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# **The Political Economy of Migrant Smuggling: The Case of Conflict in Mali**

A thesis submitted to the Department of Political Science

The American University in Cairo

In partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

By

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## Abstract

The extensive human smuggling networks that have emerged around North Africa and the Sahel have inaugurated a significant shift in the economic landscape of a region that has traditionally been characterized by the gray economy and precarious political arrangements. Ample and detailed research has been produced that highlights how militia groups and non-state actors have been tapping into these flows (via taxation of routes and racketeering against non-armed smuggling enterprises) in order to fund their various projects. The way in which this new economic landscape is affecting local political arrangements is a heretofore little considered, yet highly consequential, development of the recent 'migrant crisis'. This paper argues that emergence of migrant smuggling as a central economic pillar of Northern Mali has produced a more diversified and decentralized economic landscape, which in turn has led to a more diffused political environment that goes some way towards accounting for the protracted and fractionalized nature of the conflict. By exploring the effect of migration flows on conflict, as opposed to the other way around, this paper hopes provide an updated account of the political economic landscapes of conflict zones where migrant smuggling serves as a central pillar, as well as anticipate how the emerging 'age of migration' will impact some of the world's most vulnerable and unstable regions.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This thesis explores the effect of irregular migration flows on the nature of conflict in and across the hinterlands of the Sahara. The extensive smuggling networks that have emerged around these flows have inaugurated a significant shift in the economic landscape of a region that has traditionally been characterized by the gray economy and precarious political arrangements. Surprisingly extensive and detailed research has been produced that highlights how militia groups and non-state actors have been tapping into these flows (via taxation of routes and racketeering against non-armed smuggling enterprises) in order to fund their various projects.<sup>1</sup> While the existence of such opportunism in and of itself is not terribly interesting--at least theoretically-- the way in which this new economic landscape is affecting local political arrangements is a heretofore little considered, yet highly consequential, development of the recent 'migrant crisis'. Further, with the underlying drivers of irregular migration slated to accelerate (global inequality, environmental degradation, decreasing cost of movement, climate change, etc...) there exists an urgent need to understand the ways in which the contemporary 'age of migration' will impact some of the world's most vulnerable and unstable regions. By exploring the effect of migration flows on conflict, as opposed to the other way around, it is hoped that this thesis project can contribute to this understanding and provide an updated accounting of the political economic landscapes of conflict zones where migrant smuggling serves as a central pillar.

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<sup>1</sup> Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni Janssen, "Turning the tide: The politics of irregular migration in the Sahel and Libya," Clingendael, February 2017, [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/turning\\_the\\_tide/](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/turning_the_tide/)

In this effort, this thesis will focus on the case of Mali. As a country currently embroiled in a renewed round of conflict that dates back decades, Mali serves a useful experimental case study that allows us to compare previous outbreaks of conflict with the current one, then analyze the extent to which any different dynamics can be attributed to the recent rise of the migrant smuggling economy.

This leads to the following research question: how has the emergence of the migrant smuggling industry beginning in 2011 changed the conflict dynamics in Mali? This will be supplemented and focused towards the following sub-question of why has the post 2012 political situation in Mali developed into such a protracted and complex conflict in comparison with the previous Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s? I argue that the emergence of migrant smuggling as a central economic pillar in Northern Mali has produced a more diversified and decentralized economic landscape, which in turn has led to a more diffused political environment in the form of increased factionalism amongst armed groups. I believe that such a dynamic sheds important light on the current conflict consuming the country, and carries significant explanatory weight in accounting for the increased complexity and protractedness of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion--a ethnic minority primarily located in the north of the country--in comparison with previous ones. Indeed, the most recent rebellion from 1990-1995 against the south was terminated relatively cleanly with a peace agreement that was stable for some period of time due to a system of state co-optation of the tribal elites in the North. This system clearly broke down in 2012, and the type of peace process that was previously achieved has been elusive.

This opening chapter will proceed to present the crucial dimensions of the current conflict in Mali, and highlight the economic drivers that act as the openings through which a political economic analysis of such a conflict can enter. In this way, this introduction will serve

as a primer not only to the analytical section that specifically focuses on the case of Mali's protracted conflict, but also the ways in which political economic analyses can be put to use to understand the dynamics and drivers of conflict.

## **The Case of Conflict in Mali**

On January 16 of 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) launched an offensive against Malian state forces that would quickly result in the group's capture of most of the northern Malian urban centers and effective control over two thirds of Malian territory by April of the same year. Thus was the opening salvo of the Malian civil war that continues to embroil the impoverished and land-lacked Sahelian nation despite the intensive intervention of international and regional peacekeeping forces and repeated efforts to facilitate inclusive peace talks. These peace-keeping forces find themselves in a highly complex and dynamic conflict environment that makes discerning the real fault lines and battlefield configurations incredibly difficult; as Samake notes, "[d]ay after day, movements are created and dissolved according to the interests of certain people."<sup>2</sup> These movements, and the divisions between them, emerge and cohere along a number of ideological, social, ethnic, racial, and clan-based axis that link the web of relations in the north of Mali.<sup>3</sup> These diverse divisions also organize and structure the wider network of connections between forces in the north and Malian state, a relationship that has ranged from cooperative, co-optive, and conflictual depending on the groups in question. Regional connections are also vital to life in northern Mali, as colonial

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<sup>2</sup> Yaya Samake, "Mali: Former MP Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh threatens to resume the maquis," Maliactu, September 2016, <http://maliactu.net/mali-situation-securitaire-au-nord-du-mali-lancien-depute-ibrahim-ag-mohamed-assaleh-menace-de-reprendre-le-maquis/>

<sup>3</sup> Nationalia, "Azawadi movements start second round of negotiations with Mali, seek "specific statute"" Nationalia.info, May, 2014, <https://www.nationalia.info/new/10334/azawadi-movements-start-second-round-of-negotiations-with-mali-seek-specific-statute>

borders have drawn lines between communities that exist on both sides and move quite freely. Nonetheless, these artificial barriers have proved to be fundamental structures of the socio-economic life of Mali's peripheral borderlands, as cross-border smuggling --in the form of foodstuff, fuel, drugs, cigarettes, and people--have emerged as a central mode of reproduction for people in the unforgiving desert environment.

The combination of cross-border communal ties and intense economic interdependence has contributed to the regionalization of the northern Mali conflict. In the case of Algeria, fears of spillover, especially from the image of a successful, viable independent Tuareg movement on their southern border could inspire in their own southern Tuareg minority, has led to an intense desire to shape events in both formal and informal ways. Aside from serving as an official international mediator between the government and rebel groups, Algiers has been suspected of being in no small part responsible for the existence of the jihadist strain that has infected the region, a flame that Jeremy Kennan claims was fanned by the Algerian intelligence services in order to undermine the position of Tuareg nobles, as well as a pretext to extract 'terrorist rents' from the international community. In addition, the direct intervention of France, and suspected financial links between Qatar and a number of Islamist militant groups in the north underscore regional, inter-regional, and international forces that vie to input their preferences into the extremely dynamic political and economic systems that are feeding Mali's current conflict.

These external players are not the only elements responsible for the protracted nature of Mali's conflict, as inspections at the domestic level reveal a kaleidoscope of local interests that have thus far resisted the type of political consolidation necessary to achieve a sustainable peace agreement. Indeed, repeated rounds of negotiations have quickly fallen apart under the centrifugal forces of rebel fragmentation and inept state implementation. What began as a unified



movement, the MNLA, now consists of eight officially recognized rebel organizations,<sup>4</sup> and a number of smaller local militias that are primarily organized around the principle of community self-defense in the absence of state military protection.<sup>5</sup> This of course is not to mention the existence of jihadi groups that are purportedly motivated by their desire to implement sharia based political and legal systems across the north and ultimately transform Malian society along Islamist lines.

Thus telling the story of the conflict in Mali is a perilous undertaking that is doomed to some degree of oversimplification. From the outside, one must choose from a number of alternative narratives as to what is actually going on in Mali. Some emphasize the broad-based grievances and underdevelopment in the north that are rooted in state neglect, if not complete absence, that have impelled the Tuareg minority and its allies to rise up and demand a more just arrangement between the north and south. Others highlight the role of ‘ethnic-military’ entrepreneurs in mobilizing these real grievances along ethnic or racial lines, and instrumentally directing them towards violence against the state in order to gain what can only be taken in times of war. In his analysis of the “Tuareg question,” namely why Mali’s history is plagued by an apparent cycle of Tuareg uprisings, Sardan notes:

As is often the case for uprisings based on ethnicity, the ethnic-military entrepreneurs have above all been driven by their own interests, or those of their circle of adepts, jumping from one alliance to another, using their capacity to cause nuisance for their personal promotion, and settling into the chains of corruption and misappropriation that the “post-rebellion cash” has aroused.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Maiga, “Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the labels,” *Institute for Security Studies* 17, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Marc-Andre’ Boisvert, “Failing at Violence: The Longer-lasting Impact of Pro-government Militias in Northern Mali since 2012,” in *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 272-298.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Pierre- Olivier de Sardan, “‘The Tuareg question’ in Mali today,” LASDEL, December 2012. <http://www.bu.edu/wara/files/2013/06/mali-the-Tuareg-question.pdf> p.36

This greed narrative is widespread, even amongst international mediators, with one African Union official lamenting in an unguarded moment, “of course it is not about [a lack of development] with these people. If it was, we wouldn’t have all of these different groups fighting for power in the north, they would be united in negotiating on behalf of the people of the north.”<sup>7</sup> Many are also not blind to the fact it is many of the same actors from the conflict in the 1990s that are once again at the center stage of fighting and peace negotiating. “It is the same groups...literally the *same people!*”<sup>8</sup> In turn, these ‘ethnic-military entrepreneurs’ as Sardan would call them have a long and sordid history in the trans-Saharan smuggling economy, around which so much of the relations between a complicit state and northern elite revolved, especially since the conclusion of the rebellion of the 1990s.

Thus, in the case of the current conflict in Mali, a political economic analysis of its dynamics seems not only viable, but increasingly vital to understanding its real drivers. These economic drivers appear to range from pure greed-based opportunism and violent protection of business interests, to structuring the opportunity structures through which the more ideologically or principally inclined actors are able to channel their grievances via access to funding resources. In this light, Mali appears enmeshed within a regional war economy of the type that will be described in chapter two; that is dynamic, adaptable, and characterized by a proliferating set of activities that are increasingly contested and conducted within a context of violence. This underscores the intractable political situation and elusiveness of any negotiations to enact real disarmament and demobilization. According to the same African Union official, the current conflict environment is not a hell in which the northern elites are withstanding in order to bring

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<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview: MISAHÉL, Bamako, March 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

about a needed political change, but for many of them, especially those who participate in the region's thriving illicit economy, 'this is their paradise.'<sup>9</sup>

The story of the relationship between this illicit economy and the current conflict is a long one, but nonetheless necessary to present in order to understand the environment in which the migrant smuggling economy emerged. Indeed the arrival of increasing flows migrants in 2014-2015 were channeled into smuggling networks that had been active for some time. The way in which the migrant smuggling industry has been integrated into the existing socio-political power structure of the region had great effects on how it has ultimately impacted the dynamics of the conflict. Therefore in order to illuminate these effects, this thesis will nest the role of migrant smuggling within this larger story.

While such an analysis is plagued by issues of data collection that are endemic to areas of conflict and illicit forms of economic activity, this thesis attempts to provide some tentative conclusions that are beginning to emerge. Built upon extensive fieldwork conducted by others, as well as knowledge gained by the researcher throughout a visit to Bamako in March 2018, the evidence presented throughout is largely to result of interviews conducted by a diverse range of people from Malian government officials, staff members of international organization, and normal citizens. Triangulating from these range of inputs can help minimize the particular biases that different interviewees would present, and thus produce narratives and facts that one can be reasonably confident closely align with the historical reality. In addition, this data will be placed within a conceptual scaffolding that allows for more generalizable inductions regarding the ways in which the current conflict in Mali is representative of emerging trends in our contemporary conflict landscape.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Towards this end, the following chapter will review the literature regarding the interaction of resources and economic activity and conflict. It will then move to propose a theoretical framework that can account for the ways in which the migrant smuggling economy is contributing to a more fragmented political landscape through the ability of disgruntled or marginalized actors to create and maintain an independent resource base. This will provide the theoretical guideposts through which conflict in Mali will be analyzed. Chapters 5 and 6 will compare the current conflict in Mali with the previous Tuareg rebellion from 1990-1995. This previous conflict not only provides the salient political context within which much of Mali's subsequent politics took place, but also allows us to compare this conflict with the current one and highlight the features that set present situation apart. Indeed while many Malians view the current crisis as a re-iteration of a continual cycle of conflict between northern Tuareg and Arab tribes and the south, the country has never before seen a conflict as disastrous and politically complex as this one. 350,000 Malians were internally displaced with another 150,000 seeking refuge in neighboring countries, mostly in Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso.<sup>10</sup> Many remain displaced and unable to return to their homes in the face of protracted instability, communal violence, and the inability to enact the type of inclusive peace accords that eventually brought peace in the 1990s.

It will then move to argue that understanding these changes in the conflict dynamics of Mali must be viewed in light of a transformation in the economic environment that occurred throughout the 2000s and through the run up of 2012. As the previous conflict was largely sustained by low value and non-replenishable resources (i.e.: petty theft of cattle and vehicles), the organizational structure of the rebel movements remained, though decentralized, relatively

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<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, Mali Situation: Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees as of 31 July 2017, July 2017.

coherent due to the fact that, as anthropologist Judith Scheele observed, tribal economies characterized by low value commodities tend to reinforce existing social bonds.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the non-replenishable of these resources prevented the solidification of any schismatic movements before they could develop an independent and sustainable resource base. This in turn put the prevailing tribal leadership in a position to maintain the coherence of the various militant movements in the north to an extent that would no longer be possible by the outbreak of the conflict in 2012.

Beginning with the arrival of Andean cocaine in the mid-2000s, changes within the illicit smuggling economy facilitated the emergence of new actors and the empowerment of those previously marginalized. Tracking these changes in the smuggling economy reveals how, like resources, this activity is subject to various typologies that produce different articulations depending on the types of goods (or people) that are being smuggled. Understanding the different structural necessities that different inputs create in smuggling networks must be accounted for in explaining the conflict dynamics in Mali, and the role that the emergence of the migrant smuggling industry has played.

In short, this thesis will argue how evolutions in northern Mali's illicit economy has produced a war economy unlike the previous one. This new war economy not only affected the capacities of the armed groups involved, but also their motivations and goals, evidenced by the qualitatively different demands made by the MNLA upon the state in 2012 (full succession, as opposed to autonomy). The story of this evolution is a salient case of the ways in which politics and economics interact in contemporary conflict environments, and by the 2014, it is a story that increasingly revealed the role that illicit human movement will play in these trends.

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Scheele, "Tribus, etats et fraude: la région frontalière algéro-malienne," *Etudes Rurales* 184, no. 2 (2009).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

As the post-Cold War era intensified the trend towards internal (as opposed to inter-state) conflict, the quest for a theoretical understanding of such violence took on a greater urgency. Challenging the traditional theoretical approaches towards organized political violence, these internal conflicts, or ‘new wars’ as they were called, were characterized by a blurring of the line between the state and non-state, the soldier and the criminal, the political and the economic, and even between war and peace.<sup>12</sup> In his famous re-iteration of the military historian Otto Von Clausewitz's famous axiom that ‘war was a continuation of politics by other means’, David Keen observed that in an increasing number of cases war appeared to be continuation of *economics* by other means.<sup>13</sup> Thus rather than simply tracking the various political grievance narratives that appeared to animate these conflicts, scholars began to look towards the deeper socio-economic factors that seemed to shape their dynamics.

As this thesis is an effort to analyze the role of the migrant smuggling economy on the conflict in Mali, this section will review the literature pertaining to war economies and the manner in which resources and economic activities influence civil warfare. By considering and incorporating a number of criticisms that have been leveled at the ‘war economy’ model, I will contend that conceptualizing a more dynamic war-economy that is firmly entrenched in regional and global political economic system allows us to retain its usefulness as an analytical tool through which to analyze conflicts in an era of rapid globalization and market integration.

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> David Keen, “Incentives and Disincentives for Violence,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

Indeed, more recent approaches towards conflict analysis, driven largely by the concern over the emergence of transnational criminal networks (a category in which human smuggling networks have been placed) and its nexus with terrorism, would do well to consider the surrounding political economic landscapes in which they operate. It will then move to review the budding literature pertaining to rebel decentralization and fragmentation that serves as an dependent variable of interest in this thesis, as well as a phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention. It will conclude with propositions of how dynamic war economies can influence the organizational makeup of conflict actors in preparation for chapter four, which sets out a more detailed theoretical framework on this relationship between resources and rebel structure.

