

The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front

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*Nous ne pouvons lutter pour l'Islam mais nous luttons
d'abord pour nos conditions de vie.*

Maxim of the Tuareg movement, Alliance Démocratique du 23 Mai
pour le Changement¹

In recent decades peoples in the Sahara and Sahel have developed a new type of assault vehicle that is best known under the name of its most significant weapon, the Soviet-made Teknikal heavy machine gun. During combat, the Tuareg in Mali and Niger make clever use of their driving skills and the prevailing winds to create a dust storm offering cover to combatants both as they attack and retreat (Klute 2001:501). The victims are left in confusion, in a haze of dust. Metaphorically, it might be said that the many players and observers of the Saharan front in the war on terror have been similarly overtaken.

With the war on terror, interest in the remote corners of the world has increased. Where state control is weak or lacking altogether, terrorists can operate furtively without restraint. Afghanistan is a case in point, where so-called failed states provide an attractive sanctuary for terrorists. It is not surprising, therefore, that Africa, the continent with so many failing or failed states, is seen as a security risk. The American army has opened two African fronts within the framework of "Operation Enduring Freedom", one of them being in the Horn of Africa, the other, the focus of this article, in the Sahara and Sahel.

In the 1990s Al Qaeda was noticeably present in East Africa. Osama bin Laden stationed himself and his entourage for several years in the Sudan, organising military operations against American troops in Somalia. In 1998 there were bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. In 2003, in Algeria and northern Mali, an abduction drama lasting several months played out with the Algerian Al Qaeda-affiliated Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), and 32 German, Swiss, and Dutch hostages as lead characters.² Furthermore, the Islamic grassroots organisation Tablighi Jama'at has been active in many areas of Africa since the late 1990s; some observers view it as a cover or at least as a stepping stone for Al Qaeda's inroads to Africa.³

These events have generated a number of publications all asking the same questions: "Are the Central Sahara and Sahel a new basis for Al Qaeda and will its inhabitants become active fighters for radical Islam"? A number of journalists have set out to discover "Al Qaeda bases in the Sahara or at least to present it as a dangerous nest of smugglers, sometimes going as far as to assert the existence of actual slave markets as proof of anarchy prevailing in the area" (Van der Aa 2004; Tlemçani 2003; Winter 2004). More serious is the work of Saharan scholar Jeremy Keenan (2004, 2005), who has gone out of his way to prove that the 'Muslim threat' is nothing but an elaborate hoax set up by the US and Algerian secret services to protect their petrol and arms trade. As Keenan himself admits, his evidence for this thesis is largely circumstantial and his approach is rather sweeping. But no one can deny that the recent events, whatever their exact nature, fit astoundingly well as justification for the presence of US forces in the Sahara region. We fully agree with Keenan's conclusion that the events and groups involved in the Saharan front – so few in number, yet repeated and rehashed in almost every written piece on the subject, including this one – indicate that the actual terrorist threat is probably very limited.

Other, more cautious researchers, such as the authors of an International Crisis Group (ICG) report (2005) on the Sahara, also try to present the recent developments in a large, region-wide picture, set in an historical context of political and religious developments. They too stress that radical Islam has a history in the area and is not necessarily threatening. Among these is Sigrid Faath (2005), who contents herself with listing and interpreting the remarks and official statements from US military on the nature of their Pan-Sahel Initiative programme. The problem with all these reports, from Salima Tlemçani's slave markets to Sigrid Faath's quotation of US sources, is one that continues to haunt anything written on what happens in the Sahara: almost nothing is known with any certainty, all is shrouded in a 'haze of dust'.

We argue in this article that events in the Sahara are being shaped by the very nature of the Sahara itself: the vastness of its area and the sparseness of its population, and the form its news takes. Local media is scarce and the major sources of news are conversation and gossip, known in Africanist literature as *radio trottoir*, and in the Sahara as *télégraphe saharien* or *téléphone touarègue*. The antagonistic stance between various peoples, tribes and clans means that all news receives a local colour so that this kind of news cannot be interpreted without knowledge of the local context. Internationally-operating movements and global intellectual currents within Islam, such as Salafism, and the Neobandi tradition of the Tablighi Jama'at, are adapted to the local context, which then translates it into a local version of Islam; thereafter, ostensibly global movements can only be understood in that specific setting. The possible danger this local radical Islam may pose is in connection with the political, military, social and economic circumstances that help in shaping it. This means that whoever seeks a general picture of the situation in the Sahara must necessarily begin with detailed local stories, augmented by and juxtaposed to each other. While this process does not in itself

achieve that general image, it does reflect the complexity and diversity of the Sahara. Here, we hope to take some steps in this direction by looking at the 'on the ground' histories of three of the most important players in the war on terror in the Sahara: the American army, the Tablighi Jama'at, and the Algerian-based GSPC.⁴

American Military Initiatives

The American army has opened two African fronts within the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom: one in the Horn of Africa, the other in the Sahara–Sahel. The latter programme began under the name Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) (ICG 2005; Faath 2005), encompassing Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad. With a limited budget of six million dollars, the American army trained and outfitted rapid-reaction units in each of the four countries. These units were meant to guard the notoriously porous borders in an attempt to staunch the increasing flow of illegal persons, goods and weapons across the region. They were also to prevent the Sahel from becoming a retreat for terrorists. To this end the units were outfitted with global positioning navigation (GPS) systems, unmanned reconnaissance airplanes (locally called drones) and other up-to-date arsenal in order to uncover suspected hiding places and to eliminate terrorists.

In 2005, the PSI received continuation in the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI).⁵ This initiative occupies a wider range than its predecessor, has a planned term of five years, and has been given a fixed budget of half a billion dollars. Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal and Nigeria joined the original Sahel countries in the TSCTI, and Libya may do so in the future. The aim is to set up antiterrorism units and semi-permanent bases of operations for American troops in each country. According to local witnesses and GSPC websites, such bases have been set up in northern Mali, where the old French air-force base at Tessalit has been readied for use, in the eastern Mauritanian regional capital of Nema, in southern Algeria's Tamanghasset, and in northern Niger at Agadez. In addition, since 2004, American troops have been present in the Malian city of Gao.⁶ Central to the programme is continued border-guarding, with special attention to interregional co-operation and intelligence exchanges. Moreover, budgetary room has been created for developmental aid within the programme, in which, among others, the United States Agency for International Development plays an important role. TSCTI officially started on June 6, 2005, with the military exercise "Flintlock" in which seven African countries and a thousand American special forces took part.

US military initiatives in the Sahel were initially established in response to the idea that it was imperative to prevent the region from becoming a breeding ground for Muslim terrorism. The actual *threat* of terrorism, the abduction of tourists, and the GSPC assault on the Mauritanian army barracks at Lemgheiti in Mauritania took place only after the initiative had been operational for some

time. Nevertheless, for the Americans these actions were proof that real danger did hide in the Sahara and that their military presence was therefore warranted.

American concern was especially focused on developments in northern Mali; more than half the PSI budget had been earmarked for this region. It was considered a potentially explosive area: the region is poor, smuggling is a major pillar of the economy, and illegal firearms abound. The majority of the population are Tuareg, who are viewed as particularly volatile. Since independence, the Tuareg have twice rebelled against the government in Bamako (1963–1964, 1990–1996). The final peace of May 1996 did not, however, resolve their political frustrations; as a result, the threat of a new rebellion continued. This threat became a reality in 2006. Additionally, since the late 1990s there has been a marked increase of Islamic activism in the region. The Tablighi Jama'at has been especially successful in the desert town of Kidal, converting political leaders and former rebels. The GSPC is also present in the area and has recruited members among the local population.⁷ In light of these circumstances, it is not surprising that America's counter-terrorism experts came to the conclusion that northern Mali was ripe for something to go drastically wrong.

