

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Operation Serval, and the Value of **Irregular Warfare**

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BETWEEN 2012 AND EARLY 2013, THE forces of the jihadist organization known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies came within a hair's breadth of entirely conquering the country of Mali. Riding on a wave of civil discontent within the Malian government, the jihadist forces were able to hijack an ethnically based rebellion, capitalize on a fractured government, and bring nearly two-thirds of the country under their control. Years before the more publicized rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, an al-Qaeda affiliate came alarmingly close to establishing a Salafi-jihadist caliphate in West Africa. Only a last-minute intervention by the French military was sufficient to halt the advance on Bamako, Mali's capital city.

This conflict, generally referred to as the Malian Civil War, or simply the Mali War, has much to teach about the effectiveness of irregular warfare, particularly against a stronger military opponent. The primary and most obvious reason for the defeat of AQIM and its forces in 2013 was the overwhelming military advantage of the French response. However, I argue that a second aspect of this conflict played a significant role in the speed and decisiveness of AQIM's loss: the group made a strategic error when it abandoned the irregular warfare tactics that had led to its initial successes and attempted to engage in a more conventional style of war.

AQIM changed its tactics to be more conventional in three distinct ways. First, it focused on manning and controlling contested territory. Controlling land—whether by establishing a base or by a continuous military presence—is largely a conventional tactic, whereas irregular war primarily focuses on gaining influence over populations.¹ Second, AQIM allowed the creation and utilization of “front lines.” While this development was likely originally unintended, AQIM still attempted to maintain a forward line of battle. However, “one of the key characteristics of asymmetric [irregular] civil war is the absence of clearly defined front lines.”² Third, AQIM erred when it shifted away from a population-centric approach, because “attaining civilians’ cooperation is perhaps the most important objective for those fighting irregular wars.”³ As it became the principal belligerent in the war, AQIM no longer focused on gaining and maintaining popular support. The group focused instead on military prowess, ignoring the foundational importance in irregular war of influence and control of the population.

Not only did AQIM's change in tactics lead to a swift and decisive French victory, it was also a driving factor in France's decision to intervene in the first place. AQIM's shift toward conventional tactics, and its eventual turn back again to irregular warfare as the French gained advantage, may provide some lessons to explain why, in the years following the French intervention, and despite French counterterrorism forces remaining in the area, AQIM has been able to execute a violent resurrection.

Irregular War vs. Conventional War

As this article's central argument rests on the idea that AQIM abandoned irregular warfare tactics for conventional ones, it is necessary to provide some definition of those terms. Since the end of the Second World War, modern conflicts have largely ceased to be conventional. One could even make the argument that most conflict since the eighteenth century has been of an irregular nature, and only in the extremes has the world seen conventional wars like the First and Second World Wars. There is likely a myriad of reasons why this should be the case and, indeed, no shortage of ink has been spilled to explain the phenomenon. The simplest explanation, however, is that irregular warfare tactics are the most effective—and perhaps the singular—method by which a weaker non-state actor can stand up to a larger state entity.

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Though not perfect, the record of non-state actors credibly opposing, and in some cases even being victorious over, the state by using irregular warfare tactics is long and diverse. Most recently, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan from the US-backed central government provides a stark example, but there have been dozens of others going back centuries. The American Civil War, the Boer Wars, the Chinese Civil War, Vietnam, Iraq, and even the current war raging in Ukraine all provide examples of irregular tactics being used with great effectiveness against a much stronger opponent. While the result has not always been victory, the irregular forces have been able to do significant damage to the larger state force in nearly every instance.

For the purposes of this analysis, conventional war will be defined as an open confrontation between two or more states using traditional military tactics wherein, broadly speaking, the combatants are well-defined and both sides attempt to target military assets or entities. As defined by US Army Field Manual 3-05.130, “conventional warfare is focused on the direct military confrontation between nation-states, in which the desired effect is to influence an adversary’s government through the defeat of the adversary’s military.”⁴

Conversely, there is irregular warfare, a broad concept that can cover a much wider and more abstract set of conflict “types.” US Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02



Irregular warfare in, from top, South Africa, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”⁵ It can, however, include styles of conflict as diverse as cyber warfare, the use of organized crime, terrorism, and even propaganda and psychological warfare. What is central, nonetheless, and what differentiates irregular from conventional warfare, is the focus on popular support, influence, and legitimacy as opposed to targeting the military and strictly applying force and violence.⁶