### **Greed, Grievance, and Opportunity Structures in Conflict Zones**

One of the landmark studies credited with directing the study of civil conflict towards economic variables came from Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's large-N quantitative analysis of civil wars over the four-decade period from 1960 to 1999. They found that low GDP growth, high youth unemployment, low secondary school enrollments rates, and reliance on primary resource extraction were significantly correlated with the onset of civil war; while traditional political variables, such as high levels of inequality, lack of representative political institutions, and ethnic fractionalization were either marginally significant or not at all.<sup>14</sup> These findings largely laid the groundwork for what came to be known as the "greed and grievance" debate within the civil war literature, in which the relative importance of economic (greed) and political (grievance) factors in accounting for certain conflict dynamics was explored.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," Policy Research Working Paper 2355, World Bank, Washington DC, 2001.

Resistance to this economic approach to conflict analysis, and to the findings of the Collier and Hoeffler in particular, centered on the implied assertion that political grievances were not important or, as Collier wrote had asserted, acted as simple rhetorical tools used by rebel groups to justify what were essentially campaigns of private enrichment.<sup>15</sup> The correlations between the *abundance* of valuable natural resources and a higher risk of conflict further upended earlier ideas that it was the *scarcity* of natural resources that led to civil conflict via increased grievance and economic desperation and thus seemed to undercut the legitimacy of rebel campaigns against tyrannical and oppressive third world regimes.

Much of the greed and grievance debate arises from the fact that ‘greed’ actually represents a slight misnomer, as the economic factors under analysis can proxy both for the material incentive to wage a rebellion (for personal enrichment) as well as the opportunity for its success (via sources of funding for rebel groups). Collier himself seemed to accept this nuance, by later referring to certain salient economic variables as ‘proxies for opportunity,’<sup>16</sup> whilst dropping the ‘greed’ terminology. Thus much of the greed vs. grievance debate can wither away once it is recognized that they do not represent two dichotomous and competing explanatory approaches, but in fact two complementary components to a complex process that requires both motivations and opportunities to come to fruition (as rebellion in this case).

This political economic approach towards conflict analysis simply highlights how an actor’s motivations and actions are constrained by certain opportunity structures that are largely derived from the surrounding material environment. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to come

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Collier, “Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Nicholas Sambanis, “The Collier-Hoeffler Model on Civil War Onset and the Case Study Project Research Design,” in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005); 3-8.



across a political system anywhere in the world that did not contain some ambient level of grievance or substantial inequality that some marginalized group would hope to upend; however the likelihood and manner that such grievance will be channeled into armed action depends on the means available. The Tuareg population in Northern Mali undoubtedly has a long-standing list of accumulated grievances with the Malian state in the South--a clear political fault line which has been punctuated by eruptions of violence over the past half century. While it would be quite an unwieldy analytical task, if not an impossible one, to disentangle these grievance motivations from the specific historical context of this population and this region, focusing rather on the material opportunity factors allows us to subject these conflicts, and all conflicts in general, to a broader and more ambitious research agenda as to the deeper dynamics of organized political violence. What makes these Tuareg rebellions distinctive, and what do they share with other instances of civil conflict can be determined by looking at the material structures under which they have taken place.

James Fearon likewise emphasized looking towards certain opportunity structures in explaining the onset and duration of civil wars. However, he contended that the correlation between low GDP, high unemployment, and low levels of youth enrolled in secondary education did not proxy the low opportunity costs associated with rebel recruitment (as Collier had theorized), but in fact were a reflection of state weakness and ineptitude--which in turn made armed insurgencies more feasible.<sup>17</sup>

Further critiques have also questioned the applicability of the Collier Hoeffler model to many, if any, specific cases of conflict as the effects of these economic variables are bound to articulate differently across space and time. As Elnur notes, “[c]ivil wars are triggered by certain

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<sup>17</sup> James D. Fearon, “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?” in *Journal of Peace Research*, 41:3 (2004), DOI 10.1177/0022343304043770 ISSN 0022-3433

variables (i.e. economic, social, political) at a specific historical context, in a given socio-economic setting.”<sup>18</sup> Where these triggering thresholds are, and the nature and severity of the conflict that subsequently emerges, is heavily conditioned by a host of intervening variables that cannot simply be sacrificed at the altar of parsimony. These economic variables often interact with the surrounding social, economic, and political context in often unpredictable and chaotic ways that renders any search for linear relationships difficult, if not entirely misguided. In order to produce a conception of conflict that is amenable to these non-linearities, scholars continued to apply the political economic approach to not only identify the types of opportunity structures, or the soft underbelly of a political system, where armed rebellion can arise, but to analyze certain dynamics of conflict that are firmly rooted in the surrounding historical and socio-economic contexts.

David Keen emphasized the need to view armed conflict not as “simply a breakdown in a particular system rather than as the emergence of an alternative system of profit, power, and even protection.”<sup>19</sup> Regardless of the relative causes of its inception, violent conflict has a way of generating certain opportunistic behaviors and power relations that are based firmly based in the distinctive ‘war economies’ that emerge in these conflict zones. The concept of a ‘war economy’ simply refers to the economic activities that sustain an area during wartime. As Goodhand later specified, the range of actors engaging in this war economy include the belligerent groups themselves, opportunistic entrepreneurs, and civilians attempting to seek out a livelihood in the difficult environs of a war-battered region.<sup>20</sup> The activities can range from purely profit-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibrahim Elnur, “War and transformative potential: Toward an alternative conceptual framework for analysing post-civil wars,” in *Contested Sudan: The political economy of war and reconstruction*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

<sup>19</sup> David Keen, “Incentives and Disincentives for Violence,” 16.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Goodhand (2003) “From war economy to peace economy?” In: *State reconstruction and international engagement in Afghanistan*, Joint CSP/ZEF (Bonn) symposium, 30 May - 1 June 2003, Bonn, Germany

motivated capture of lootable resources or exploitation that are only possible in the relatively anarchical environment of a civil war, to the various means through which rebel groups and armed actors develop funding streams to fuel their war-fighting capacity. Between these points--pure opportunism on the one hand and resourcefulness by armed groups or civilians on the other--exists a broad gray area that represents the aforementioned blurred lines between criminal and soldier, politics and economics, and war and peace. What regularly comes into focus, however, in the analysis of conflict zones is that their traditional image as anarchical and chaotic spaces characterized by mindless and irrational violence gives way to a coherent war economy with a distinct power structure and interest-matrix.

The particular types of resources and economic activities that compose these war economies, as well as the way in which they are dispersed across the territory produce different conflict dynamics as they empower some groups over others and create new incentives for control over certain areas. For example, Ross found that oil, non-fuel minerals, and drugs to be correlated with longer war durations, likely due to the illicit smuggling trades that these resources are often associated with in times of conflict--particular in areas of weak or acquiescent state control. As types of resources, these commodities are characterized by their high value and strong demand on the global market, making them highly liquidable assets that rebel groups can easily manage to convert to much needed financing. This could be contrasted with renewable resources such as agricultural land, which produces much smaller dividends over longer periods of time. This fact makes renewable resources a much less valuable asset for belligerent groups consumed by the urgency of war-making, and also likely accounts for the lack

of correlation between agricultural resources and conflict dynamics (both likelihood of onset and duration).<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the types of resources, the manner in which they are concentrated and distributed across the territory is also worthy of attention in analyzing relationship between resources and conflict. Le Billon presented a model that proposes that resources concentrated near areas of strong state control, such as a capital city, are more likely to encourage coup d'états or other forms of elite conflict, as opportunistic agents move to take control over the state and direct the resource rents towards themselves. On the other hand, resources concentrated in more peripheral areas are often associated with secessionist movements (such as oil in southern Nigeria) or a type of warlordism if the resource is decentralized and diffuse (one may think of Afghanistan and opium in this case).<sup>22</sup>

### **The Globalized War Economy and Regionalized Conflict**

These two factors--the types of resources and their geographic spread--have their limits in accounting for the emergence of certain conflict dynamics and the composition of particular war economies. They present an image of a hermetically sealed conflict zone with a predetermined set of lootable resources that will set the parameters of the hostilities. Therefore the model fails to account for the ways in which local economic activities are embedded within larger regional and global forces that combine to produce modern conflict environments.<sup>23</sup>The economic and

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<sup>21</sup> Michael L. Ross (2004), "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases, in *International Organization*.

<sup>22</sup> Philippe, Le Billon (2001), "The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts," *Political Geography* 20 (5):561-84.

<sup>23</sup> Goodhand, "From War Economy to Peace Economy."

technological features of the modernity, what Harvey dubbed the ‘compression of space-time,’<sup>24</sup> have intensified the linkages between groups and across regions, and elevated these linkages themselves to a place of fundamental importance to daily life. Rather than simply supplementing internal economic activity, trade and long-distance interchanges form the core of subsistence to an increasingly proportion of the world. This is especially true of borderlands where geographic, political, and economic structures create the incentives for transborder trade and smuggling by populations that often find themselves neglected by development initiatives centered around the core.

This element of integration led scholars to not merely analyze the internal processes of conflict, but consider the regional military, economic, political, and social networks in which they are imbedded.<sup>25</sup> Wallensteen and Sollenberg presented the concept of the “regional conflict complex” after their quantitative analysis of the 103 conflicts from 1989 to 1997 found that over half them were substantially linked to conflicts in neighboring countries.<sup>26</sup> The formal borders that separate these conflicts are porous enough to allow for transborder connections, but real enough to make such activity strategically viable. Price differentials of basic commodities, often caused by the structural adjustment policies or currency devaluations, create the incentives for transborder smuggling activity and parallel trading networks. The protective cover of sovereignty often allows combatants to seek refuge on the other side of a national border and outside the reach of state-backed forces. Rival leaders see opportunities in their neighbor’s instability,

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<sup>24</sup> Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity : an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge, Mass. :Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Pugh and Neil Cooper, “The Regional Dimensions of Civil War Economies,” in *War Economies in a Regional Context: Challenges of Transformation*, ed. Pugh and Cooper (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 26-35.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, “Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97,” in *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 5 (September 1998): 621-634, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343398035005005>

sending resources across the border to influence the outcome of nearby civil conflicts, and transborder ethnic groups often provide crucial material and logistical support to their brethren engaged in liberation struggles in adjacent countries. These economic, military, political, and social links form the main conceptual framework that Rubin put forward for understanding how conflicts become regionalized, not in spite of their formal borders, but because of them. In this way, regionalization can be seen as an increasingly structural feature of contemporary conflict, as Rubin notes, “[c]onflicts are regional. Most of the conflicts that confront the international community are not intrastate, as is commonly said, but consist of networks of conflict situations that link entire regions...”<sup>27</sup>

The regional networks that sustain these conflicts are often in turn linked to global networks.<sup>28</sup> The ease of access to the external markets allows rebel groups to find ready buyers for their looted resources.<sup>29</sup> Duffield observed that “political actors have been able to control local economies and realize their worth through the ability to forge new and flexible relations with liberalized global markets.”<sup>30</sup> The protracted civil war in Sierra Leone demonstrates the regional and global networks that formed and sustained the conflict for over a decade. The RUF largely derived their viability from a diamond-based war economy that spanned the whole region and maintained a strong link the global diamond markets. These so called ‘conflict diamonds’ found consistent access to export outlets along the West African coastline--especially from Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Ghana; or were traded internally, often directly bartered for arms that were imported from outside the region. The broad extension of this economy was the

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, “Regional Approaches to Conflict Management in Africa,” presentation to UN Security Council meeting, August 8, 2001, [www.cic.nyu.edu/conflict](http://www.cic.nyu.edu/conflict).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies,” in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 47.

key to its adaptability and resilience. Regulatory crackdowns in one country would simply divert illicit resource flows elsewhere, while the loss of access to any particular port would simply increase business down the coastline. All the while political leaders such as Charles Taylor imposed a modicum of control by allocating military resources when and where needed in order to keep this prolific regional shadow economy operating, and used his extensive international commercial contacts to ensure access to global markets. Thus these war economies are sustained at multiple levels, with regional and global networks interacting to create dynamic and sophisticated structures of interchange that are very much an emergent product of contemporary globalization. The characteristics of the global economy as “internationally networked, expansive, and supremely adaptive,” are imbued into the local war economies and regional networks that are linked to it,<sup>31</sup> often creating the conditions for complex and protracted conflicts.

These regional and global linkages not only sustain the continuous and stable exploitation of resources within conflict zones, but also hold the key to ways in which these resources bases, and the conflict dynamics and emerge from them, evolve. Global demand for resources and the ease through which their value can be realized on the market is not a historically static given, but indeed changes over time. This would imply that conflict itself, and the particular resource and economic endowments that characterize any specific conflict zone, are constantly evolving in line with larger developments in the globalized economy. As Le Billon is keen to point out, “rather than simply being driven by need (resource scarcity) or greed (resource abundance), conflicts may be viewed as a historical product inseparable from the social construction and political economy of resources.”<sup>32</sup> The regionalized conflict in West Africa was as much a

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Le Billon, “The Political Ecology of War,” 575.

product of global demand for diamonds as anything else. This is not to overemphasize the extent to which actors were purely motivated by access to gem profits or personal enrichment, though we would certainly do no better to under-emphasize or neglect this dynamic all together. The essential takeaway is that access to global diamond markets served as the permissive opportunity structure through which the RUF and other combatants were able to channel their aims, and this structure is composed of global and regional economic forces that are capable of transforming and re-making it in response to global changes in price, regulatory controls, and competition.

### **Beyond Resource Reductionism**

Understanding how war economies emerge, regionalize, and change is also limited by a myopic focus on the illicit and parallel trade in commodities. This is not to say that the disproportionate attention to paid to natural resources is not somewhat justified. As Collier's data showed, countries with an economic reliance on natural resources are particularly prone to civil war, as this reliance is at once a cause and consequence of the type political and economic underdevelopment that fosters the conditions for conflict. Aside from a simple reflection of state weakness, the availability of lootable natural resources do prove to be an exceptionally strong competitive boost to armed groups that successfully capture them. The relatively low costs of extraction, often just a matter of labor (such that can usually be hyper exploited from the local population), ease of transport, and high payoffs make natural resources a consistent stream of easy revenues for actors that have little time or capital to devote to creating productive industries capable of sustaining their war-fighting capacities. The RUF's presence in the diamond mines of Sierra Leone, the Taliban's control over lands that produced that ultimately account for 90% of the world's heroin production, or even ISIS' capture of the Levantine oil fields, extractive



equipment in-tact and all, had immediate consequences to these conflicts and directly drove their dynamics in very obvious and visible ways.

Despite the fundamental role that natural resource played in these conflicts, and continue to play across contemporary conflict generally, the exclusive focus on certain primary commodities in the creation of war economies is neglectful of other crucial drivers of conflict. This may at some level be a result of institutional and analytical biases that tend towards illuminating the brightest and most romantic connections and relations, such as the rebel-held diamond mine, or jihadi-run oil field; or the fixation on the simplest and thus most amenable conflict drivers. Indeed, these conflict resources often make their way to Western markets, opening up clear lines of leverage for the international community to decrease demand and thus shape the dynamics of the conflict in ways that no amount of humanitarian aid or military intervention ever could. However, the almost exclusive focus on natural resources fails to register the effects of other forms of economic activity that nonetheless play a crucial role in an area's political economic life. Nicola Palmer critiqued this legacy of 'resource reductionism' in her analysis of the 'non resource-based war economy' in Sri Lanka and the way in which remittances, taxation by Tamil militant groups along checkpoints in their territory, and other rents extracted from the state and donor community have influenced the conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Expanding the focus from natural resources to encompass all forms of salient economic activity allows for a fuller understanding of the political economic landscape of a particular conflict zone, in particular ones that are relatively scarce in natural resources--such as Sri Lanka and Northern Mali. This expanded focus in turn widens the applicability of the war economy model, in so much as it provides a framework for understanding the salient economic factors at

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<sup>33</sup> Nicola Palmer (2005), "Defining a Different War Economy: the Case of Sri Lanka," in Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No.3 on *Transforming War Economies: Challenges and Strategies*.

play in various conflicts that do not fit the traditional models of ‘resource wars.’ As Palmer notes, conceptualizing a “‘non resource based war economy’ allows us to understand the “complex set of economic motivations that constitutes part of the reason why conflicts like Sri Lanka’s remain intractable,”<sup>34</sup>. The seeming lack of an animating role for natural resources in such a conflict has caused much of the analysis to default to purely grievance based approaches as the “greed” dynamic seems to not apply. However what Palmers contends is that economic means through which belligerent actors fund their activities is relevant in explaining certain dynamics of the conflict (protractedness in this case) --regardless of whether these funds are derived from natural resources or other economic activities.