One of the most noteworthy weaknesses in the current American approach is its dependence on technology in order to obtain information.⁸ Typical examples are the deployment of three radio remote-controlled airplanes (drones) in northern Mali in 2004, which had to provide images of the local 'situation' 24 hours a day. However, technology does not generate intelligence, only raw data. While a first step towards the creation of intelligence is collation of correct and sufficient data, it is just that – a first step. The techniques used here, images taken from aeroplanes, could easily have been faulty – either too detailed or too large to be of use. Second, intelligence requires the correct interpretation of this data, and to interpret data correctly one needs to have pre-existing knowledge and experience. It is in these steps that American efforts had the potential to fail: in particular, they lack direct input of local expertise or even collaboration with local experts 'on the ground'. If interpretation of data collected by the drones was indeed left solely to American analysts, they probably failed to generate correct intelligence. They do not know the local situation or the terrain well enough to read the data they see. And even when local collaborators are searched for, they tend to be selected according to 'trustworthiness' as determined by Western criteria and pre-determined understanding – they are not really 'rated' in terms of their 'native worth'. Security experts from the US embassy in Bamako, for example, used one particular local partner for their visits to Kidal who had been chosen mostly because he had been married to an American woman, had worked in Europe, and spoke English reasonably well.⁹ The third step in this process is to use the intelligence generated to prevent an opponent's actions or to intercept him. After all, this is what the war on terror wants – to prevent terrorist activity, not simply to monitor it. Again, to do this, one needs to be able to predict the moves of the opponent; this can only be done successfully if one has knowledge of the terrain, the

means at the disposal of the opponent, and an understanding of the choices he is likely to make in any given situation where these factors are at play.

Proof that the American high-tech strategy did not work was the capture of GSPC Commander Abderrazak *El Para*. While he had been hunted down by American elite troops, it was a Chadian local rebel movement equipped only with Teknikals and Kalashnikovs and using the *télégraphie saharien* – local knowledge and information – who had the experience necessary to anticipate the movement of the GSPC runaways. Similar proof of the inadequacy of technological ingenuity was delivered by the assault of the GSPC on the Mauritanian military base at Lemgheiti on June 3, 2005, exactly three days before the start of Operation Flintlock in the border region between Mauritania, Mali and Senegal. There is no doubt that all the American gadgets were in place to support the exercise – yet, they did not see the GSPC coming. Jeremy Keenan reads this as proof that the GSPC is controlled by the Algerian secret services, who are favourable to American and Algerian interests; he argues that it staged the attack to justify America's presence.¹⁰ We, on the other hand, drawing on evidence from comparable failures elsewhere, contend that the answer is far less mysterious: American's blind trust in technology, lacking supportive 'on-the-ground' collaboration, left it with flawed, incomplete information that their 'experts' did not know how to interpret.

The Jihadist Focus on Africa

After several years of relative neglect, Africa seems to be back on the *jihad* agenda. The advance of the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia has been greeted by international *jihadi* movements with great enthusiasm, and the hope is being expressed that a new Taliban state will be established. In a spoken message that was published in April 2006, Osama bin Laden himself called for the *mujahideen* to proceed to Darfur in order to fight the international peacekeeping force there. Last May, this call was repeated by Ayman al-Zawahiri in his video message Supporting the Palestinians.¹¹

In the same month, a piece written by one Abu Azzam al-Ansari, "Al Qaeda turns to Africa", appeared in *Sada al-Jihad* (The Echo of Jihad), an electronic magazine believed to be of Saudi origin distributed via Arabic-language *jihadist* forums on the internet.¹² In the article, the author listed the many possibilities the continent has to offer in the fight for a worldwide *jihad*. He urged that because African governments are weak, divided, and corrupt, lacking strong armies and effective security and intelligence services, and because borders are poorly guarded and cheap weapons are easily available in quantity, *mujahideen* could easily organise themselves without being discovered. According to al-Ansari's reasoning, not only is the idea of *jihad* widespread, it is particularly appealing to Africans because they have a 'readiness' to die a heroic death (this being evidenced by the numerous ethnic conflicts and civil wars in which Africans engage). Africa would also be ideal because it would be easy to spread a full-fledged *jihad* into both Egypt and Palestine, and to launch assaults into

Europe and on vital transportation routes of the 'crusaders'. In short, al-Ansari concluded that the circumstances and possibilities on the African continent are propitious for launching a worldwide *jihad*.

It is notable that al-Ansari expresses himself in stereotypes similar to those of Western Orientalism, in imperialistic geo-strategic platitudes. He sees Salafism as universally valid, thereby writing off as irrelevant the local cultural, social and political context. According to Oliver Roy (2004:23–4), this kind of 'deculturalised Islam' is characteristic of contemporary fundamentalist trends: "The construction of a deculturalised Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture".

Al-Ansari also made an interesting observation about the Sufi. He argues that the fact that most African Muslims are Sufi is no deterrent to persuading them to take part in *jihad*. On the contrary, he notes that experiences elsewhere have shown that it is simpler for the *mujahideen* to work with Sufis than, for instance, with Shiites or communists. He is probably referring to Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan, where *jihadi* Salafism was able to make significant inroads in what were unquestionably Sufi religious contexts. Recent proof of this alliance can be found in Iraq, where Sufis have formed the Abd al-Qadir Jilani battalions and have joined the armed rebellion (Khalil 2006). The considerable theological differences between the two routes appear less an obstacle in practice than one would have anticipated in principle.

But American counter-terrorism specialists employ a very different model in their reasoning. According to them, there are 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims' – 'good Islam' and 'bad Islam'. In this model, West African Islam, correlated with Sufism, is tolerant and peaceful; Islamist movements, in contrast, are suspicious. This dichotomous oversimplification does not reflect the complexities of Islamic history in the region. In the nineteenth century, for instance it was Sufi-inspired *jihads* (both Tijaniyya- and Qadiriyya-based) that had the Sahel in political and military upheaval from the Atlantic to northern Cameroon, while the much-feared Wahhabism has, since its introduction to West African countries such as Mali and Ghana in the 1930s, enjoyed a peaceful history (Kaba 1974).

America is especially suspicious of the Salafi and the Tablighi Jama'at. These branches of Islamic activism are considered hotbeds of terrorism. There is much confusion in the post-9/11 era about the nature of Salafism. This is caused by the self-image of the movement, and by the various trends within Salafism. Salafism is a specific movement within modern Islamic activism.¹³ The term refers to al-salaf al-salih (the pious forefathers), the first three generations of Muslims. The Salafi do not consider themselves to be a separate sect, movement or party, but simply the only true Muslims. Historically, Salafism is a descendant of Hanbalism, one of the four Sunni schools of law, and is permanently linked to Wahhabism, the official religion of Saudi Arabia. The Salafi, however, refuse to identify themselves as 'Hanbalis' or 'Wahhabites'. They refer to themselves as

muwahhideen (followers of *tawhid*) or *Ahl al-Sunna wa'l-Jama'a* (the followers of the example of the prophet Mohammed and the *Salaf*), as well as 'Salafi'. All Salafi adhere to the same doctrine (*aqeeda*). There are, however, three currents which differ over the manner in which doctrine should be put into practice (Wiktorowicz 2006): the purists or the *Salafiyya Ilmiyya*, the Salafi political reformers or the *Sahwa* movement, and *jihadi* Salafism. For our purposes, the most significant differences relate to the stance they take towards the state and the political measures they employ. The main direction is the *Salafiyya Ilmiyya*. According to their tenets, modern political concepts such as 'nation-state' and 'democracy' cannot be traced back to the Qur'an or Sunna and are therefore *bid'a* (illegitimate). Because of this viewpoint, they do not engage in politics. Moreover, they adhere to the position taken by the great Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) that "sixty years under a despotic ruler is better than one night without him". Under this maxim, they accept the state de facto. The *Sahwa* movement, on the other hand, does actively engage in politics. They accept existing political institutions and try to influence them within the framework of state-sanctioned activities such as demonstrations, petitions, and boycotts. The *jihadi* variation of Salafism rejects the existing political order and champions challenging it vigorously by means of armed *jihad*. The GSPC is an exponent of *jihadi* Salafism. The Tablighi Jama'at, on the other hand, does not adhere to the Salafi tradition at all, but is a conservative piety movement primarily focused on converting individuals who are already Muslim. The Tablighi Jama'at is explicitly apolitical and condemns violence, holding that if all people are good Muslims, violence and politics will no longer be necessary (Masud 2000).

