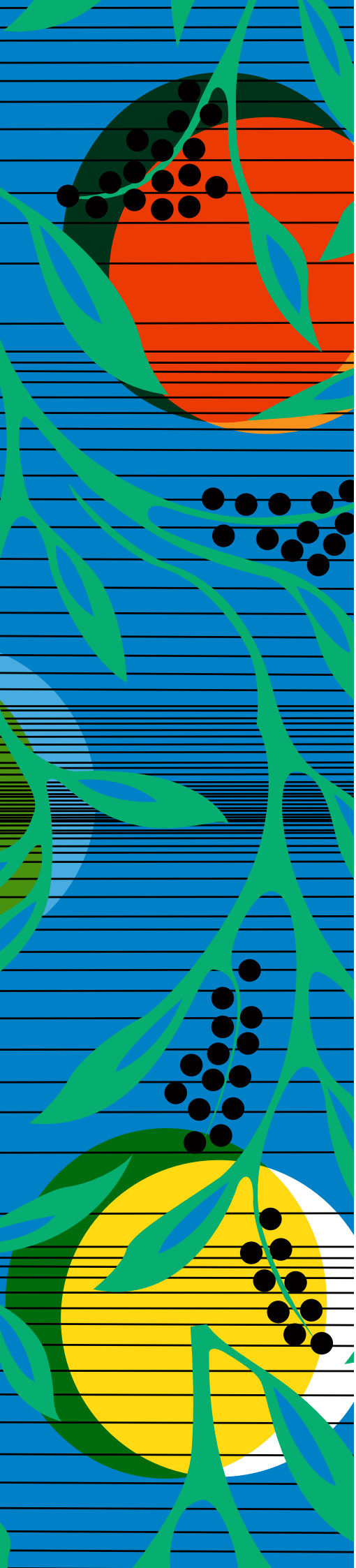

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POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS WITH JIHADISTS IN ALGERIA AND THE SAHEL

WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

October 2018 **No. 18**

SAHEL AND WEST AFRICA Club Secretariat

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BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

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POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS WITH JIHADISTS IN ALGERIA AND THE SAHEL

This paper has been prepared by

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BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

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ABSTRACT

Military operations have not prevented the spread of jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, particularly in Mali. While some Sahelian elites favour dialogue with jihadists, hoping to negotiate political settlements that reduce or end violence, past political settlements have sometimes set the stage for future conflict. This paper analyses past settlements with jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel, distinguishing between "stabilising settlements" that remove fighters from the battlefield versus "delaying settlements" that allow jihadists to accumulate resources and recruits. Even stabilising settlements carry downsides, particularly when they push jihadists into neighbouring states. The paper also analyses recent efforts in Mali to conduct dialogue with two leading jihadists, Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa. The paper assesses that these efforts have faltered due to logistical problems and the state's ambivalence, rather than due to ideological factors. Although renewed dialogue is more likely to fail than succeed, the paper recommends making further attempts.

Keywords: rebellion, jihadism, peace negotiations, Sahel, Sahara, Mali, Al-Qaeda
JEL Classification: F51, N47

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SWAC's mission is to promote regional policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people in the Sahel and West Africa. Its objectives are to: i) Improve the regional governance of food and nutrition security. ii) Improve the understanding of ongoing transformations in the region and their policy implications through regional, spatial and forward-looking analyses.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Some of the groups are listed by their French acronym.

AIS	Islamic Salvation Army
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination of Movements of Azawad
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FIS	Islamic Salvation Front
FLM	Macina Liberation Front
GIA	Armed Islamist Group
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HCIM	High Islamic Council of Mali
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa-al-Muslimin'
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Military operations have not prevented the spread of jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, particularly in Mali. Although France's Operation Serval broke jihadists' control over northern Malian cities in 2013, jihadists regrouped in remote areas. Since 2015, jihadist attacks have increased in both impact and frequency. High profile attacks have occurred in Mali's capital Bamako and Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou. Pervasive insecurity has taken hold in northern and central Mali, and the tri-border zone between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. An interlocking set of security force deployments comprising France's counterterrorism mission Operation Barkhane, the United Nation's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the European Union Training Mission, and most recently the G-5 Sahel Joint Force has not halted the violence. Indeed, foreign security forces have themselves become targets of violence.

Neither has Mali's mainstream peace process, represented by the 2015 Algiers Accord between the Malian government, an ex-rebel coalition and pro-government militias, stopped the bloodshed. This is partly because the peace process largely rehashes strategies attempted in earlier, failed peace accords in northern Mali and partly because of profound mistrust between key parties as well as repeated delays and disagreements in implementation. Meanwhile, some protagonists in northern Mali have frequent opportunities to sabotage steps toward peace.

In this atmosphere, some Sahelian elites favour dialogue with jihadists with the goal of reaching political settlements that reduce or end violence. Mali's Conference of National Understanding, held in March-April 2017, formally recommended that the Malian government pursue dialogue with the two most prominent Malian jihadists: Iyad ag Ghali, the leader, and Amadou Kouffa, a senior commander, of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, a subsidiary of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

This paper analyses past political settlements with jihadists in Algeria and the Sahel, distinguishing between "stabilising settlements" that remove fighters from the battlefield versus "delaying settlements" that allow jihadists to accumulate resources and recruits. It shows that even stabilising settlements carry downsides, particularly when they push jihadists into neighbouring states. The paper also analyses recent efforts in Mali to conduct dialogue with ag Ghali and Kouffa. It assesses that these efforts have faltered due to logistical problems and the state's ambivalence on dialogue, rather than due to ideological factors. Although renewed dialogue is more likely to fail than succeed, the paper recommends making further attempts.