Whether it is the transnational diaspora fund-raising, taxation along inter-regional transit routes, or the direct smuggling of commodities or people, these activities materialize due to the political and economic structures that emerge from borders and differential regulatory regimes. This gives them a decidedly regional component. They rely on a set of regionalized networks for their existence, networks that they in turn feed and perpetuate--representing an emergent contradiction in contemporary border and regulatory regimes that create industries that are then declared an existential threat to the formal political order. Interest in such activity has also been reflected in the emerging literature on ‘new regionalism’ in IR which seeks to elevate the role of non-state actors in directing regional economic flows and political processes. According to Fawn, “if we anticipate regionalism to start with and/or be predominantly economic, we may well find the substate, trans-national and private economic interests that some have identified

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 3.

now as major forces for regionalism and integration...Regionalism, broadly construed, can also be said to exist through transitional connections forged by criminal activities.”<sup>35</sup>

These transnational economic connections play an essential role in the creation of regional conflict complexes. The more entrenched and diversified these networks, the more protracted that conflicts they sustain tend to be. Modern communication, banking, and navigation technology create the conditions for flexible and resilient shadow economies that emerge within and across crevices in formal regulation institutions. New industries emerge and existing ones expand as they are fostered by a regional and global economic conditions that have significantly lowered the costs of doing illicit business across vast territories. Local economies become enmeshed within regional trading networks while the modern-day merchant is capable of running scaled up operations with relatively little initial investment. These regional networks become linked with others as demand swings or new supply discoveries will divert resources with an increasing imperviousness towards distance. The involvement of Lebanese traders in Sierra Leone’s shadow diamond industry, the role that these profits later played in funding Lebanon’s civil war demonstrates the extent to which regionalized conflict economies are not only internally integrated, but also increasingly linked with each other.<sup>36</sup>

Non-resource based exchange relations are salient in this process of change and expansion as they are less tied to place and more adaptable to changing economic and political circumstances. Thus analyses of the non-primary sectors of various war economies is crucial to understand how they emerge, adapt, expand, and hopefully transform eventually into peace economies. The migrant smuggling economy in Mali has undoubtedly had a significant impact

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<sup>35</sup> Rick Fawn (2009). “‘Regions’ and their study: wherefrom, what for and whereto?” In *Review of International Studies*, 35, pp 5-34 doi:10.1017/S0260210509008419, pg. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Lansana Gberie, *War and Peace in Sierra Leone: Diamonds, Corruption, and the Lebanese Connection*, Occasional Paper no. 6 (Ottawa: Partnership Africa Canada, November 2002).

on the the local war economy, as well served to link this conflict to regional and global networks. Analysis of the local effects of this economic activity must therefore keep this larger context in view, and in doing so may shed light on the ways that emergent industries and geopolitical shocks, such as a wave of refugee flows, can transform war economies, create new regional conflict complexes, and link areas in fundamentally different ways.

In addition, as countries develop and diversify their economies, the means through which political and economic power is distributed and contested will increasingly take place around non-resource based economic activity. This has been apparent in parallel commodity smuggling economies that sustained war economies in the former Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka, and is especially salient in resource poor areas such as Northern Mali where local power dynamics are largely derived by control over smuggling routes.

Finally, the effect of climate change is sure to accentuate the relations between changing resource bases and conflict dynamics. This may not only occur along the lines of increasing competition over scarce resources, a dynamic more akin to traditional ‘resource wars,’ but also competition over resources that climate change is making more abundant, such as environmentally-displaced migrants or ‘climate refugees’ fleeing towards the Global North. These ‘new abundances’ will inject new sources of contestation amongst vying groups, and may grant competitive advantage to to actors most capable of capitalizing on the windfalls that emerge in times of acute crisis and change (those engaged in human smuggling, in this case.)

### **A Return to a Political Economic Approach**

Much of the recent scholarly and policy work on smuggling enterprises has followed a narrative of criminality and focused on the security threats presented by transnational criminal

organizations (TCOs). Indeed, the rise of migrant smuggling has been placed within a wider literature that identifies illicit smuggling of all types; in particular drugs and weapons, as emerging global security threats that erode local state authority and provides fertile ground for extremist groups to take hold.<sup>37</sup> This organized crime- state fragility nexus has played heavily in assessing the contemporary conflict dynamics of the Sahara-Sahel region, as well as additional Central and South America, and, perhaps most prominently, Afghanistan and the prolific opium trade. By focusing on issues of criminality, licit vs. illicit, state vs. non-state, this contemporary focus has again reified these political and economic factors as essentially dichotomous forces, as opposed to amounting to two ends of a continuous spectrum along which the complicated vagaries of modern conflict are manifested. Thus by moving away from the war economy model which sought to illuminate these vagaries, the recent work on conflict, to the extent that organized crime has taken on a central focus, has returned to the state-centric militaristic approach that has proven to be an unwieldy tool in comprehending the deeper social, political, and economic dynamics of modern conflict. In short, recent work on conflict has focused on the manifestations of underlying conditions, rather than these underlying conditions themselves. Combating transnational criminal organizations, drug gangs, illicit arms dealers, and criminally linked militia groups will be much like a game of whack-a-mole so long as the underlying political and economic conditions that foster their emergence and resilience are not accounted for.

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<sup>37</sup> See for example: Ibid; Tuesda Reitano and Marcena Hunter, "Protecting Politics: Determining the Influence of Organized Crime on Public Service Delivery," from *The Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime*, 2016, <https://tuesdayreitano.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/protecting-politics-deterring-the-influence-of-organized-crime-on-public-service-delivery-pdf.pdf> ; Rachel Locke, "Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: A New Approach," *International Peace Institute*, July 2012.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, civil conflict is taking place along a diversified and proliferated set of spectrums and axes that are derived to a large extent from the local material environment. Globalization and the transnationalization of economic networks has not minimized the importance of local war economies, as the conflict dynamics they produce are indeed manifested locally. All transnational networks and enterprises that garner much of the interest in recent organized crime-oriented conflict research have local articulations that become embedded in the political economic fabric of a particular area. These operations remain reliant on local sources of labor and knowledge as they pass through various territories, leaving a stream of revenues as they traverse their transnational landscape. It is these latter articulations and local effects that can come to comprise a key pillar of the war economy of a conflict zone, such is the case of the transnational smuggling networks in Northern Mali. As a dynamic and regionalized war economy, the migrant smuggling economy has entered Mali and reshaped the political economic landscape in a way that has changed the existing power arrangements and opportunity structures under which the most recent conflict is taking place. While Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s was characterized by a degree of factionalism and diffused rebel organization, these divisions were limited and kept within the parameters of what was still, in essence, a separatist campaign targeted towards specific political demands against the state.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the current conflict-- which kicked off in 2012 with the thunderous advance of Tuareg militants towards the South--has developed beyond a traditional separatist conflict organized along ethnic lines to include a broader array of actors-- from other local ethnic communities to Islamic extremist groups-- with a dizzying matrix of shifting hierarchies, allegiances, and purported goals.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Habaye Ag Mohamed, "Senegal and Mali," in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005) 247-302.

<sup>39</sup> Jeremy Keenan, "Preparing for the 'Long War'," in *The Dying Sahara: US Imperialism and Terror in Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 264-282.

Accounting for this shift in conflict dynamics, namely an increase in rebel decentralization, is crucial for understanding the current state of conflict in Mali and why it has taken on a degree of complexity and protractedness in comparison with the past. Indeed, the ‘problem’ of fragmented insurgencies and decentralized militant movements have drawn the attention conflict researchers more generally, as they are increasingly associated with prolonged conflicts that are difficult to resolve by traditional military or political means. The following section will review the current research pertaining to rebel cohesion, in particular how the material environment intersects with rebel organizations to create pressures of either centralization or decentralization.

### **Decentralization and fragmentation**

The presence of fragmented insurgencies and decentralized rebel movements have been identified as a key impediment to any movement towards a peace process.<sup>40</sup> Traditional warfare, wherein two hierarchical organizations competing over conflicting political aims, would often terminate when one side realized the futility of continuing or both sides came to a mutual agreement to cease their operations. In either case, the strategic goals and tactical decisions were made within a largely centralized decision-making structure with sufficient degree of control over the organization to mobilize collective action. Increasingly however the world has witnessed an increase in conflicts that are characterized by decentralization, with combatant groups more accurately described as networks than hierarchies, and the consequent blurring of many of the conceptual lines that defined the ‘old wars.’ For instance, Kathleen Gallagher has compiled a dataset which shows that merely 10% of nationalist opposition movements between

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<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, “Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict,” in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (July 2013), pp. 659-672.

1960- 2005 were able to maintain cohesion and resist fragmentation, a fact that she demonstrated to be strongly correlated with an increase in civil war onset.<sup>41</sup>

Contemporary conflicts additionally demonstrate the degree to which fragmented oppositions create longer and more violent conflicts. Writing in the Washington Post recently, Bakke et al. lamented:

Events in Syria reflect the wider fragmentation of Middle Eastern states and societies, as evidenced by ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. A prominent feature of these conflicts is the inability of movements to remain united, both during and after civil wars. In Syria, the opposition has fragmented repeatedly – and more recently, so have the various forces aligned with the government. Militias have proliferated in Iraq, compounding the country’s already fractured politics. In Libya, fighting among the various factions has divided the country into rival camps and provides a telling example of how tenuous the unity of armed groups can be. In Yemen, an unlikely series of alliances has seen yesterday’s foes become today’s friends as political order has fragmented across the country’s divided regions and in the capital of Sanaa. These examples are not exceptional.<sup>42</sup>

In such an environment peace talks become more difficult, if they occur at all, as more opposition actors insist a seat at the table to push their conflicting demands in exchange for a cessation of hostile activities that they may or may not be able to actually impose on their rank and file. Nationalist groups splinter into a wide web groups, some of which only separated by differences of strategy or tactics, while others develop into something else entirely with aims that that border on the cosmological. This complex web is most apparent in place such as Syria, Libya, and Mali, where secular opposition groups and global jihadi groups often find side by side against the state; at times cooperating while in others turning their guns towards each other.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Kristin M.Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher, and Lee J.M Seymour, “The Problem with fragmented insurgencies,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/13/the-problem-with-fragmented-insurgencies/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.29cc393faf3e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/13/the-problem-with-fragmented-insurgencies/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.29cc393faf3e)



Thus delving into the internal politics of non-state actors and peering beneath the ‘unitary actor’ fallacy has become a task of immense interest to conflict researchers and policy makers alike. To the extent that decentralized and fragmented opposition movements create the conditions for protracted civil conflicts, understanding when, why, and how such fragmentation takes place are questions of imminent urgency. In addition, as Gallagher’s dataset revealed and current conflicts are displaying with tragic clarity, decentralization appears to be a fundamental trait of contemporary conflict.<sup>43</sup> Therefore theories of rebel fragmentation must present causal factors that are generally widespread and operative across a range of regions and political contexts. Extremely contextual and specific explanations for a phenomenon that has affected over 90% of opposition groups over the past half century simply will not do, insofar as they fail to illuminate general and global pressures that could account for what appears to be a general and global trend.

Scholars have generally agreed that their access to resources is a crucial component to a rebel group’s behavior and organization, though there is disagreement as to the precise role resources play and whether they general promote cohesion or fragmentation. Weinstein was one of the first to present a theory of insurgent behaviors and is considered one of the most industrious attempts at analyzing the inner workings of non-state groups as actors in their own right as opposed to shadowy, ill-defined, and poorly understood sources of ‘opposition’. He argued that the behavior of insurgent groups, and their relations with the surrounding population, is significantly derived from their resource base. Groups that derive most of their revenues from natural resources or external sponsorship develop traditional rentier economies across the territories they control, and thus behave with higher levels of violence and barbarism towards

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<sup>43</sup> Gallagher, “Actor Fragmentation.”

civilian populations as command structures break down and banditry abounds. On the other hand, groups that are less reliant on such rents must develop more social capital with the wider population in order to derive consistent revenues and local support, leading to less barbaric behavior and stronger ties both within the organization and between the organization and the wider community.<sup>44</sup>

Weinstein's theoretical contention that resources infect militant groups with the dreaded resource curse is contrasted with other analyses that show resources can actually promote cohesion. For instance, Tamm's analysis of the configuration of alliances in the Congolese wars showed how external state sponsorship could promote rebel cohesion when directed towards supporting the existing leadership, while at other times encouraging fragmentation when provided to schismatic weak points within an organization.<sup>45</sup> Staniland summed up the impasse in the literature:

It is hard to square this circle: resource wealth on its own is associated with both undisciplined fragmentation and disciplined organization building. Monocausal explanations that link resource flows to patterns of organizational form and behavior can offer valuable insights into particular cases, but they are insufficient when considered in comparative perspective.<sup>46</sup>

He proposed as social institutional model that identifies pre-existing social cohesion as the key variable for whether insurgencies fragment or cohere as they gain access to resources. He argues that in instance of an injection of resources, whether a capture of territory with valuable resources or any form of sponsorship, groups with existing structural fault lines within their

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<sup>44</sup> Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion : The Politics of insurgent Violence* ( Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Henning Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599–610.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no.1 (2012): 9.

social, ethnic, or ideological composition will fall victim to a type of resource curse that promotes in-fighting, intra-group competition, and ultimately fragmentation. On the contrary, groups that are socially and ethnically cohesive from the outset are generally empowered by the injection of resources and are able to efficiently allocate them throughout their organization and increase their war-fighting capacity.<sup>47</sup>

Staniland's model presents a generalizable framework to account for why resource abundance produces varying effects across different rebel organizations. However, his conclusion that, "discipline and control are functions not of resource endowments, but instead of the ability of insurgent social networks and organizations to harness resources,"<sup>48</sup> borders on the tautological, and fails to fully consider the fact 'resources' themselves, like 'opposition groups', are not a unitary category. Asking if more resources make groups more or less cohesive/fragmented is like asking if more food makes one more or less healthy. The question lacks the necessary precision to produce any useful answer. Different resources produce different effects depending on the types of resources they are.

Resources are a broad and diverse category that require different institutional structures to be harnessed. Some require high levels of central control and organizational discipline, while others are easily lootable and liquidable, making them prone to exploitation by any number of opportunistic or ambitious actors without the need to go through the central nodes of the hierarchy. With this in mind, Staniland did compare cases with "identical resource profiles" that nonetheless exhibit variation in group cohesion.<sup>49</sup> However, to the extent that fragmentation is an increasing feature of contemporary conflicts, variations in the social composition of rebel groups

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

fails to fully account for this trend. Granted, rebel groups are not blank slate actors, and they certainly emerge as militant groups with their own unique set of social, cultural, and ideological characteristics that play a part in determining their makeup and behavior. While such antecedent characteristics are vital to incorporate into any analysis of a specific case, one would have to presume that social diversity is increasing globally to account for the general state of fragmentation across nearly all conflicts.

In addition, determining the degree to which a rebel group is predisposed towards cohesion can lead to a number of selection biases and selective descriptions. All successful rebel movements, and social movements in general, exist as collections of coalitions that are able to collectively push forward towards an agreed upon goal despite their underlying differences. One way of arriving at the myopic ‘unitary actor’ conception is the tendency to ignore these underlying differences and schismatic weak points that exist within all organizations, and mistake their ability to paper over these differences as evidence that these differences simply never existed in the first place. This perhaps led Staniland to reify ascriptive differences in fragmented groups, while ignoring them in seemingly cohesive ones.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the relationship between resources and rebel fragmentation remains an open yet urgent field of inquiry. Establishing what type of conflict landscape emerges out of the interaction of resources and the political and social institutions that stitch together rebel organizations requires a firm and theoretically grounded understanding of both the inputs (resources) and the a priori institutions that they animate. Existing literature produces contradictory conclusions regarding the effect of resources and on rebel cohesion, while attempts

to ‘square this circle’ place an undue weight on social factors that themselves are intimately entwined with the surrounding material environment.

In a regionally networked and dynamic war economy, new modes of economic activity often enter conflict zones and disrupt existing social relations. The remaking of these social relations will manifest themselves in the region’s politics in ways that can fundamentally alter the dynamics of exiting conflicts, or create new ones that proceed along new lines. This proposition will be tested in the case of the migrant smuggling economy and the changing nature of conflict in Mali, specifically if the increase in fragmentation can be explained simply by changes in the social composition of northern Mali, social changes that themselves predated the changing economic landscape. To the extent that this is not true, it would appear that the changing nature of Mali’s war economy, and the resource profile that characterizes it, would be a crucial part of the story.

In addition, the existing literature spends little time differentiating between different types of resources. Acknowledging that ‘resources’ are a category as diverse as ‘medicine’, is crucial to discerning any specific effect that any one resource or mode of economic activity is having on a conflict zone. Indeed, resources that form the dominant mode of economic activity in a conflict zone do not simply flow into rebel organizations and produce linear effects, but they re-make the entire political economic structure around it. Understanding the structural changes that such economies produce is the lens through discerning how any particular resource, migrant flows for instance, are affecting a region’s conflict dynamics.

The following section will propose a theoretical framework for how different types of resources alter the structures of a conflict’s war economy, and thus place varying pressures on organizations for which they act as inputs. As a point of comparison, it will discuss the narco-

economy of Colombia and Afghanistan, then will specifically focus on the case of migrant smuggling and outline how these networks produce decentralization--and ultimately defection--pressures on the political systems with which they interact.