American policy-makers, particularly among the European Command military personnel, are afraid of what they call 'the stepping stone effect': the automatic transformation of pious Muslims, by means of a *da'wa* (Islamic preaching) movement such as the Tablighi Jama'at, into *mujahideen*.¹⁴ This reasoning needs nuance. The branches within Salafism employ the same doctrine but render a completely different meaning to the particular terminology contained therein. All branches, for example, have clear concepts of the term armed *jihad* (*qital*). However, for the *Salafiyya Ilmiyya*, the *jihad* is bound by many restrictions. For instance, *jihad* has to have a reasonable chance of military success and preferably be fought only defensively under the command of a ruler. *Jihadi* Salafis, in contrast, set aside all restrictions and take on *jihad* as a personal duty. Thus, within Salafism there exist not only *jihadi* tendencies, but also movements that vehemently refute and condemn Al Qaeda's concept of a global *jihad*.¹⁵ They have produced strong arguments against extremism which check radicalisation. The proposition that Salafism or fundamentalism leads necessarily to terrorism is therefore untenable. Moreover, there is not only a clear-cut difference between the Salafis and the Tablighi Jama'at, but actual antagonism. Although both movements are fundamentalist, they are organised differently and hold dissimilar interpretations of the Islamic creed. Salafis consider the Tablighi Jama'at an "evil sect [that] has exceeded all bounds in innovations and aspects of shirk (idola-

try)".¹⁶ Consequently, although individuals or small groups belonging to a *da'wa* movement may well be radicalised, there is no instance of collective radicalisation of the *da'wa* movements in the recent history of West Africa. It is therefore untenable to assess these movements as cover organisations of Al Qaeda.

The Tablighi Jama'at in Northern Mali

Since the 1990s the Sahara has been open to various global Islamic movements, the first of which was the Tablighi Jama'at. The Tablighi Jama'at was originally founded in the 1930s in the Indian province of Deccan (Masud 2000). After the partition of India and Pakistan 1947, the organisational headquarters remained in India's Mewat. Nevertheless, the movement came to be labelled as Pakistani. From the 1960s onwards, under the leadership of founder Maulana Ilyas' grandson Maulana Hassan, the Tablighi Jama'at became an international movement. Its success as an organisation rests primarily on its egalitarian structure and low financial costs, possible because of the personal dedication and sacrifice of its members. A devout Tablighi dedicates 10 'volunteer' days per month or 40 days per year for mission work in the movement. They travel in groups of about 10 on missions called *khuruj*, lasting from 10 or 40 days to a whole year. Upon arrival in a community, a *khuruj* first asks permission for their activities from local state authorities, next from the traditional authorities, and finally from local 'ulema. Only after permission is given by the last and an exchange of ideas with the local 'ulema has taken place does the mission spread to the local population. The missionary teachings are held in a local mosque. Participants in northern Mali consider these as 'three-day courses' in which the Tablighi doctrine of Islam is explained in six simple principles. Those who want to learn more may follow a 10- or 40-day course in a larger Tablighi centre, where their personal involvement in the *da'wa* increases. Those who want to proceed further still can decide to spend up to a year in one of the movement's larger centres in Raiwind in Pakistan, Tongi in Bangladesh, or either Mewat or the Deoband Madrasa in India. In this way, the Tablighi Jama'at has grown to be the biggest grassroots Islamic movement in the world. The yearly gatherings of members in Raiwind and Tongi are, with more than a million visitors each, together as big as the *hajj*.

The success or failure of the Tablighi Jama'at in northern Mali has been largely dependent on the local political and religious situation.¹⁷ At the end of the 1990s, the Tablighi Jama'at's mission work in Francophone West Africa was coordinated from Gambia, where the movement was established in the early 1990s (Janson 2005).¹⁸ From there, the movement seems to have spread first through female Gambian Tablighi to Mauritania, later to southern Mali, and from there to the north. During Ramadan, February 1999, four 'Pakistani' *khuruji* arrived on a *da'wa* mission to Kidal.¹⁹ They were replaced after Ramadan by Mauritanian members, who in turn were replaced by Malians from Bamako. The movement was not initially successful, but since May 1999 the three-day courses have attracted interest, especially among the members of the Tuareg Ifoghas clan.

Tablighi Jama'at missionary activity in Kidal coincided with the preamble to local mayoral elections of June that year which was, in turn, unfolding as part of an ongoing political conflict for power between two clans. The traditional rulers in the region, the Ifoghas, legitimate their power largely on religious grounds, claiming *shorfa* (descendant of the prophet Muhammad) status; the traditional leader presents himself emphatically as *amir al-mu'minin* – ruler of the believers. Their position of dominance is contested by another clan, the Idnan, who had the most popular candidate for the position of mayor: a woman, lovingly nicknamed Tenhert, meaning Doe. In Tuareg society women traditionally enjoy a great measure of freedom to involve themselves in public life. There was nothing unusual or particularly notable about this situation, for Kidal. The presence of the Tablighi Jama'at, however, introduced an important new dynamic. This kind of freedom for women is often viewed as exceptional, to say the least, elsewhere in the Muslim world – an exception of which Kidal women who had lived in the Arab world as migrants were all too aware (Figueiredo 1996). The Tablighi Jama'at, with its Indian Muslim roots, strongly reflects the Deccan cultural context in which it was born. At that moment, the entry of Indian women into public life (in British colonial society) was a hotly contested, much resented development. Scholars who have studied this movement have observed that, from the outset, it was among those strongly opposed to this 'Western style' emancipation of Indian women (Metcalf 2000). Consequently, in the highly politicised Kidal context, it is hardly surprising that its strongly anti-feminist concepts and apolitical subordination to local power-holders would shape a distinctive role for the movement in the local debate. In the process, it would thus become transformed and (in spite of its principles) politicised.

Initially the tribal chief acted favourably to the female candidate in spite of her clan origin. However, under the influence of the Tablighi doctrine, in May, the local *'ulema* decreed that it was impossible in Islam to have a female mayor. Should the tribal chief fail to revoke his support for Doe, they would no longer acknowledge him as *amir al-mu'minin*. The chief complied, withdrawing his support. He thereupon suggested one of his sons to run as an alternative candidate for Doe (within the same party), while another son decided to run for an opposition party so as to hinder any talk of a 'coalition' council with Doe after the elections. In the intervening period, one of the chief's most important advisors had completed a 40-day Tablighi Jama'at course in Gambia, and his two sons had completed a 10-day one in Bamako, after which they became active at the local mission.

If the influence of the Tablighi Jama'at was gaining momentum within the leading family and its supporters, it was therefore by definition unpopular among opposing clans such as the Idnan. In fact, the influence of the Tabligh in the Kidal area remained limited to the Ifoghas. It was simultaneously generating sharp opposition among the women, particularly women from Doe's immediate family. The issue for them was not only the matter of the aborted mayoral race. Like many of Kidal's women, they feared what they called 'Algerian situations' – a

forced retreat from public life symbolised by the veil, which they do not traditionally wear. Many Tuareg women have lived for some years as emigrants in Algeria, where they experienced the 'Arabian' influence on their culture; the restrictions it imposes, especially with respect to a diminished role in public life, were well known back home (Achterberg 1988; Bellil and Dida 1993; Figueiredo 1996). In an open letter to the traditional rulers and notables of Kidal, a group of influential women asked where, precisely, Islam bars women from becoming elected as mayor, and since when the spiritual leaders of the region needed advice from strangers. They reiterated that women had always enjoyed the right to mingle in political debates and urged that the traditions of the Tuareg be preferred over those of strangers.²⁰ In the end the Ifoghas were successful in preventing Doe from being installed as mayor – in spite of the fact that she did remain in the race and actually won the election!