Based on this overview of past and ongoing attempts at political settlements with jihadists, the paper shows that it is difficult to establish any settlement without the state's involvement. Civil society actors have difficulty offering meaningful concessions or enticements to jihadists without backing from state authorities. The paper also argues that civil society actors can be valuable conduits between governments and jihadists, particularly religious and ethnic elites with personal ties to the regions where jihadists operate. Finally, the paper shows that negotiations, amnesty and dialogue can help split jihadists by eliciting defections even from hard-line jihadist groups.

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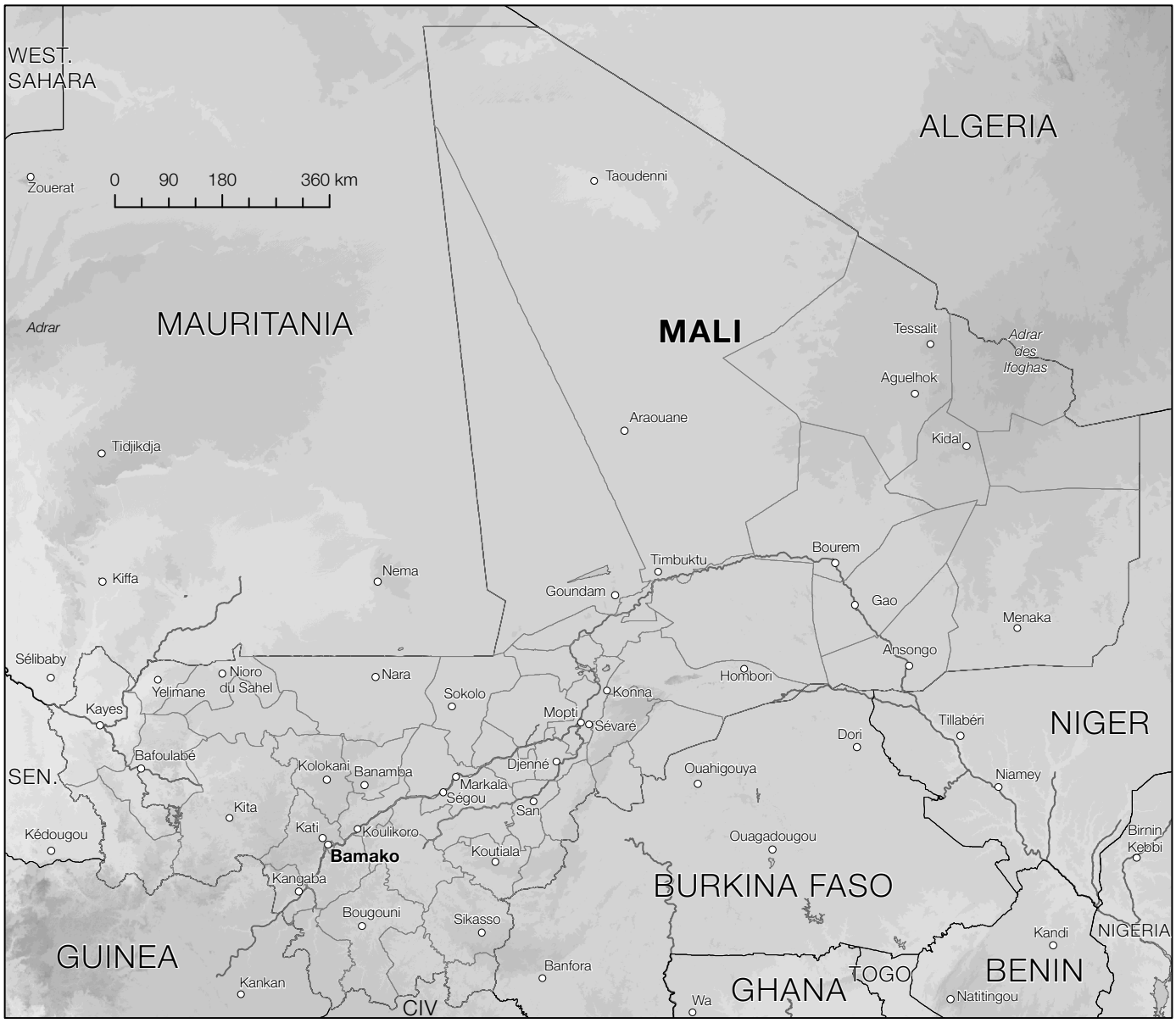
Map 1
Mali



Cartography: Olivier Walther, 2018

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines what kinds of explicit or tacit agreements have been, or would be, possible for national governments to establish with jihadists in the Sahel. Given jihadists' ideologies, political settlements with them may seem far-fetched. Yet in parts of the Sahel, and earlier in Algeria, the country of origin for some of the Sahel's current jihadist leaders, some settlements have occurred. Other settlements have been credibly attempted, failing more due to logistical obstacles than to ideological issues between the parties. Still other settlements – or "wartime political orders" (Staniland, 2012) – have existed even amid armed conflict, as states and insurgents develop relationships that involve some co-operation or tacit non-aggression.

Political settlements with jihadists carry downsides. A settlement in one country may give jihadists a freer hand to mobilise in a neighbouring country, give jihadists freedom to accumulate resources and recruits, or may undercut the state's credibility, both with its international partners and with domestic constituencies. Problems of trust pervade the process of brokering and maintaining political settlements – a wider problem that governments confront in attempting to bring civil wars to an end more generally (Dancy, 2018).

Amid widespread insecurity, some Malian elites believe that Mali's crisis can be settled by bringing jihadists into negotiations.[1] The rationale involves not only the argument that jihadists are the authors of substantial violence, but also, in some cases, the possibility that some mainstream rebels still have close connections to jihadists (Roger, 2015). For this reason, excluding jihadists from the peace process might ultimately make the Algiers Accord unworkable. It is known that some jihadists will at least reply to overtures from state authorities or civil society elites: Amadou Kouffa, the leader of Katibat Macina, responded, albeit tepidly, to outreach from elites in Bamako. However, the broader question of whether Malian jihadists might agree to a meaningful, stabilising settlement remains open.

