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## Pragmatism and Purism in Jihadist Governance: The Islamic Emirate of Azawad Revisited

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### ABSTRACT

The Islamic Emirate established in northern Mali in 2012 was brought down less than a year later by a French military intervention, provoked by the Emirate's belligerent posture. This article explains why the leaders of the Emirate appeared to govern in a way that jeopardized the state's survival, despite AQIM's leadership calling for a cautious approach. Based on novel primary sources, this article provides a detailed view of governance practices in the Emirate, showing that they were in fact considerably more pragmatic than hitherto assumed. Furthermore, it argues that both AQIM and the leaders of the Emirate in the end were more concerned with the long-term prospects of jihadist expansion in the region than with the survival of the Emirate itself.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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In 2012, jihadist<sup>1</sup> groups overran all of northern Mali and established what became known as the Islamic Emirate of Azawad,<sup>2</sup> the largest contingent territory ever held by groups affiliated with al-Qaida. Even though the leadership of AQIM (al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib) admonished the people in charge to govern pragmatically and avoid provocations, the newborn state quickly gained notoriety for harsh governance and belligerence to the outside world, provoking a French military intervention that crushed the Islamic Emirate of Azawad less than a year after it was declared.

The purpose of this article is to explain why the leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad (henceforth “the Emirate” for short) seemingly ignored the AQIM leadership's calls for pragmatism and chose to govern in a way that jeopardized the state's survival. I rely on previously unused and underused sources to provide an in-depth analysis of the internal debates on governance within AQIM and its partner group Ansar Dine, as well as an account of actual governance practices in the Emirate.

In light of this material, I find that the leaders of the Emirate were considerably more pragmatist in their governance than what has hitherto been recognized in the literature. While there were important differences in policy preferences between them, I argue that a binary opposition between a pragmatist AQIM leadership and an ideologically purist Emirate is too reductive.

The more hardline governance pursued by the Emirate was not primarily a matter of ideological concerns trumping the AQIM leadership's pragmatic ones, but represented

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a different strategy to reach similar long-term goals. As will be shown, both AQIM's leadership and the leaders of the Emirate shared an understanding that the state venture was going to be *temporary* – sooner or later, the state would be taken down by a foreign intervention. Therefore, the key disagreement between them was over how to make the most of the time at their disposal. A pragmatic approach would extend the time frame available to propagate jihadist ideology among the people, whereas a more purist line would aim to attract support by building a state that more closely embodied the ideals they were fighting for.

This article makes two important contributions; The first is empirical, as it provides the first detailed description, based on primary sources, of governance practices and strategies in the Emirate. Second, the case study contributes to our understanding of jihadist rebel governance, by suggesting reasons for why jihadist state formations across the globe seemingly tend to “sacrifice state-building on the altar of ideological purity.”<sup>3</sup>

In analyzing the governance strategies of AQIM's leadership and the leaders of the Emirate, I employ the terms “pragmatism” and “purism.” I define “pragmatism” as a jihadist actor's willingness to make *ideological compromises*, which in this context entails *postponing* certain ideologically mandated actions that may provoke hostility toward the group, be it from civilian subjects, competing groups, or from neighboring states and their Western allies. “Purism” is defined as the opposite of pragmatism, and is therefore understood as unwillingness to postpone such actions. Building on these definitions, I analyze differences in jihadist governance strategies by looking at five practices typical of jihadist proto-states.<sup>4</sup> These practices are 1) the declaration of an Islamic state, 2) iconoclasm, 3) the implementation of Islamic law 4) non-cooperation with non-jihadist rebel groups, and 5) belligerence toward the outside world.<sup>5</sup>

The article proceeds as follows: I begin with an overview of the literature on jihadist governance and the Islamic Emirate of Azawad, as well as the sources used for this article. I then give an overview of the events leading up to the establishment of the Emirate, as a background for the discussion that follows. Next, I explore the AQIM's leadership's “pragmatist” plan for the running of the Emirate. Thereafter, I compare AQIM's plans for the state project with the type of governance that was actually implemented on the ground, focusing on the five practices listed above. In the final section, I discuss the findings from the previous sections and propose a new way of understanding the strategic reasoning underpinning pragmatist and purist governance practices in northern Mali.

## Literature and Sources

Since the rise of ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) and its declaration of a caliphate in 2014, the growing literature on *rebel governance* has been complemented by a number of studies on governance by jihadist actors. In an article on jihadist proto-states, Brynjar Lia notes that despite the importance of the concept of the state in jihadist ideology, jihadist state builders tend to avoid taking measures that would help their nascent states survive in the long term. They seldom moderate behavior and rhetoric once in power, but tend to persist in erratic and belligerent behavior that leads to state destruction by domestic foes or external interventions. This trend, Lia

suggests, is driven partly by rivalry with other Islamist rebels, which makes it difficult to seek compromise without alienating key constituencies, and partly by competition with other jihadist fronts for foreign fighters and external assistance.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Alex Thurston notes, with reference to AQIM's activities in Azawad, that jihadist politics have failed to find a viable methodology to reach its goals, as state builders are caught between either "implementing an uncompromising version of their agenda, inviting Western military intervention" or "seek[ing] a more pragmatic middle course that cannot satisfy hotheads and that risks 'diluting' jihadism itself."<sup>7</sup>

While building on these insights, this article suggests that an analysis of the *temporal* dimensions of jihadist state building provides a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon. When the jihadist struggle is envisioned to be a generational one, the success of a particular jihadist state *today* is not determined by whether or not it falls, but by whether or not it lays the groundwork for future strategic gains.

Despite attracting significant media attention in 2012-2013, the academic literature on the Islamic Emirate of Azawad remains underdeveloped, especially from a governance perspective. Recent exceptions include Ferdaous Bouhleb and Yvan Guichaoua (2021),<sup>8</sup> which investigates differences in the use of violence by jihadist rebels in Kidal and Gao, and Isak Svensson and Daniel Finnbogason (2021),<sup>9</sup> which includes a case study of civil resistance in the Emirate. Other works, including articles by Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall<sup>10</sup> and Troels Burchall Henningsen,<sup>11</sup> similarly deal with jihadist rebel governance in Mali, but focus on the more recent governance efforts of Katibat Macina, JNIM (*Jamā'at nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-muslimīn*) and ISGS (*The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*) in central Mali. A couple of other academic works treat the 2012-2013 period in depth, but they tend to focus less on governance practices than on the relationships between jihadist commanders and local political actors, including Thurston's excellent *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*,<sup>12</sup> which was mentioned above, and works by Stephen Harmon,<sup>13</sup> Pascale Combelles Siegel<sup>14</sup> and Adib Bencherif.<sup>15</sup> Overall, there remains a lack of empirical studies of governance practices in the Emirate.