The impact of the Tablighi Jama'at, notably among the Ifoghas, was further manifested by the journey of one of the traditional chief's sons to the Tablighi Jama'at headquarters in Raiwind, Pakistan. Iyad ag Ghali, the paramount leader of the rebellion in Mali in the 1990s and a fellow clansman of the tribal chief, had also devoted himself to taking Tablighi Jama'at courses. He continued his study of Islam in 2002 with a sojourn in a mosque in Saint Denis, a suburb of Paris. In the Tuareg world, where Iyad is famous and very powerful, humorous remarks were made about his conversion. It was said that "in the 1990s, if you arrived at Iyad's door in the mornings and the guard said that he was indisposed, then he had been drinking all night. If you arrive now at his door and the guard tells you that he is indisposed, he has been praying the whole night."

The reception of the Tablighi Jama'at in the neighbouring town of Menaka that same year was decidedly cooler. The local tribal chiefs in this region do not root their power in Islam at all, but rather seek legitimacy based on secular authority, and military and historical prestige. For religious issues they rely on the judgement of a family of traditional *'ulema*, the Kel Essuk – Kel Eguedesh. It was to these clerics that they referred the Tablighi missionaries upon their arrival in town, stating that they would agree to their presence only on the advice of the local *'ulema*. This support was not forthcoming. Competition was unwelcome and the Pakistani missionaries were chased out of town.

In contrast to what many anticipated, the movement quickly lost popularity in Kidal, and indeed in Mali in general, after the events of September 2001. It must be remembered that, contrary to the impression given by some reports, the Sahara and Sahel were being visited not only by the Tablighi Jama'at. Many Saudi and other Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were competing in the religion-based development market. One key tactic that had been used by the Tablighi Jama'at to great success in the Sahel was its stress on its Asian origins. Tablighi Jama'at missionaries in Kidal emphasised that, just like the local population, they were not Arabs. The many Arabs from the peninsula that visit the region as tourists, mostly for hunting, as well as those who come as religious

development workers, are reputed to be arrogant, lazy and demanding. In its missionary discourses the Tablighi Jama'at stresses that, having spread Islam from the Arabian peninsula centuries ago, Arabs had not really done much for Islam. Muslims from Asia and Africa had done much more. This discourse has met with approval.

But after September 11 and the subsequent US counterattack on Afghanistan, the inhabitants of the Sahel quickly realised that the link being established between radical Islam, with which they were associated, and the terrorist attacks might lead to retaliation. Shortly thereafter, the Malian government proceeded to extradite 25 Pakistani members of the Tablighi Jama'at. The movement was left with dwindling representation in northern Mali. While Tablighi Jama'at missionaries originating from Bangladesh had resided for some time in Timbuktu, their popularity barely grew at all. The population in this city is well aware of its international reputation as a prestigious historical centre of Muslim learning. It is equally aware of its current economic dependence on both Western and Saudi tourists and also of the very bad reputation South Asian fundamentalists have in the West and on the Arabian peninsula too. Hence, perhaps without actually wanting to condemn their presence (a grave insult to hospitality), the inhabitants of Timbuktu stress their own value in Islam as a centre of tolerance. During a scientific conference about the historic contacts between Timbuktu and the West in that city in December 2004, the delegates of the traditional religious elite emphasised that Timbuktu had always adhered to a more tolerant style of Islam – unequivocally distancing themselves from the fundamentalists.²¹

Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat

The organisation over which American authorities have expressed the most concern is the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat.²² The GSPC, operating out of the Sahel, is an offshoot of the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA). In September 1998, GIA Commander Hassan Hattab created a separate organisation in protest at the views of the GIA concerning *takfir* (excommunication) and its bloody consequences for the civilian population. During the 1990s, the GIA had excommunicated everyone who did not actively support it, with ruthless, merciless power. The GSPC, in contrast, limited its use of the *takfir* concept to the state alone, arguing that the latter does not operate in accordance with God's laws and is therefore subject to punishment. GSPC activity was therefore primarily focused on the Algerian state, especially the army, the police and the security services, although civilians were not completely spared.

After September 11, the GSPC was placed on the American list of terrorist organisations and linked directly to Al Qaeda. This relation is, however, not unequivocal. It is clear that both organisations adhere to the ideology of *jihadi* Salafism.²³ And it is true that the GSPC emir Nabil Sahraoui has pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda; members of both organisations maintain close personal ties with each other. However, this does not automatically mean that the GSPC forms

an operational unit in the commando structure of Al Qaeda. If one focuses more on the actions of the GSPC than on its rhetoric and ideology, it becomes clear that the GSPC has its own agenda – to date, the armoured fights against the Algerian state, and not the global *jihad* against the West. It is possible that this strategy may change in the future as Ayman al-Zawahiri announced in September 2006 that the GSPC had joined Al Qaeda, “a great step in the war against France and America”.²⁴ It is difficult to know what the decision really means.

In 2003 there occurred a change in the GSPC leadership, leading to a de facto split into region-based factions. Hassan Hattab was succeeded first by Nabil Sahraoui and later by Abu Musab Abd al-Ouadoud. They formally took over the complete leadership of the GSPC, but their real power was confined to northern Algeria. In southern Algeria and in the bordering Sahel states, two other emirs, Amari Saïfi and Mukhtar Bilmukhtar, carved out territories for themselves.

Amari Saïfi (b.1968) is a former paratrooper of the Algerian army, the source of his pseudonym Abderrazak *El Para*. It was he who was responsible for the spectacular 2003 abduction of 32 European tourists in the Algerian Sahara, which lasted several months and came to an end only after the German government paid five million euros in ransom. A year later, *El Para*'s group was hunted down by the GPS-equipped rapid-reaction units in the Sahara, but was eventually captured in March 2004 by the small, poverty-stricken rebel group *Movement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad (MDJT)* in the north-western part of Chad. After exhausting and chaotic negotiations in October 2004, *El Para* was finally handed over to Algerian authorities, who sentenced him to life-long imprisonment.²⁵

The other GSPC commander who operated in the southern region was Khalid Abu Abbas, alias Mukhtar Bilmukhtar (b.1972). At the end of 2002, the French and American security forces accused this former Afghan *mujahid* of having personal ties to Al Qaeda. One of his contacts was Imad Abd al-Wahid Ahmad Alwan, a Yemeni suspected of having been involved in the Al Qaeda assault on the American warship the *USS Cole*. Bilmukhtar and Alwan had purportedly planned to blow up the US Embassy in Bamako with a truck loaded with explosives. But when Alwan was killed by security forces in September 2002 in south-east Algeria, the plan was presumably abandoned. Bilmukhtar was also in charge of the assault on the Mauritanian military base in Lemgheiti (bordering Algeria and Mali, June 3, 2005). In that attack, which involved about 150 GSPC fighters, 15 Mauritanian soldiers and nine fighters from the GSPC were killed. The GSPC captured not only ammunition and firearms but also six military vehicles. In a communiqué published immediately afterwards on the internet, the GSPC justified the surprise attack in politically-laden *jihadi* rhetoric. The attack was presented as the first of a “series of activities” that would ultimately rid Muslim countries of “unbelievers” as well as “apostate rulers” – in this case the “Karzai of Mauritania”, the agent of the Jews, President Maouyaould Taya.²⁶ In the months previous to the attack, the ould Taya regime had arrested a large num-

ber of members from the Islamic opposition as well as suspected members of the GSPC. The communiqué explained that the attack was an act of revenge. In a subsequent interview, Bilmukhtar went on to defend the motivation for the attack,²⁷ mentioning that the Mauritanian goal was chosen because of the tight bonds Taya had with Israel and America. The attack occurred on June 4, 2005, just after the Israeli Minister of External Affairs, Silvan Shalom, had paid a visit to Nouakchott. This also just preceded the American-led military exercise Flintlock.²⁸

Although the GSPC originally had a clearly specified political agenda and aimed to accomplish its goals by means of *jihad*, the southern faction of the GSPC seems to have applied itself primarily to criminal activities. Bilmukhtar has built up a reputation as a powerful and successful smuggler (ICG 2005:18). Given that the kidnapers in the Algerian hostage affair actually only demanded a ransom and made no political claims, it might be reasonable to argue that the kidnappings were more a criminal than a terrorist affair.²⁹ The criminal motivation of the GSPC in the Sahel can also be seen from the assault on the barracks at Lemgheiti, where GSPC fighters took weapons and cars as booty in their retreat.