It is rare that a conflict is entirely irregular or wholly conventional, as most violent engagements have elements of both. When evaluating such a conflict, one should imagine a “sliding scale” between the purely irregular and the purely conventional on which any violent event would land. Moreover, any conflict or belligerent force may slide closer to or farther from the ends of this scale, even over the course of the conflict. This article will demonstrate that most of the tactics and methods used during the 2012 and 2013 events in Mali fall far closer to the “irregular war” side of the scale. Even though the jihadist forces shifted to more conventional tactics during one phase of the conflict, the war overall would still be considered an irregular conflict. The premise is not that AQIM’s forces entirely converted into a conventional force, but merely that they adopted certain specific tactics that slid them closer to the conventional end of the scale and weakened their overall effectiveness as a fighting force.

In this article, I will first provide some context for the 2012-2013 Malian Civil War; then I will separate the conflict into three phases, with a fourth (post-civil war) phase covering the period between the end of the war and the present day. In each phase, I will discuss some of the irregular warfare tactics that AQIM used and benefited from, and compare them to the conventional tactics that it attempted unsuccessfully to apply. By abandoning some of the irregular war concepts that had brought it success early in the fighting, AQIM lost the advantages it had against the Malian government and, eventually, against the French.

Background to War

Despite eventually being a principal belligerent in the conflict and thus the primary focus of this article, AQIM did not start the Malian Civil War that began in 2012. One can arguably trace the war’s root causes centuries into the past. Both before and after colonization, the territory that is today the Malian state has been home to a kaleidoscope of ethnic, cultural, and tribal groups who for generations competed and worked together for power, resources, and



prestige.⁷ Though differences and tensions between ethnic groups existed, it was colonization that would dramatically intensify them.

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It could be argued that French colonization in West Africa began in 1885, when the colonial powers divided up control of Africa among themselves. However, France did not take over Mali (then called French Sudan) until 1892.⁸ Among the myriad depredations of colonial rule, one that would be highly detrimental to Mali's ability to govern itself in the future was France's deliberate marginalization of ethnic groups, particularly the Tuareg, who occupied the northern parts of what is today Mali. Ethnic tensions between the various groups within the country existed prior to French colonization, but it "exacerbated these resentment [sic]. This is due to the attitude of the French during the colonial period, when they decided to educate a ruling class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners [in lieu of groups from the north such as the Tuareg]."⁹ Through their deliberately divisive management, the French ensured that, while under colonial rule, the leadership of Mali was too weak to resist. However, this also ensured that the leadership of post-colonial Mali was too weak to govern.

By the time Mali gained independence in 1960, the "Northern Problem" of ethnic conflict with the Tuareg was one of the most pressing issues for the nascent, ineffective Malian government. "Since 1960, the Tuareg and the Arab populations have never succeeded in fitting within the new Malian state model and have been regularly marginalised from positions of power."¹⁰ These tensions were the root cause of three significant Tuareg rebellions prior to 2012—in 1963, 1990, and 2006—wherein armed Tuareg rebels sought to establish their own independent nation-state in a region called the Azawad, comprising the northern two-thirds of Mali (see figure 1).

The 2012 Malian Civil War was, at least in the initial stages, largely motivated by the same Tuareg discontent and desire for Azawad independence that had ignited the previous uprisings. The 2012 war would likely have been similarly short, and suppressed in similar fashion, had it not been for the Libyan Civil War and the subsequent collapse of the Qaddafi regime. This additional element of



instability intensified the situation to a dramatic degree, and likely bore a level of indirect responsibility for the Malian Civil War and the initial success of the rebel forces.

For decades, disenfranchised Tuareg fighters who felt that they had no real opportunities in Mali became mercenaries in the service of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. They acted as his personal paramilitary corps for a significant part of his reign. When Qaddafi was toppled and executed in 2011 during the Libyan Civil War, those Tuareg fighters returned to Mali. "Estimates of the number