## Chapter 3

### Conceptual Framework

Several conceptual frameworks have emerged that attempt to lay a theoretical groundwork for analyzing the mechanisms behind insurgent fragmentation. As noted above, the essential organizational framework of a particular organization could be read quite differently by different analysts; indeed, as Zech and Gabbay note, “the FARC has been contrastingly depicted as a decentralized “network” [...] and as a hierarchical “army”.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, many concepts, largely borrowed from organizational theory and network science, have created some opportunities for forward progress. This chapter will discuss these frameworks as they attempt to grapple with a number of issues that must be addressed in the study of the organizational makeup of non-state militant groups. It will begin with issues of classification and the attributes that are general associated with either hierarchical or networked insurgent groups, before moving to the exogenous factors that contribute to the formation of these respective organizational types. It will then explore how a theoretical model that focuses on the ability of actors to accumulate resources independent of the existing organizational leadership structure creates or limits the opportunities for defection and ultimately group fragmentation. A running comparative thread will be drawn with the narco-economies in Colombia and Afghanistan, a primary topic of interest to scholars interested in the relationship between resources and conflict dynamics. It will propose an alternative theoretical explanation, focusing on the above mentioned mechanism, for the relative degree of cohesion that both the FARC and Taliban have maintained.

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<sup>50</sup> Steven T Zech and Michael Gabbay, “Social Network Analysis in the Study of Terrorism and Insurgency: From Organization to Politics,” *International Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 231.

Finally, the concluding section will move to contrast the structural features of a narco-dominated war economy with the case of Mali, and propose the mechanisms through which the migrant smuggling industry has created a war economy particularly conducive to defection and fragmentation.

### **Hierarchies and Networks**

In order to navigate this analytical landscape with due deference to the complexity and gray zones that resist precise classification, Gutierrez and Giustozzi place militant groups somewhere along a spectrum between army and network, with each end representing hierarchical and networked organizations, respectively.<sup>51</sup> In their comparative analysis between the FARC in Colombia and the Afghan Taliban, they describe two groups that fall within different places along this organizational spectrum. They describe the Taliban as an insurgent group that is representative of an organizational structure closer to the network end of the spectrum. As such, they have traditionally maintained a strong social base and decentralized leadership structure that delegates a good deal of authority and strategic decision making to their field commanders. These essential qualities represent the trade-offs that occur as a groups moves along this spectrum from hierarchy to network: namely, as they decentralize they attain a stronger base of social support and thus resilience, but lose some capacity to coordinate collective action and begin to encounter principal-agent problems between leaders and subordinates.<sup>52</sup> The FARC on the other hand, as a more hierarchical organization, is much more accurately conceptualized as a traditional army capable of coordinating action and defined by a very clear vertical line of

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<sup>51</sup> Francisco Gutierrez Sanin and Antonio Giustozzi, "Networks and Armies: Structuring Rebellion in Colombia and Afghanistan," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 836-853.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



authority and control from the top on down, yet plagued by a “very brittle and fragmented support base.”<sup>53</sup>

By applying these empirical cases to their army-network framework, they conclude that ‘organizational specificity’ not only illuminates certain general characteristics of insurgent groups (social support base, coordination capability, leadership control, etc..) but also the range of factors that contribute to the historical development of such organizational features. In accounting for this development, they maintain that the organizational specificity of any insurgent group is:

(a) a result of a co-evolutionary process; (b) not reducible; (c) prone to produce path dependency. It is a product of co-evolution, in the sense that armed groups develop their practices and thumb rules in response to hard evolutionary pressures, coming both from economic and other (human resource–based, for example) constraints, and from the strategies of their adversaries (for example, armies and counterinsurgencies).<sup>54</sup>

Despite this non-reducibility, analysis of the exogenous factors that impact the development of certain organizational types, particularly the ‘hard evolutionary pressures’, is possible. For instance, the authors suggest some type of correlation between organizational structure and a group’s funding base. In the case of the more centralized FARC,

there are credible evidences that since the 1990s it started to develop vertical integration, actively engaging in the protection of crops, the processing of the product, and its exportation...This contrasts with the highly decentralized Taliban modus operandi where, although in principle the fund-raising effort is subjected to the supervision of the leadership, and contributions are collected by specially appointed representatives, field commanders collect money too, particularly harvest tax. For practical reasons, it would require excessive human resources to appoint civilian cadres to collect dispersed revenue like this...”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

Unpacking this correlation between the group's respective organizational forms and their mode of interaction with the surrounding resource base is difficult, as there are certainly elements of endogeneity and a host of intervening factors. The role of the Taliban's pious ideology certainly has played a role in their hesitance to become as directly involved in the narco-economy as FARC, preferring instead to extract revenues indirectly and thus retain some semblance of distance.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this indicates that that organizational specificity is non reducible to resources or solely economic factors, though determining the extent to which these factors do create certain organizational pressures is possible by conceptualizing the role they play in determining the costs structures that act upon rebel groups.

### **Decentralization and Defection**

Patrick Johnston directed attention towards such costs by mobilizing a principal agent framework in his analysis of Sierra Leone and Liberia. He presented evidence regarding the impact of geography and technology on the insurgent organization, particularly the ways in which they increased or decreased the costs of governance and defection that are endemic to geographic expansion. Borrowing from the literature on corporate organization, he again conceptualizes insurgencies in two organizational forms, centralized and non-centralized.<sup>57</sup> He posited that as insurgencies expand and capture more territory, they are pressured to delegate more authority to sub-commanders who are charged with controlling and maintaining their growing territorial base.<sup>58</sup> In essence, expansion raises governance costs, which leads to delegation and decentralization. This in turn decreases the cost of defection from the point of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 17, no.1 (2008): 107-137.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

view of these sub-commanders or other agents, as such acts are difficult to detect and even more difficult to punish given the distance. This can be mitigated however by access to communications and information technology that allows the leadership to maintain close monitoring of their subordinates and ensure a regular flow of information from top to bottom, and vice versa. This effectively reduces the governance costs associated with expansion on the part of leadership, and maintains the cost of defection on the part of subordinates as the leadership is in effect hovering much closer than would otherwise be the case.

Attaining breathing room from an organization's leadership is one permissive cause that can allow subordinates to act independently. However, in order to be able to fully defect and mobilize an alternative support base that can eventually form a splintering faction, such divergent actors must have the means to support themselves and their budding sub-movements independent of any patronage ties with the main organization. This is the point where resources and economic landscapes come in. Fragmentation occurs precisely because divergent actors have both the breathing space from above and the material base from below in order to successfully defect and embark on their own independent action. The extent to which the economic landscape from which the organization extracts revenues is centralized, whether in hierarchical form or horizontally integrated around a central and essential node (presumably the existing rebel leadership), will determine the ease through which divergent actors can develop their own funding activities without the need to answer to or even cooperate with the leadership.

Even decentralized networks can maintain a strong degree of cohesion that is in no small part due to the integrated economic landscape that they operate in. In the case of the Taliban, they were able to maintain cohesion and minimize defection despite the broad geographic spread

and decentralized economic landscape.<sup>59</sup> Conceiving of a model in which the ability to derive resources independently of any overarching hierarchy or integrated network is essential for defection could account for this resilience of the Taliban's coherence by recognizing that the narco-economy of Afghanistan was, while decentralized, highly integrated in the sense that it relied on mutual and sustained coordination between a range of actors.

Here it is important to posit that despite the fact that networks and hierarchies are often presented as opposite forms with a set of attendant characteristics that differentiate their inclination towards either cohesion or defection, in fact, in these matters certain networks may resemble certain characteristics of more hierarchical organizations. This can be demonstrated by reference to concepts from network science and the emerging field of social network analysis in the study of insurgent groups. Indeed since, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the elevation of global jihadi 'networks' on the list of security threats facing states, how these networks operate and organize themselves, as well as the behavioral implications for these organizational configurations has been an area of intense scholarly and policy interest.<sup>60</sup>

At the basic level, networks are simply "system of interconnected actors" that are connected through ties of "kinship, friendship, personal contact, interaction, shared experiences, or other forms of relations."<sup>61</sup> While the difficulties of establishing the nature, strength, and totality of these ties, as well as the borders of any interconnected network have always nagged scholars and counter-terrorism analysts, mapping out these networks can reveal quite a lot about the key nodes that keep the organization operating. The centrality of a node, observed by the number of ties connecting it to other nodes in the network (itself likely revealed through

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<sup>59</sup> Gutierrez Sanin and Guistozzi, "Networks and Armies."

<sup>60</sup> Zech and Gabbay, "Social Network Analysis."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 216.

intelligence intercepts, personal correspondences, or mentions made in public addresses), can reveal the operational leadership of a network, and thus identify targets whose elimination could significantly disrupt it. Other measures, such as ‘betweenness’ which identifies the degree to which one node is essential for connecting and transmitting information to others, and “closeness” which tracks for the speed and ease through which such information can be transmitted, help in creating an inner map of organizations that were previously considered too decentralized and opaque to analyze with a fine grain.<sup>62</sup>

What such analyses, and the concepts that enable them, also reveal is that networked forms of organization exhibit a great deal of variation regarding their degree of interconnectivity, centrality, and transmission processes. Networks can be more or less integrated and centralized, with has implications regarding their cohesion and the ability of any given node to operate independently of the others. In this way, highly centralized and integrated networks can exhibit some similarities with hierarchies in the sense of maintaining the overall cohesion of the group, as a key common characteristic of both organizational types is each node’s reliance on the others to perform their roles within the system. Whether these nodal ties are oriented vertically, as in hierarchies, or horizontally in the case of networks, each node is heavily embedded within a sophisticated system that directs action in particular directions (through certain ties) and limits the ability of any given node to act independently. Thus both hierarchies and integrated networks represent structures that promote collective action and provide little incentive or ability for any individual node to break off; that is, to defect.

In this light, decentralization does not necessarily denote a lack cohesion or the conditions for defection. It is possible to conceptualize of networks that are integrated and

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

cohesive despite their decentralization. The question becomes under what conditions do networks fragment as they decentralize, and when do they maintain their internal integration and cohesion? This thesis posits that the material environment, or economic landscape, that sustains the organization is a crucial factor. As Johnston's theory would predict, the Taliban decentralized their operations and leadership structure as they expanded their territory; however, it was the economic environment that was not conducive to opportunistic actors to acquire the material means to pursue divergent interests. Looking at the nature of narco-economy that was a crucial source of Taliban revenues, it comprised of an integrated network of powerful and entrenched regional interests. The Taliban's role in this economy was essential in "managing key issues where the [interests of] traders, smugglers, clerics and agrarian elites converge."<sup>63</sup> The Taliban has relied on these actors (and vice versa) in maintaining this multi-billion dollar illicit economy that has formed a central pillar in the regional war economy.

The integration of this economy is a necessary condition for the operation of this industry; as growers, smugglers and dealers are entwined in relationships that require a high degree of coordination throughout the entirety of the production and distribution process in order to evade international policing efforts and clandestinely enter global markets. In such a system, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any actor to derive significant revenues while cutting off ties with other nodes up or downstream. These ties are crucial to the realization of the resource's value, as well as key to coordinating the political conditions necessary for the illicit industry to thrive.

These features imply that narco-economies are prone to higher degrees of centralization, whether in the form of vertical hierarchies as reflected in FARC's organizational structure, or

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<sup>63</sup> Gutierrez Sanin and Guistozzi, "Networks and Armies."

integrated networks in the case of the Taliban. In addition, by recognizing that traditional perceptions of decentralization as being synonymous with a lack of cohesion and tendency towards fragmentation, the aforementioned challenges regarding the classification of armed organization, such as the disagreement over whether FARC should be classified as a hierarchical army or decentralized network, can be partly papered over. The central element of interest in this case is cohesion, and the common resource profiles of both Colombia and Afghanistan that curiously produced variance in organizational structure, in fact produced similar outcomes regarding cohesion. In neither case were actors with divergent interests able to acquire the necessary material means to fully break with the mother organization, even when, in the case of the Taliban, the requisite breathing space from above was there as a result of geographic expansion. Acquiring or intercepting a shipment of narcotics as they moved through the region is not necessarily a boon for any independently inclined actor with a mind towards branching off, as the product must be transferred through other nodes within the system in order to realize any value. The reliance on these nodes, themselves possibly maintaining loyalty ties with the existing leadership, significantly constricts windows of opportunity for independent action.

Indeed, popular images of the all-powerful drug lord reigning over pyramidal cartels attests to the notion that the narco-economies are prone to monopolistic competition and some degree of centralization. Again, these features are structural necessities for global illicit enterprises that requires multiple steps of production, refinement, transport, and distribution. The trans-regional dimensions of this process further reinforces the need for central organizational structures capable of achieving coordinated action. As a case in point, the discovery of an abandoned Boeing 727 in the Gao region of Northern Mali that had been estimated to be carrying 7 to 11 tons of cocaine highlighted the degree to which the global narcotics industry has

developed.<sup>64</sup> Registered in Guinea-Bissau and originating from Venezuela, “Air Cocaine”, as the plane has been dubbed, reflected the immense coordination and trans-regional ties that have come to sustain the illicit narco-economy; a level of coordinated action that is only possible with cohesive organizations with integrated orders of authority and control.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, though the similar resource profiles of Colombia and Afghanistan seemed to produce varying outcomes in terms of organizational structure, the key outcomes regarding cohesion and integration were similar. This is due to the structural necessities of running a trans-regional illicit drug industry, which requires a degree of centrality that permeates both the hierarchical and networked organizations that partake in it. The extent to which these structures of the economic environment imbue themselves onto political organizations is not necessarily simple or straightforward, as it will certainly vary with their degrees of involvement that these organizations have in these industries, as well as a host of other relevant intervening factors (ideological coherence, cultural attitudes, path dependence, etc.). However, considering the ways that the economic landscape structures the opportunities that actors have to pursue divergent action independent of an overarching organization can shed light on how some economic environments, indeed some war economies, prove to be more fertile grounds for defection and fragmentation than others.

This preceding discussion of the structural organizational pressures that emerge from narco-economies has served as a point of comparison to what will follow, which is a similar conceptual analysis of the type of structural pressures that would emerge from a war economy dominated by migrant smuggling. By proposing ways in which the migrant smuggling economy

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<sup>64</sup> Gregory Chauzel and Thibault van Damme, “The roots of Mali’s conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis,” Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2015. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/The\\_roots\\_of\\_Malis\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/The_roots_of_Malis_conflict.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



can create the conditions for divergent actors to defect from prevailing organizational structures and pursue independent interests, the driving hypothesis of this paper; namely that this economy has promoted fragmentation in the Northern Mali conflict, can be placed within this theoretical framework. This chapter will now move to a more in depth discussion of the war economy in Mali, and propose the ways in which developments in the smuggling trade and the means through which militant groups fund their operations are responsible for contributing to the high degree of fragmentation that the conflict has witnessed.

### **Mali's War Economy: Breeding ground for fragmentation?**

The war economy in Northern Mali is embedded within the extensive trans-Saharan smuggling networks that have sustained the region for centuries. As a 'non resource based war economy' that is largely reliant on these regionally and trans-regionally integrated smuggling activities, the economic environment of northern Mali evolves with the larger trends in regional trade and the movements of smuggled goods. Thus the region represents the type of dynamic and globalized war economy that Duffield describes as resulting in "a strong and contrary tendency toward regional schism and destabilizing political assertiveness."<sup>66</sup> This slippery hold on political power and the tendency towards a state of 'durable disorder' across the global south in general can in part be attributed to this constantly shifting economic and material landscape that continually opens new opportunities for effectively challenging existing power structures and channeling grievances through armed force. Changes in the economic landscape can also exacerbate existing tensions or add an element of protractedness into ongoing conflicts by injecting new sources of revenues into an area that then become contested and ultimately

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<sup>66</sup> Duffield, "Globalization."

funneled into the war fighting capacities of the various parties. As Peter Lock noted in his analysis of the link between war economies and globalization,

As long as the current regulation of the globalisation process produces a dynamic symbiosis of globalisation and shadow globalisation, it might be necessary to rethink our conceptualisation of war to arrive at a more inclusive definition, which covers the ongoing transformation towards more diffuse and enduring forms of organised violence.<sup>67</sup>

Ironically, it is the vibrant global ‘shadow economy’ that has contributed to the “failure to build durable political hierarchies in Africa.”<sup>68</sup> To illustrate how this global economic dynamism articulates at the regional level, it is useful to conceptualize three types of events that generally produce a shift in the economic landscape of a particular area; 1.) A new resource or mode of economic activity is discovered or arises locally, such as the discovery of a new lode of precious minerals; 2.) the demand for an existing resource or service changes as a result of a change in the global market, like the sudden demand for uranium at the advent of the nuclear age; or 3.) a resource enters from outside the region and embeds itself in within the local economy, perhaps through the diversion of a smuggling route through a territory. Whether this injection of resources will have a cohering or fragmenting effect on militant groups depends largely upon the type of economic structures that they promote, and will subsequently play a large role in determining the nature of the conflicts that these groups are engaged in.