From a Saharan perspective, there is a third and more nuanced way to understand this situation. All of the abducted tourists were travelling unescorted through the desert. According to the Sahara's 'unwritten laws', travelling without a guide is equivalent to not paying toll fees and, adding to that insult, the theft of meagre supplies such as water and firewood. The tourists were, according to local law, in the area illegally. The attack at Lemgheiti, too, fits into a Saharan military tradition whose history reaches back to the colonial 'freedom fighter' from southern Morocco, Ma 'al-Ainin, and was repeated in the Tuareg rebellions of both the 1960s and 1990s: to rob an adversary is a psychological conquest that humiliates him and makes him aware of his impotence (Lecocq 2002). Moreover, in a real physical sense, it renders the adversary powerless in an environment where his enemies' resources are replenished with the loot of the attack. In these manoeuvres, Saharan fighters make no distinction between civilians and the military. The abductions were nothing more nor less than a traditional military *razzia*.

However this is to be interpreted, following on the mediation of the Malian government and Iyad ag Ghali, the German government paid the GSPC a ransom of five million Euros. The Malian government tolerated the continued presence of the GSPC on its territory provided it kept the peace. The Tuareg intermediaries made it quite clear that if the GSPC created any trouble, it would be dealt with on Tuareg terms. Neither 'understanding' inhibited further GSPC activity – five million Euros will buy a lot of supplies! It is likely that material supplies were procured at the local black market of Al Khalil (northern Mali).

It is clear that the US government did not agree with the solution to the hostage crisis. American troops started actively to hunt down the GSPC battalion in late 2003, which resulted in the group splitting itself into four units of about 50 each, reinforced with new members recruited from northern Mali, Algeria and (appar-

ently) Libya.³⁰ One group headed for the area between the Malian and Mauritanian border where they were last sighted in mid-January by a party of German cross-desert tourists; the tourists were subsequently forced to spend a day and night in GSPC company as that group was having car problems and did not want the tourists to warn the authorities.³¹ A second group remained in northern Mali at the border with Algeria, where they were last noticed abducting a small number of German tourists who had visited the Festival du Desert at Essaiane; they released the music-lovers after two days (and with no demands). A third group patrolled the Tamesna area between Mali, Algeria and Niger, attacking 20 French tourists travelling with an Agadez-based tour operator and requisitioning their vehicles. This attack took place on February 23, 2004, exactly a year after the first abductions in Algeria.³² The same group executed a second attack north of Tahoua in Niger in April of the same year. According to the Nigerien newspaper *Le Républicain*, the group was driven towards Chad where they were encountered and dealt with by Nigerien armed forces, assisted by US troops. A fourth group had reportedly already moved into Chad under the command of *El Para*. He was undoubtedly seeking to procure arms, vehicles and other equipment at the arms market at the El Salvador Pass (on the Chad–Libyan–Niger border). It was there that they were finally caught by the Chadian rebel movement (MDJT). As pointed out above, the fact that the battalion under *El Para* was caught by the Chadian rebels, and not by the US special forces who had been hunting him, is telling evidence about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of US operations on the ground when not assisted by local auxiliary.

Renewed Tuareg Rebellion in Northern Mali: A Link to Global Jihad?

As has been sketched above, Iyad ag Ghali, one of the most powerful men in northern Mali, had joined the Tablighi Jama'at before their popularity declined, and remained committed to fundamentalist Islam. Iyad's Islamic activism, the general if diminishing sympathy towards Muslim radicalism in the region, and the business connections between smugglers in the Sahara made northern Mali an excellent hiding place for the GSPC, and its inhabitants excellent mediators in the hostage crisis of 2003. However, the region, having housed the main political prison (Kidal) in both colonial and postcolonial times and having staged two rebellions against state power since independence, has generated a very negative image of its population and garnered a rather sinister reputation. It is perhaps less than surprising, then, that none of the reports so far written on the 'terror threat' in Mali mentions that the GSPC hostage crisis was actually resolved through the mediation of "the savage and violent rebel" Tuareg from Kidal. Thus, even though acting as 'good guys' in this situation, they remained 'bad guys' in the public image, simply because they had been seen that way for more than a century.³³ This negative view, despite what they see as their positive contribution to the solution of the GSPC problem, does not surprise the Tuareg in Kidal, but it

does embitter them. If being the good guy for a change does not pay off, then why continue even trying?

The Tuareg rebellion, which had officially ended in March 1996 with the ceremonial burning of weapons in Timbuktu, flared up exactly 10 years later on May 23, 2006. The main rebel leaders in the revived conflict were those who had directed the rebellion in the 1990s:³⁴ the brothers Moussa and Ibrahim Bahanga, Hassan ag Fagaga and Iyad ag Ghali. After an initial short period of uncertainty about the motives of the rebels, it became clear that these were in line with demands made in the previous two rebellions initiated in Kidal. In fact, the main demand the current rebel movement, Alliance Démocratique du 23 Mai pour le Changement (Democratic Alliance for Change of 23 May) makes is the full application of the agreements reached in the *Pacte National* peace treaty of 1992.

Yet, from the situation sketched at the start of this section, what seems to have emerged publicly is a reminder of Iyad ag Ghali's continued personal commitment to fundamentalist Islam and his historical connection with 'rebellion' – which means, generally speaking, a possible association of the new resistance movement with radical Islam. But just prior to the recent uprising, the rebels published their *raison d'être* on the internet: the only demands that can be interpreted even remotely as reflecting Islamic fundamentalism are those relating to education – they demand an Islamic curriculum, education in the Arabic and Tamasheq languages, and the separation of boys and girls in school.³⁵ However, these same demands had been among those posed by the tribal chiefs of Kidal to future Malian leaders even before independence, and they had been reiterated during the first rebellion of 1963. Even after the rebellion had been quelled, during the harsh military occupation of the region in the 1960s, the issues remained so important that tribal leaders kept insisting on them. This continued 'resistance' led to the incarceration and death of one leader and the flight of several others to Algeria (Lecocq 2002:93). The education-related demands, therefore, can hardly be attributed to current influences of fundamentalist Islam. Indeed, the present rebels have done everything in their power to make it clear that their fight is *not* a part of a worldwide *jihād*. On their own website³⁶ the rebels deny any connection between their movement and global holy war:

The Muslim Daawa [*da'wa* – Tabligh I Jama'at] has arrived at the right moment to revive an education the nomads should never have left. Given that this Islam is tolerant and knowledgeable, it is dangerous and truly evil to try to connect it to the GSPC Salafists, who are banished from the land that spawned them and rejected by their own brothers in arms in Algeria. Thank God, even Uncle Sam does not believe this poisonous low-grade humbug.³⁷

In order to prove their point, they go as far as to use their military means to combat the GSPC. On September 27, 2006 the rebels reported to Kidal.info:

skirmishes between elements of the [rebel] Alliance and the military command of the GSPC in the Sahara, with as consequence the death of three of its most important leaders, one of whom was the successor to *El Para*. According to reliable sources, the goal of this operation is to affirm the credibility and trustworthiness of the Alliance to the Algerian authorities, and to inform the international opinion that they have nothing in common with the Salafists.³⁸

It is perhaps this clearly articulated mandate against global *jihad* that has kept the American forces in the region from involving themselves directly in this conflict.³⁹ However, it is questionable that they will remain aloof if the conflict is prolonged and therefore begins to present a risk to American exploration for oil and other minerals in northern Mali.

