro (2018, pp. 588–590) considers a result of the President Amadou Toumani Touré's "neopatrimonial regime." More concretely, MUJAO benefited from the

conflict among Fulanis and Tuaregs concerning the water dispute in Gao, as well as the conflict between Arab Lamhars and Kuntas (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). Similarly, Ag Ghali used the internal conflict among the Tuareg clans to attract Tuareg dissidents and Salafist groups to *Ansar Dine*. In fact, this organization used the Ifhoga's tribal linkages of most of its members to gain control over Kidal, a majority-Ifhoga city that was ruled by the MNLA in 2012 (al-Ma'ali, 2012, p. 7).

Therefore, jihadist organizations increasingly appropriated the Azawad insurrectionist discourse and proposed a more inclusive political project that could include the non-Tuareg peoples of Azawad, hence undermining the traditional hierarchic system. In this view, the Azawad was no longer focused on the ethnic character of Tuaregs, but on the implementation of a religious view where all Muslims were treated equally. This, vis-à-vis the crisis within the MNLA's popular support (Hagberg & Körling, 2012), progressively increased the legitimization of *Ansar Dine*, AQIM and MUJAO as subjects under the Malian civil conflict.

To sum up, the moral legitimacy of the MNLA as the representative organization of Azawad was coopted by the jihadist organizations within the non-Tuareg communities. On the one hand, these groups took advantage of the distrust and the lack of representativeness of MNLA in Azawad and used it to promote Salafism (Roetman & Dudouet, 2019). On the other hand, jihadist organization joined the internal fissures and cleavages in Northern Mali tribes and clans to foster support among the Tuareg and non-Tuareg groups, thus obtaining access to the material resources derived from these strategic alliances (i.e., trading and trafficking routes).

Local Alliances Through Marriages. One of the main determinants of MNLA's success is that this organization is composed of largely familial relations—including noble families and inherited leaderships—which generates several sub-groups with divergent interests and positions (Bencherif, 2016, p. 8). As a result, marriages have continued to be exploited to renew community ties and establish alliances or weaken political enemies (O'Lunaigh, 2019, p. 31; Scheele, 2012). Given this scenario, jihadists—in many cases foreigners—could find difficulties to integrate within Northern Mali communities and increase their influence in the region.

Nonetheless, jihadist organizations could successfully integrate within the Northern Mali dynamics and even reach leadership roles. By marrying local women, jihadist organizations strengthened their legitimacy among the Northern Malian communities, as they became members of those tribes and accessed key political alliances—thus being able of exploiting their animosities (Ould Salem, 2014).

AQIM and *Al Murabitun* used two different strategies to achieve this goal. On the one hand, Mokhtar Belmokhtar got married to a prominent Berabich family woman from Timbuktu, a political alliance that provided him military protection and access to the trafficking networks that clan was controlling (Boeke, 2016). In addition, according to al-Ma'ali (2012, p. 2) Belmokhtar “directed his fighters to marry women from the region to increase his movement’s connections and ties within the local populace.” Therefore, through this engagement, Belmokhtar improved his moral legitimacy, coopted socio-organizational resources from the Northern tribes of Mali and increased his power within the region.

On the other hand, some AQIM members—that is, Abdelhamid Abu Zeid—chose a different path: they got married with women of less powerful Malian—Tuareg and non-Tuareg—tribes (Christensen et al., 2012, p. 131). Through these alliances, the organization could integrate in Northern Mali, show a more pious image of itself, and undermine the Northern-Mali-clan hierarchy. Additionally, this closeness with local communities allowed AQIM to gain increasing economic influence (Desgrais & Lebovich, 2018, p. 660; Ould Salem, 2014) as well as protection by these clans (Berthemet, 2010). In an interview to Andrew Lebovich, he argued that Al-Qaeda emirs “are said to have worked to create some local relationships, both through marriage and transactions with some segments of local Tuareg and Arab communities” (Cavendish, 2012).