While the academic literature on terrorism has long been criticized for overreliance on secondary sources,<sup>16</sup> scholars have noted a marked increase in studies based on primary sources in recent years.<sup>17</sup> This article situates itself within a growing trend of scholarship on jihadism that bases its analysis on internal documents from jihadist organizations. The trove of al-Qaida documents found in Abbottabad in particular has provided important new insights, both into al-Qaida's central organization (AQC)<sup>18</sup> and that of its affiliates in Africa.<sup>19</sup> Our understanding of jihadist groups in Sahel have similarly been augmented by the discovery of internal AQIM correspondence retrieved by journalists in Timbuktu after the jihadists left the city. However, these letters have still received relatively little scholarly attention, and will be used extensively in this article.

The most important of these letters for the purpose of this study is a July 2012 letter from AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel to the Shura Council of AQIM in the Sahara and Ansar Dine. The letter was found by Rukmini Callimachi in 2013 and published online by *Associated Press* with an English translation,<sup>20</sup> but this version is incomplete and lacks several pages. It remains the one commonly cited in the academic literature, even though a complete version of the letter (in French translation) was

published in 2013 by *RFI* and *Libération*.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, the original Arabic version was published online with an introduction by the al-Qaida-affiliated media group *Nukhbat al-i' lām al-islāmī*.<sup>22</sup> It is this version this article will refer to.

A new source that will be used extensively in this article is a 176-page interview with one of the jihadist leaders in the Emirate identified as Abd al-Aziz Habib.<sup>23</sup> The interview was conducted by Zakariyya Bughrara and published in a six-part series on [www.marsadpress.net](http://www.marsadpress.net) in 2013-2014,<sup>24</sup> and in book-form later in 2014.<sup>25</sup> Habib's real identity is not known, but the depth and detail of his testimony, as well as the accuracy of the various facts and biographical details presented, leaves little doubt that Habib had intimate knowledge of the Emirate from an insider's perspective. As one can expect, however, his account aims to portray the Emirate in a positive light, and its claims should therefore be treated with some caution. Finally, the article will rely on some of the jihadists' semipublic online communication, including Q&A-sessions that were held online in jihadist web forums by spokesmen in AQIM and Ansar Dine.<sup>26</sup>

Building on these primary sources, this article provides a rich empirical account of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad and challenges common notions about this jihadist proto-state in the current academic literature. Information obtained from the primary sources listed above has been critically assessed, and whenever possible, triangulated with other sources, including the existing literature, media reports, and court documents. All primary sources are in Arabic, and the translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

## **Context: Jihadists and Tuareg Separatists in Northern Mali**

The establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad was precipitated by the outbreak of a Tuareg rebellion, in which an assortment of jihadist factions joined with Tuareg separatist rebels to expel the Malian government from the north. In the aftermath of the rebellion, relations between Tuareg rebels and jihadists broke down, and after a period of fighting between the two factions, the jihadists emerged as the *de facto* rulers of northern Mali. This section will give a brief background on the main jihadist and Tuareg actors involved in the conflict, followed by an overview of events leading up to the jihadist take-over of northern Mali in 2012.

Jihadist groups originating in Algeria had been operating in northern Mali for more than a decade prior to seizing control of its territory in 2012. GSPC (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*), which changed its name to AQIM in 2007, had maintained a presence in the region from the early 2000s. The area would go on to play a key role in AQIM's strategic calculus, serving various purposes such as being a physical sanctuary from Algerian attacks, a hub for various illegal economic activities, and a location for training camps.<sup>27</sup> Over the years, AQIM's commanders in the south also worked systematically to cultivate ties with tribes and local communities in northern Mali.<sup>28</sup> By 2012, AQIM was no longer simply a foreign "terrorist" group, but had become tightly integrated into northern Mali's social, political, and economic networks.

While AQIM's leadership in Algeria wanted to keep using northern Mali as a rear base to focus on its primary objectives, namely fighting the Algerian government and

targeting Western interests in the wider region, AQIM's growing number of Sahelian cadres were eager to take the fight to the Sahelian governments. However, the leadership refused to yield to its demands and give up on the original, Algerian-centric aims of the group. The intransigence of the leadership was likely one of the main reasons for the internal split that occurred in October 2011, which saw a group of Sahelian AQIM members split off to form MUJAO (*Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*), which explicitly stated its intention to fight in the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>29</sup> Such an opportunity presented itself both to MUJAO and AQIM's southern brigades just a few months later with the outbreak of the Tuareg rebellion in January 2012.

The Tuareg rebellion of 2012 was the last in a series of Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali, the first of which broke out shortly after the country gained independence in 1960, followed by further rebellions in the 1990s and from 2006-2008.<sup>30</sup> From late 2010, Tuareg political activists renewed calls for Azawadi independence with increased vigor, while at the same time, events in Libya ensured that the secessionists would soon have the military means to challenge the Malian state. As Muammar Gaddafi's regime was crumbling under the combined weight of a popular uprising and NATO's bombing campaign from February 2012, many of Gaddafi's veteran Tuareg fighters went back to Mali, taking large stockpiles of weapons with them. Well-trained and well-armed, the returnees, many of whom had gone to Libya after being defeated in one of the previous rebellions, soon entered into discussions with local power brokers to plan a new revolt. Thus, after a lengthy round of negotiations in Zakak in northern Mali, the attendees created the movement known as MNLA (*Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad*) in October 2011. This broad, secular-oriented Tuareg separatist movement was to be the main instigator of the rebellion that broke out just a few months later.<sup>31</sup>