Given the controversial nature of past settlements and the hopes and doubts surrounding future ones, a more systematic look at political settlements is needed. The first part of the paper examines four past experiences, starting with Algeria's amnesties between 1995 and 2006 and its limited political engagement with defectors from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). It then discusses the intertwining of a kidnapping economy, drug trafficking, and alleged official collusion in northern Mali between the early 2000s and 2012. The paper also addresses efforts by different parties and governments to negotiate with Ansar al-Din and Iyad ag Ghali during the 2012-13 crisis in Mali, and the apparent tacit ceasefire or *mutaraka* (mutual leaving alone) between the Mauritanian state and jihadists since late 2011. The second part of the paper examines three recent initiatives: the effort by ethnic Fulani elites in Bamako to open a dialogue with Amadou Kouffa, the limited efforts by Mali's High Islamic Council to talk to jihadists since 2013, and the reported political outreach in northern and central Mali by current Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga thus far in 2018.

Based on these cases, there is a fundamental difference between stabilising settlements that increase state authority and delaying settlements that weaken it. Put differently, a stabilising settlement reduces violence, demobilises fighters and recruiters, splits jihadist/rebel ranks, and is accompanied by enhanced security capabilities on the part of the state. A delaying settlement reduces, or perhaps merely contains violence without removing fighters from the battlefield and without extending state authority. Algeria's experience in the late 1990s/early 2000s, and Mauritania's experience since 2011, are examples of stabilising settlements, while northern Mali's experience in the lead-up to the 2012 rebellion is an example of a delaying settlement.

The third part digests lessons learned from these experiences, and then assesses whether dialogue might be possible with ag Ghali and Kouffa. The paper concludes that dialogue is worth attempting, but that its prospects for success are uncertain.

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PAST EXPERIENCES

Algeria's amnesties

The most prominent jihadist actor in the Sahel is AQIM, which has various allies and offshoots. The antecedents to AQIM emerged in Algeria during that country's 1991-2002 civil war. AQIM's predecessor organisation was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the dominant rebel faction in Algeria in the mid-1990s. In 1996-98, authoritarian and murderous tendencies within the GIA's central leadership, as well as the GIA's involvement in massacres of Algerian civilians, prompted numerous regional GIA commanders to break away and establish the GSPC.

Algeria's civil war ended in part due to political settlements that authorities offered to Islamists and jihadists.[2] These settlements were primarily intended for the Islamist political party the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its armed wing the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), rather than for the GIA or, later, the GSPC. In January 1995, Algerian political parties, including part of the FIS, signed the Sant'Egidio Platform in Rome, a document intended to provide a roadmap for peace. The GIA, however, rejected the platform, as did the Algerian presidency. An amnesty offer by the Algerian government in 1995 was also rejected (Khatib, 2005).

More effective were the negotiations between Algerian authorities and the AIS beginning in the summer of 1997, which resulted in the AIS declaring a unilateral ceasefire in September 1997. Afterwards, Algerian authorities promulgated two key initiatives approved by voters in referenda: the 1999 Civil Concord law and the 2006 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. These measures were elaborated in the context of citizens' widespread exhaustion with the war, as well as the desire among both citizens and elites to turn the page on the 1990s; the regime of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who took power in 1999 and remains president today, promised to move Algeria forward and bring peace. In this atmosphere, the Civil Concord and the Charter offered amnesty to fighters who surrendered and who had not participated in massacres, rapes, or bombings in public places (People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, 2006). The AIS dissolved in January 2000 and Algerian authorities released the FIS' two main political leaders from detention in 2003.

In the early 2000s, the GIA was dismantled and its last major leader, Antar Zouabri, was killed by security forces (Loos, 2002). The GSPC, meanwhile, was pulled in several directions. In 2003, the GSPC announced its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and in 2006 it formally joined the Al-Qaeda network, renaming itself AQIM in 2007. Some leading members, notably GSPC founder Hassan Hattab, reportedly objected to these moves; in 2003, according to divergent accounts, Hattab was either replaced or resigned as the GSPC's emir. In 2007, following the promulgation of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, Hattab turned himself in. Since that time, Hattab has reportedly lived under authorities' surveillance and protection in Algiers, and has convinced some other militants to surrender and accept amnesty (Alilat, 2014; 2017).

Algerian authorities' approaches, partly predicated on existing divisions between and within armed movements, helped to further split rebel ranks, induce defections, and restore stability. These approaches were "premised on compensation, forgiving, and forgetting" (Mundy, 2015: 8). Algeria's experience loosely parallels other states' approaches to rebel movements. For example, one study found that states are more likely to grant concessions to separatist movements with internal divisions (Cunningham, 2011). The Algerian case may offer lessons to Mali and other contemporary conflict zones: casting a wide net in attempting to "recuperate" rebels can help make peace. At the same time, Algeria's policies had direct consequences for Mali, given that the GSPC effected its "Saharan turn" in the early 2000s partly in response to the political shifts within Algeria.

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Northern Mali's de facto pre-2012 settlements

Amid the GSPC/AQIM's "Saharan turn," northern Mali attracted the group's southern battalions. Between the early 2000s and the rebellion of 2012, a set of de facto settlements developed there. These settlements represented the intertwining of several systems: a kidnapping economy, a smuggling economy of both licit and illicit goods, and alleged collusion by local and even national Malian officials.

The withdrawal of most Malian military units from the north following the 1992 National Pact – an agreement with some leaders of the 1990 Tuareg-led rebellion – contributed to the flourishing of these illicit economies. The state vacuum in the north was reinforced by the 2006 Tuareg-led rebellion, as the state came to rely on government-aligned, ethnically based militias to counter rebels. Although widespread trans-Saharan cocaine smuggling began in the early 2000s, analysts have traced the flourishing of links between northern Malian elites and narcotraffickers to the post-2006 period. Some of the pro-government militias had links to narcotraffickers, which meant that the war in the north came to include battles over cocaine routes and shipments (Lacher, 2012: 11-12). In 2010, Mali's then-President Amadou Toumani Touré denied that there was any high-level complicity in drug trafficking, but he came to view the demilitarisation of the north as a mistake. He also privately said that Malian authorities' handling of certain trafficking scandals had inadvertently encouraged rumours of complicity (United States Embassy Bamako, 2010a).