Similarly, *Ansar Dine’s* leader, Ag Ghali, also used marriage as a way of achieving political alliances. Ag Ghali, who initially aimed at gaining control over the Tuareg tribes, got married to an influential Tuareg woman, the ex-wife of one of the main leaders of the Tuareg independence movement, El Hadj Ag Gamou (Thurston, 2018). At the same time, he exploited the shared blood lines with some AQIM leaders, like his cousin Abdelkrim al-Targui, a Tuareg warlord (Afrique Slate, 2012). Hence, Ag Ghali casted himself as the—ideological and blood “point of union” between the Tuareg independence movement and the jihadist thought, questioning the alleged hegemony and legitimacy of the MNLA.

In sum, the jihadist organizations challenged the MNLA traditional strategic alliances through the celebration of marriages with Northern Mali women. More concretely, the MNLA was confronted in three ways: first, Belmokhtar got married to a Berabich noble family with control over trafficking routes; second, AQIM members promoted marriages with less powerful tribes; and third, Ag Ghali married a well-positioned Tuareg woman, closely related to the Tuareg elite. Therefore, by joining local tribes, jihadists effectively integrated in the Northern Mali dynamics and undermined MNLA

traditional linkages, gaining sympathy among the local communities and increasing their moral (legitimacy) and social organizational (access to local tribes’ networks) resources.

Social Organizational Resources

Another key point for the jihadist success in Northern Mali was the process of social organizational resources cooptation and appropriation that jihadist organizations developed to gain support among the Northern Mali communities and finally weaken the MNLA social base. With that purpose in mind, this section analyzes the decentralization and the consolidation of “big men”; bystanders’ support and members’ recruitment through institutionalization; and penetration of local communities.

Instability, Decentralization, and the “Big Men”. Given the political turmoil lived in Northern Mali due to the various Tuareg rebellions, the area gained relevance for the commerce and trafficking of illegal substances. Additionally, the region became a nodal point for the spread of radical forms of Islam due to the emergence of new social configurations derived from the dynamics arisen from different attempts at resolving the Tuareg conflict (Bøås, 2012).

Under this scenario, cooptation mechanisms played a determinant role for the establishment of new social dynamics in the region. On the aftermath of the second Tuareg rebellion, and after the enactment of the National Pact in 1992, the initial aim of coopting Tuareg leaders in order to guarantee peace ended up deepening the conflict: given the decentralized nature of the arrangements in 1992, Tuareg high ranking officials accessed to economic and political power both at the local and national level. This “loose” hierarchy, sustained on the indirect control of the Malian government (Balduino, 2018, p. 587), paved the way for subsequent dynamics that employed these so-called “big men” on the formation of new groups, that is, jihadist movements (Bøås, 2012).

As the initial cooptation of Tuareg leaders proved to be a short-lived strategy, discontents started to emerge, especially on the most isolated areas of the region, which often perceived peace’s benefits as insufficient. The latter, together with the emergence of the rebellion in 2007—which brought new actors into the already complex scenario, that is, AQIM and the Niger Justice Movement (MNJ)—and the decentralization program enacted in order to maintain the unity in the country, opened the floor for the cooptation of local communities by leaders that would then follow their own agenda. Furthermore, the emergence of other movements—MUJAO or AQIM—made the scenario more complex and more difficult in terms of sustaining the same

cooptation incentives used by the State, whose officials tolerated the creation of informal networks of smuggling and trafficking. This situation would aggravate considering the creation of the *commune* figure (Bøås, 2012).

The Decentralization Commission (DC), an organism created with the aim of fulfilling the peace agreements, created new administrative frontiers and transformed villages into communes. Although this initiative had the objective of empowering local populations, it also became a useful apparatus for aspiring Big Men to organize their own communes and benefit from the networks they had already developed (Bøås, 2012). For example, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga after the end of the Second Tuareg Rebellion acquired his own commune and was able to access key resources derived from the state and from patrimonial politics. The case of Ag Bahanga exemplifies the complexities of the Malian scenario: while it is true that he has profited from the resources derived from the State, he has also used his position to make political claims, that is, the creation of a special status for Kidal that could be replicable for other Tuareg territories (Chebli, 2014).