Shortly afterwards, another Tuareg rebel group with jihadist leanings formed around Iyad ag Ghali, who had risen to prominence as a rebel leader in the 1990-1995 uprising. In 2007, he was given a posting at Mali's consulate in Jeddah, but was expelled by the Saudi government in 2010 for cultivating bonds with unspecified extremist elements. Seeking to regain political relevancy after years abroad, Iyad ag Ghali made an unsuccessful bid to become the secretary general of MNLA at the Zakak meeting, followed shortly afterwards by another unsuccessful bid to become the successor to the *amenokal*<sup>32</sup> of the Ifoghas tribal confederacy. After this failure, Ag Ghali decided to form his own organization, Ansar Dine.<sup>33</sup>

Ansar Dine drew members from two core constituencies; members of Ag Ghali's Ifoghas tribe and Tuareg jihadists.<sup>34</sup> The Ifoghas contingent included a number of Tuareg politicians and long time associates of Ag Ghali with considerable clout in northern Malian politics. These prominent figures were willing to work with the jihadists to reach common aims, but were nevertheless not wholly committed to jihadist politics.<sup>35</sup> Ansar Dine's numbers were also bolstered at an early stage by around 40 members of Katibat al-Ansar, an AQIM brigade composed of ethnic Tuaregs led by Ag Ghali's kinsman Hamada Ag Hama.<sup>36</sup> AQIM's decision to throw in their lot with Ansar Dine from the beginning of the rebellion, as well as Ag Ghali's favoring the jihadist faction within the group, contributed to the jihadists eventually gaining the upper hand.

On 10 January 2012, news media reported that MNLA and Ansar Dine had come to an agreement to combine their forces in the upcoming confrontation with the Malian government,<sup>37</sup> which started on 17 January with rebel attacks on Ménaka, Aguelhok and Tessalit.<sup>38</sup> The situation changed decisively in favor of the rebels after 21 March, when a mutiny at a military base outside of Bamako evolved into a full-blown coup d'état.<sup>39</sup> In the tumultuous period following the coup, the resistance previously put up by Malian government forces in the north melted away. From 30 March - 1 April, the three provincial capitals of Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao all fell to rebel forces.<sup>40</sup> After Douentza was captured on 6 April, MNLA declared that it had liberated all of its desired territory and declared independence from Mali as the state of Azawad.<sup>41</sup>

As independence was declared by MNLA, it became apparent that the jihadists had also secured a strong position in Azawad, and the two sides immediately began vying for control. While the enmity between MNLA and the jihadists did not break into open conflict at this point, it became increasingly apparent, now that the fight against the common enemy had ended, that their political goals were on collision course. As neither side was in a position to fight the other without simultaneously jeopardizing their tenuous grip over northern Mali, MNLA and Ansar Dine entered negotiations to find a political settlement that could satisfy both parties.

On 26 May, MNLA and Ansar Dine announced that they had come to an agreement and signed a provisional plan for how the state of Azawad would be governed.<sup>42</sup> The agreement, which was signed in the city of Gao, stipulated that Azawad would be an independent, Islamic state. The Gao Agreement seemed to ensure that MNLA and Ansar Dine were not only going to coexist peacefully, but it even declared that the groups would be merged and organized into a regular army.<sup>43</sup> Less than a week later, however, members of MNLA political leadership denounced the deal as a betrayal of MNLA's secular values,<sup>44</sup> prompting MNLA representatives in Gao to walk back on the promises in the initial agreement.<sup>45</sup> On 7 June, MNLA presented its own Transitional Council that would govern the state, consisting entirely of members drawn from its own ranks, a move which Ansar Dine denounced as a violation of the Gao Agreement.<sup>46</sup>

The simmering conflict between MNLA and the jihadists broke into open fighting on 26 June. Seizing the opportunity provided by popular protests against MNLA in Gao, MUJAO attacked and ousted the rival group from the city after heavy fighting.<sup>47</sup> Ansar Dine then ordered MNLA to leave Timbuktu and Kidal,<sup>48</sup> which they did, reportedly without a fight.<sup>49</sup>

With the exception of a few towns and pockets of territory held by MNLA and other militias,<sup>50</sup> the jihadists were now in control of the entirety of northern Mali. Iyad ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine, was named emir<sup>51</sup> of the state. Abu Zayd, commander of AQIM's Tariq ibn Ziyad brigade, served as his second-in-command and *wālī* (governor) of Timbuktu,<sup>52</sup> ruled jointly by AQIM and the hardline jihadist faction of Ansar Dine. Kidal meanwhile was controlled by a more moderate faction of Ansar Dine dominated by the Ifoghas tribe.<sup>53</sup> Gao was ruled by MUJAO, which although it had broken its official ties with AQIM, still cooperated with the other jihadist factions throughout 2012<sup>54</sup> and joined the their southward offensive in January 2013.



While the first steps toward creating an Islamic Emirate of Azawad had been taken right after the jihadists had entered these cities in March-April, from July onwards, they were able to develop their state project with minimal interference.

### **Droukdel's Pragmatist Program for the Islamic Emirate of Azawad**

AQIM's leadership had not planned to establish a state in northern Mali, nor had it condoned opening a new front against the Malian government. In April 2012, however, AQIM's leadership was forced to deal with precisely such a situation when Ansar Dine and AQIM's southern commanders captured Azawad. While unable to exercise firm control over his commanders in the south, AQIM-leader Abdelmalik Droukdel nevertheless sought to influence the course of events in Azawad. This section explores the AQIM leadership's position on jihadist state-building in general and its program for Azawad in particular, which emphasized pragmatism and long-term investment over ideological purity.

As indicated in the previous section, AQIM's leadership had initially defied its southern cadres' wishes to open a new front in the Sahel, as per the instructions given to AQIM by al-Qaida Central. Usama bin Ladin had explicitly warned Droukdel against trying to bring down the Sahelian governments, as an Islamic state, he argued, should not be declared until the jihadists had sufficient popular support and resources to govern a state effectively and meet the demands of its subjects.<sup>55</sup> Bringing down the local regimes would only result in chaos and harm the jihadists' efforts to spread their ideology.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, until the United States and the West in general had been weakened to the point where it would be unable to interfere decisively in Muslim affairs, an Islamic state led by jihadists would be crushed and valuable resources wasted.<sup>57</sup> Bin Ladin therefore encouraged AQIM to negotiate truces with the Sahelian governments instead of fighting them, and furthermore to continue treating northern Mali as a rear base for operations targeting Algeria and Western interests in the region.