The kidnapping economy developed in parallel with these developments (Ibrahim, 2017). In 2003, the GSPC kidnapped 32 European tourists in southern Algeria. Although the lead kidnapper, Amari Saifi or "El Para," was captured by Chadian rebels and repatriated to Algeria, the hostages were freed through the payment of a reported USD 5 million ransom by the German government. Between 2008 and 2013, another 20 hostages held by AQIM were ransomed by European governments for an estimated total of at least USD 91.5 million (Callimachi, 2014).

Although AQIM kidnapped victims in places as far apart as coastal Mauritania, southern Tunisia, and Niger's capital Niamey, northern Mali was the epicentre of the kidnapping economy: most hostages were held there, and negotiations often occurred within Mali. Several networks of mediators emerged, most of them connected to the governments of Mali's Touré and Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré. On the Malian side, key negotiators included Iyad ag Ghali, AQIM's future ally. Burkina Faso's negotiators included Mauritanian national Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi, an advisor to Compaoré (Lacher, 2012: 13). Chafi has been especially controversial in regional politics – in 2011, the Mauritanian government accused him of financing and supporting AQIM (Jeune Afrique/AFP, 2011). Burkina Faso's current president, Roch Kaboré, has suggested that Compaoré's regime as a whole had a problematic relationship with AQIM. In 2017, Kaboré said, "Ex-President Blaise Compaoré played a mediation role in Mali, which meant that, in a constant fashion, we had collusion with the jihadist forces in Mali" (Ayad, 2017).

The kidnapping economy did not just represent a lucrative trade for jihadists and their partners including, perhaps, some of the negotiators and national governments themselves. It also represented a political settlement with jihadists. In this political sense, northern Mali offered two essential features: a state vacuum and a national government that could negotiate with jihadists. These deals entailed not just money but also prisoner exchanges. One significant exchange occurred in 2010, when four AQIM members were exchanged for a French hostage (Diallo, 2010). These hostages may have included Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, who would go on to lead the AQIM offshoot the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (AFP, 2014). That release evoked diplomatic protests by Mauritania and Algeria, who accused the Malian government of empowering AQIM and threatening regional security (Chikhi, 2010). From the vantage point of Mali, however, other countries in the region were dumping their problems, and the blame, on Mali (United States Embassy Bamako, 2010a).

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Such settlements involved not only Mali and AQIM, but also European governments, who largely preferred the safe return of their kidnapped citizens to other alternatives, especially given a record of failure in armed rescue attempts.

The question of Malian authorities' stance vis-à-vis the kidnapping economy touches on broader issues of collusion, at both the local and national levels, with both AQIM and narcotraffickers during the years leading up to the 2012 rebellion. This collusion had a financial aspect, but it also represented a political settlement in which various actors helped each other entrench power. In those years, northern mayors and parliamentary deputies were frequently accused of benefiting from the drug trade. The northern city of Gao, for example, became infamous for the wealth flaunted by suspected traffickers. These developments seem to have aided AQIM, which allegedly developed a symbiotic relationship with traffickers, receiving protection payments and using ransom money to purchase supplies from traffickers and smugglers. Some figures stood at the intersection of politics, kidnapping, and trafficking – one example is Baba Ould Cheikh, then mayor of Tarkint in the Gao Region, who was simultaneously a hostage negotiator and an alleged trafficker (Thiolay and Thiénot, 2013).

At the local level, these settlements helped set the stage for jihadist control in northern Mali in 2012. The challenge of government-backed militias helped push some of the Tuareg elite in Kidal into the arms of Ansar al-Din and AQIM, while some reputed traffickers in Gao became allies for MUJAO (Lacher, 2012: 15-16). In some cases, ideological affinities reinforced these alliances, given the spread of conservative religious activism in northern Malian society, particularly since the 1990s. Shifting settlements have continued since the French-led intervention. Amid the kaleidoscopic and fluid political realignments in the north (Walther et al., 2017), some accused traffickers and jihadists from Gao and elsewhere have reincarnated themselves, politically, as members of pro-government militias (Lebovich, 2017: 18).

Negotiations with Ansar al-Din

Another attempted settlement in Mali has even more direct repercussions for assessing the likelihood of constructive political settlements in the future. From approximately June 2012-January 2013, three jihadist organisations dominated northern Mali: Ansar al-Din, AQIM, and the MUJAO. In terms of their geographical dispersal, Ansar al-Din was most dominant in Kidal and Timbuktu, AQIM was most present in Timbuktu, and MUJAO dominated Gao. Of these movements, Ansar al-Din was the most Malian in character, given that its top leader, Iyad ag Ghali, as well as his key advisors and lieutenants and the bulk of his fighters, were all Malians. MUJAO also recruited substantially among Malians.

During 2012, three public efforts to negotiate with Ansar al-Din proceeded. All three efforts ended in January 2013 when Ansar al-Din and AQIM advanced on Mopti, in central Mali, alarming the international community and provoking a French-led military intervention (Walther and Christopoulos, 2015). The trajectory of the failed negotiations with Ansar al-Din is, however, worth examining as a precedent for more recent negotiation efforts.