“I Use the Enemy, I Use Anarchy”

An important point of American concern, strongly informing their actions and now gaining weight with the renewed Tuareg revolt, is the supposed lack of state presence and the anarchy reigning in the Sahara (Pringle 2006). The weak presence of strong state institutions is seen as a lack of control in the Saharan region. As we have mentioned, failed or absent states are seen as inviting sites for terrorist activity. This too is more complex than it might seem. In the Sahara, the Malian government, like its predecessors, makes use of a delicately balanced set of power structures, of which its own visible structures are but a part, and in which local traditional powers are more important. If not disturbed, this system functions effectively. But as we will show, it is shaken at present. Historically, external states (colonial and others) have always found themselves forced to make use of indirect rule in the Sahara. In the precolonial period, many clan leaders, emirs and *Qaids*, nominally acknowledged the authority of the Moroccan Sultan. His supreme rule was subverted during colonial times by a nominal acknowledgement of French authority – nominal, since the French have always applied a high degree of indirect rule. Until the 1950s, for example, when mineral riches began to play a role in Saharan politics, ‘pacification’ and taxes were the main concerns of French political masters and both were best obtained with the auxiliary aid of tribal chiefs and French-equipped armed *meharist* guards.

The position of tribal leader grew to become that of a fully-fledged colonial civil servant with its own rank, career path and salary scale, responsible for justice, safety, taxes and education. For example, the chief of the Ifoghas, the most important tribal leader in the Kidal region, was among the highest paid civil servants in West Africa. In 1961 this civil service status given to clan leaders was formally revoked. But, like the French before them, the Malian authorities quickly discovered that direct rule without tribal leaders was not possible. Thus the clan leaders were restored to their former status, albeit informally, with their former duties and an informal financial compensation. Apart from their informal status, many tribal leaders have been integrated into the national political system

as members of parliament or comparable political players. In Niger and Mauritania, clan leaders had never formally been dismissed and they too are now often influential in party politics as well as in their traditional functions (Lecocq 2002, 2003). Evidence of this system in practice was the handling of the 1990s rebellion. The rebel leaders were often explicitly opposed to positions taken by the clan leaders and the disputes were public; from the perspective of the latter, it was still their 'informal duty' to keep peace. As the conflict persisted, a war-weary population again turned to the tribal leaders to use their influence as spokesmen; in the end, they played an important role in achieving real peace (Lode 1996; Lecocq 2002). Nevertheless, their informal role as securers of peace and safety had been severely compromised by the rebellion. To compensate for the loss of this now-compromised arrangement, the Malian state integrated a number of Tuareg rebel leaders into the national army at a high rank. These ex-rebels, sometimes in collaboration with the tribal leaders, were now officially responsible for security in the north, in an arrangement with the state that Klute (1999) has labelled as 'parasovereign'. Thus, the Malian government has unwittingly followed the infamous British singer Johny Rotten's advice to the letter: "I use the best / I use the rest / I use the enemy / I use anarchy."⁴⁰

For cultural, social and political reasons this arrangement cannot be made publicly explicit. Despite the political reorganisation of the 1990s, the Malian authority remains rooted in the traditions of both French centralist administration and African politics. According to Jean-Francois Bayart (1986:112–3):

Underlying the ideologies of national unity there is a hegemonic imperative which drives the state and the self-proclaimed dominant social groups to seek to control and to shape civil society. The first task is to define the basis on which others can gain access to the political system. Most regimes severely restrict such access by preventing the autonomous and pluralistic organisation of subordinated social groups. Instead, rulers either attempt to integrate the various social forces into single movements or set up intermediary and indirect means of control. *Their objective is to enlist dominated social groups within the existing space of domination and to teach them to be subject to the state.* (authors' emphasis)

The positioning of ex-rebels and traditional chiefs in the Sahara is a perfect example of Bayart's analysis: where northern Mali appears to outsiders like America to be 'lacking state authority' it is in fact exercising a particular kind of parasovereign power. Appearances in the case of its Saharan region are even more deceptive because both the practice and discourse of power are guided by local political concepts of honour and restricted speech (*esshek* and *tengelt* respectively in Tamasheq). Evoking informal rule or recompense publicly would degrade the tribal chiefs and the ex-rebels to mere 'errand boys of Bamako'; their local honour and prestige would be diminished and their ability to function effectively would thereby be undercut.

The success of this balance between central authority and local leaders in the past has been repeatedly demonstrated, the negotiated release of the GSPC hostages in 2003 being only one example. However, the most recent rebellion is severely testing tradition and threatening to upset the balance. As a number of the most important 'official' peacekeepers have again turned rebel in 2006, after a period in which many experienced clan leaders have been replaced by younger men, the Malian state is now severely hampered in finding local partners to quell the current upsurge and needs to resort to direct negotiations to solve the problem.

Economic Incentives: Oil and Smuggling

For the United States, next to searching for the GSPC, the priority is keeping an eye on all the existing international smuggling networks in the Sahara where it suspects finance terrorist activity. It is known that the GSPC is involved in parts of the networks to finance its military activities, and it is widely believed that it is through these smuggling activities that contact was made between the Tuareg of northern Mali and the GSPC. Although this is a tempting and not implausible idea, it is not necessarily the case. The 'Marlboro Road'⁴¹ has various branches, which are in the hands of different groups. Although chasing after the GSPC is likely to be met with approval from the majority of the locals, the disturbance it would bring to black-market trading, the region's main source of revenues and cheap consumables, can only antagonise the population overall.

Present-day smuggling is a continuation of the old trans-Saharan caravan trade and often involves the same families. While the nature of the trade and some of the goods traded have changed over time, it must be noted that arms-trading in the Sahara goes back a long way. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, German sword blades found their way across the Sahara quite legitimately. During the 1920s and 1930s it was mostly Belgian weapons that were unloaded on the Mauritanian and west Saharan coast, to be used by Ma 'al-Ainin's insurgents in southern Morocco's Dra'a Valley. After the Second World War and into the 1950s, small quantities of German Mauser and Italian Manlicher Carcano rifles were being smuggled from Libya by Algerian Chaamba and Tuareg.⁴² Since 1962 these arms have been replaced by weapons from the Algerian War of Liberation, traded out of Tamanrasset. And from the 1970s, the long-lasting civil wars in Chad flooded the region with surplus Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers. With the end of this conflict and the continuation of the war in Sudan, more and heavier weapons have found their way to the notorious weapons market at the El Salvador Pass. The smuggling of weapons has been augmented since the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s with food from Algeria and small electronics from Libya. In the 1990s the smuggling of people, cars, cigarettes and drugs increased. The most lucrative of these is the transport of cigarettes along the Marlboro Road that stretches from Mauritania, via Mali and Algeria, to Europe. The traffic in people has also grown in volume during the same period. Contrary to impressions of it, however, a lot of the traffic is not really 'illegal' at all as

most Africans travelling within Africa do not require any kind of visa;⁴³ legal or not, it remains a dangerous traffic for those being transported.

In the Sahara, custom offices are not located at the border itself but in the larger cities in the area where legal transports have to be declared for import or export. There are patrols controlling border traffic. In fact, an important part of the TSCTI programme consists of US training of Malian border patrols and the establishing of joint patrols on part of the Markouba Road.⁴⁴ The Malian customs agency, however, works on an unofficial custom-revenues quota system. The government in Bamako demands a predetermined amount of customs income each year. The surplus monies collected by customs officials may be kept and divided among staff. This system is a boon for smuggling, fraud, and corruption. In the market of Kidal, for example, the majority of articles for sale are smuggled from Algeria. Since the 1990s, most of the Saharan networks have been assimilated into larger transnational networks, and the Tuareg and Moorish smugglers function now only as transporters. They are paid per successful trip with a part of the profit, the rest of which goes to the Nigerian, Libyan or Lebanese financial backers (Grégoire 1999). To be able to participate in this venture, they have to pay a deposit of 2 000 000 CFA francs, after which their vehicle has to pass inspection by the organisation in a West African port city such as Lomé. Only after this inspection can one take part in a smuggling venture.⁴⁵ By local standards, this involves a significant investment. Consequently, there is a real danger that the US campaigns against the GSPC and smuggling could backfire, as each campaign disrupts the livelihood of the local people. Moreover, the training of border guards and increased 'security' will only target the transporters who have invested family savings and often gone into debt to get a foothold in the business – the enterprise itself, in the hands of its foreign backers, will continue unimpeded.