Leaked internal communication shows that the decision to join with Ansar Dine in the rebellion was made by AQIM's commanders in the south, and not by the leadership in Algeria. A letter from AQIM leadership to the Shura Council of AQIM in the Sahara and Ansar Dine dated 16 March 2012<sup>58</sup> (i.e. after the rebellion had started), shows that the leadership only followed the events from afar and had minimal information about what the southern commanders were up to.<sup>59</sup> However, with Azawad firmly in rebel hands, Droukdel communicated his plans for the state building strategy in Azawad, in an audio message released on 21 May 2012. It is worth noting that despite its contents, the message was not treated confidentially and sent directly to the local commanders, but was disseminated by the Mauritanian newspaper Sahara Media.<sup>60</sup> This provides an indication that AQIM's leadership struggled to establish efficient communication with its nominal subordinates and partners in the south. However, Droukdel probably felt the need to weigh in on the process at this key juncture, that is, when Ansar Dine and MNLA were in the process of negotiating the Gao Agreement.

Droukdel's message encourages the jihadists to proceed with prudence and caution, directing their efforts toward winning popular support, rather than insisting on



ideological purity. They should ensure the security of the local population and their belongings as their first priority. Next, he enjoins them to set up an effective administration as soon as a territory is captured, and to involve local notables and skilled workers in it as soon as possible. Such an involvement would not only ensure popular support, but also help with sharing the burden of governance, which Droukdel acknowledges exceeds their capacities as a group. For the same reason, he stressed the necessity of “avoid[ing], as much as possible, confrontation with the MNLA,”<sup>61</sup> and to find common ground on which they can base the state project. Finally, Droukdel warns against rash application of the precepts of the Sharia, especially the *hudūd*-punishments.<sup>62</sup> While open displays of immorality, such as bars, should be closed immediately, the implementation of the *hudūd* should only come gradually and when conditions were ready for it.<sup>63</sup>

Droukdel’s subsequent communication, a letter dated 20 July, 2012,<sup>64</sup> berates Ansar Dine and AQIM’s commanders for apparently disregarding his recommendations. Despite his exhortations to proceed gradually with the implementation of Islamic law, Ansar Dine had already gained notoriety for its extremist policies. Droukdel had been particularly alarmed by the destruction of the Sufi shrines in Timbuktu, which had caused an international outrage. He also criticizes the implementation of the *hudūd* for adultery, in direct contradiction of his previous recommendations. Moreover, he criticizes the enforcement of Islamic precepts that are not strictly necessary, and the use of house-searches, etc., which in his opinion not only alienates the people, but also goes against the precedence of the *salaf*.<sup>65</sup> While recognizing that infringements be the fault of individuals rather than the system, he admonishes his commanders in the south to rectify these behaviors and follow his instructions.<sup>66</sup>

More than anything, Droukdel was dismayed by the fighting between the jihadists and MNLA. He had regarded the Gao Agreement, which stipulated that the two movements would work together to create an Islamic state of Azawad,<sup>67</sup> as a major victory, and appeared overjoyed at the extent to which MNLA was willing to make compromises with the jihadists. The Gao Agreement is, he states, “a great and very important victory; it serves our interest to a great extent in its draft form, even if we were not to amend a single one of its points. In our view, it goes further than any follower could expect from the movement [MNLA], which is supposed to be secular in orientation.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, he is sorely disappointed that the jihadists did not do more to put the agreement into practice, and exhorts them to reestablish a working relationship with MNLA.<sup>69</sup>

The benefit of working with MNLA, Droukdel argues, is threefold: First, cooperation could prevent MNLA and other local groups from forming the basis of *ṣaḥwa* (uprising) against the jihadists.<sup>70</sup> Second, an alliance with MNLA would leave Ansar Dine and the whole Azawadi state venture better prepared to fight off a probable, if not certain, military intervention. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Droukdel hoped that an alliance with MNLA would help *conceal* the jihadist character of the Emirate, and thereby prevent or delay a Western military intervention from nipping it in the bud. He asks:

“What is the ideal scenario for forming a government that guarantees us, on the one hand, an Islamic state, and on the other hand, not to brand it as a al-Qaida-esque

Islamic emirate or a jihadist government? Solving this difficult equation is what we must base our correct perception of the government upon. For whenever we act alone in the government, and whenever our control over the government becomes evident, the more certain a foreign intervention becomes, and the faster it will come. [Conversely], it will be more difficult for the enemies to resort to [an intervention] whenever it shows that the government represents the majority of the people of Azawad with all its constituent groups, movements and tribes – and that it is not only an al-Qaida or Salafi-jihadist government.”<sup>71</sup>

Droukdel’s proposed solution is that instead of seeking to dominate the state, the jihadists should actively seek to involve others in governance. This inclusion of actors in governance should not be limited to the MNLA, but should also extend to representatives of other political factions and ethnic groups, whose absence is the only substantial objection he puts forward to the original text of the Gao Agreement. By doing so, he reckons, the government of Azawad would appear truly representative, gain greater legitimacy, and tone down the overt involvement of the jihadists.<sup>72</sup>

To this end, Droukdel suggests dividing up government ministries between Ansar Dine and MNLA and ceding control of some state functions that were of less direct interest to the jihadists to the separatists. These would include foreign affairs, finances, public works and the like, while Ansar Dine would be in charge of the army, the media, the judiciary, education and the ministries of Islamic affairs and *da’wa*.<sup>73</sup> In short, Ansar Dine would control all of the sectors necessary to implement Islamic law and ensure the Islamic character of the state. In terms of long-term strategic value, controlling these sectors, would give the jihadists the means to propagate their ideology to the people. Since Droukdel reckons it is highly likely that a foreign intervention will eventually bring down the “newborn” Islamic state, the most important task is to spend their limited time planting the seeds of jihadist ideology among the people of Azawad, whose fruits they would benefit from at a later stage.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, Droukdel’s letter to the commanders in Azawad shows an acute awareness that belligerence toward the outside world would be detrimental to the state project. However, since al-Qaida Central had emphasized that AQIM’s main objective should be to conduct terrorist attacks against the “far enemy,” Droukdel sought to balance this objective with the interests of the state. Such a balance would be achieved, he suggests, either by integrating most of AQIM’s members in Mali under Ansar Dine while retaining a portion of the group to conduct external operations, or by keeping AQIM’s southern command intact, but distinguishing clearly between its external and internal operations. In any case, Ansar Dine would operate within its Malian territory only. He further emphasizes the need to “consider the balance in every external jihad action between the size of the interests that can be hoped for from that action, and the size of the expected evils that will result from it and befall the Azawad region.” As for representatives of the state, Droukdel exhorts them to “adopt a moderate and mature rhetoric that calms and reassures [and] avoid any provocative statements about neighboring countries.”<sup>75</sup> The jihadists in Azawad should, he states, pretend to be a domestic movement with its own issues and interests, and, at this point, hide the fact that they have an expansionist policy.<sup>76</sup>