MUJAO has also proved to use resources emerging from other group's networks. They established alliances with Gao's businessmen and could use these relationships to increase their wealth. Furthermore, they exploited their partnership with Fulani, who were at odds with the Tuaregs due to water control disputes and benefitted from their knowledge and control of trading routes: 90 percent of the import/exports between Mali and Guinea-Conakry is under the control of the Fulani. Despite the latter was a major incentive for the MUJAO to attract the Fulani, the organization also exploited its relationship with Fulani's main leaders in order to justify the "black identity" the movement later defended. Although they tried to foster this novel identity, the complex nature of the Malian scenario requires a more nuanced assessment: Ould Dahda, a MUJAO member denied the terrorist nature of the movement and stated that 80% of MUJAO members are dealers, and people looking for money (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015).

In addition, according to Lebovich (2013, p. 13), MUJAO could also take advantage of its "Arab nature" in the conflicts between the Kunta tribe and the Arab Lamhars—their former vassals—to gain legitimacy and support. Kuntas have enjoyed a leading economic position—sustained on their alleged descent of the Prophet—and controlled the trading routes toward Algeria (Scheele, 2012). However, Lamhars increasingly contested Kunta's superior hierarchy—sometimes with the state's acquiescence. In that context, MUJAO embraced Lamhar's cause to improve its influence in the region and took control of the trading routes from the Kuntas. As a result, according to Strazzari (2015, p. 7),

"MUJAO had by then [by 2012] managed to cut out the Tuareg MNLA from control of the north-south route connecting Mali to Algeria."

Another case on which cooptation of resources has been used is the case of the jihadist Belmokhtar, who after escaping Algeria settled in Lerneb in order to establish contact and penetrate the Arab Berabiche network (Raineri & Strazzari, 2015). After that, he managed to partner up with local traffickers and use their social networks and trafficking routes to strengthen and implement his own agenda. Before turning into an active member of the arms trafficking business, Belmokhtar was a well-known tobacco smuggler, known as "Mr. Malboro" (Gallien, 2021).

Bystanders' Support and Members' Recruitment Through Institutionalization. As a response to the Tuareg's uprisings during the 20th Century, the Malian State increasingly abandoned the territory as a way of avoiding the escalation of conflicts. However, this solution had two effects: on the one hand, it increased the Tuareg claims regarding the lack of investment in the Azawad; and on the other hand, it promoted the development of illegal trafficking networks that occupied the empty space left by the Malian government.

In this context, the Salafist movements in Mali could effectively spread, in part due to the lack of State's institutionalization—that is, the State was virtually absent from many communities. The latter was a fertile ground for the support of new organizations that would precisely act as providers of resources the State proved to be incapable of administering. As Byman (2013, p. 354) contends, "Islamist insurgents like all insurgents, seek to control the government, need money and weapons, and thrive where the government is weak." The employment of this tactic would increase the support from local communities—that found on these organizations a new way of improving their living conditions (Strazzari, 2015).

More concretely, MUJAO could gain support by displacing MNLA from Gao in 2012. Unlike MNLA, MUJAO did not antagonize the Malian State and, instead, the group was more focused on supporting the idea of a "borderless Islam"—the idea of uniting Muslims across the globe (Walther & Retailié, 2015). In the case of Mali, this idea was appropriated by jihadists fueled both by internal logic as well as by international dynamics (Scheele, 2021). With this in mind, the group promoted some strategies that proved to be highly popular. First of all, they declared custom duties and tariffs as illegal under their rule and promoted a massive campaign in favor of traders, traffickers and smugglers. As a consequence, goods decreased their price and their availability increased, making people perceive an

improvement on their lives' quality. As this measure enriched the trading relations with Algeria, Gao's *cercle des notables* sided with MUJAO, giving them access to their trading networks as well. Another effect of this policy was the goodwill of illegal smugglers and traffickers, whose activities also benefited from MUJAO's "open frontiers" policy (Jihadology, 2012; Raineri & Strazzari, 2015, pp. 262–263).