As the emergence of the migrant smuggling industry in Mali represents an instance of this third event--that is, a new resource (migrant flows) have entered the area from outside via the regional transborder trade networks, this thesis is arguing that this transformation in the war

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Lock, “War Economies and the Shadow of Globalisation,” in Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No.3 on *Transforming War Economies: Challenges and Strategies*, pg. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Gutierrez Sanin and Guistozzi, “Networks and Armies.”

economy favored a more protracted and factionalized state of conflict. I have arrived at this hypothesis through analyzing what type of economic structures that arise around migrant smuggling, the manner in which it is distributed across the territory, and how this compares with the economic environments of earlier outbreaks of violence in Mali. For matters of organization, it may be useful to begin with the latter (the material environment of the 1990s Tuareg rebellion), then contrast this against the contemporary war economy and the role of migrant smuggling in shaping it.

One of the most sophisticated attempts at a political economic analysis of conflict in Mali comes from Macartan Humphreys' and Habaye Ag Mohamed's case study of the Tuareg Rebellion of 1990-1995.<sup>69</sup> In their attempt to tease out the impact of Northern Mali's material environment on the dynamics of the conflict, they concluded that the resource poor conditions of the area did not lend itself to protracted conflict as the rebels soon ran out of resources and ultimately opted for a negotiated settlement. "The financing of the Tuareg groups depended largely on lifting stocks of resources such as cattle and vehicles," however "dwindling stocks left groups, including the leadership of the organizations, living increasingly from hand to mouth. In this context, a negotiated solution with the offer of a salary a part of a package [from the state] was increasingly attractive."<sup>70</sup>

A second salient finding was that the nature of the resources that acted as financing, primarily cattle and vehicles in this case, were diffuse and did not require an overarching and centralized organization to manage. They found that this diffused resource landscape was reflected in the lack of rebel cohesiveness, and thus delayed the signing of a negotiated peace

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<sup>69</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Habaye Ag Mohamed, "Senegal and Mali," in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambinis (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005) 247-302.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 278.

between a coherent and legitimate rebel leadership with control over their fighters, and the government. Such coherent leadership structure was lacking amongst the various Tuareg factions throughout the early to mid-stages of the rebellion as “there were weak financial consequences for the groups from their lack of cohesion.”<sup>71</sup> This condition persisted along with the conflict until the unreplenishable resources in which the rebels relied became exhausted and the appeal of a negotiated settlement rose.

These two factors, diffusion and replenishability of resources are key variables that permeate throughout the literature on the impact of resources on conflict dynamics (see Le Billon, Ross). In line with LeBillon’s typologies of conflict, diffused resources tend to give way to decentralized rebel zones; and the nature of the lootable resources at that sustained the rebels led to a lack of political cohesion, as they did not require an overarching organizational structure to exploit.<sup>72</sup> However, despite this lack of political cohesion on the part of the rebels, the inconsistency of this revenue stream prevented Northern Mali from devolving into a protracted conflict area, and ultimately led to a negotiated settlement with the state. Indeed, while it was the nature of the economic environment that led to a degree of dis coherence on the part of the opposition, it was the non-replenishability of the resource landscape that ultimately caused the rebels to meet the government at the negotiating table in order to hash out a deal to ensure the continued economic viability of the region in exchange for peace. The types of resources that Tuareg rebels relied on throughout this conflict, cattle and vehicles, were unable to sustain the rebellion for long, as they represent renewable resources that are quickly exhausted and take a

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 289.

<sup>72</sup> Le Billon, “Political Ecology of War.”

long time to renew--an observation that is in line with the general quantitative findings regarding renewable resources and conflict duration.<sup>73</sup>

By comparing this previous resource environment with the contemporary conflict in Mali, we can now analyze migrant smuggling in light of these salient factors and determine the type of conflict dynamics that we would expect to emerge from an economic environment in which it predominates, and discern the degree that such a conflict environment would be conducive to fragmentation. The emerging research into the migrant smuggling economy across the Saharan region characterizes a diffused set of networks that resists overarching centralized structures and hierarchies.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, this resistance towards centralization appears to be a structural feature of migrant smuggling activity, as the array of actors who engage in it can easily extract revenues with only loose ties with other nodes in the network. Smugglers simply deliver migrants from location to location, and need not involve themselves in ensuring their continued movement through the network, a responsibility that often falls on the migrants themselves. Horizontal ties certainly do develop amongst smugglers to comprise a loose regional network, however such ties are not as much of a structural necessity as they are in say, drug smuggling. Smugglers often scale up their operations to coordinate the entirety of a migrant's journey, however any actor keen on involving themselves in smuggling need not be bound by these pre-existing networks and can carry out profitable business independent of other nodes in the system.

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<sup>73</sup> Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War?"

<sup>74</sup> See: Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni Janssen, "Turning the tide: the politics of irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya," Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2017. [https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/turning\\_the\\_tide/](https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/turning_the_tide/); and Fransje Molenaar and Thibault van Damme, "Irregular migration and human smuggling networks in Mali," CRU Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael, 2017.

[https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/irregular\\_migration\\_and\\_human\\_smuggling\\_networks\\_in\\_mali.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/irregular_migration_and_human_smuggling_networks_in_mali.pdf); and Tuesday Reitano, Laura Adel, and Mark Shaw, "Smuggled Futures: The dangerous path of the migrant from Africa to Europe," Research Report, Geneva: The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2014, <http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/Attualita/Notizie/Documents/Global%20Initiative.pdf>

As has been outlined, previous work indicates that we should expect a diffused political environment to arise from such an economic landscape. This thesis will contend that this is precisely what is being observed in the current conflict in Mali, as the initial rebels have subsequently splintered and newly minted armed groups have emerged and proliferated. While previous conflict in Mali have been characterized by a degree of rebel factionalism and lack of cohesion, the current situation has evolved into another scale entirely, with a dizzying array of actors and groups, from Tuareg nationalists to extremist groups, that have turned Northern Mali into a protracted conflict zone that has caught the concern of regional and global actors--as evidenced by France's intervention from 2012-2014.<sup>75</sup> In addition to the scale of smuggling activity, the continuous demand for the service, beginning with the increase in migrant flows in 2011, has created a steady and replenishable source of revenues for an array of actors across Northern Mali and the wider region.

Tracing the process that has led to this contemporary state of affairs will be the intention of this research. By establishing the ways in which the smuggling economy has produced a more decentralized and diffused economic landscape wherein centralized control is not a structural feature, I will highlight how disgruntled rebels have thus been able to split from central organizations and channel their grievances through a proliferated set of opportunity structures.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the fragmentation of insurgent groups is a product of both structural features and agent-based motivation to defect. In terms of the latter, the level of grievance and divergent interests within an organization will vary according to levels of ideological and ethnic cohesion,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibrahim Maiga, "Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the labels," *Institute for Security Studies* 17, 2016.

as well as the ability of leaders to inspire loyalty amongst their followers. Like the study of conflict in general, these specific grievances and motivations are crucial to telling the entire story of an insurgent movement; however, focusing on the structural characteristics that allow such grievances to be channeled along a viable path towards defection is the other part of the story. These structural features also allow for generalizable insights as to the pressures that all militant groups operate under, and can lead to a fuller picture of why fragmented conflicts occur and persist. These structural features that this thesis is focusing are of course those that emanate from Mali's war economy, and specifically how the migrant smuggling economy has opened avenues for defection and the ensuing state of fragmentation throughout the conflict zone. As Gutierrez et al noted, "for armies, the condition of survival is internal cohesion, and so allowing direct access of individual fighters or of the middle rank to rents [...] is suicidal."<sup>76</sup> The argument here is that precluding or controlling access to the rents that may be derived from the migrant smuggling economy is highly difficult, if not impossible.

Thus, by providing the means through which disgruntled rebels may accumulate the necessary resources to defect independent of any overarching hierarchy or integrated network, the migrant smuggling economy has played a crucial role in creating the fragmented nature the opposition, and the conflict dynamics more generally. In order to detect the extent to which this is the case, and avoid any charges of reductionism, it is necessary to focus in on the broader drivers of conflict in Mali over the years, and track the role that evolutions in the smuggling economy have played in transforming the conflict landscape; and it is to this task that the following chapter now turns.

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<sup>76</sup> Gutierrez Sanin and Guistozzi, "Networks and Armies."

## Chapter 4

### The Case of Conflict in Mali

The conflict-ridden history of Mali serves as a natural case study for analyzing the ways transformations in a region's resource environment produce different conflict dynamics. This analysis will run a qualitative comparison between the current conflict in Mali and the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s. As both of these conflicts have been initiated by a common set of actors expressing a common list of grievances, these political factors can be held more or less constant and economic drivers can stand in a more prominent explanatory position. Thus, this analysis can shed light on how the changes in the regional smuggling economy have contributed to the increase in factionalism amongst the armed groups in the north of Mali. It will begin with the conflict of the 1990s and identify the main actors that emerged throughout the course of the conflict, and highlight how the organizational structure of this rebellion was largely derived from the surrounding resource environment. It will then discuss the transformation in the regional smuggling economy that began with the arrival of drugs flows in the mid-2000s, and the way this form of smuggling broke apart many of the social bonds that held traditionally maintained the socio-economic equilibrium of the north. The explosive characteristics of these breaks came in the form of the current conflict which began in 2012. This analysis will demonstrate that while both conflict periods were characterized by the type of decentralized resource landscape described in the previous chapter, the factionalism that has emerged recently is much more calcified. Indeed, the current conflict has witnessed former allies take opposing sides of the conflict and violently contesting competing claims for the future of northern Mali. It will in turn



analyze this development from a political economic perspective, and argue that this unprecedented factionalism is largely emergent from Mali's smuggling economy.

These intertwined social, political, and economic developments tell the story of northern Mali's recent history, and represent the context in which migrant flows would enter begin in 2011. This chapter will conclude by placing the migrant smuggling economy within this story, and argue the ways in which it has re-enforced these latent and growing social cleavages, and thus contributed to the increase in factionalism in the conflict in Mali.

### **1990s: 'The Second Tuareg Rebellion'**

The events of 2012 in northern Mali seemed to be a reiteration of a cycle of civil conflict that many hoped had been finally arrested nearly two decades ago. The conflict of the 1990s, what is dubbed the "second Tuareg rebellion" after the initial uprising in the 1960s that was brutally squashed by the Malian state-- lasted nearly six years until the signing of a series of peace accords and the ceremonial burning over nearly 3000 weapons in Timbuktu in 1996.<sup>77</sup> It began in 1990 with a series of planned and premeditated attacks on government installations in the north by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA).<sup>78</sup> Like 2012, this movement was predominantly Tuareg, though was formed under the aegis of representing the interests of the entire north. Many MPLA fighters previously gained extensive combat experience throughout the 1970s and 80s in Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan after being recruited into Muammar Qaddafi's Islamic Legion. Thus, unlike the 1960s, the government's aggressive attempts to repress the uprising were repelled by the new liberation movement, killing

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<sup>77</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Habaye Ag Mohamed, "Senegal and Mali," in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambinis (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2005) 247-302.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

nearly 200 government troops in one battle in September of 1990.<sup>79</sup> This new combat reality led the government towards a different approach.

Utilizing their capital with a number of Tuareg tribal elites, the government encouraged the less radical elders to speak out against the strain of separatism that permeated some elements of the movement, and ultimately sat down with a number of rebel leaders in Tamanrasset, Algeria in January 1991 to hash a conciliatory road forward.<sup>80</sup> The Tamanrasset Accords were considered quite generous on the part of the government, as they agreed to an eventual demilitarization in the north and the initiation of decentralization process that would empower northern communities with a significant degree of autonomy. The accords also included a set of material rewards for the rebels in the form of integration into the Malian armed forces and a number of public positions, from local administrative jobs to ministerial roles in the capital. Following the accords, the MPLA officially changed its name to the Popular Movement of Azawad (MPA), notably dropping the term of “liberation” and re-affirming their commitment to maintain the territorial integrity of Mali.<sup>81</sup>

The negotiations proved controversial on both sides, with the government largely keeping the details secret for fear that it would be perceived as a “surrender by the South [government].”<sup>82</sup> On the rebel side, the negotiations brought an array of ethnic and ideological divisions to a head. The Arab components of the movement broke away to form the Islamique et Arabe de l’Azawad (FIAA) in order to secure their own interests in what increasingly seen as a Tuareg dominated movement, though they largely retained cooperative relations with the (MPA)

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 256.

and were committed to the implementation of the accords. Deeper strains began to emerge however with rises level of violence that were taking on an increasingly ethnic dynamic.

In the process of the political transition in Bamako and the reforms of the armed services that were a crucial component of the accords led to frustration within the Malian army, a frustration which was routinely unleashed upon targets in the north, particularly around the regional hub of Gao. Feeling increasingly targeted, and abandoned by the south as the promised benefits of the Tamanrasset accords were slow to materialize, Tuareg and Arab fighters increasingly turned to banditry. The sedentary communities that were victimized by these attacks formed their own self-defense militias that were not hesitant to conduct collective retaliation against the nomadic “whites” (Arabs and Tuaregs) that were threatening their livelihood.

Macartan Humphreys and Habaye Ag Mohamed note:

By mid 1991 public displays of violence, such as the public burning of a nomad, or the destruction of premises owned by Arab traders, led to enormous refugee flows from the white settled as well as nomadic populations. By the end of the summer, Timbuktu was all but deserted by white groups.<sup>83</sup>

Despite peace accords being negotiated and agreed upon in the early part of 1991 by the leaders of the largest rebel groups and the government, such racialized violence and banditry persisted for many years. In 1994, these conditions spurred the creation of the Ganda Koy (“masters of the land” in the Songhai language) by a Songhai deserter of the Malian army who had lost faith in that institution's ability to protect the north’s sedentary population. Rather than a ragtag militia group, the Ganda Koy proved to be quite a stout military force, in so small part to the deserters from the national army that filled their ranks. After a summary execution of nine accused cattle rustlers, the Ganda Koy was able to repel a counter-attack by the MFUA (a

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 257.

coalition of the main Tuareg and Arab militant groups).<sup>84</sup> Humphreys and Mohamed observe that “the formation of the Ganda Koy marked the transition of the war from a struggle directed against the central government to an intercommunal conflict.”<sup>85</sup> The banditry, insecurity, and fragmentation of the north along ethnic and racial lines became an endemic feature of this conflict as it developed, as neither the MPA, FIAA, nor the government was able to control the behavior of their troops.

Though this lack of cohesion would seem pathological, and indeed it often led to horrific humanitarian consequences, it is hard to attribute this intercommunal violence solely to ancient hatreds or the proclivity towards racism or violence by any one group. Rather, there is ample reason to believe that, instead of being a simple reflection of a lack of discipline or professionalization amongst these groups, it was in large part a product of decentralized organizational structures. For one, this fragmentation and lack of cohesion affected nearly all ethnic groups party to the conflict, suggesting a more general environmental factor which places diffusionary pressures on these groups. In addition to Tuareg disagreements over the Tamansararat accords, the Arabs saw significant fragmentation with the creation of their own FIAA in 1991, which subsequently broke into the Front Populaire pour la Libération de l’Azawad (FPLA) and the Armée Révolutionnaire pour le Libération de l’Azawad (ARLA).<sup>86</sup> These fragmentary pressures affected the whole span of professionalism as well, with the relatively experienced and trained MPLA splitting at the first moments of contentious political

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<sup>84</sup> Marc-Andre’ Boisvert, “Failing at Violence: The Longer-lasting Impact of Pro-government Militias in Northern Mali since 2012,” in *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 272-298.

<sup>85</sup> Humphreys and Mohamed, “Senegal and Mali,” 259.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

decision making (the Tamarassant negotiations), not to mention the fact that the Ganda Koy was largely the product of a schism within the Malian army.<sup>87</sup>

This general diffusionary pressure leads one to ask: was there something in the environment at the time that could account for this? As argued in chapter four, the answer is likely to lie in the resource environment of the conflict. Rebels largely relied on the rustling of cattle and theft of vehicles to attain the resources necessary for war-making. As noted previously, Macartan and Mohamed link this resource base with the organizational structure of the rebels.<sup>88</sup> This was a war economy characterized by diffuse resources, which LeBillon noted is generally associated with decentralized militant movements. Further, the nature of this resource profile (stolen cattle and vehicles) particularly lends itself to what appear to be targeted violence, as the means of acquiring them necessarily entails a violent dispossession. As one Malian military official observed soon after the war, “it proved difficult to differentiate between insurgency and sheer banditry.”<sup>89</sup> This banditry was not merely the product of over-eager troops breaking with discipline to snatch an easy opportunity for personal enrichment (though this undoubtedly occurred), but rather it represented a fundamental element of the rebel war effort. However, despite this decentralization and problems of maintaining a cohesive unity amongst the rank and file, some semblance of cohesion remained at the group level as quarrels over strategy and leadership, or the fundamental political aims of the rebellion, remained limited in comparison to 2012. Utilizing Scheele’s conception of the nature of low value commodity trading and tribal solidarities, this relative coherence at the highest levels largely derived from the fact the value of

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<sup>87</sup> Boisvert, “Failing at Violence.”

<sup>88</sup> Humphreys and Mohamed, “Senegal and Mali.”

<sup>89</sup> Kalifa Keita, “Conflict and conflict resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg insurgency in Mali,” in *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 9, no. 3 (1998): 120.

the resources and theft that sustained the war effort was of relatively low, and thus did not challenge the existing social arrangements that sustained the position of the Tuareg leadership.