In sum, Droukdel’s vision for the Islamic Emirate of Azawad was decidedly pragmatist, meaning that he was willing to compromise and postpone ideologically mandated

actions in all of the five practices typical of jihadist states outlined in the introduction. In principle opposed to the very creation of an Islamic emirate in Azawad, Droukdel also condemned acts of iconoclasm and wished to postpone the implementation of many Islamic legal precepts. Even more remarkable was his willingness not only to collaborate with, but also to cede power and government functions to a secularist group. In effect, what Droukdel is proposing is not simply pragmatic accommodation with political realities, but a *dissimulation* of the jihadist character of the state. The state would be an “Islamic state,” but the jihadists would have to compromise on their political positions and include other political actors to the point where the outside world would not perceive that the jihadists were in charge.

If the state would not embody the ideals Droukdel was fighting for, what would the purpose of the Islamic Emirate of Azawad be within Droukdel’s broader strategy? It would continue to serve as a sanctuary for AQIM, as northern Mali had done prior to the rebellion, but even this course of action was fraught with difficulties, as any external operation AQIM undertook would draw negative attention to Ansar Dine and the state. But the most important goal of the state, in Droukdel’s view, was the golden opportunity it provide the jihadists to spread their ideology in Azawad, which would provide future rewards that would outlast the Emirate itself.

### **Inside the Islamic Emirate of Azawad**

Having reviewed Droukdel’s plan for the running of the Emirate, as well as the criticisms he levied against his commanders for their handling of the situation, this section will take a closer look at events on the ground. To this end, it will look separately at each of the five practices typical of jihadist governance listed in the introduction, and discuss the extent to which these can be termed “pragmatist” or “purist.”

The account which follows will be somewhat Timbuktu-centric, especially with regards to issues of Islamic law and iconoclasm, since the primary sources mainly deal with events in this city. Moreover, Timbuktu was controlled by AQIM and the more jihadist-leaning faction of Ansar Dine, who were the likely recipients of Droukdel’s private rebukes.<sup>77</sup> Focusing the discussion on governance practices in this city thus provides the best background for understanding the internal debates in AQIM.

### **Declaration of an Islamic State**

As seen in the previous section, the jihadists’ capture of territory in Azawad and the subsequent declaration of an Islamic emirate directly contravened al-Qaida Central’s recommendations to AQIM’s leadership. While this course of action was clearly less pragmatist, the jihadists in Azawad were not oblivious to the dangers of this strategy and actively sought to mitigate them.

Testimony from key figures involved in the state-building venture suggests that the plan was actually *not* to declare an Islamic state, but instead to implement a *de facto* Islamic state on the ground without declaring it as such. The reason an Islamic state was not supposed to be officially declared, Habib explains, was to protect the people from the outside aggression that would inevitably follow such a declaration.<sup>78</sup>

In fact, according to both Habib and Ansar Dine spokesman Sanda Ould Boumama, an Islamic state *was* actually never officially declared by the jihadists.<sup>79</sup> Ould Boumama explains that while the Gao Agreement stipulated that the parties would *work toward building* an Islamic state, no official declaration was made, but the media took the mere mention of an Islamic state in the agreement as tantamount to declaring one.<sup>80</sup> Thus, once an Islamic state was declared by the media, the original plan – not to declare an Islamic state – had failed.

While it seems unlikely that a *de facto* implementation of an Islamic state on the ground would have gone unnoticed without an official declaration of statehood, the supposed declaration of an Islamic state could possibly be seen more as an abject failure of communication than a lack of pragmatism.

### **Non-Cooperation with Non-Jihadist Rebel Groups**

Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO fought side-by-side with MNLA throughout the rebellion, and despite their ideological disagreements with MNLA, they did not immediately seek to destroy their ally once the fight against the common enemy had ended. On the contrary, the Gao Agreement stipulated that the groups would be merged to form a regular army. Moreover, the agreement showed that the jihadists in Azawad were willing to make non-trivial political concessions to run the new state jointly with MNLA. It represented a compromise between the two groups, wherein each party obtained the political objective that it deemed most important, namely the recognition of Azawad as a sovereign state for MNLA and a commitment to implementing the Sharia for Ansar Dine.

However, MNLA undoubtedly made the greater concessions. Ansar Dine had to give up on its explicit demand to impement the Sharia in all of Mali, committing itself to “the independence of Azawad, recognizing and respecting the borders of neighboring countries.”<sup>81</sup> This did not, however, entail ceding any actual political powers to MNLA, and it would in any case secure them strong territorial base from which to expand further if they were to renege on this point in the future. For MNLA, on the other hand, the compromise they had struck meant not only abandoning their goal of a secular state, but in practice, it also meant ceding control over the most important state institutions – the legislature and courts – to Ansar Dine. It is therefore not surprising that MNLA pulled out of the deal shortly after it was signed. The political distance between the two parties was probably too great to be overcome, and it appears highly unrealistic that the deal could ever have been successfully implemented as Droukdel had wanted.

In sum, even though they eventually clashed with MNLA, the jihadists in Azawad nevertheless cultivated a close relationship and were willing to make certain compromises with their non-jihadist allies. This pragmatic approach distinguishes them from certain other jihadist groups, such as ISIS, which, in rhetoric if not always in practice, refuses all compromise and tactical alliances with ideological adversaries.<sup>82</sup> The eventual breakdown of relations between the jihadists and MNLA cannot therefore be analyzed simply as purist considerations prevailing over pragmatic ones. Despite what seems to have been honest efforts at reaching a shared solution, the political distance was too great to be overcome.