Lecocq and Klute (2013) sustain that although mujahideen's superiority in the battlefield played a major role on defeating the MNLA in 2012, they also employed their economic resources to foster goodwill among the local population and spread their areas of influence. More concretely, by paying for food relief aid, fuel and medicines to run local hospitals and power stations, MUJAO was assuming State competencies that were unattended due to the crisis—and the withdrawal of the government—lived in the country. Hence, by presenting themselves as goods' suppliers, they obtained local support. This strategy was complemented with the economic compensation to local merchants when they were forbidden to trade alcohol or tobacco (Radio France International [RFI], 2013).

Up to this point, bystanders complied with MUJAO's presence. But in light of the growing rejection toward MNLA, local people started to actively support the group and even join it. From June 2012, the MNLA was surpassed by jihadist groups due to their lack of resources and became unpopular among the local population as they started to loot businesses in order to obtain financing sources (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Moreover, the monetary incentives for young people to join the group were high: salaries to lure recruits were attractive, especially for young orphans and ex-MNLA combatants. Due to the latter dynamics, local people perceived the implementation of MUJAO's own version of Islam as a "lesser" evil. In fact, AQIM also tried to improve a pious image of itself through the assumption of abandoned governmental tasks. "The mujahideen also used their cash reserves to pay for food relief aid, fuel and medicines to run local hospitals and power stations, thereby creating some goodwill among the local population" (Lecocq & Klute, 2013, p. 350).

Penetration of Local Communities. As previously explained, the main source for funding AQIM relied on the acquisition of material resources, especially money from hostage-taking and subsequent ransoms (Ouellet et al., 2014, p. 660). These resources allowed the spread of the organization along the Sahel region and the establishment of linkages with the trafficking networks in Northern Mali. Even though it is almost impossible to track down the group's expenditure schemes, it is believed that most of its financial resources are employed

on the payment of its fighters, funding and developing a network of loyal tribes and other terrorist groups, and spreading its influence by providing governance on "forgotten communities" (Fanuzie & Entz, 2017). The latter implies that material resources were employed to obtain other kinds of resources and develop novel dynamics in the region. These dynamics, in turn, were highly impacted by cooptation as a key mechanism for resource access. In fact, Walther and Christopoulos (2015) contend that after using the nomad's knowledge and the networks to gain control of key routes and settlements, AQIM and *Ansar Dine* dissolved their initial alliance with the MNLA.

The spread of AQIM in Northern Mali has been possible, among other things, through an active cooptation of resources, that is, moral and social organizational. However, the role that material resources have played on the successful spread of this organization is undeniable. AQIM was considered Al-Qaeda wealthiest branch in 2012, which proves the enormous capacity it had to sustain its own operations and the subsequent networks it developed to create local affiliates. More concretely, AQIM has benefitted from the following activities: (1) kidnapping for ransom, an activity valued in 100 USD million, often paid by Western countries, (2) drug trafficking and smuggling of cigarettes, people and arms. This activity has been changing and AQIM, if not directly participating in the activity, has developed a taxing scheme for trafficking routes, (3) extortion, looting and spoils, specifically the looting of arms from Malian forces in 2012 and from Libya after Gadaffi's overthrow in 2011, and (4) donations, although a minor source for funding there are some cases, for example a Guinea-Bissau cell sold luxury vehicles as a fundraising strategy (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019; Fanuzie & Entz, 2017; Strazzari, 2015, pp. 3–4).