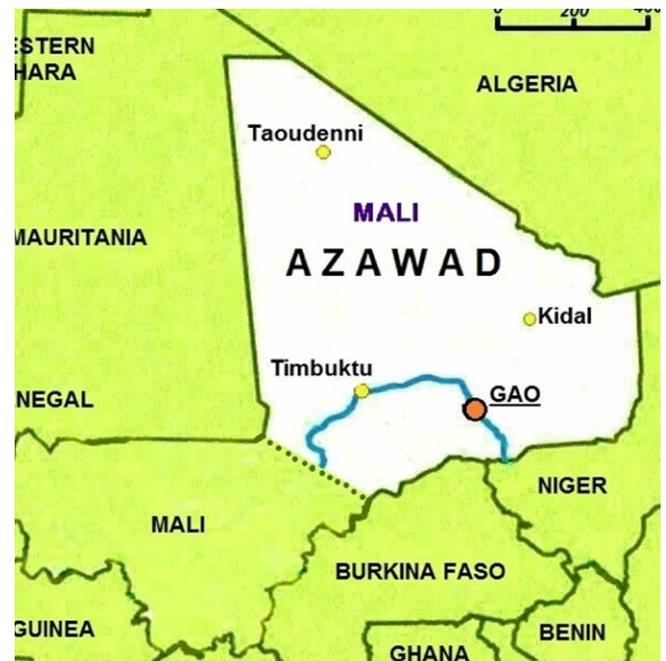


Figure 1: The Region of Mali Claimed by the Tuareg as the "Azawad."¹¹

of returning Tuareg mercenaries ran as high as 4,000. . . . [T]hese fighters brought arms and military experience with them and by late 2011, had reignited the Tuareg separatist movement.”¹² The influx of trained fighters with revolutionary fervor and ambitions of freedom sparked the separatist movement in the Tuareg communities for a fourth time and gave the ever-smoldering ethnic conflict within Mali a reason to re-ignite.

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Phase I: Tuareg Rebellion

The rebellion began when the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Awazad (MNLA), a secular coalition of Tuareg militias, attacked Malian army outposts in early 2012. Though the MNLA was supported by jihadists under the banner of AQIM, the original impetus of the attacks was to establish an independent and secular Tuareg state. With jihadist assistance, the Tuareg separatist militias were able to quickly push the Malian Army out of several major bases in northern Mali. By March 2012, outposts in or near the cities of Kidal and Gao had fallen, and the city of Timbuktu was soon to follow.

It is important to note here that, for the purposes of clarity and simplicity, this article will generally refer to the jihadist elements within this civil war as AQIM. However, the reality was far more complex: AQIM was—and still is—but one of a web of allied and subordinate jihadist groups operating in Mali and neighboring countries. That said, most of these organizations, such as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine, and al-Mulathameen, all either fell below AQIM in the chain of command or were closely allied with the group.¹³ Putting all these groups under the AQIM umbrella also differentiates the jihadists from the Tuareg rebels who, though allied with AQIM in early 2012, were a separate entity that was mostly concerned with secular and political gains.

By eliminating the Malian Army presence in the northern cities and towns, the Tuareg rebels were able to claim that they had taken those cities. However, the reality was that most of the violence was directed against the Malian military and other government entities. Though information from that time is not entirely clear or reliable, the civilian populations of the northern towns were usually not the primary targets of MNLA operations (although



Muammar al-Qaddafi, 2009

there were occasionally minor deviations from this), since most of the civilians in the north were Tuareg themselves and supported the Tuareg cause. Even when surrounding Timbuktu, the MNLA claimed that its objective was only “to dislodge what remains of the Malian political administration and military there.”¹⁴

The group benefitted from being an irregular force with widespread public support. Because of that support and their local familiarity, “controlling” a city or region required far less in the way of manpower and resources for the MNLA than it would have for a conventional force of outsiders, as many of the regional inhabitants considered themselves and the MNLA to be of the same group. As previously explained, “the guerrilla strategy of denial does not aim at control over territory. Instead, hit-and-run operations and ambushes are carried out to loosen state control over territory and population. . . . The guerrilla’s goal is to impose costs on the adversary in terms of loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, peace of mind, and most importantly, time.”¹⁵ In some ways, the first phase of the war can be viewed not as a rebellion by Tuareg separatists, but rather as an operation to eject “occupying” Malian forces from traditional Tuareg lands.

Moreover, the MNLA didn’t need to hold territory for an extended period of time. Only four months after hostilities commenced, the MNLA declared independence for the Azawad, an area encompassing 800,000 square kilometers of Mali and 10 percent of the population. There was no need to establish battle lines, because although the borders



Tuareg rebels join forces in northern Mali.

of the Azawad were notional, they were understood by those who mattered: the Tuareg people.