In addition, the non-replenishability of these resources prevented the solidification of any schismatic movements before they could develop an independent and sustainable resource base. By 1995 the violence abated and the warring parties agreed to disband at the ceremonial burning of the weapons in Timbuktu. A year earlier, such an outcome “would have seemed impossible,” given the fresh grievances that were accumulating almost daily and the powerful military momentum of the Ganda Koy.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, many of the key elements of a protracted conflict seems present, except of course a resource base that could sustain it. “Dwindling stocks left groups, including the leadership of the organizations, living increasingly from hand to mouth. In this context, a negotiated solution with the offer of a salary a part of a package [from the state] was increasingly attractive.”<sup>91</sup>

What began as a largely unified armed movement with real political demands against state, quickly disintegrated into a factionalized conflict that witnessed high levels of inter-communal strife and targeted ethnic violence. These developments were facilitated by a war economy with a diffused resource profile that facilitated decentralized rebel organizational structures. However, it was the nature of these resources that, unlike the conflict in 2012, some level of elite cohesion was maintained; while their ultimate non-replenishability eventually closed off any path forward for rebels. The North’s resource poor environment encouraged regional elites to look towards the state to provide the means necessary to maintain the economic viability of the region, and the socio-economic system that laid over it. It was in this context that

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<sup>90</sup> Humphreys and Mohamed, 259.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 278.

peace negotiations took place, and the subsequent agreements seemed to produce commitments that were satisfactory to all relevant parties; at least for a time.

### **Breaking of the Bonds: The run-up to 2012 and the breakdown of the post 1990s order**

The system of co-optation that kept the north pacified, especially the restive Tuareg population, began to breakdown in the mid to late 2000s as a result of significant changes in the region's socio-economic life. These changes not only threatened the north-south linkages that Bamako relied on to govern its periphery from a distance, but also pressured the entrenched local hierarchies that had organized the north for decades. Since the National Pact of 1992, the initial peace framework that was eventually accepted by all parties in 1996 (the event that the ceremonial burning of weapons was meant to celebrate), the Malian state has embarked on a project of decentralization that was a key demand of northern rebels. Remarking on this new political arrangement, and what it presaged for the future, Boas notes that "this may be read as an attempt to empower local populations, but also became a tool for local aspiring big men to organize their communes as they saw fit."<sup>92</sup> This restructuring of the political relations between north and south that seemed to be so essential to ending the conflict in the 1990s would quickly begin laying the groundwork for the next one in a way that would highlight the persistent dialectic of conflict and change in a region where politics and dynamic shadow economies open new avenues to contestation as quickly as old ones are closed off.

Since the times of French colonialism, outside actors with an interest in exerting control in northern Mali would use the region's diverse ethnic composition and complex social structures as a way to exercise influence in the vast territory. These fault lines to be exploited

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<sup>92</sup> Morten Boas, "Castles in the sand: Informal networks and power brokers in the Northern Mali periphery," in *African conflicts and informal power : big men and networks*, edited by Mats Utas (London: Zed Books, 2012) 123.

could be found both within and between competing groups, with the tried and true methods of divide and rule and selective co-option of local big men presenting the strategy of choice of first the French colonizers, and more recently the modern Malian state.<sup>93</sup> Thus, the National Pact of 1992 was one in a long line of renegotiations between elites in the north and south as they adapted to the changing circumstances of modernity. However, by the mid-2000s, the state's withdrawal from the north and the effective demilitarization of the region further structured the north of Mali as a place where regional shadow economies can thrive; and it was changes in this illicit economy, and the global links and technological advancements that animate it, that would lead to a breakdown in the post 1990s order and lay the groundwork for events of 2012 and beyond.

Traditionally complementing their livelihoods with the smuggling of cigarettes and other legal goods, the people of the northern Mali, and the Sahara-Sahel zone more generally, have comprised an essential node in the informal socioeconomic links across the desert.<sup>94</sup> This comprised a steady income for money, but it was never a path to quick riches or exorbitant wealth. For this, the state became a key source of resources and a short cut to wealth and prestige. This spicket was turned by the cyclical conflict machine that would allow certain 'ethnic-military' to capture 'post rebellion payoffs' in the form of the usurpation of newly earmarked development aid or cushy public jobs at the local or national level.<sup>95</sup> As unstable and undesirous as such a system may appear, it bears repeating that Mali was held up as a model of democratization and conflict control/resolution throughout the 1990s despite the low intensity

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<sup>93</sup> Jean Pierre- Olivier de Sardan, "'The Tuareg question' in Mali today," LASDEL, December 2012.

<http://www.bu.edu/wara/files/2013/06/mali-the-Tuareg-question.pdf>

<sup>94</sup> Ivan Briscoe, "Crime after Jihad: armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali," Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2014.

<https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Crime%20after%20Jihad.pdf>

<sup>95</sup> Sardan, "'Tuareg Question'".



conflict that burned throughout the decade. Indeed, as far as countries characterized by repetitive conflict cycles go, Mali could have been doing much worse.

By the mid-2000s however a new source of quick and exorbitant wealth would emerge that would encourage the contestation of the system by those who felt marginalized by it. Due to increased interdiction efforts in North America, Latin American drug cartels began looking towards Europe and Africa as alternative markets for their product. Authorities in West Africa seized 46 tons of cocaine between 2005 and 2008, with estimates from the UNODC figuring that this represented only a fraction of the total cocaine being transiting through the region, which was estimated to value nearly 1.8 billion USD. “The share remaining in the hands of local African cartels is estimated at around 450 million US\$ per year, or 0.5 percent of overall West African GDP.”<sup>96</sup>

Guinea Conakry is reportedly the main entry point for this regional illicit network after increased US-supported crackdowns on drug cartels in neighboring Guinea Bissau. Here, “the business was moved to new and safer grounds, less in the spotlight,” and would continue its clandestine journey through West Africa, through the Sahara desert, and on to the lucrative northern markets. In Mali, reports indicate the witnessing of “Peruvian scouts” in the north as early as the early 2000s as they attempted to locate suitable navigation routes through the country.<sup>97</sup> These routes would follow the paths of pre-existing networks that were structured around ethnic and kinship ties that have long facilitated the “connectivity” of the desert space that is essential to the movement of goods and people across it. For example, it has been reported that most of the cocaine entering Mali moves through the Guinean port city of Labe, which has

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<sup>96</sup> Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali,” in *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 255.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

been described as the capital of the Fulani-Peul people who are spread across Guinea and Mali. In contrast to their traditional reputation as nomadic herders, the Fulani are known to control nearly 90% of the import/export trade between Guinea and Mali and are thus believed to have played a crucial role in the movement of narco-shipments through Bamako on to the regional hub of Gao in the north.<sup>98</sup>

North of Gao, the traditional *droits de passage* (rights of passage) traditionally came under the aegis of Arab and Tuareg tribes.<sup>99</sup> It is at this point that the true Sahara begins, and where intensive and socially embedded knowledge of the terrain has been essential to survival, let alone successful maintenance of consistent trans-desert trading ties. However, the arrival of cocaine smuggling represented something different from goods that had animated the smuggling industry in the past. The structural necessities of such narco-trafficking were different from those of lower value goods, a fact which would stress the socio-economic equilibrium and traditional hierarchies of the region. As anthropologist Judith Steele observes,

Small [smuggling] networks do not explicitly rely on tribal links, but they nevertheless reproduce the major divisions to the extent that these determine everyday social ties, shared material interests and marriage alliances.... In contrast, drug trafficking is described as a means for an individual to get rich fast, to the detriment of wider solidarities.<sup>100</sup>

The immense riches that could befall actors even in entry level roles were indeed dramatic. For instance, drivers who previously made a living transporting smuggled fuel or other subsidized goods from Algeria to Mali often made the switch to driving cocaine shipments.

Rainari and Strazzari's research reveals the inner workings of the operation:

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Judith Scheele, "Tribus, états et fraude: la région frontalière algéro-malienne," *Etudes Rurales* 184, no. 2 (2009): 84-85.

Drivers and *passeurs* are recruited locally and are paid—in advance—quite lavishly to transport the cargo, whose content they sometimes are unaware of, to a given location identified by GPS coordinates. Here the goods are either buried under the sand or directly handed over to the person in charge of the subsequent transport segment. Throughout the journey, drivers are to keep constant radio or satellite contact as a form of mutual insurance: armed “area controllers” ensure the security of the convoy while preventing it and its precious load from disappearing from surveillance. Each delivery is reportedly paid an amount estimated at between 3,000 US\$6000. All sources agree that, after a certain number of successful journeys (three to five, depending on the source), drivers are allowed to keep the vehicle.<sup>101</sup>

These quick riches undermined the usual socio-economic relationships that facilitated the delegation of employment and resources, while the arrival of GPS navigation and communication technology allowed smugglers to circumvent the traditional (taxed) routes and rely less on the services of the masters of the land.<sup>102</sup> This undermined the traditional relations both within and between groups, with previously marginalized groups, castes, or even individuals were able to acquire an independent livelihood and source of income free from controlling power structures. This is illustrated by analyzing the predominant ethnic, and sub-ethnic tribal, groups that were active early on in the narco-smuggling industry. Indeed it was not the existing elite or dominate tribes that absorbed this new industry, but vassal classes who were able to seize the opportunity to transform these riches into political power, and thus challenge the traditional order of things.

A significant portion of these narco shipments would pass through Gao towards Algeria via the Tilemsi valley, and area controlled by the Tilemsi Arabs, or else be directed through the other logistical hub of Timbuktu where Arabs of the Berbiche community would facilitate their transit north.<sup>103</sup> While this would largely follow traditional routes long used to transport legal

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<sup>101</sup> Raineri and Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad.”

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

goods such as subsidized fuel and foodstuff, as well as cigarettes and migrants, the operations of these drug shipments took on a much different dynamic. The enormous profits to be gained from this high value, low volume (and thus easily transportable) commodity made the risk of theft much more acute. This often led to upstream cartels in Latin America to demand upfront cash payments as a form of insurance before handing over their precious cargo to Sahelian tribes for transport.<sup>104</sup> These structural pressures served to increase the rate of inner communal violence as the value of control over smuggling routes suddenly skyrocketed, and the heightened cost of entry to the lucrative business (via upstream insurance payments) created incentives to acquire these startup funds through any means necessary. Indeed, the rise in kidnappings that plagued the region beginning in in 2003 by remnants of the Algerian GSPC that had fled to Mali and would begin to form the precursors to AQIM would provide a crucial source of rents that could open the doors to the lucrative narcotics trade.

*katibas* of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) would typically hand over ransom money they had received to drug traffickers as a form of investment. Depending on the situation and the source, up to half the profits generated from drug trafficking would be paid back in kind to the jihadis, via weapons, ammunition, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and other equipment. Traffickers would typically buy arms on behalf of terrorist groups, who could thereby avoid exposing themselves.<sup>105</sup>

In this case the lines between terrorism and crime, the jihadist and the smuggler, become increasingly blurred as many of AQMI's leaders integrating themselves in the communities central to the trafficking of drugs. One of the earliest illustrative examples may arguably be found in the person of Mokhtar BelMokhtar, a GSPC leader throughout the 1990s in Algeria and was known under the moniker "Mr. Marlboro" for his involvement in regional cigarette

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<sup>104</sup> Briscoe, "Crime after Jihad."

<sup>105</sup> Raineri and Strazzari, "State, Succession, and Jihad."

smuggling. “Mr. Marlboro” would soon take on the title of ‘bin laden of the Sahara’ as he was instrumental in aligning elements of the Algerian GSPC with Al Qaeda in the late 1990s and 2000s, and had positioned himself to cash in on the flows of Andean cocaine after settling in the town of Lerneb and marrying the daughter of a prominent Berbiche Arab.<sup>106</sup> From here Belmokhtar was able to move up the smuggling value chain, and move that many suspect was facilitated by his ties to kidnappings, as he negotiated the release of 32 western hostages in 2003 in return for a 5 million Euro ransom.<sup>107</sup>

The early involvement of the Berbiche and Tilemsi Arabs in the drug smuggling trade not only served as an opening for foreign fighters with Islamist ties to infiltrate the social fabric of northern Mali, but it increasingly stressed the local socio-economic balance. As traditional vassal tribes, the economic empowerment of the Berbiche and Tilemsi posed a political threat to the ruling power structures, particularly the Kounta tribe that claim descent from the prophet and have held a dominant, tribute extracting position in northern Mali since the start of the 20th century.<sup>108</sup> This tribal dividing line was also paralleled in the Tuareg community, where the involvement in narco smuggling of traditional vassal class, the Imghad, was tolerated by Bamako in order to offset the power of the Imghad nobles. “Unsurprisingly,” Strazzesi notes, “Kunta and Ifoghas have often joined forces in defense of the status quo among northern Mali’s “white” communities.”<sup>109</sup> Seeking to claim their share of the lucrative business, and re-assert their claim over the *droits de passage* (rights of passage), the Ifoghas began an increasingly assertive campaign to collect taxes on the narco when and where they could. The situation grew

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<sup>106</sup> Wolfram Lacher, “Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel,” WACD Background Paper No. 4, West Africa Commission on Drugs.

<sup>107</sup> Raineri and Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad.”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

increasingly explosive as violence became a prominent tool in this high stakes game of profit and control. As Shaw and Tinti note, “prior to the country’s collapse, much of northern Mali, specifically Kidal, was controlled by an increasingly complex patchwork of militias who sought to collect rents and levy taxes on goods passing through their territory.”<sup>110</sup>

In sum, the injection of a new resource (narcotics) into the region represented an almost immediate diversification of the economic landscape. This diversification creates an increased array of opportunity structures for marginalized actors to gather an independent resource base and challenge the prevailing power structures that were rooted in the pre-existing socio-economic order. The empowerment of the Berbiche and Tiilemsi Arabs, as well as the Imghad Tuareg via their involvement in the cocaine smuggling demonstrates that even the most entrenched social structures can be shaken in response to significant changes in the surrounding resource environment. Indeed, Bencherif observes that while

in certain societies, such as in that of the Tuareg, a degree of rigidity still structures social categories, particularly between the noblemen, vassals and freed slaves. This rigidity, which characterizes other ethnic groups as well, can however be mitigated under certain circumstances: when political and social tensions occur [or] when competition over political or economic resources increase...<sup>111</sup>

As a region where smuggling activity reigns supreme, the displacement of consistent streams of relatively low value goods by high valued narcotics render traditional social ties to places of secondary concern, as the road to quick riches, and the insulating effects this could have on one’s material security, empowered actors to chart their own paths. Whereas the previous socio-economic environment was characterized by a high degree of decentralization

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<sup>110</sup> Mark Shaw and Peter Tinti, “Organized crime and illicit trafficking in northern Mali,” Research Report, Geneva: The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Adib Bencherif and Aurelie Campana, “Alliances of convenience: assessing the dynamics of the Malian insurgency,” in *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no.1 (2017): 126.

and networked power relations rather than centralized hierarchies, it was nonetheless an integrated system held together by deep social bonds that were reproduced through relations of exchange, division of smuggling routes, and cooperative negotiation amongst regional elites. By the mid-2000s however, the traditional tribal hierarchies that comprised the central nodes of these regional networks began to lose their centrality. In this sense the political environment came to more closely align with the type of diffused networks described in chapter three, with marginalized actors able to disentangle themselves from the power of hierarchies and enter new networks that did not demand of them the same type of political allegiances.

This change in the political economic environment in turn sheds light on the interaction of resources and a priori social structures. Rather than a simple quantitative increase in resources leading to political fragmentation, the type of resource that narcotics represent (in the form of smuggled goods), significantly structures the way in which such fragmentation takes place. The high cost of entry and transregional ties that were necessary to link into the narco-smuggling business necessitated the complicity of state authorities that would provide some level of guarantee for the products unencumbered passage from the West African coast up into the Sahara. The existence of an extensive Malian shadow state involved in the trafficking of drugs has been well documented, particularly in the aftermath of the “Air Cocaine” incident which reportedly carried around 10 tons of cocaine, or “roughly equivalent to one per cent of the entire yearly global production of cocaine, or over one-third of Britain’s entire yearly consumption.”<sup>112</sup> Reports indicate that Malian authorities deliberately bungled the investigation, resulting in the release of all suspects and no charges ever being brought and “raised suspicions of collusion with traffickers at the highest levels of the state.”<sup>113</sup> This state complicity in turn favored the more

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<sup>112</sup> Briscoe, “Crime after Jihad,” 38.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 39.

marginalized actors in the north as Bamako allowed, or facilitated, their involvement in the industry in the hopes of balancing against the traditional nobility who played a key role in previous rebellions.

From the north on down, opportunistic jihadists funneled in from surrounding countries, and even outside of the region, to seize the opportunity provided by the industry. As ... notes, “it is the way in which a high-value, hyper-modern and globalized form of business activity was put in the service of traditional forms of political and social organization that helps account for its destructive legacy.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the roots of Mali’s regional and dynamics global war economy were taking hold. The schisms that formed during this period became crucial fault lines over which the impending conflict would play out, while the transformed political economic landscape would structure the rebel’s demands against the state constrain their capacity to act collectively and maintain unity behind a common political vision.