There is yet another side to this complex international business. In accordance with peace treaties reached after the rebellion of the 1990s in Mali, quite a few Tuareg were accepted into the customs department, providing them access by other means to the 'profits' of smuggling – ironically, in this case, through the taxation system. The money 'legally' skimmed off the top finds its way back to the Tuareg community via their customs officials. But once again, this means that the US must proceed very cautiously: these officials and the smugglers often belong to the same clan. Clan loyalty will always come before national patriotism or professional ethics. The existing delicate balance between smugglers and their income, and customs officials and their income, may easily be upset by American intervention, with unpredictable results for local stability.

As is the case everywhere in the Sahara, oil plays an important role in American concerns in Tuareg territory. Since the 1990s, exploration for oil and gas reserves has met with success in neighbouring Sahel countries. Following on these discoveries, in July 2004 the Malian government adopted a new law on mineral exploration and exploitation. Since November 2004, an Australian–Malian consortium – Baraka Mali Ventures Limited, an offshoot of Baraka Petroleum Limited – has

been carrying out explorations in five blocks of the Taoudenit basin on the Mauritanian–Mali border, worth some \$52 000 000 over four years.⁴⁶ In June 2005 the Malian–Australian consortium Mali–Petroleum SA, daughter of the Australian Sphere Investment Limited, was granted a concession to explore, exploit, transport and refine oil and gas in Block 8 of the Taoudenit basin and Block 10 of the Graben field near the city of Gao (Vallet 2005a:54, 2005b:48).⁴⁷

Baraka Petroleum Limited is active on the Mauritanian side of the Taoudenit basin as well, where the blocks are divided up among the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the Australian Woodside, the Spanish Repsol, and the French Total (Vallet 2006a:63). In February 2006 Mauritania started the export of light crude oil from the Chinguetti and Thiof blocks. It is therefore not surprising that American troops were very active in this area and established a number of semi-permanent bases in Mauritania and northern Mali.

In Niger to the east, Petronas Caligari Niger Exploration and Production Limited, a subsidiary of the Malaysian Petronas, in conjunction with Exxon Mobile, has carried out successful explorations in the Agadem block, with an estimated potential of 2540 barrels per day.⁴⁸ The Nigerien Djado–Murzuk block is also an important concession. The American Hunt Oil Company first explored it in the 1990s. The problem with this concession was that a huge portion of the estimated oilfield lay in Libya. The American explorations in the 1990s so much irritated Qaddafi that he provided a rebel group of Tuareg and Tubu, the Forces Armées Révolutionnaires du Sahara, with weapons to make the area unsafe.⁴⁹ This in turn shattered the brittle peace between the Nigerien government and the Tuareg, who had been in rebellion since 1992. The conflict flared once again and lasted until 1998 (Mayer 1997a,b,c). The current situations involving oilfields on the borders of Mauritania and Mali and of Chad and Niger and Libya set the scene for similar kinds of conflict – but this time American interpretations will have Muslim fundamentalist terrorists playing the role of villains.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The question, “Is there really a terrorist threat lurking in the Sahara?” is not easily answered. Information in the Sahara about local events is bound to personal communication, a news network that is hard to tap. The population mistrusts official media and the state, and any event is followed by an enormous dust storm of rumours. This image epitomises ‘news’ in the Sahara and in the Sahel, with each party involved having its own interpretation launched upon the *télégraphe saharien*. Every event is interpreted and narrated by each party in an eloquent story line. Truth is not only relative in this cultural context: it is antagonistic by nature. Facts, analysis, opinion, and fiction are almost inextricably linked to each other in Saharan social reality. That is why the idea persists that the GSPC is in the controlling hands of the Algerian intelligence services, regardless of whether or not this is true. Likewise, the fact that, from a local perspective, there does not appear to be an ‘urgent’ terrorist threat has given rise to much speculation about

the sudden upsurge in American military activity in the region. It is not surprising that many have come to believe that it is not terrorists but the potential presence of lucrative quantities of oil that motivates these actions.

Whether inspired by so-called democratic capitalism or Islamism, those who would employ universalist ideologies in the cause of empire-building inevitably run up against the rock-hard reality of the Sahara. Seeing that both parties entertain similar pretensions, it is their actual knowledge of the local context that differentiates the sincerity of their concern for the Sahara and its inhabitants. When it comes to trying genuinely to understand and integrate themselves into local communities, the various Islamist movements in the region, perhaps driven by their restricted resources, seem to be a step ahead of the US and its allied African governments. Whether initially intended or not, the GSPC and the Tablighi Jama'at have adjusted to the local situation. In the case of the GSPC one can perhaps say that they have positively embraced local reality as they explicitly position themselves within the Islamic tradition of the Sahara. In a recent interview Mukhtar Bilmukhtar posits that al-Shinqit (Mauritania) figured importantly in the past in the spread of political Islam to the Maghreb and al-Andalus (Spain): the GSPC portray themselves as the descendants of the *Murabitun* (Almoravids), who conquered regions deep into the Sahara as well as Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In contrast to the Islamist movements, the US depends almost totally on its perceived military and technological superiority. Some observers continue to share this trust in the efficiency of technology in the creation of intelligence. Keenan, for example, argues that these attacks are nothing but skilfully arranged deceptions based largely on this premise. We point out that GSPC attacks repeatedly take place in spite of the presence of American surveillance hardware because US intelligence lacks the local knowledge needed to interpret its own collected data. After all, how can an ordinary American soldier know what to look for when he sees pictures of the Tigharghar mountains? Islamists, if they are able to procure local guides and chauffeurs, have an immediate advantage over even the most sophisticated radio-controlled drone.

If the US army wanted an example closer to home of how it could improve its own efficiency, it should take America's own Peace Corps, an organisation that specialises in learning to communicate with *radio trottoir* and the *télégraphe saharien*. Additionally, it would be helpful if the US learned more about and from their local partners. In its fear of the dangers that emanate from the Sahara, the US relies too much on central government officials and their armies, who themselves have too little knowledge of 'peripheries' like the Sahara. As we have seen, governments such as Mali have traditionally worked with indirect parasovereign relationships in order to extend influence into distant corners of the nation. And more generally, one can see African central governments seeking more power-sharing arrangements with local populations.

On the other hand, the success rate of the Islamists is at least equally dependent on local support, and therefore has been limited so far. For example, the capture of *El Para* by the Chadian MJDT has shown the vulnerability of the GSPC, whose attacks in Niger on locally guided tourist groups have damaged their local image severely. The Tablighi Jama'at, in accordance with its apolitical stance, is completely dependent on local political circumstances. This makes them extremely vulnerable, as is shown by the post-9/11 period, when the popularity of Tablighi Jama'at bottomed out because of the fear of American repercussions.

Whether or not the local populations' fear of US power is held in check and their patience with the Islamists' presence endures, depends in large measure on the degree to which the war on terror infringes upon the local economy and society. The current uneasy balance is precarious, the potential for the situation to explode into violence a real one. The third Tuareg uprising that erupted in May 2006 in northern Mali managed to shift the war on terror to the background. But the fact that the rebels have lined up against the Islamists for the time being does not necessarily translate into support (unconditional or otherwise) for the US. As the maxim at the start of this article affirms – Saharans choose for themselves. Their stubbornness and resilience have always served them well in the past. This is not likely to change in the future.

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Notes

1. <http://azawad-union.blogspot.com/2006/06/dementi-pour-toute-connexion-de-notre.html>.
2. See Jeremy Keenan's article "The Banana Theory of Terrorism" in this volume.
3. This group is treated extensively in the second half of this essay below.
4. The Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, see detailed discussion, below.
5. www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/tscti.htm.
6. Interview with Mukhtar Bilmukhtar, *Al-Jama'a* 7 (Rabi'al-Thani 1427) 30.
7. Another factor that caused the security services to be on the alert was the fact that the 'father of the Islamic atomic bomb', the Pakistani physicist Abdul Qadeer Khan was frequenting the region and owned a hotel in Timbuktu. The vicinity of Nigerian uranium mines, as well as Khan's contribution to the proliferation of nuclear technical knowledge, played major roles in America's nightmare scenario.
8. Ironically, the Saharan populations share the American conviction that this technology is 'power'. Its use caused much fear locally. One of the few results of the American presence was that the prices for second-hand satellite telephones in the region went down. Many of the local traders (and smugglers) who used the popular Thurayas were frightened that the Americans could locate and kill them from a distance via satellite communication!
9. Conversation with American embassy staff in Bamako, January 2004.
10. Interview with Jeremy Keenan on BBC World Service radio documentary "Secrets in the Sand 1". Broadcast on August 8, 2005. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/documentary_archive/4131336.stm.