## Implementation of Islamic Law

The first priority for the jihadists upon taking over the cities had been to set up an Islamic justice system. This move was partly practical in nature, aimed to secure popular support by establishing order after the widespread looting and insecurity that followed the departure of the Malian state.<sup>83</sup> It also served an ideological purpose of seminal importance – after all, the implementation of Islamic law stands as the foremost, if not the only, *raison d'être* for an Islamic state.<sup>84</sup> With this in place, the jihadists in Azawad quickly gained notoriety for banning things such as smoking, alcohol, shaving<sup>85</sup> and music, as well as cutting off hands of thieves and stoning adulterers. While these policies appear *prima facie* to epitomize an ideologically purist posture, even here several arguably pragmatist measures were taken.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Islamic justice system was the implementation of *hudūd*-punishments. While these punishments were indeed implemented, Habib states that the courts sought to limit their frequency because the people in Azawad were little acquainted with the precepts of the Sharia. According to Habib, they did so by setting the bar for passing a *ḥadd*-verdict extremely high, and only applying it if it could not be avoided. By way of example, Habib states that the *ḥadd*-punishment for theft – amputation of a hand – was only implemented once.<sup>86</sup> All other cases were dismissed because of *shubha* (doubt), which as an Islamic legal term refers to “factual doubt, legal doubt, and even moral doubt about the propriety of punishment,” which constitutes grounds for acquittal in *hudūd*-cases.<sup>87</sup>

In fact, both the *ḥadd* for theft and other *hudūd*-punishments were, according to Habib, only ever implemented when the accused confessed his crimes, or when circumstances left absolutely no doubt that a crime had been committed.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes, however, the Islamic Court had no option but to pass a *ḥadd*-verdict, even if they saw that carrying out such a sentence would cause great social harm. In these cases, they would pass the sentence as required by the Sharia, but simply indefinitely postpone its implementation.<sup>89</sup>

Another interesting example of pragmatism can be found in the issue of which school of law<sup>90</sup> the Islamic Courts should base its judgements on. Salafists of all stripes, including jihadists, commonly hold that adhering to one of the traditional schools of laws, instead of relying solely on the Quran and Sunna, represents a form of unlawful religious innovation. Droukdel, however, took the view that for the time being, the people should be left to follow the local Maliki school of law with which people were acquainted.<sup>91</sup> The leaders of the Emirate must have agreed with this opinion, as the Islamic Court indeed judged according to Maliki rather than Salafist principles.<sup>92</sup>

Further flexibility with regards to the application of Islamic law was shown, according to Habib, by the fact that the Islamic Courts frequently resorted to the rulings of other schools of law if they thought the Maliki ruling would be too harsh.<sup>93</sup> As an example of this, Habib mentions that in one case, an unmarried couple had been charged with adultery, which in Maliki jurisprudence would be punished with 100 lashes and forced exile for a year. However, considering the money and effort the jihadists, as well as the victims' families, would have to spend to enforce the punishment of exile, the Islamic court decided to rule according to the Hanafi school of law, which held that exile was not obligatory.<sup>94</sup> Other examples of rulings that went against Maliki jurisprudence include only 40 lashes given for drinking alcohol (instead of the

usual 80),<sup>95</sup> convicted sorcerers were allowed to repent to avoid execution, and the Court further disagreed with the Maliki opinion that the *hadd* is the appropriate punishment for stealing from the public treasury. If they had ruled according to the Maliki school of law on this issue, Habib states, “a lot of hands would have had to be cut off.”<sup>96</sup>

Finally, while the harshness and transgressions of the Islamic police<sup>97</sup> had been one Droukdel’s main objections to the way the Emirate was administered, Habib praises the Islamic police specifically for being cautious and gradual in their approach. He notes that they followed a strategy of “admonition first, then threats, then punishment.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, they would first preach about what sins to avoid, then threaten people to give up sin, and only then would they punish those who were obstinately sinning.<sup>98</sup> It should be noted that Ansar Dine gained a reputation for punishing minor sins relatively quickly after gaining power, indicating that these three steps must have followed each other in relatively short order.<sup>100</sup>

### ***Iconoclasm***

The jihadists in Timbuktu considered the city’s centuries old Sufi shrines and the local practice of worshiping at them as a form of religious deviancy, and embarked on a mission to demolish them. The first, but relatively minor attack against a shrine in Timbuktu happened in early May.<sup>101</sup> Then, a systematic campaign to destroy the shrines was initiated on 30 June, 2012, when three shrines were completely demolished with shovels and pickaxes.<sup>102</sup>

As mentioned, Droukdel was furious with the destruction of the shrines, which had sparked an international outrage.<sup>103</sup> In addition to his worries about the negative press, Droukdel believed that the timing was wrong – the people were not yet sufficiently acquainted with the precepts of the religion to understand the benefits of destroying the shrines, and the position of the jihadists was in his opinion too weak to face the potential popular backlash.<sup>104</sup>

In this case, however, Droukdel’s orders appear to have been blatantly ignored, and further destructions took place throughout the autumn,<sup>105</sup> with the last instance reported just a few weeks before the French intervention.<sup>106</sup> Shrines were also destroyed in Goundam<sup>107</sup> and in Kidal.<sup>108</sup>

Even in this case, Habib emphasizes that the jihadists had shown leniency and followed a gradualist procedure. Members of the Islamic police had begun teaching the locals about the ills of praying by the shrines soon after entering the city, and done so regularly every Friday when people gathered to pray. Moreover, on the Friday preceding the destruction, the jihadists had ordered all imams in the city to deliver a pre-written sermon on the reasons for and benefits of destroying them.<sup>109</sup> Only after three months, and by orders of the leaders of the Emirate, did they take the decision to destroy the shrines.<sup>110</sup>

### ***Belligerence toward the outside World***

Although they had been explicitly warned against doing so by Droukdel, the Emirate adopted a belligerent posture toward the outside world that was manifest both in



speech and actions. Considering that the intervention that toppled the Emirate came as a direct response to the jihadists' offensive into central Mali, the Emirate's belligerence appears on surface to showcase a lack of pragmatism that borders on the suicidal.