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In April of 2012, when the MNLA declared the Azawad's independence from Mali, neither local nor foreign intervention seemed likely. The government in Mali's capital, Bamako, was in disarray following a coup d'état (itself a reaction to perceived mismanagement of the Tuareg rebellion). Though neighboring countries denounced the MNLA's action, they demonstrated little will to intervene militarily. In France, politicians were focused on the upcoming presidential elections, and since international affairs would not be the primary focus for any winning candidate, there was little political will to get involved there, either.¹⁶ Had these conditions persisted, it is likely France would have remained on the sidelines and possible that the Azawad would have remained independent far longer, but Phase II of the conflict was about to begin.

Phase II: AQIM takeover

Had the Tuareg and their allies ceased the conflict in mid-2012, things might have turned out very differently. However, once AQIM's leaders realized that the Tuareg were prepared to end the war with only the gains that had been made to that point, they began to hijack the rebellion for their own ends. Even before the declaration of Azawad independence, the jihadists had acted as something of a parasitic ally, allowing the MNLA to do the fighting, then coming in on its heels and attempting to usurp the leadership of the city or town that the MNLA had won.¹⁷

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However, in April, AQIM and its jihadist allies "ended their collective alliances with the MNLA, because the MNLA's objective, to establish a secular and independent state in northern Mali, strongly contradicted Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO's aims to create a united Malian state governed by Shariah law."¹⁸ In the end, the Tuareg cause and MNLA fighters simply were not willing to go far enough to satisfy AQIM's objective to form an Islamic caliphate.

It is here that we see the first shift in focus from the irregular methods employed by the MNLA—which had little need to maintain a garrison or permanent military presence in majority Tuareg towns—to the more conventional strategy used by AQIM, which relied heavily on controlling and guarding territory. Because this new tactic required increased manpower, both for future combat operations and to maintain control of those territories already under its sway, AQIM prioritized the recruitment of foreign fighters. Hundreds of jihadists, from other African countries such as Niger and Sudan but also from as far afield as Pakistan, arrived in Mali to take part in the fighting.¹⁹ The effort to maintain control over fixed positions and cities was costly in terms of manpower and exertion, using resources that may very well have been more effectively spent in upcoming military operations.

Not only was this shift costly in terms of manpower, but it was also a drain on AQIM's political capital. The arrival of foreign fighters caused friction with local populations, who saw the Tuareg-majority MNLA sidelined in favor of AQIM personnel. Moreover, it soon became clear that AQIM rejected the original Tuareg goal of independence and instead sought to continue military operations beyond



Mao Zedong in 1963.

the Azawad. Most damaging to AQIM's popular support, however, was its move to institute its extreme brand of shari'a in the towns it now controlled. Women were forced to cover up, corporal punishment was allowed, and smoking, drinking, and even football were outlawed. The locals immediately began to chafe under the new extremist government system and support for AQIM plummeted.²⁰

Eventually, through its heavy-handed and overbearing tactics, AQIM so completely alienated the MNLA and other Tuareg groups that they turned on the jihadists. "The first clashes between the MNLA and Ansar Dine reportedly occurred on 8 June 2012, in the surroundings of Kidal, triggering a parallel [non-international armed conflict] between Tuareg and Islamist rebels. By the end of the month, Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM expelled the MNLA from major cities in the north."²¹ Many MNLA fighters would eventually go so far as to join the Malian and French forces and fight against the same jihadists with whom they had begun the war.²² Though AQIM succeeded in usurping the MNLA's position and taking

control of the rebellion, by focusing on territorial control rather than cultivating the support of the local population, it expended valuable resources, losing allies as well as a significant measure of local backing.

This was not the only drain on political capital to which AQIM would commit itself. As previously stated, popular support is central to any irregular or guerilla war effort. According to Mao Zedong, whose book, *On Guerilla Warfare*, has defined irregular war for generations, "because guerilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation."²³ At a basic level, the jihadists sought to build an Islamic caliphate by conquering the whole of Mali, while the Tuareg simply sought a free, Tuareg-led Azawad. This disagreement over final objectives was undoubtedly a primary cause of friction. The progressive exclusion of the MNLA and other Tuareg forces certainly exacerbated the problem.²⁴

However, the jihadists' greatest loss of public support and cooperation was caused by their insistence on the



Flag of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

implementation of strict shari'a law. In June, after wresting control of the Azawad from Tuareg leaders, AQIM began to institute shari'a law in Timbuktu. In mere weeks, the practices spread to Gao, Kidal, and all of the larger towns in northern Mali. The Tuareg people, who made up most of the population in these areas, chafed under the strict

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interpretation of Islamic law and, in some cases, began to actively resist. A few AQIM leaders recognized the detrimental effect that shari'a was having on the populace, but their warnings went unheeded. Thus, as AQIM forces began to prepare to push farther into Malian territory, they simultaneously eliminated what should have been their primary sources of safe haven and aid.

northeast, AQIM staged its forces for its push southwest, where its true prize—the capital city of Bamako—was defended only by an enfeebled Malian Army that was still reeling from an internal coup.