One effort came from the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM). The Council is a government-recognised umbrella organisation for Mali's Muslims, although it operates with significant autonomy. Since 2008, its president has been Mahmoud Dicko, a Salafi leader from the Timbuktu region now based in Bamako. After hostilities broke out in northern Mali in January 2012, Dicko and the HCIM attempted to act as conduits for peace and negotiations with the armed factions in the north and particularly with ag Ghali. In late July 2012, Dicko travelled in an individual capacity to Gao to meet and negotiate with ag Ghali. He reportedly had the blessing of then-Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra and framed the mission as an exploratory trip to "talk with the occupiers, to know exactly what they want, and how they see the situation, because they cannot stay indefinitely. So we were there, first to go and listen to them and see if one could truly go forward in the

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sense of a dialogue, as we hope to do" (Idrac, 2012). Dicko also stressed the centrality of ag Ghali to any potential negotiations. Ag Ghali, Dicko said, "occupies a central position in this affair… His position is decisive in all that will be decided" (Idrac, 2012). Nevertheless, ag Ghali did not consent to meet Dicko.

A second effort came from the government of Mali's neighbour Burkina Faso. As noted above, the regime of President Compaoré had negotiated hostage releases, which gave Compaoré's team some contacts with jihadists. Amid the Malian crisis of 2012, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) selected Compaoré as its mediator. In June, Compaoré hosted some of Ansar al-Din's more flexible leaders – who were primarily politicians from "noble" Tuareg clans in Kidal – in Ouagadougou (Palus, 2012). In August, his Foreign Minister Djbril Bassolé traveled to Kidal and met ag Ghali. Bassolé told journalists that ag Ghali "said he was ready to negotiate" (Nossiter, 2012). Bassolé added that any negotiations were conditional on ag Ghali rejecting AQIM, but that ag Ghali had only committed to "reflect and come back to us" on that question (Nossiter, 2012).

The question took on greater urgency as the year progressed, with ECOWAS slowly moving toward a decision to intervene militarily against the jihadist occupation. On 4 December 2012, some of Ansar al-Din's more flexible leaders met a Malian government delegation and a non-jihadist Malian rebel delegation in Ouagadougou, where the Ansar al-Din delegation committed to a ceasefire (Reuters, 2012). On 1 January 2013, Ansar al-Din presented its demands: autonomy for northern Mali, a constitutional declaration that Mali was an Islamic state, and the application of sharia in the north (RFI, 2013a). When the Malian government refused these demands, ag Ghali released a statement ending the ceasefire and accusing the Malian government of insincerity, although the statement left the door open to renewed negotiations (Sahara Medias, 2013a).

Bassolé was still working to prevent an ECOWAS military intervention. Initially, another trilateral meeting between the Malian government, Ansar al-Din, and non-jihadist Malian rebels was planned for 10 January in Ouagadougou (RFI, 2013b). The flexible wing of Ansar al-Din, however, was unable to convince ag Ghali to continue with negotiations.[3] Ag Ghali and AQIM headed south, capturing the town of Konna on 10 January (Touchard, 2014; Sahara Medias, 2013b), provoking the launch of Operation Serval. It is difficult to reconstruct the precise timeline of these events and the underlying intentions of key actors, but it is clear that Ansar al-Din was internally divided up to and after the attack on Konna.

A third effort involved negotiations in Algeria, where Ansar al-Din members were also frequently present. Although ag Ghali reportedly rejected an offer from Algerian authorities to meet him during the 2012 rebellion,[4] some of the more flexible leaders of Ansar al-Din were veterans of earlier Tuareg-led rebellions in Mali and had significant ties to Algeria. For example, the Tuareg leader Ahmada ag Bibi partly grew up in Algeria and still has family there. In interviews with the Algerian press during 2012, ag Bibi commented favourably on the diplomatic role that Algeria could play in the crisis (Abdeladim, 2012). In December 2012, following their visit to Ouagadougou, the Ansar al-Din delegation travelled to Algiers as part of the same effort to forestall an ECOWAS military intervention and organise a ceasefire. The delegation expressed its preference for Algeria, rather than Burkina Faso, to be the site of negotiations, given Algeria's role in mediating previous northern Malian rebellions (Liberté, 2012). Ultimately, this is what came to pass – Algeria was the site of the talks that resulted in the 2015 accord. Although Ansar al-Din as such was not represented at those talks, some of the breakaway members of the group were. The same figures who represented the movement in Burkina Faso and Algeria in 2012 became those who broke away from the movement in January 2013 and rejoined the mainstream of the rebellion, leaving ag Ghali and hard-line jihadists to carry on the Ansar al-Din name.

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Diverse, and even contradictory, lessons could be drawn from the negotiations with Ansar al-Din in 2012-13. Arguably, the negotiations helped to split Ansar al-Din following the French intervention – although it could also be argued that the Ansar al-Din wing that engaged in negotiations always represented a pragmatic faction of Tuareg elites, one in which politicians such as Alghabass ag Intalla were keen to shape Ansar al-Din without closing off the option to return to more mainstream politics. It could also be argued, then, that negotiations with figures such as ag Intalla slowed down the inevitable mobilisation of an external military intervention in northern Mali, and that such negotiations never stood a real chance of swaying the movement's true hardliners. Even more salient, although just as difficult to assess, are the contradictory signals that ag Ghali sent regarding his own willingness to negotiate. On the whole, however, the attempted negotiations held out some hope of staving off further war and contributed to the "recuperation" of a significant portion of Ansar al-Din.

Mauritania's mutaraka

Between 2005 and 2011, Mauritania suffered roughly a dozen serious attacks or attempted attacks by the GSPC/AQIM (Ould Ahmed Salem, 2013). These included raids on remote military outposts, assaults on foreign embassies in Mauritania's capital Nouakchott, and kidnappings and murders of Western tourists and aid workers. This period overlapped with erratic transitions in Mauritanian politics. The turbulent and repressive end of the regime of long-time ruler Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (1984-2005) was followed by a caretaker military regime under Colonel Ely Vall (2005-07), a short-lived democratic interlude under President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (2007-08), and the return of a senior military officer-turned-civilian president, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2008-present).