Even prior to the offensive, the rhetoric coming from its representatives did little to assuage international concerns about the Emirate's jihadist nature and expansionary ambitions. While the Gao Agreement had stipulated that Ansar Dine would commit itself to "the independence of Azawad, recognizing and respecting the borders of neighboring countries,"<sup>111</sup> its representatives were ambivalent as to whether they would actually do so. When asked on a jihadist web forum, spokesman Sanda Ould Boumama repeated the standard jihadist understanding that recognizing international borders was tantamount to disbelief (*kufur*). At the same time, however, he stated that expansion into other regions of Mali or outside of Mali would be unrealistic considering their strength at the time, and therefore a merely theoretical issue.<sup>112</sup>

Despite this recognition of their weakness, the jihadists nevertheless launched a major offensive into central Mali in early 2013, capturing the strategically important town of Konna in the Mopti region on 10 January.<sup>113</sup> Fearing a jihadist advance toward the capital Bamako, Mali's government requested military aid from France, which launched a military intervention the next day.<sup>114</sup> A mere three weeks into the French military offensive, the jihadists had lost all the three major cities of the north, Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao, which effectively put an end to the Islamic Emirate of Azawad.<sup>115</sup>

Habib explicitly dismisses the notion that the jihadists had planned to capture the south of Mali and the capital Bamako,<sup>116</sup> and provides two other explanations for why the jihadists embarked on this ill-fated offensive against Konna. First, he presents it as a justified response against the Malian government for its repeated abuses of the Muslims in the south, and specifically for the massacre of a group of Tablighi preachers at the hands of the Malian military in Diabaly in September 2012.<sup>117</sup> This ideologically justified explanation is juxtaposed in Habib's testimony with another, more plausible explanation, namely that the offensive came as a preemptive strike in response to a build-up of Malian forces near the borders of Azawad and a looming UN intervention.<sup>118</sup>

On 20 December, 2012, the UN Security Council had passed Resolution 2085, which approved the deployment of a 3,300-strong African-led force in northern Mali (known as AFISMA) to combat terrorism and restore Mali's territorial integrity.<sup>119</sup> Since this intervention was not scheduled to be launched until September 2013,<sup>120</sup> Habib's explanation suggests that the jihadists perceived that they had a window of opportunity to launch a preemptive strike and seize strategically important ground before AFISMA deployed. Droukdel's statement on the preparations for a military intervention refers to it as "France's proxy war" and conveys an expectation that France would primarily be working in the background, letting Mali's African neighbors do the heavy lifting,<sup>121</sup> as the UN resolution also had planned for. That a direct French intervention would be launched was therefore likely not what the jihadists had anticipated.

Thus, by inadvertently provoking an immediate French military intervention, the Emirate probably came to an end eight months earlier than it otherwise would have,



depriving the jihadists of valuable time to put down local roots and recruit new followers. In the end, even if ideological concerns may have played some role in the decision to advance southwards, the offensive was also, if not mainly, motivated by strategic considerations, however ill-advised they might have been.

### **Purism within Constraints: Analyzing the Emirate's Methods and Aims**

The account in the previous section challenges two notions in particular about the Islamic Emirate of Azawad that is currently found in the literature: one concerning the Emirate's *methods*, the other concerning its *aims*, and by extension its *legacy*. In this section, I first question the notion that the leaders of the Emirate disregarded Droukdel's pragmatist plan and instead opted for an ideologically hardline, i.e. purist, implementation of their state project. Second, I challenge the view that Droukdel's plan would have been more successful at securing a favorable outcome for the jihadists and argue that we need to reassess our understanding of the Emirate's long-term goals.

The standard interpretation of the discrepancy in governance strategies between Droukdel and the leaders of the Emirate has been, as Alex Thurston writes, that the latter "disregarded Droukdel's advice to move slowly with the implementation of AQIM's brand of Sharia and with the territorial expansion of the jihadist proto-state."<sup>122</sup> Boeke similarly describes how the leaders of the Emirate failed to heed Droukdel's calls for pragmatism.<sup>123</sup> This interpretation makes sense when we rely only on the testimony of Droukdel. However, when we consider other accounts of the Emirate, the picture gets more complicated.

AQIM's leadership appears in fact to have perceived that their advice for the most part was being followed. In an exchange of letters between AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar and AQIM's Shura Council dated 3 October 2012, the latter notes that "most of the Sharia issues [...] were brought to the [leadership] and all of them [...] have received the appropriate attention."<sup>124</sup> It furthermore notes that the recommendations were adopted by the Shura councils of al-Qaida in the Sahara and Ansar Dine.<sup>125</sup>

However, as seen in the previous sections, the leaders of the Emirate undoubtedly disregarded *some* of Droukdel's recommendations – most conspicuously on the issue of the destruction of the shrines. That said, they also *followed* his recommendations on many important issues. For example, they did not "implement a Salafi-jihadist version of Islamic law,"<sup>126</sup> but ruled according to the Maliki school of law, as per Droukdel's instructions. They also reportedly followed Droukdel's general recommendations of prioritizing establishing law and order and by involving local notables in governance.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, it seems likely that some of the divergence in policy preferences between the two sides stemmed from the fact that Droukdel had unrealistic expectations of what was possible to achieve on the ground, as suggested by his overly optimistic suggestions for how political arrangements with MNLA should be managed.

While one of Droukdel's main criticisms of the Emirate had been its rash implementation of Islamic law, one notices that Droukdel does not really propose an alternative policy. Droukdel had called for a gradual approach, which the Emirate seemingly made some efforts to follow, even though they progressed too quickly for his liking.

However, Droukdel clearly *wanted* Islamic law to be applied, and wrote in his letter that a council of scholars (ar: *majlis al-‘ulamā’*) in Azawad should “ban all violations of Islamic law.”<sup>128</sup> One is therefore left with some doubt as to what Droukdel’s alternative, lenient policy would consist in, other than being more patient.

Scholars have pointed to a letter to AQIM penned by AQAP-leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi as a plan for a more lenient policy, the existence of which has also been taken as an example of the Emirate’s resistance to pragmatist policies. In the letter, al-Wuhayshi imparts lessons from AQAP’s state project in the Abyan province in Yemen 2011-2012, encouraging his comrades in Azawad to adopt a cautious and gradual approach to implementing Islamic law. The fact that the Emirate went ahead with *ḥudūd*-punishments after receiving this warning has been presented as a proof that its leaders “did not [heed] advice for pragmatism and gradualism.”<sup>129</sup> However, al-Wuhayshi did not say that the *ḥudūd* should *not* be implemented. In fact, his “pragmatist” recommendation was for them to “*try* to avoid implementing the *ḥudūd* by [resorting to] *shubuhāt* [doubts].”<sup>130</sup> As seen, this is exactly the procedure the jihadists in Azawad followed.