The following chapter will outline the events of 2012 and beyond and discuss how this altered resource environment produced qualitative differences in this conflict in comparison with the 1990s. This will produce answers to several questions pertaining to the apparent paradox of a ‘nomadic state’ that stood as a central demand of the initial Tuareg insurgency, and the role that borders would play creating the smuggling markets that have structured the interests and capacities of specific actors throughout the conflict and thus produced the organizational structure of the northern opposition. This analysis will finally allow for the migrant smuggling economy to be placed within its appropriate context, and ultimately isolate the specific ways in which it has altered the conflict dynamics in Mali.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 22.



## Chapter 5

### 2012 and the Emergence of Migrant Smuggling

The events of 2012 seemed to many another reverberation of Mali's long structural conflict between the north and south. However, as the so called "third Tuareg rebellion" unfolded, it appeared that the country was dealing with something quite different than ever before. First, the rapid advance of the northern rebels, under the banner of the Tuareg led MNLA, shocked even the Malian state, which would soon experience a coup d'état largely in response to frustrations over the inept handling of the rapidly deteriorating crisis in the north on the part of the military's middle and low ranks. This increased military capacity occurred in conjunction with the return of the many Tuareg fighters from Libya following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, who pulled a stream of sophisticated and modern weaponry in their wake. This quick military success also relied a second key difference, which revolved around the 'alliance of convenience' made between the MNLA and the jihadi groups that had gained a foothold in the north throughout the previous decade. Armed with a cadre of devoted fighters and flushed with cash, this 'unholy alliance' between the Tuareg MNLA and the Al Qaeda breakaway groups known as MUJAO formed an unstoppable force that soon succeeded in expelling all semblances of state authority from the north; taking complete control over the region by April 2012.<sup>115</sup>

As in 1990, this initial unity would soon dissolve into a collection of competing visions that largely followed the faultlines of tribe and ethnicity. In addition, these divisions also reflected the respective 'modes of production' of these groups as they followed a course that was

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<sup>115</sup> Bencherif and Campana, "Alliance of Convenience."

most amenable to the structural needs of their means of extraction. These competing visions have been broken down into three main strands, which themselves represent another break with past conflicts. The first is that of a sovereign and independent state of Azawad in the north, which MNLA leaders declared on April 6th of 2012.<sup>116</sup> This event was indeed novel, as previous Tuareg uprisings primarily focused on increased autonomy and lack of state meddling in their nomadic livelihoods. In addition, the idea itself seemed paradoxical.

The claim for independent statehood is at cross-purposes with the traditional picture of the Tuareg as the quintessentially uprooted community, nomadic people par excellence with no attachment whatsoever to the lands they roam. Indeed, one might well wonder about the meaning of the armed uprising that, in the early months of 2012, mobilized a nomadic national identity in a military offensive that led to the proclamation of the independent state of Azawad.<sup>117</sup>

According to Rainari and Strazzari, the answer to this riddle can be found in the transformed political economic landscape described in the previous section. With the emergence of narco-trafficking, “the geopolitical value of control of desert routes has skyrocketed, especially in the remotest areas of Mali.”<sup>118</sup> This not only created a market for armed protection, but also the enforcement of borders and traditional *droits de passage* that the Tuareg elite were keen on re-establishing. With these developments, the conditions for state-making were present, though competitive elements in the north would rise up and contest the claims of the MNLA.

The second competing vision was that of a regional Islamic state in accordance with Sharia law that was advanced by the MNLA’s initial allies and later rivals--MUJAO and Ansar Din. What on the surface may appear as a simple incidence of ideological divergence, actually

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<sup>116</sup> Ibrahim Maiga, “Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the labels,” *Institute for Security Studies 17*, 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Francesco Strazzari, “Azawad and the rights of passage: the role of illicit trade in the logic of armed group formation in northern Mali,” NOREF Report, 2015.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

reveals the extent to which the rebel fragmentation was being driven by material factors. Briscoe notes of Mali that “very few countries have experienced an armed insurgency so strongly rooted in criminal networks, no more so than in the case of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).”<sup>119</sup> With strong ties to the Tellemsi-Arab and Fulani communities, whose involvement in the narco-smuggling economy was documented in the previous section, MUJAO can be seen as an attempt to preserve the interests of these traders from the threat of Tuareg domination. Indeed, the case of the city of Gao provides a stark illustration of the tensions building up between the MNLA and MUJAO as their cooperative occupation of the city quickly broke down until the former was eventually expelled by the latter. While MNLA fighters largely relied on their traditional mode of accumulation and financing (ie: banditry and theft), the MUJAO used their narco-funds to purchase the loyalty of many influential segments of the Gao population whose interests they intended to serve. MUJAO’S tough imposition of ‘law and order’ in the form of a particularly draconian version of Sharia law can at once be seen as a direct attack on the MNLA rank and file whom themselves did a good portion of the looting, but also a way to gain the support of the local business community by laying down the structural scaffolding under which high value commercial trading could continue:

Soon MUJAO gained the backing of Gao’s *cercle des notables*, the most widely recognized local representative body. This institution’s membership is slightly but significantly different from the traditional leadership inasmuch as it is entirely informal and open to non-aristocratic members of civil society: wealthy merchants. Three notables volunteered to act as mediators between MUJAO and the local population throughout the period of Islamist control over the city. They were Ali Badi Maiga, Mohamed Baye Maiga, and (once again) Mohamed Ould Mataly: two local Songhais and one Tilemsi Arab. The three men are all wealthy, their fortunes allegedly linked to illicit trafficking and criminal activities and in need of armed protection.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Briscoe, “Crime after Jihad,” 22.

<sup>120</sup> Raineri and Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad,”

MUJAO's military targets also prove illustrative, as they expended much effort to attack Algerian border stations in order to facilitate illicit commerce, as well as "keep the frontiers open" and free of the cumbersome taxation of the Kidal Tuareg.

Local elites connected to drug cartels, many of them Arabs, feared the prospect of border control enforced by the Tuareg in a new state and thus feared the State of Azawad altogether. As a result, they decided to wage war against it, or at least to support implicitly those who opposed its establishment. Against a backdrop of religious zeal, the ideologies of free trade and global, borderless jihadism went hand-in-hand.<sup>121</sup>

The third vision more closely resembled remnants of the 1990s, as local militias and schismatic Tuareg and Arab groups have aligned themselves with the Malian government against the project of separatism and present themselves as adherents to a more explicitly Malian political identity. This third pillar is largely comprised of sedentary communities with divergent interests and historical enmities with the nomadic Tuareg. Many of the roots of these fighters date back to the Ganda Koy, and later Ganda Iso, militias formed in previous conflicts to protect the land and interests of black sedentary populations. Formed under the common banner of the CFMR in July of 2012, "the main objective of this grouping, which formed as a result of the 2012 crisis, was to reconquer territories, which had fallen into the hands first of armed rebel groups and then of jihadist groups."<sup>122</sup> Indeed, territory and land has always been a crucial element of life for these sedentary communities reliant on the agriculture it can produce, however as a result of the change that occurred in the north's war economy this land was now increasingly coveted by Tuareg and Arab traders. The crucial difference now was that rather than simply retaining the ability to move goods across these territories, a right that could always be negotiated, these traders (smugglers) now wanted complete control over the land so as to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Maiga, "Armed Groups in Mali," 4.

maximize the profits that can be extracted throughout the transport process, especially at the crossing of borders. Resistance to such a project made the CFMR a natural ally of Bamako, and indeed “their creation and, especially, their participation in the negotiations, were encouraged by the transitional government to counter the influence of the MNLA and HCUA [described below].”<sup>123</sup>

These three visions have formed a sort tripartite grouping of actors jockeying for position in the peace process. The main opposition groups have organized under the umbrella of the CMA in order to negotiate as a united front against the Bamako. The CMA coalition is comprised of the MNLA and the HCUA--a breakaway Tuareg group led by the tribal chief of the Ifoghas of Kidal--as well as the CMFPR II, the MAA-dissident, and the CPA. While the grouping represents a broad set of communities and interests, the general motivating principle is rooted in the desire for an independent Azawad. The MNLA, HCUA, and CPA are largely led and composed of Ifoghas Tuareg, with battles over leadership leading to cracks in the initially united front; while CMFPR II and MAA-dissident groups broke away from the mainstream organizations representing the interests of the Songhai/ Fulani and Arab communities, respectively. This coalition is contrasting with the Platform of groups aligned with Bamako and committed to national unity (see table below).<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<b>CMA</b>	<b>Platform</b>
MNLA	GATIA
HCUA	CMFPR I
CMFPR II	MAA
MAA Dissident	
CPA	

The GATIA is largely organized to represent the interest of the Imghad Tuareg, whose involvement in the illicit trafficking economy was tolerated by the state. The CMFPR I and MAA represent other groups that developed extensive ties to drug smuggling networks; namely the Fulani and Berbiche Arabs, respectively.<sup>125</sup> Thus what all these groups of the platform share is their traditionally marginalized social status, and a newly empowered capacity to challenge this prevailing social structure via access to narco-smuggling revenues. The security of this industry, and thus of their livelihood, in turn required a certain level of cooperation with the Malian state that goes some way to explaining their current alignment with Bamako. In this way, the division between the independence leaning CMA and pro-Bamako Platform can be viewed as being laid over the socio-economic fissures that emerged from the arrival of drug flows prior to

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

2012; with the traditional tribal elite attempting to assert their right to collect taxes and tribute from the trade, a process that eventually leads to conceptions of their rightful sovereignty over the north. In contrast, the previously marginalized groups are aligning with (and at some level encouraged by the state to facilitate the movement of illicit flows from the West African coast--all the while sidelining the previously ‘troublesome’ actors of the north--namely the Ifoghas Tuareg whom had led most previous rebellions. These political economic forces have also been active at the inner-group level. Speaking of the fragmentation of the MAA, African conflict analyst Andrew McGregor observes:

The mainstream MAA is dominated by members of the Lamhar clan, a group whose recent prosperity and large new homes in Gao are attributed to their prominent role in moving drug shipments through northern Mali. Some reports have characterized the split in the MAA as being directly related to a struggle for control of drug-trafficking routes through northern Mali.<sup>126</sup>

The transformative effects of the drug smuggling economy have thus played a key role in determining the political dimensions of the post 2012 crisis in Mali. From structuring the demands of various rebel groups against the state, as well as empowering previously marginalized actors to pursue their own agendas independent of the prevailing power networks, the current conflict dynamics in Mali can be seen as emergent properties of the surrounding resource environment. Whereas the conflict in the 1990s was driven primarily by demands for increased autonomy and development funds from the state in Bamako, the current conflict has been characterized by demands for independence and complete sovereign control over a region whose political and economic value has skyrocketed as a result of changes in the smuggling

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<sup>126</sup> Andrew McGregor, “Anarchy in Azawad: A Guide to Non-State Armed Groups in Northern Mali,” in *Terrorism Monitor* 15, No.2 (2017).

economy. In turn, the composition of the opposition shows a much higher degree of fragmentation, with four officially recognized factions in 1990 vs eight today (not counting the various jihadi groups whom are secluded from formal peace negotiations as well as the numerous self-defense militias that seem to multiply daily.) Analyzing the tribal and ethnic makeup of these new factions reveals that they have largely emerged from marginalized segments of northern society that have been engaged in the narco-smuggling economy; suggesting that the increased fragmentation of the northern opposition is in part a product of changes in the economic environment.

This is the political economic landscape that the migrant smuggling economy would enter as the flows of migrants transiting Mali would increase greatly throughout the course of the conflict. Largely a result of exterior events, in particular the collapse of the Libyan state and the cessation of the coastline monitoring, the increase of migrant and refugee flows from Sub-Saharan Africa attempting to reach Europe would become a fundamental pillar Mali's war economy. Research shows that rather than overtaking and supplanting the narco-smuggling economy, the migrant smuggling economy would emerge and reinforce developments that were firmly underway, whilst redirecting or slowing other trends. The following section will move to a detailed analysis of the migrant smuggling economy in Mali and outline the ways in which it has altered the political economic landscape and conflict dynamics of the country. Just as narco-smuggling represented a certain type of smuggling activity that carried its own structural necessities that in turn shaped the surrounding political environment, migrant smuggling also is a unique activity in its own right, and it is these specificities that account for the ways in which it has altered the conflict dynamics in Mali.



## The Emergence of the Migrant Smuggling Economy

The movement of migrants across the Sahara and Sahel zone has been a fundamental aspect of the regional economy for centuries; a coping mechanism that has become all the more vital in the face of building climatic and demographic pressures. This movement was traditionally part and parcel of the broader trans-Saharan smuggling caravans that trafficked in subsidized goods, cigarettes, and other relatively low value commodities.<sup>127</sup> In this way the smuggling of migrants was initially an activity that worked within, and further solidified, the traditional social bonds that animated socio-economic life across northern Mali. However, as outlined in the previous section, this equilibrium was upended following the decentralization process emerging from the conflict in the 1990s and the subsequent arrival of narcotics in the smuggling economy of the region. Due to the high value and trans-regional supply lines associated with the smuggling of cocaine in particular, the narco-smuggling economy entailed a number of structural necessities that had the effect of re-forming the social and political bonds within northern Mali, and between the north and the south. To review, this was the necessary involvement of high level state authorities to secure the passage of the precious cargo across populated border areas (such as in between Guinea and Mali; then subsequently up to Bamako and beyond) as well as aerial routes that would deliver cocaine shipments directly to the north of Mali (ie: “Air Cocaine”). These links with complicit state authorities in turn gave some northern groups advantages over others to thrive in the industry, while the selective engagement with marginalized groups, such as the Berber Arabs, Fulani and Imghad Tuareg, on the part of

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<sup>127</sup> Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni Janssen, “Turning the tide: the politics of irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya,” Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2017.

Bamako allowed the state to manage the political balance of power in the north from a distance. Indeed, “these activities had become, by late 2011, an intrinsic part of the way businesses, politicians and armed groups in north Mali operated, and a channel through which the central state in Bamako managed its relations with the north.”<sup>128</sup>

Thus, the smuggling networks that have emerged to cash in on the increasing flows of migrants that the region has witnessed since the collapse of the Libyan state were born of an environment that had already undergone significant “criminalization”. The previous modes of movement that had traditionally characterized the steady flow of migrants in the past were reliant on social bonds that had been firmly broken, and these migrant flows were quickly incorporated into Mali’s war economy. The migrants that take the Malian path towards North Africa are generally young males seeking employment opportunities, and largely originate from nearby West African countries such as Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, and Benin.<sup>129</sup> While they often hail from other ECOWAS countries, and thus maintain the right of free movement from their origin countries to Mali, these migrants nonetheless must rely on the services of smugglers to navigate the perilous landscape and cross the southern borders of the North African states (i.e. Algeria.) What largely begins as a voluntary case of economic migration (though characterized by increasing sense of material desperation and social isolation), the journey of these migrants across the region is increasingly perilous and characterized by exploitation as political and social conditions have deteriorated.

Smuggling services have become more sophisticated and routes increasingly contested in ways that track with broader changes across the region as the control of migrant flows become

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<sup>128</sup> Briscoe, “Crime after Jihad,” 15.

<sup>129</sup> Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni Janssen, “Turning the tide: the politics of irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya,” Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2017.

increasingly politicized, and in the case of Mali, militarized. As Shaw et al note in one of the earliest surveys of migrant smuggling across the region in 2014:

Traditionally smugglers have been locals with special skills or contacts acting alone, and usually not part of an organized transnational criminal structure. However, recent trends show that smuggling activities are becoming more sophisticated and are increasingly evolving into professional networks, as specialized skills and resources are becoming more necessary to reach Europe.<sup>130</sup>

Analyzing the ways in which migrant smuggling has been absorbed by Mali's war economy, and where it has altered it, can be difficult. However, research is emerging that suggest some trends and structural pressures that the migrant smuggling economy is placing on the political relations in the north and the dynamics of the conflict. Firstly, migrant smuggling remains a relatively low value, labor intensive industry that tends to dull the motivation for armed actors to engage in it directly. Rather, most armed groups derive revenues from the flows indirectly via taxation at checkpoints, extortion and kidnapping of migrants, and offers of protection services. The opportunity to tax checkpoints has been a boon to local militias, as impromptu checkpoints often emerge where armed militants are able to line their pockets with cash extorted from bus passengers. These checkpoints require little less than a brandished firearm, which suggest that they require little overarching organizational coordination and thus provide a relatively easy opportunity for rank and file soldiers to supplement their income or provide their basic needs, thus lowering the operating costs of local militias. Along the route from Bamako to Gao, travelers encounter a number of checkpoints where they are forced to pay 1,000 to 5,000 CFA (approx. \$2-10) per passenger (total trip).<sup>131</sup> Further north, as migrants

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<sup>130</sup> Tuesday Reitano, Laura Adel, and Mark Shaw, "Smuggled Futures: The dangerous path of the migrant from Africa to Europe," Research Report, Geneva: The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2014, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Molenaar and Janssen, "Turning the tide," 16.

continue the trek north of Gao to Algeria, prices rise significantly as migrants are demanded to pay around 5,000 CFA per person, per checkpoint.<sup>132</sup> It was reported that the number of migrants traversing this route numbered in the hundreds per week, representing a very significant stream of revenues (over 12 million CFA, or \$22,000 a week) for the groups controlling the route. These northern passages largely follow the traditional routes used by Tuareg traders as they moved goods to and from Algeria, and have thus allowed the Ifoghas Tuareg, represented by the MNLA and HCUA under the banner of the CMA, to extract significant revenues from the flows. However, whereas the routes may be traditional, other elements surrounding the movement of migrants are more rooted in Mali's current political economic environment.