Tactically, AQIM's first goal was to take the strategic city of Konna, just across the river. With Konna secured, the jihadists could then move on to Mopti, sixty miles to the south, and thereby control the airfield at Sevaré. In the first

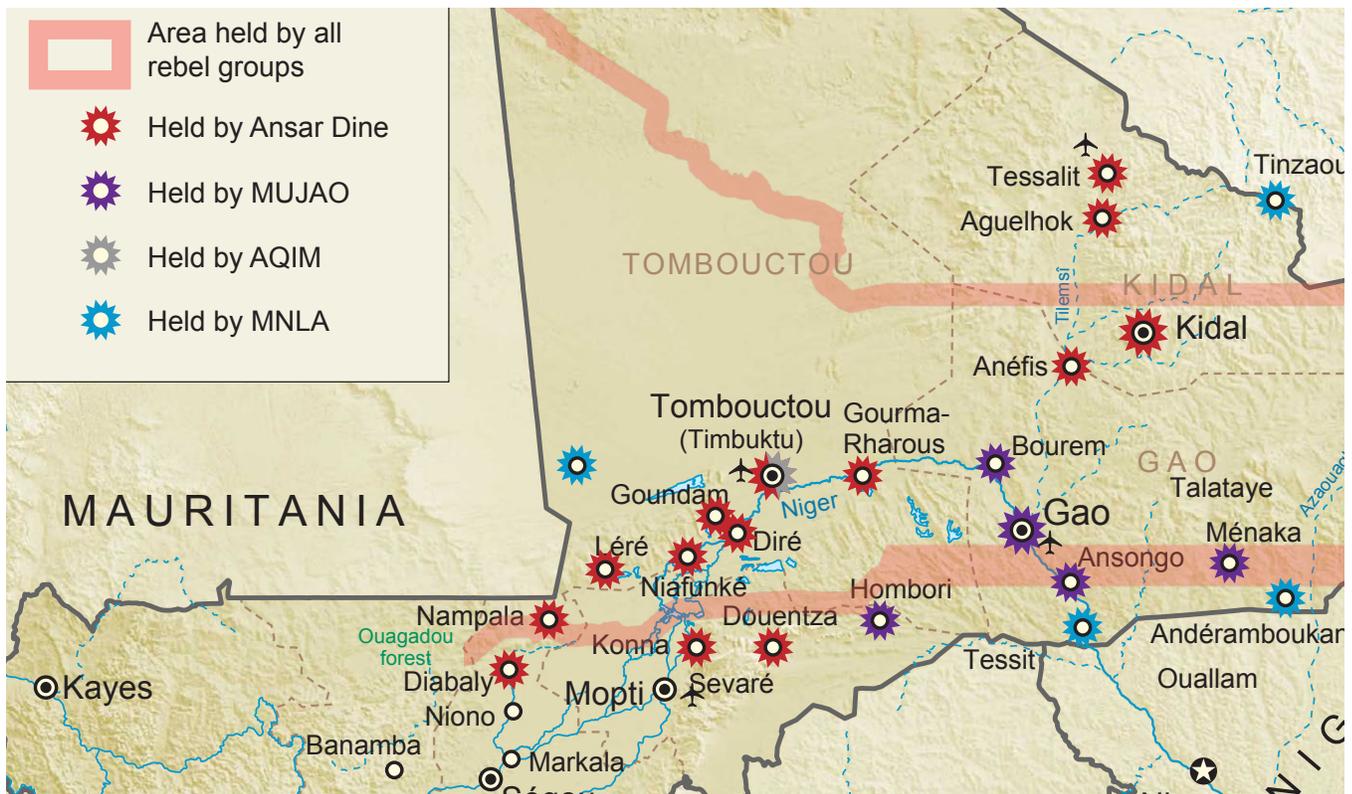


Figure 2: The farthest extent of rebel-held territory as of January 2013.²⁶

The final conventional tactic that AQIM adopted was the formation of something akin to battle lines. Unlike the refocus on territory and on the implementation of shari'a at the cost of popular support, it is probable that creating a "front line" was not a deliberate tactic. The Niger River formed a natural border between the lands claimed by the Tuareg as part of the Azawad and the rest of Mali. Therefore, the river also served as a de facto front line. To the