11. Osama bin Laden, *Ya ahl al-islam: Al-risala al-sabi'a ila al-umma al-islamiyya* (O People of Islam: The Seventh Letter to the Islamic Nation), released on April 24, 2006. Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Da'm al-Filastiniyyin*, published by al-Sahab.
12. Abu Azzam al-Ansari, "Al-Qa'ida tattajih nahwa Ifriqiyya", in *Sada al-Jihad* 7 (Jumada al-Ula 1427) pp. 18–20. A translation and analysis of the article are available on www.sofir.org/sarchives/005627.php.
13. There is no connection between the contemporary Salafis and the modernist movement of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Ridda of a century ago that bore the same name.
14. "Most of the worst-case speculation about the Tablighi Jama'at being a possible precursor of terrorism seems to have originated with the US European Command (EUCOM) which is also responsible for US military concerns in West Africa". Personal communication, October 9, 2006; Robert Pringle, former US ambassador to Mali and currently studying the democratisation process in Mali. See Pringle 2006.
15. See for example the website *La li'l-irhab* (No to Terrorism), where Salafi 'ulema present many religious arguments against the global *jihadi* trend, www.anti-erhab.com.
16. http://www.allaahuakbar.net/tableegi_jamaat/index.htm.
17. Unless indicated otherwise, the following is based on fieldwork in northern Mali in 1999, and conversations with inhabitants of northern Mali in 2004 and 2005.
18. Its most important centre was Serrekunda. It should be noted that the local impact of the Tablighi Jama'at varies from place to place. Whereas the women of Kidal clearly saw the Tablighi Jama'at as a threat, Gambian women actively support the Tablighi Jama'at and participate actively in *khuruj da'wa* missions. The explanations are to be found locally.
19. The four men in question clearly originated from South Asia. Whether they were Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi is unclear. Locally, anything or anyone South Asian is called 'Bukstan', Pakistani. Four Tablighi missionaries on *khuruj* in 2004 who were extradited by the Malian authorities in Gao were identified as Bangladeshi. A small group of Tablighi missionaries encountered by one of the present authors in Timbuktu in December 2004, was also Bangladeshi.
20. One of the present authors was invited by this impromptu women's council to help draft the letter.
21. Discussion Panel "La Parole au Sages" at the conference "Heinrich Barth (1821–1865): European Scholar and Intermediary Between Worlds And Cultures", Timbuktu, November 28 to December 5, 2004. The panel consisted solely of traditional and Western-trained scholars from Timbuktu, who discussed the meaning of Barth for Timbuktu through local oral traditions interpreted through a present-day lens. The audience did not have to listen carefully to get the message!
22. This section is partly based on ICG 2004 and McGregor 2006.
23. The online library of the GSPC lists numerous writings of Saudi ideologists, such as Yusuf al-Ayiri and Abu Jandal al-Azdi, who have provided the global *jihad* with an intellectual foundation (GSPC website www.moon4321.net, consulted on May 18, 2006).
24. Interview *Qadaya sakhina* (Hot Issues) with al-Zawahiri, published on the internet by Al Qaeda's media company al-Sahab in September 2006.
25. For more on *El Para*, see Keenan "The Nature of Terror" in this volume.
26. GSPC communiqué *Ghazwat Badr Muritaniya* (June 2006). The comment about Jewish sympathies was a reference to Ould Taya's decision to recognise Israel in 1999. The establishment of a formal embassy followed about five years of increasingly high-profile visiting between the two countries. Even in Mauritania, these close relations generated a huge amount of dissent and are thought to have been a significant factor in the ultimate success of opposition forces in his overthrow (summer 2005). See Jourde in this volume.
27. "Hiwar ma'a al-qa'id Khalid Abi al-Abbas" in *Al-Jama'a* 7 (Rabi'al-Thani 1427– May 2006) pp.28–33. *Al-Jama'a* is the electronic magazine of the GSPC.
28. According to Bilmukhtar, the exercise was specifically aimed against the GSPC.
29. The only tourist who died during the kidnapping was not killed but perished as a result of sunstroke.

30. Based on various conversations with members of the Kidal community in Bamako during 2004 and 2005. As regards the Libyan recruitment, it seems Muslim militants were growing wary of Qaddafi's *rapprochement* with Great Britain. But overall, and even taking into consideration the new believers among Mauritians, Malians, Chadians and Nigerians (who tend to draw the attention of the media), the truth of the matter is that in its diffused and 'co-opted' form, the GSPC in the Sahel probably numbers no more than a few hundred men.
31. http://www.Sahara-Info.ch/Foren-Warnung-Saharakidnapper_Nordlich_Timbuktu. Message left on the forum by the tourists in question.
32. http://www.Sahara-Info_ch/Foren-Niger-neuerUeberfall.htm. The attack on this group which stood under local protection outraged the population of northern Niger. The fact that the local population occasionally abducts or shoots at tourists themselves is irrelevant in their opinion, although this is, of course, of no comfort to potential targets.
33. In fact, even longer. See McDougall in this volume.
34. For a more complete overview of the rebellions, see Lecocq 2002. It is striking that the prelude to the third rebellion has many more elements in common with the first rebellion than with the second. As in the early Sixties, in 2006 the area is infested with Algerian insurgents (FIS in the 1960s, GSPC in the 2000s), and foreign troops (French in the 1960s, American in the 2000s), and the paramount chief is retreating from power, leading to disputes over his succession.
35. <http://www.kidal.info/docs/statut-particulier.rtf>.
36. azawad-union.blogspot.com.
37. <http://azawad-union.blogspot.com/2006/06/dementi-pour-toute-connexion-de-notre.html>.
38. <http://www.kidal.info/infos/news/infos.php> 27/09/06, 16h50. *Accrochages mortels entre le GSPC et l'alliance démocratique du 23 mai pour le changement*. While the statement is written in the third-person plural, the information is coming from the rebel movement itself.
39. However, the generally well-informed Sahara-watcher Michel Vallet asserts that American troops did indeed participate in the occupation of Kidal city on May 25, 2006, after the first rebel attacks on May 23 (Vallet 2006b:72).
40. Sex pistols. "Anarchy in the UK", *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here Come the Sex Pistols*. WEA 1977.
41. The route best known for smuggling cigarettes, hence the name.
42. Archives Nationales du Mali, Fonds Récents 1E 24: Rapports Politiques Cercle de Kidal 1930–1960.
43. Only in Algeria and Libya do some nationals require a visa or residence permits.
44. The road leading from Gao via Tarkimt to Boughessa and Tessalit. This public road is known for its austerity, tough terrain and lack of water, and is generally avoided by smugglers.
45. This was the amount demanded in the 1990s; information based on conversations with former smugglers who cannot be identified.
46. Diarra-Sod, S. 2004. "Prospection Pétrolière au Mali: Les Américains débarquent", *Info Matin* No 1604, 09-11-2004; Vallet, M. 2005. "Chronique de la vie au Sahara, 4e Trimestre 2004", *Le Saharien*, 172,67. <http://www.barakapetroleum.com/ENGLISH/profile.html>; http://www.barakapetroleum.com/ENGLISH/projects_mali_link01.html
47. <http://www.sgg.gov.ml/Ccm/ccm29juin05.pdf>.
48. <http://www.mbendi.co.za/indy/oilg/ogus/af/ni/p0005.htm>.
49. The same movement was responsible for the kidnapping of Italian tourists in south-eastern Niger in 2006. The tourists were released in October after 52 days of captivity. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6051320.stm>.
50. In other words, although we do not necessarily share Jeremy Keenan's analysis of the situation in the Sahara to date, we do not deny that such a scenario of 'state-backed Salafi groups' might be played out in the future.

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