Armed groups have also marketed their violence to smugglers in the form of protection services for migrant convoys that are increasingly targeted for theft and kidnapping. The targeting of migrants demonstrates that way in which the criminalization of the region, as well as the increased flows of migrants, has transformed migrant flows from a the level of low level smuggling activity to a source of rent coveted by armed groups. The kidnapping model of fundraising that as behind the success of many of the region's jihadi groups in the 2000s appears to have inspired an increasing number of actors to view migrants as kidnapping targets.

Reports...indicate that migrants are being kept hostage and brutalised when they reach border posts. Smugglers call the migrants' families and request 300,000 CFA (450 EUR) to secure their release. This money is sent to a Bamako contact of the smugglers, who collects the money and sends a message to the smugglers that the migrant may be released. This development is reminiscent of the situation in Libya, where state absence has given rise to similar exploitative practices.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 25-26.

The prolific financial opportunities afforded by extorting migrants gives a selection advantage to the more violently inclined actors that are less committed to the social norms governing the region. Speaking of these encounters, one member of the international community notes, “when you encounter the bad ones, they steal everything from you—the good ones, you just have to pay them off to continue your drive.”<sup>134</sup> Determining who precisely these ‘bad ones’ are, and whether they are individual criminals or maintain ties with politico-military groups is lacking in any hard evidence, however circumstantial evidence and recent history suggest some links with jihadi groups.

Aside from checkpoints and extortion, revenues from migrant flows also enter the regional economy in other forms. At the various nodes in the transport process, migrants settle for a period of time to await further transport or work until they can afford the pay for the next leg of the journey. In Gao for instance, migrants reside in various ghettos throughout the city as they wait, where they are in turn charged for their stay, often referred to as the *droit de ghetto*, by the “chairman” of the neighborhood. These chairmen comprise a significant element of the business elite of the city, making the “facilitation of irregular migration...part of the socioeconomic fabric of Gao.”<sup>135</sup> Prominent ‘*passuers*’, those whom interact directly with the migrants and facilitate their logistical needs, often overlap with prominent leaders of armed groups and form a complex web of political, economic, and social relations that are animated by migrant money. Indeed, research is emerging that illustrates these relations between smugglers and specific armed groups, as one recent report identifies the case of “one prominent businessman and transport company owner active in the human smuggling trade, who shall

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 20

remain unnamed here, who confidential intelligence sources tie directly to the GATIA leadership.”<sup>136</sup>

The role of these transport/bus companies in facilitating these flows in turn reveals links with the Malian state and the politicization of migrant flows. As Mali is a member of the ECOWAS zone, which secures the right of free movement across the signatory West African states, most migrants utilize commercial bus companies from surrounding countries to Bamako, then from Bamako on to Gao where they are transferred down the line to continue their journey through the more perilous northern region. Research indicates that the owners of these regional bus companies are often involved in larger criminal economies. “In a recent incident involving NOUR transport, for example, one of the company’s buses was stopped by Malian customs and was found to be transporting 25 ammunition boxes from Senegal into Mali.”<sup>137</sup> Indeed, one regular traveler from Bamako to Gao reported to this researcher that people a number of bus companies exist for the trip to the north of the capital, in which the previously mentioned NOUR transport usually takes the longest, as the buses stop at all checkpoints where travelers are forced to hand over approximately 1000 CFA (approx. \$2 USD) a person. Curiously, other more expensive companies exist that travel with an armed guard and pass straight through the checkpoints. It is unclear what sort of arrangements these companies have with the militias, “but most people figure there must be some sort of agreement...like a kickback or something that these companies pay for free passage.”<sup>138</sup> This suggests the involvement of forces within the shadow state that facilitate and profit from the migrant flows, as these bus company owners “form part of a group of privileged elites with strong ties to the political center, whose position in

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>138</sup> Personal Interview, Bamako, March 2018.

power relies on economic activities that supersede the lines between licit and illicit endeavors.”<sup>139</sup>

Shadow state activity is arguably more pronounced at the lower levels of authority, seen in the issuance of false passports and bribes accepted by customs officials. As a Malian passport will grant visa free passage into Algeria, they are particularly valued by irregular migrants seeking to reach North Africa, which creates a strong demand for false Malian ID cards and passports that are readily met by opportunistic public officials.

Corruption and bribes occur along the various stages of this procedure and involve officials at different levels. An estimated 10 to 15 percent of Malian passports are issued to migrants in this manner [illegally], with prices ranging between 50 and 200 EUR. According to a high-ranked member of the international community, rooting out the false passport manufacturing industry is complicated, as ‘there is always somebody to take the spot of those who have been arrested.’<sup>140</sup>

Thus the migrant smuggling economy is defined by a number of political economies that vary by region. In the southern and central region between Bamako and Gao the smuggling networks are characterized by the involvement of the shadow state and local business elites, which evidence also suggest includes ties with select armed groups--specifically the GATIA. This largely maps on the previous political relations that emerged from the narco-economy, with government complicity acting to favor Bamako’s preferred military actors further north. Around the smuggling hubs of Gao and Timbuktu, local passuers and business elite reign over a increasingly contested urban space for the business of housing, transporting, and indeed exploiting migrants. Further north, control over smuggling routes remain contested, much like the drug routes, as the flows and value of migrants have increased. The traditional Tuareg elite

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<sup>139</sup> Molenaar and Janseen, “Turning the tide,” 16.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 17.

have indeed benefited greatly from these flows due to their control over these droits de passage near the Algerian border, however they have been unable to monopolize the trade as the GATIA (largely made up of Imghad) have been shown to also be heavily involved in the industry and thus pose competition to the Ifoghas.

This political economy in the north most directly attest to this thesis' contention that the networked and decentralized nature of this industry has facilitated fragmentation and prolongation of the conflict. The Tuareg were unable to maintain unity as the nature of the economic environment changed to open up new avenues of accumulation, first drug smuggling and now migrants, independent of the prevailing hierarchies. Indeed, comparing the conflict in the 1990s with the current one highlights the degree to which this inner-Tuareg chasm has expanded. While schisms regarding leadership and strategy certainly persisted throughout the previous rebellion, a fully independent Tuareg faction capable of not only charting its own path, but in fact taking a stance directly against the traditional Tuareg nobility never emerged. In this way the GATIA represents a qualitatively different element of this conflict, as the factionalism, in the Tuareg case, moved beyond the narrow lanes of personality or strategic disagreements to a full-fledged break with opposing groups pursuing contrasting aims. This intra-ethnic fragmentation traces through the Arab and sedentary populations as well, seen in the MAA/ MAA-dissident and CFMPR I/ CFMPR II breaks, respectively. While the fragmentation throughout the previous conflict largely took place at the inner-ethnic level, this intra-ethnic fragmentation highlights the degree to which diffusionary pressures has have increased across the Malian landscape.

The role of the migrant smuggling economy in altering this landscape can be analyzed by identifying a few of the main trends that were transforming the political economic landscape of



Mali prior to the outbreak of conflict in 2012 as a result of the infusion of narcotic flows; then determining where migrant smuggling re-enforced, or tempered, these fundamental changes. The first main trend was that the geopolitical value of land skyrocketed as a result of the cocaine smuggling and the desire of groups to tax it. It seems quite clear that migrant flows re-enforced this trend as they represented an infusion of resources that further increased the value of the lands they traversed. Secondly, there was increasing alignment with the state by marginalized groups directly involved in drug trafficking. This trend additionally appears to have been re-enforced, as there appears to be evidence of collusion along southern segment of route (Bamako-Gao), between business elites (mainly bus and hotel owners) --whom are naturally tied to Malian political authorities, and armed groups in the platform, particularly the GATIA. This shadow state alliance in turn led to the third pre-war trend, which was a distinct shift in the balance of power towards these marginalized groups, and away from the traditional elite, whom for historical and strategic reasons were not natural allies of the state. The arrival of extensive migrant flows appears to have blunted this trend and the relative power decline of the regional elites, whom were able to profit quite well due to their control over the northern sections of the route, especially along the border with Algeria. Indeed, the MNLA, was all but done until the French intervention in 2013, an event many note as having significantly disrupted the regional flows of cocaine and eliminated much of the shadow state support or facilitation of it.<sup>141</sup> Following 2013 however the MNLA's fortunes changed, as they were able to regroup and now maintain a strong position at the negotiating table and control over their traditional stronghold of Kidal. More research would need to be conducted in order to link this development with the

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<sup>141</sup> Gregory Chauzel and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis," Conflict Research Unit Report, The Netherlands: Clingendael Netherlands Institute for International Relations, 2015.

emergence of prolific migrant flows through traditionally MNLA strongholds, though the timing of their arrival and the extent of the revenues derived from them along this section of the route suggest a causal relation.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This thesis has sought to begin investigating the political ramifications of the recent increase in migrant flows and the prolific smuggling economy across North Africa and the Sahara. From the beginning, it was mindful of the fact that these effects may articulate differently across different political contexts, and thus chose to focus specifically on the effects of migrant smuggling on conflict. This proved to be a worthy starting point given the natural entanglement between migration and conflict, and the need to understand the ways in which both phenomenon created and reinforced each other. Such an analysis is timely as contemporary commentary and policy focus regarding ongoing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East view both conflict and irregular migration as complementary concerns. Indeed, in an era of unprecedented global connectivity, rising inequalities, and decreasing costs of movement, contemporary migrant and refugee flows have reached levels not seen since World War II. As all of these trends are slated to continue to solidify into the future, not to mention the compounding effects of climate change, understanding the effects of the emerging ‘age of migration’ on issues of peace and security is an urgent task.

This final chapter will highlight a number of conclusions that have emerged throughout the course of this research regarding the effects of migrant smuggling on the conflict in Mali. As this research is exploratory in nature and a part of an ongoing effort to gain a more holistic understanding of the interplay between migrant smuggling and the politics of the region, these conclusions are somewhat tentative. Further, any case study analysis faces the challenge of generalizing any findings beyond the specific circumstances of the research subject (Mali in this case). However, giving due consideration to the pre-existing social, political, and economic

landscape allows the researcher to discern any changes in this landscape that could be attributed to the arrival of the migrant smuggling economy. This has been the guiding methodological focus of this thesis, and it will hopefully serve as a useful tool for identifying a number of common pressures that affect political systems in areas where migrants smuggling thrives.

This section will begin with reviewing the effects of migrant smuggling on the conflict in Mali that has served as the analytical heart of this thesis. This analysis has allowed for the type of in-depth investigation as to the effect of migration flows on conflict that has largely been lacking from existing scholarship. It will then proceed to discuss the effect of this economy on issues of governance. The involvement of the state in the illicit economy of Mali-- first in the trafficking of drugs, then the smuggling of migrants, proved to be a crucial element in the story of how Mali's evolving smuggling economy impacted the politics of the north. Analyzing these effects on two levels of politics--namely that of state governance and of armed groups--presents a relatively broad spectrum of political life that can reveal some general pressures emanating from the regional migrant smuggling economy.

In terms of this thesis' framework and hypothesis that the decentralized nature of this migrant smuggling has contributed to the fragmented nature of conflict in Mali, there appears to be suggestive evidence. While perhaps it was not the cause, as that story seems to date to a few years earlier to the arrival of narcotic flows, it does appear to have reinforced and prolonged the fragmented nature of the opposition. Here we have a case of multiple opposing factions of a conflict deriving consistent and sustained revenues from a common resource, and it is the nature of this resource that one group's access is not necessarily contingent on taking it from the other, as these migrant flows traverse multiple regions and leave a consistent stream of revenues in their wake. This prevents any one group from capturing the industry and translating this

economic centralization into political control and battlefield dominance. As a particularly salient case, the recent severity of the Tuareg split between the Ifoghas and Imghad tribes--built upon structural social fault lines that date back centuries--attest to political ramifications of this economic transformation and the attendant increase in opportunities to challenge existing power structures. While these structural divisions have been latent in Tuareg society for centuries, never before have these faultlines rumbled so severely with the creation of two independently viable armed political organizations competing for alternative visions for north. Crucially, the ability to derive independent revenues from smuggling has allowed the Ifoghas to slip out from the material leverage that the Tuareg nobility traditionally held.

This ability to cultivate and sustain an independent resource base was largely derived from the nature of the resources that were being smuggled. Both drug and migrant smuggling have not required the type of large scale cooperation between tribes that would ultimately lead to an integrated industry and political cooperation. GPS and communication technology has allowed smugglers to bypass the traditional elite on whom they previously relied for safe passage across the unforgiving desert landscape, and thus undercut the material linkages that previously sustained social hierarchies.

In turn, the state would play a crucial role in facilitating the flows of these resources, and dictating who the main beneficiaries would be. Throughout the emergence of drug trafficking, it was the strategic mission of the state to divert the industry through the marginalized tribes of the north in order to neutralize the power of the traditional elite, mainly the Ifoghas Tuareg, whom they had historical reasons to fear. This proved quite effective in altering the balance of power in the north, as the nature of drug trafficking necessitated the active involvement of the state at the highest levels. In contrast, state complicity in migrant smuggling appears to take place at the

lower levels of local officials, customs officers, and bureaucrats printing false IDs and passports. This blunts the ability of the state to truly act as gatekeepers for this industry and direct it towards their strategic goals. This may account for the resurgence of the Ifoghas dominated MNLA following the disruption of the drug trafficking networks with the French intervention in 2013 and subsequent arrival of large flows of irregular migrants through their territory.

These varying levels of state involvement in turn reflect the different structural necessities of the industries, with migrant smuggling only requiring the complicity of lower level bureaucrats and local officials. This difference in turn suggests the independent effects of the migrant smuggling industry on the conflict, as the diffused nature of the industry and inability of the state to strategically direct it allows for the empowerment of irredentist groups, the MNLA in this case, and could go some way to accounting for the solidification of rebel fragmentation derived from these independent resource bases. More research is needed to validate this latter proposition, particularly regarding the role of migrant smuggling revenues in the resurgence of MNLA strength following the French intervention in 2013.

Thus in order to discern the independent effects of migrant smuggling on the conflict, it has been necessary to place the industry within the context of the broader smuggling economy and the socio-economic transformations that were taking place in response to the emergence of drug trafficking. In one sense, both drug trafficking and migrant smuggling can be grouped together as two forms of smuggling that have worked against the grain of traditional tribal relations, and lent themselves to significant politicization in the forms of state corruption and exploitation by armed political factions. On the other hand, the varying levels of state involvement account for differences in terms of how the industries are controlled from the top, with migrant smuggling representing a more decentralized and diffused activity whose

beneficiaries are dictated more by geography than state direction. This could go some way towards accounting for the protractedness of the conflict as the segmented nature of the route system has allowed opposing groups, namely the MNLA (Ifoghas) and GATIA (Imghad) to maintain viability through extraction of this common resource that heretofore has proven replenishable. In the case of the MNLA and other local militias, it appears to have entrenched their irredentism and decreased their incentives for reconciliation with the state through the formation of their own “lucrative local smuggling fiefdoms.”<sup>142</sup>

The degree to which these developments are specific the Malian case, or representative of general mechanisms that would articulate themselves across varying political and social contexts, is the next question to untangle in order to discern how the migrant smuggling industry is affecting the region. As this thesis has argued that the effects of the industry are largely derived from its structural characteristics – mainly the fragmented nature of the networks and minimal need for high level state complicity – there is reason to believe that this economy will produce common pressures across a range of contexts. So long as the industry remains defined by economic decentralization, the political landscape may likewise be subject to decentralization pressures. In terms of conflict, this decentralization occurs in the form of increased factionalism amongst armed groups; a proposition that could be further tested through the incorporation of Libya as a case study. Likewise, the implications of the industry in terms of governance and lower levels of corruption, or the ‘hollowing out of the state from within’ would find a ready-made case in Niger, where migrant flows typically traverse more urbanized areas with a stronger state presence. Comparing these three cases would allow for a broader analysis of the effect of the migrant smuggling industry across the spectrum of political organizations, from armed

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

militant groups to the state itself, and thus lead to generalizable conclusions regarding the macro-effects of large irregular migration movements, and the smuggling networks that emerge to facilitate them, on the political life of this most vulnerable region. Indeed, further research is needed to both solidify the conclusion of this thesis that the migrant smuggling economy has contributed to factionalism in the northern Mali conflict, as well as derive larger findings regarding its impact on the region as a whole.



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