The penetration of AQIM on local communities was the ultimate step of a very complex trajectory of networks' configuration. In 2006, the GSPC formally joined Al-Qaeda and became AQIM, managing to merge within other Salafist jihadist groups. The main aim of the group was to establish an Islamist caliphate based on its jihadist network—developed when the group merged with other Salafist organizations—and the backing-up of Al-Qaeda brand. AQIM was established in Mali in the early 2000s, mainly through the presence of Belmokhtar, who acted with some political and economic autonomy. During its first years of existence, AQIM successfully integrated jihadist groups like al-Furqan Squadron, Tarek Ibn Ziyad Battalion and al-Ansar Squadron (al-Ma'ali, 2012, pp. 3–4). Nonetheless, AQIM's relation with other Islamist organizations has been flexible and dizzying: for instance, AQIM halted *Ansar Dine* in order to spread its presence in Northern Mali and suffered

several splits—MUJAO in 2012 and Belmokhtar's new group, *Al Muthalinim*. However, in 2012, MUJAO, *Ansar Dine* and AQIM, after a fragile and short alliance, appropriated the Tuareg uprising and gained control in Northern Mali. Bencherif (2016, p. 9) sustains that one of the main reasons of AQIM's paradoxical alliance with the MNLA was to use the Tuareg social base to penetrate new territories and promote the Salafist discourse.

Although the brand name Al-Qaeda gave AQIM the possibility of accessing important legitimacy sources, they also employed other tactics to penetrate local communities and spread their ideology through more subtle and efficient strategies. One of them, according to Ouellet et al. (2014, pp. 657–658), was the gradual abandonment of suicide attacks: even though suicide attacks were vehemently promoted by Al-Qaeda Central, they were rejected by the Malian population and by the Algerian Salafist fighters, who were rooting against the “martyr” figure. As a result, between 2003 and 2010, AQIM increasingly replaced suicide bombing tactics by the very lucrative business of hostage-taking—that later became the main financing source of the jihadist organization (Ouellet et al., 2014, pp. 657–659).

In addition, by arriving into local Timbuktu communities and presenting themselves as hardworking herders, they managed to access local networks and merge with their dynamics. Relatedly, by distributing money, medicines and basic supplies for local people—mainly through the kidnapping benefits—, they enjoyed high levels of popularity and goodwill. This strategy was culminated by the active use of already established social networks for the consolidation of their own version of Islam: AQIM established alliances with local marabouts (religious teachers) to spread its interpretation of the Quran, which implies a violent interpretation of Islamic law. In fact, AQIM also reportedly provided support to elements of Nigeria's Boko Haram (Congressional Research Service, 2018). For achieving this, AQIM lured the already referred religious leaders by giving them cars, money, weapons, and bodyguards, thus actively utilizing an already developed cultural structure that, before their arrival, lacked much real power, hence coopting it for their own agenda consecution (Bøås, 2015). In Skretting's (2022, p. 4) words “By 2012, AQIM was no longer simply a foreign ‘terrorist’ group, but had become tightly integrated into northern Mali's social, political, and economic networks.”

Therefore, jihadist groups were able to infiltrate the communities in Northern Mali by leveraging the assistance of local smugglers and providing goods to the locals. Through these means, the groups were able to exploit and take control of the social and organizational resources that were later utilized to generate financial resources in support of their political and religious

objectives. This underscores the importance of both resources and the means of obtaining them for the success of jihadist organizations in Mali.

Conclusions

After carefully analyzing the different resources and mechanisms for resources access within the 2012 uprising in Mali throughout the revision of secondary sources, newspaper articles, academic articles and intelligence reports, it is possible to conclude that the Resource Mobilization Theory offers an appropriate, and complementary, theoretical perspective to understand in depth how several jihadist movements could successfully settle and spread in Northern Mali. More concretely, the article has developed two contributions to the extant academic literature.