days of 2013, both the Malian government and the French military watched events unfold and understood that, were AQIM to cross the Niger River, it would signal not just the start of an offensive on Konna but the first stages of a strategy to eventually capture Bamako. The Niger River had become AQIM's Rubicon, and crossing it meant that the war was no longer about Azawad independence.²⁵

By defining its front lines, whether intentionally or not, AQIM provided the French with two key advantages: one tactical, one strategic, both conventional. Tactically, the French now knew exactly where the jihadist forces were. Thus, when the French military intervention began, it was much easier for French forces to find, fix, and target AQIM. In a guerilla war, the enemy hides within the population “like a fish in the ocean.”²⁷ But AQIM forces were out in the open and separate from the civilian populations in which they might have hidden. For their part, the French understood this to be an error and also recognized how the terrain was affecting AQIM’s order of battle, making it easier to strike the insurgents with airpower and standoff weapons.²⁸ Through its actions along the Niger River, AQIM negated one of the most significant advantages of irregular warfare.

Strategically, by concentrating its forces on one side of the line, AQIM dramatically simplified the political decision-making of the French government. Prior to the force posturing on the river, “French policy was to avoid unilateral intervention and instead work through international organizations.”²⁹ Then-French President François Hollande would have had to decide whether to undertake a risky foreign intervention on the side of an unstable Malian government, or to wait until a combined force of soldiers from other African states and the UN could be organized. By building up its forces along the Niger River, AQIM changed that calculus: if the jihadists crossed the river, a French intervention would become far more necessary and, simultaneously, far more politically palatable.³⁰ Subsequently, when its forces did cross the line (both literally and figuratively), AQIM gave France the justification to intervene directly. On 11 January 2013, Operation Serval began.

Phase 3: Operation Serval

As announced by President Hollande on 11 January, the French objectives were three-fold: first, stop the “terrorist” aggression southward; second, secure the country by recapturing those cities taken during the first phases of the

war; and third, expel any remaining AQIM forces into the deserts of northern Mali, and even into Algeria, in order to restore Mali’s territorial integrity.³¹ To accomplish this, the French would have to rely on speed, overwhelming military force, and accurate intelligence regarding the location of jihadist forces, to ensure that those forces didn’t escape by dispersing into the population. But having separated

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Once French boots hit the ground in Mali, one of the first objectives was to secure Bamako by stopping the advance of the AQIM forces. “In the afternoon [of 11 January 2013], Gazelle helicopters strafed the advancing enemy vehicles. That evening, Mirage 2000 fighter jets based approximately 2,000 km away in Chad carried out numerous attacks.”³² With the primary threat to the capital neutralized, French Marines were able to secure the city and airport within eight hours of receiving their orders. Less than two weeks later, the French installed their headquarters in a secure capital city.³³ The French military had accomplished the first of its objectives only days after AQIM began its southward push.



The next notable operation aimed at AQIM’s de facto front lines with the intent to take control of the area known as the Niger Bend, where the river turns toward the southeast, and where Timbuktu and Gao, two of the most strategically vital cities in Mali, are located.³⁴ Operation Oryx commenced on 15 January, when French ground forces, along with allies from Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, and Canada, began their push northward. While Timbuktu fell

without a fight, Gao had the potential to be a much harder battle. However, as mentioned previously, AQIM had lost the support of significant swathes of the population. In fact, the French were joined by Tuareg militia members in Gao, including members of the MNLA. “The Tuareg

contingents involved in French operations were small, but they played important roles as guides, scouts, and interpreters. . . . Their involvement may have helped secure for France local buy-in and popular support.”³⁵ Though it is unlikely that Tuareg support was decisive to the eventual French victory in Operation Serval, it almost certainly made that victory easier. It may very well have saved lives in the process, and came with the added benefit of costing AQIM time and freedom of movement.