Policy lurched in several directions. During the waning years of Ould Taya's rule, authorities pursued widespread repression against the entire Islamist movement, violent and non-violent. This response, which included torture, inadvertently helped GSPC/AQIM recruit some young Mauritanians (Al Jazeera, 2006; Schmiddle, 2009). Under the transitional military regime of Vall and the civilian administration of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, authorities opened political space, including to non-violent Islamists. However, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi 's regime, which overlapped with a spate of particularly serious attacks, at times appeared flummoxed by AQIM, and attracted wide criticism (Fertey, 2008; Hochman, 2008). The coup leaders of 2008, led by Ould Abdel Aziz, partly explained their actions by alleging that Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi had failed against AQIM.

Amid an initially aggressive response to AQIM, which included forays into northern Mali targeting AQIM camps in 2010-11, Ould Abdel Aziz's regime began pivoting to a new strategy. It is unlikely that this strategy rested on a formal truce. A document recovered from Osama bin Laden's compound in Pakistan indicates that as of March 2010, AQIM leaders were considering ceasing attacks in Mauritania in exchange for annual payments of 10-20 million euros and the release of detained jihadists (DNI, 2016). Once the document became public in 2016, Mauritanian authorities denied the existence of any agreement (Hosenball, 2016). A Mauritanian national who is a former senior member of Al-Qaeda has expressed skepticism that any formal truce occurred (CNN Arabic, 2016).

In the absence of a formal agreement, a tacit mutual leaving alone (*mutaraka*) seems to have evolved. This understanding appears to be based on four policy choices Mauritanian authorities made. First, Mauritania refused to join the French-led military intervention in Mali. Second, it abandoned the practice of wide-ranging dragnets targeting Islamist and Salafi activists. Third, the country supported dialogues with accused, imprisoned jihadists starting in 2010, which resulted in various individual reconciliations and a group prisoner release in September 2010. Fourth, Mauritania tolerated preachers who oppose democracy, denounced France and the United States, and have an ambivalent position towards jihadist projects in certain countries outside Mauritania.

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For their part, Mauritanian authorities do not acknowledge the *mutaraka* as a policy. Official Mauritanian policy, as elaborated in the April 2012 "National Strategy for Fighting Terrorism and Transnational Criminality," privileges the following elements: legal instruments for prevention and punishment; intelligence collection; military "anticipation, reactivity, mobility, modularity, and interoperability," as well as the demarcation of special military zones in the northeast; diplomatic efforts to address root causes of jihadism; and society-wide efforts to promote development and inclusion (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et de la Coopération, 2012: 19). In explaining Mauritania's recent stability, authorities cite an evolution in Mauritanian military capabilities, particularly the development of light mobile units, as a major factor in reducing jihadist violence in the country. One retired colonel and prominent security expert argues that security policy, new laws, international co-operation, and non-violent measures such as the prison dialogues have all worked together to improve security in the country (see Mouemel, 2017).[5] Prominent Mauritanian politicians and religious leaders also consider the prison dialogues a major success. The state has even given financial support to some of those who formally repented. Some politicians also acknowledge that relative freedom of speech for hard-line preachers is preferable to granting them notoriety by arresting them.[6]

Mauritania's *mutaraka* carries some downsides. For one thing, it may contribute to instability in northern Mali. That is, if Mauritanian authorities tacitly signal to Mauritania's homegrown jihadists that they must either renounce violence or leave the country, this may put pressure on the Malian territory. Mauritania's *mutaraka* also has limited "exportability." Given Mauritania's small, tightly connected population and the limited numbers of jihadist recruits willing to fight inside the country, Mauritania's situation was and is fundamentally different than Mali's. Nevertheless, the Mauritanian case may demonstrate the advantages of giving more, rather than less, freedom of speech to radical preachers, especially in a country where a highly developed Islamic scholarly culture may act as something of a natural brake on radicals' audiences and ambitions. The Mauritanian case also highlights the advantages that Sahelian states may reap when they limit co-operation with external military interventions.

RECENT INITIATIVES

Fulani-led dialogues with Amadou Kouffa

Mali's Conference of National Understanding held in March-April 2017 recommended that the Malian government negotiate with Malian-born jihadists, particularly ag Ghali and Kouffa. Shortly after the conference, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, visiting Mali, indicated his government's opposition to such an idea: "How could one negotiate with the terrorists? It is a fight without ambiguity" (Reuters, 2017). The Malian government shifted positions from considering negotiations to opposing them (Studio Tamani, 2017). In this atmosphere, the initiative fell to civil society and retired politicians. With Kouffa, the prime movers in dialogue efforts have been elites from the Fulani ethnic group, to which Kouffa also belongs.

Amid the crisis in central Mali, Fulani elites have organised community meetings in the Mopti Region. At one such meeting in May 2017, a Fulani man offered to connect Ali Nouhoum Diallo with Kouffa. Diallo, who presided over Mali's National Assembly from 2002 to 2012, is widely considered the "dean" of the Fulani elite. During summer 2017, Diallo worked to communicate with Kouffa via intermediaries (see Bamey, 2017).[7] After Diallo asked to hear directly from Kouffa, the latter released one of his signature recordings in August 2017. The exchange between Diallo and Kouffa turned antagonistic – Diallo had insulted Kouffa as being a "slave of Arabs," and Kouffa responded that Diallo and his peers were "slaves of the West."[8] Yet in the recording, Kouffa took self-contradictory stances on the question of dialogue. While rejecting the idea of "hagg[ling] over God" early in the recording, at the end he indicated that he would be willing to speak with Malian religious leaders such as Mahmoud Dicko. Kouffa also stated that any political dialogue should take place with ag Ghali, a statement that did not necessarily convey ag Ghali's willingness to talk, but that at least acknowledged such a possibility.[9]

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After Kouffa released his recording, the dialogue effort seemed to falter for several reasons. First, there was personal animosity between Kouffa and Diallo. Second, the Fulani elite in Bamako is not able to make direct offers of concessions or negotiated settlements to Kouffa, they can only lobby the government to do so. Third, some of the religious leaders named by Kouffa as possible interlocutors have not, so far, been publicly willing to commit to such a role. Fourth, Kouffa's statement that political negotiations should be with ag Ghali, rather than with him, may preclude the possibility of separate settlements for central and northern Mali. Diallo has also publicly argued that the Algerian state and foreign jihadists have an interest in scuttling any potential settlement, which would place the conflict in an even wider circle of regional and global politics (Bamey, 2017). Nevertheless, Kouffa's statements suggest that a two-track dialogue effort – a religious dialogue with Kouffa, and a political dialogue with ag Ghali – could bear some fruit.