In the first place, the article has developed the empirical application of a well-known social movements' theory for the understanding of the expansion of various jihadist organizations, engaging with the already existing literature about the Malian conflict: ungoverned space theory, a dichotomous discussion of the local and the global as opposing explanatory models, and a discussion of the role of “greed” and economic incentives (Hansen, 2022).

This paper, in turn, by unraveling the different mechanisms for resource access used by AQIM, MUJAO and *Ansar Dine*, contributes directly to the understanding of how the control and production of resources affects the life-span of a given organization. For instance, the Tuareg MNLA—once a strong movement—lost its momentum in the face of the appropriation and cooptation of its resources by the jihadist organizations.

More concretely, AQIM, MUJAO and *Ansar Dine* found their strength where the MNLA and the Malian government failed to establish. Similarly, by coopting socio-organizational resources and creating moral resources, they managed to spread their own version of radical Islam. More specifically, by merging with the local communities—through strategic marriages or by fulfilling local communities' basic needs—and by enhancing their trafficking networks, they were capable of obtaining other resources to accomplish their agendas.

The latter would not have been possible without first obtaining the support and legitimacy from local people affected by the conflict. Given the exclusionary nature of MNLA's Azawad, the jihadist organizations fostered a more inclusive political project characterized by its border-free and insurrectionist vision—especially exploiting the internal divisions and conflicts of the Northern Mali communities. This, in turn, favored their image and facilitated the acceptance of their rule, although they employed violent methods as well. In this sense, this study is imbricated into the three academic debates

already found in the literature, as it is dealing with the global dynamics in local communities, the ungoverned space theory—as jihadism could spread in absence of a strong leadership—and where the incentives—or resources—were coopted and appropriated.

The second contribution this article has developed is the understanding of the spread of radical Islam with its nuances and complexities. By studying the different mechanisms for resource access, it is possible to understand how relations among actors are embedded into other ongoing processes. For instance, the cooptation, appropriation and creation of resources by the jihadist organizations could not occur under the existence of a strong State. It was due to the inability of the Malian government to respond appropriately to the Tuareg conflict that radical Islam could thrive. Hence, the jihadist organizations took advantage of a scenario in which they could effectively use “foreign” resources under an increasingly weak MNLA. This is evidenced throughout the analysis, where jihadist organizations take advantage of local dynamics and grievances to obtain moral resources. They even managed to exploit local alliances to strengthen their socio-organizational networks in order to gain legitimacy, especially as they became active suppliers of key economic and social programs.

To sum up, this article evidenced how moral and social organizational resources were coopted by different jihadist organizations and how such organizations were able to create moral resources given the fragile state of both the Tuareg movement and the Malian central government. With this in mind, it is possible to affirm that the strength of Salafist Islam in Mali was achieved when jihadist organizations started to employ different mechanisms for resource access to control resources that were previously handled by other actors, especially by the MNLA.

In this sense, jihadists groups took advantage of the historic weakness of the Malian State in Northern Mali and developed a campaign aimed at increasing their presence on the region, hindering the social and political orders and replacing them by their own systems. This strategy included growing control of the existing governmental and customary authorities—including repression, cooptation and negotiation—as well as the establishment of their own social institutions (i.e., house construction, charity, well digging or veterinary and medical clinics) directed to promote acceptance and collaboration within the Malian population. Even though this strategy was clearly successful in the short and middle term, as it allowed the alliance with the MNLA and the expansion of the jihadist groups, it severely compromised the social and political orders in the regions, as it aggravated the historic lack of presence of the Malian government in the Northern Mali.

All in all, this study sheds light on the complexity of Salafism spread in Northern Mali and opens the floor for

new avenues of research, especially around the relevance of resources access and further control. For instance, it is key to comprehend the material flow of resources to unravel the complexity of the jihadist organization and how they employ such resources not only in Northern Mali, but globally. This would certainly contribute to a deep understanding of how extreme movements work and expand.

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