It can be tempting to go into the tactical minutia of individual battles and troop movements throughout Operation Serval, but the reality is that, once committed, the French military was in a position of overwhelming advantage. Thus, in many ways, the analysis of irregular versus conventional tactics becomes less important once the French intervention began. Inasmuch as the outcome of Operation Serval was a French military victory, by adopting a more conventional way of war (albeit still irregular compared to the French), AQIM didn’t change the result of the French intervention. What it did do, however, was to spur France to action and ensure that the already massive power differential was amplified dramatically, resulting in a faster, more decisive, and more efficient operation by French forces.

By March 2013, the French had retaken most of the cities and towns that the Tuareg and AQIM had occupied in 2012, pushed AQIM into the mountains to the northwest of Mali, and killed AQIM leader Abu Zeid. Operation Serval continued until 18 June 2014, when the Malian government and the MNLA, along with other Tuareg rebel groups, signed the Ouagadougou Accord, which imposed a ceasefire and, on 15 July 2014, officially ended the Tuareg rebellion. With this success, the French were ready to draw down their forces, expecting them to be replaced by UN and African forces and, eventually, it was to be hoped, the Malian military as well.

Phase 4: Operation Barkhane

Unfortunately, AQIM had no obligation or intention to sign on to the ceasefire. Despite having been dealt a grievous blow during Operation Serval, AQIM remained active. Within weeks of the investiture of the new Malian government, AQIM began carrying out attacks across Mali. In addition to jeopardizing the nascent peace, the attacks showed that AQIM was no longer intending to fight anywhere near the conventional end of the scale, but

rather had returned to its old tactics of hit-and-run attacks, car bombs, and kidnappings. In other words, AQIM was again an irregular guerilla force.

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In early 2014, partially in response to the continued threat posed by AQIM, the French government decided to transition Operation Serval into a counterterrorism operation named Barkhane. The change was “intended to allow for the most rapid response possible against the remaining jihadists.”³⁶ The goal was to “clear up” the remaining threats from AQIM and its allies, and ensure that Mali had the best possible chance to emerge strong and prosperous from the civil war.

Eight years later, Operation Barkhane continues, but with questionable results. Though French counterterrorism forces have met with some success in killing or capturing members of AQIM—or its rebranded umbrella group, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)—Mali and the surrounding region have experienced the most rapid increase in jihadist violence of any region in Africa in recent years.³⁷ The similarities between Operation Barkhane and US counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are disappointingly evident. In all three areas, superior military force has consistently resulted in tactical successes, but those tactical wins rarely translate

into strategic success. Direct action against terrorist or insurgent forces is, in general, more straightforward and easier to quantify and, subsequently, easier to mark as a success. Tactical success is often demonstrated using metrics such as enemy killed in action (EKIA) or military accessibility, that have nothing to do with strategic progress. Though this approach appears effective on paper, irregular warfare necessitates a population-centric approach; in Mali, such an approach would seek to convince the people to

cease supporting the jihadists, and to demonstrate that the population would be better off siding with the government or French forces.³⁸



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As evidenced by recent protests against France's military presence, Operation Barkhane, unfortunately, has largely failed to enact a population-centric approach.³⁹ Though the numbers of jihadist EKIA are impressive, terrorist attacks and other violent events in the region have doubled every year since 2015.⁴⁰ Barkhane has proven so ineffective, in fact, that France has been forced to announce a complete military withdrawal from Mali in 2022.⁴¹ This resurgence by AQIM and its allies undoubtedly has a myriad of social, political, and religious causes, but one must ask the question: how is this happening while the same French forces that decimated AQIM during Operation Serval remain in place with the same primary mission of finding and eliminating AQIM wherever possible?

As with any question regarding military conflict, the answer is, inevitably, highly complex. However, one of the primary reasons AQIM has been able to accomplish its violent resurgence with such success is that it has returned to the tactics and strategies of irregular war. It has deprioritized controlling terrain, making its positions impermanent and its movements nearly impossible to track. It can operate out of some of the towns and cities in the north not only because it controls them militarily, but also because it is accepted and supported by the relevant populations. Finally, it has not created anything that could be construed as a front line. All of these tactical changes make AQIM, once again, far more difficult for largely conventional forces like the French to fight. AQIM's move toward conventionality in 2012 and 2013, however slight, was a disaster for the group, and likely cost it its dream of an Islamic caliphate in Mali. But now, its return to irregular warfare, coupled with the government's inability to stop it with conventional efforts, may precipitate the collapse of the Malian state.

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