High Islamic Council of Mali efforts since Serval

Although the HCIM and its president, Mahmoud Dicko, were not able to broker a peace with Ansar al-Din and ag Ghali in 2012, Dicko has periodically performed a kind of internal diplomacy between the Malian government and various actors in the north since the launch of France's Operation Serval in 2013. Dicko remains supportive of negotiations with ag Ghali and other jihadists. In a July 2017 interview, he said, "If we do not negotiate with them, what are we going to do? If one had the means necessary to eradicate this problem, one would have done so a long time ago. But one cannot keep on doing nothing. These jihadists are Malians like ourselves. They are just lost sheep. So we should try to bring them back to reason" (Magassa and Dubois, 2017).

It has been difficult to assess the fruits of Dicko's efforts. In October 2016, Dicko announced that he had received a letter from ag Ghali offering a ceasefire (Macé, 2016). Violence, however, continued afterwards. Later, Malian Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maïga who served from April-December 2017 recruited Dicko to perform a "mission of good offices" to bring peace to northern and central Mali. Dicko traveled to Kidal that July and met a range of non-jihadist actors (RFI, 2017). Following his return, Dicko said, "I did not meet Iyad. I did not send him emissaries and he, too, did not send me emissaries. I have, however, talked with reasonable people close to him" (Sissoko, 2017).

Meanwhile, Dicko supported the idea of inclusive dialogue in central Mali. Dicko has not publicly taken up Kouffa's offer to discuss religious matters, but Dicko is at least aware of the offer.[10] In October-November 2017, Dicko's "mission of good offices" organised regional forums for religious and traditional leaders in Segou and Mopti (Bamada, 2017a). Dicko reportedly attempted to convince then-Prime Minister Maïga to pursue dialogue with Kouffa's group, a strategy Maïga seems to have rejected (Bamada, 2017b). Ultimately, amid a broader rupture between Dicko and President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Dicko's mission came to an end by early 2018 (L'Indicateur du Renouveau, 2018).

Efforts by Soumeylou Maïga

With the end of Keïta's support for Dicko's "mission of good offices," the initiative passed to Keïta's new prime minister, Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga. Appointed in December 2017, Maïga is a former intelligence chief and cabinet minister, originally from Gao. Maïga's appointment was widely viewed as Keïta's attempt to shore up support and ensure his own re-election. In March 2018, Maïga toured northern Mali, including a visit to Kidal – the first made by a sitting Malian prime minister since the military debacle occasioned by then-Prime Minister Moussa Mara's visit there in 2014. Some press commentary hinted that Maïga's visit, which involved discussions with the ex-rebel umbrella group the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA), may have involved indirect signals to Iyad ag Ghali, given suspicions that parts of the CMA remain in contact with ag Ghali (Macé, 2018). Other observers saw Maïga's reception in Kidal as a sign that the CMA and the Kidal elite were moving further away from ag Ghali and positioning themselves closer to the Malian government (Coulibaly, 2018).

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After Maïga's visit, the possibility of dialogue with ag Ghali remained alive. When he was asked about dialogue in the north in a March 2018 interview, CMA spokesman Ilad ag Mohamed said, "for some time, there has been a debate about the inclusion of Iyad. If Iyad is part of the solutions for definitively settling the problem of Mali in general, I do not think it would be disadvantageous for him to intervene in one way or another. Paris has greatly revised its position. I have seen recent comments by senior French officers who are starting to talk about political solutions. I think in political solutions, that means that it is necessary to rule out the hard way" (RFI, 2018a). Although President Keïta officially opposes any dialogue with jihadists and especially with ag Ghali, it is possible that different views exist within his administration.

Maïga has also appeared open to the possibility of dialogue with Kouffa. During a February 2018 visit to Mopti, he expressed support for dialogue with anyone willing to lay down arms (Diakité, 2018). Nevertheless, Maïga has stressed that he will escalate force in the centre; during the same visit, he commented, "we are going to hunt the enemy without concessions" (RFI, 2018b) adding, "it is the time when each person must choose his camp" (Dicko, 2018). Overall, the prime minister appears to view securing the centre by force as the best short-term path to peace.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Based on this overview of past and ongoing attempts at political settlements with jihadists, a few patterns become clear.

- There is a difference between *stabilising settlements* and *delaying settlements*. Even a stabilising settlement, however, generally comes at the cost of pushing conflict into nearby, weaker states. Although many of Mali's problems reflect policy choices by successive Malian governments, they should also be viewed within a regional context. The political settlements in Algeria, and later in Mauritania, exacerbated some of the conditions that made Mali the regional epicentre of jihadism, as did the participation of other governments and actors in the kidnapping economy.

- It is difficult to establish any settlement without the state's involvement. Civil society actors have difficulty offering meaningful concessions or enticements to jihadists without backing from state authorities. This dynamic limited what Malian elites such as Ali Nouhoum Diallo or Mahmoud Dicko could accomplish. Even when Dicko was mandated to carry out the "mission of good offices" in 2017, his position was undercut by rapidly shifting and sometimes self-contradictory stances by the government. Nevertheless, some Malian elites believe that more bottom-up settlements are possible, particularly in central Mali.[11]

- Civil society actors can be valuable conduits between governments and jihadists. All the cases above show that state officials in the Sahel know how to contact jihadists when they need to. Such contacts inevitably run through civil society, and often through religious and ethnic elites with personal ties to the regions where jihadists operate. Civil society leaders, however, are sometimes reluctant to take on roles as intermediaries, especially in a public fashion, because of risks that they will be accused of supporting jihadism – a charge that has frequently been thrown at Dicko.

- Negotiations can help split jihadists. One former Ansar al-Din member believes negotiations with ag Ghali could help convince some of his circle to make peace, even if ag Ghali himself was not convinced.[12] The example of Algeria's Hassan Hattab also shows that amnesty and dialogue offers can elicit defections even from hard-line jihadist groups.

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In light of these patterns and of the broader military stalemate in northern Mali as well as the insecurity in central Mali, this paper assesses that dialogue with ag Ghali and Kouffa would be worth attempting. Such an attempt would be ambitious: any resulting settlement would be broader than any previously established in the Sahel – an agreement with top jihadist leaders and involving entire movements, rather than the partial settlements that have existed in the past.

For a dialogue to succeed, the Malian state's foreign partners would have to avoid publicly disparaging the effort. Malian elites would also likely want to negotiate with the Algerian state to find a consensual approach. Success would also necessitate credible intermediaries and significant flexibility on the part of both the state and the jihadists.

Building on the proposals offered by Ansar al-Din in 2012-13, key points in the dialogue might include the future status of the north, particularly Kidal, and whether a greater degree of autonomy is possible. The possibility of an amnesty for ag Ghali and Kouffa and their fighters would also have to be considered, along with the possibility of criminal accountability for Malian security personnel found guilty of human rights violations. The possibility of revisiting the question of the secularism of the Malian state, perhaps through a national referendum, is another point of debate. The return of state authorities at the local and regional level in the Mopti region cannot be avoided. Finally, any agreement should entail the disarmament of fighters, and might also include permanent exile for ag Ghali outside Mali.

Given the sensitivities of these questions, as well as the probability of mistrust and miscommunication between the Malian government and the jihadists, this paper assesses that such a dialogue is more likely to fail than to succeed. Notably, some of ag Ghali's former colleagues in Ansar al-Din – men who remain key Tuareg elites – believe that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to convince him to negotiate.[13] Nevertheless, the bleak outlook for the conflict means that a dialogue is at least worth attempting.

NOTES

1 This perspective, in varying forms, was also expressed in several author interviews with Mahmoud Dicko (20 January 2018), Mahmoud Zouber (23 January 2018), and Amadou Mody Diall (9 March 2018) in Bamako.

2 "Islamists" are here defined as activists who want a sweeping Islamisation of state and society, but who do not consider existing states to be theologically illegitimate. The term "jihadists" refers to groups who accuse existing states of violating Islamic law and committing acts of unbelief, and who attempt to violently overthrow those states and/or attack their foreign backers.

3 According to Mohamed ag Aharib, ag Ghali's decision to advance south was taken with AQIM against the advice of ag Aharib and other Tuareg elites in Ansar al-Din (interview, Bamako, 24 January 2018).

4 Interview with Ahmada ag Bibi (Bamako, 13 March 2018).

5 Interview with Colonel (ret.) El Boukhary Mohamed Mouemel (Nouakchott, 30 April 2018).

6 Interview with Sidi Mohamed Ould Maham (Nouakchott, 3 May 2018).

7 Interview with Mody Diall (Bamako, 9 March 2018).

8 Interview with Ali Nouhoum Diallo (Bamako, 25 January 2018).

9 French translation of the recording – copy in the author's possession.

10 Ali Nouhoum Diallo told the author that he had shared a copy of Kouffa's August 2017 recording with Dicko (Bamako, 25 January 2018).

11 Interview with Thierno Hadi Thiam (Bamako, 10 March 2018).

12 Interview with ag Bibi (Bamako, 13 March 2018).

13 Interviews with Alghabass ag Intalla (Washington, 13 January 2018) and ag Aharib (Bamako, 24 January 2018).

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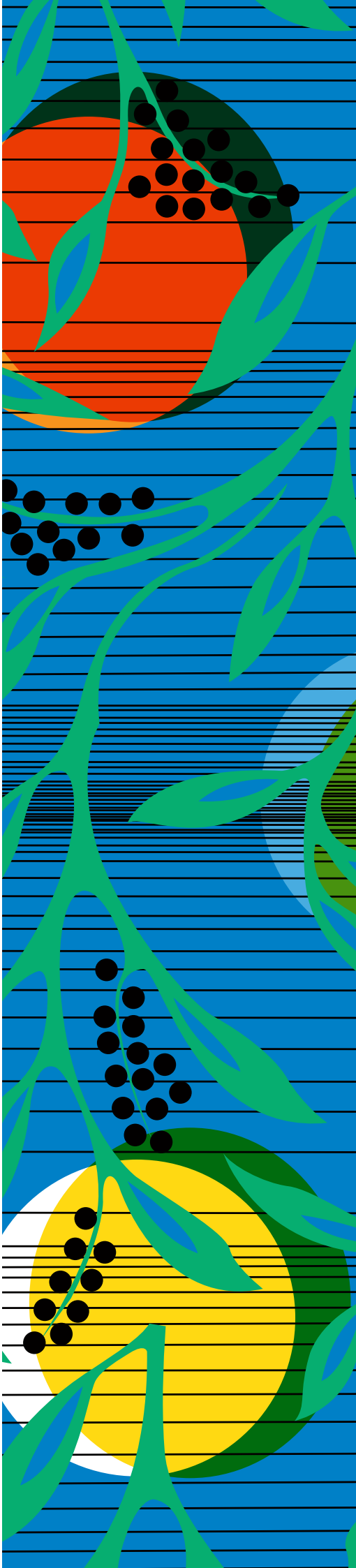
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