Overall, while they followed a less pragmatist approach than Droukdel had wanted, it would be inaccurate to depict the governance strategy of the jihadists in Azawad as an ideal-type of ideological purism. As shown, they were very aware of the negative repercussions ideological excesses might cause and sought, at least to a certain extent, to avoid them. In hindsight, it is clear that many of their attempts to be pragmatic, such as not *officially* declaring an Islamic state, and some strategic decisions, such as launching the offensive against Konna, were fundamentally misguided. However, these decisions stem, it seems, more from strategic miscalculations than from ideological fiat.

Turning to the issue of the aims and legacy of the Emirate, one finds an implicit understanding in the literature that the Emirate’s strategy was fundamentally misguided, and that the project ended in failure. Thurston comments that “[f]or all that jihadists had endured in the Sahara, they had achieved nothing lasting.”<sup>131</sup> Boeke meanwhile states that “[d]espite warnings by the strategic leadership, local commanders made all the mistakes they were instructed to avoid.”<sup>132</sup> Boeke’s assessment implies that Droukdel’s plan, which was more concerned with not provoking a military intervention, would have been more successful at securing a favorable outcome for the jihadists. Since the Emirate lasted for merely nine months, this conclusion is hardly surprising. However, such an assessment is only valid if we assume that the overall strategic concern of the parties involved was the survival of the Emirate – which does not seem to have been the case.

Droukdel and the leaders of the Emirate shared the assumption that the Emirate was going to be *temporary*, as sooner or later, any Islamic state ruled by jihadists would be brought down by a foreign intervention. This is plainly stated in Droukdel’s admonitions to his commanders. While Habib is less explicit on the issue, he voices the same concern when discussing the reasons for not making an official declaration of an Islamic state. In any case, given their knowledge of previous jihadist state projects, as well as the warnings they had received from Droukdel, the leaders of the Emirate were obviously aware of the imminent likelihood of a military intervention.

This assumption was not unfounded. Already in early June 2012, that is, before the final rupture between the jihadists and MNLA, the African Union announced that it

would request UN support for a military intervention in northern Mali.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, while the Emirate's subsequent provocative actions – such as the implementation of Islamic law, destruction of shrines and above all the attack on Konna – likely invited a military intervention ahead of time, a more moderate attitude would not have prevented it.

Since both sides of the pragmatist-purist divide thus shared an underlying assumption that the Emirate was going to be temporary, it follows that the main difference between their respective policy preferences was over how put the limited time at their disposal to best use. The pragmatist line sought to extend the time frame available as much as possible, by making compromise and avoiding provocations. This longer time frame would provide the best opportunity to engage in *da'wa*, i.e. preaching the jihadist ideology to the people and building a broad popular support base. Although this strategy may potentially have prolonged the survival of the Emirate, an overly pragmatist posture presents challenges of its own. Arguably, at some point of pragmatist accommodation the state ceases to be “jihadist” as such, which opens up for further challenges, including criticism from jihadist hardliners, defections to more ideologically committed groups, and potential loss of support from the global jihadist constituency.<sup>134</sup>

The more purist line favored by the leaders of the Emirate, on the other hand, aimed to create an Islamic state that more closely embodied the ideals that they were fighting for, albeit with several pragmatist compromises. While this approach may have reduced the lifespan of the state, it was not in itself inimical to *da'wa*-efforts.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, it may have been better suited to recruiting ideologically committed members, a consideration which may have contributed to the decision to undertake provocative, headline-grabbing actions such as the destruction of the shrines in Timbuktu. If one assumes that the state is going to be short-term, it might make more sense to appeal to already sympathetic hardliners who may join as combatants, rather than embarking on a long-term project to win popular support.

The dilemma outlined in this article is one that all jihadist state ventures are faced with – whether to be purist, which all but ensures that the state will be destroyed by outside powers and/or internal popular uprisings, or pragmatist, which risks a dilution of the jihadist character of the state, while providing no guarantee that a military intervention will not occur. Alexander Thurston pointedly asks if this seemingly insoluble problem shows that jihadist politics is fundamentally a “dead end.”<sup>136</sup> Judging from recent decades' history of short-lived jihadist proto-states, and in a short-term perspective, this does seem to be the case.

If one takes a long-term perspective, which is favored by several key jihadist strategists and ideologues, the case is not as clear-cut. The current leader of al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, foresaw that the jihadist fight would demand great sacrifices that could last for numerous generations.<sup>137</sup> Bin Ladin similarly envisaged a long-lasting war of attrition against the United States, which would be “bled dry” through its military interventions against jihadists in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>138</sup> As Bin Ladin's previously mentioned letter to Droukdel communicated, final victory would only be achieved when the power of the West was depleted to the extent that it could no longer intervene decisively in Muslim affairs.<sup>139</sup> Yahya Abu al-Hammam, who took

over the reins of AQIM's Saharan command in 2013, expressed the same line of thinking with regards to the French intervention in Mali, stating that "in [this] guerilla war, the most patient and steadfast will prevail. This is a war of attrition, that will last for a long time."<sup>140</sup> On this view, the value of each iteration of a jihadist emirate is not determined by whether it survives, but by whether or not it contributes to this overall, long-term strategy.<sup>141</sup>

Despite its short lifespan, the Emirate provided a consolidation period for the jihadist movement in the region, creating a generation of commanders that contributed to jihadism's unprecedented spread in the Sahel in the years that followed.<sup>142</sup>

## Conclusion

The sudden jihadist take-over of northern Mali in 2012 meant that AQIM's leadership and the leaders of the newly established Emirate, who until then had commanded only their own fighting units, had to create a strategy for governing more than a million subjects in a territory the size of France. Recognizing not only the precariousness of their situation but also the opportunities it presented, both sides understood the need to strike a balance between establishing an Islamic state that would allow their ideology to consolidate locally, and shielding the state from the outside intervention that would inevitably follow.

In this article, I have shown that although the leaders of the Emirate opted for a more ideologically purist approach to governance than AQIM-leader Droukdel had suggested to them, they were nevertheless more pragmatic than hitherto appreciated in the literature. We see clear examples of pragmatism in the implementation of Islamic law, in the reluctance to openly declare an Islamic state, and in cooperation with non-jihadist rebel groups. Moreover, I have argued that since both Droukdel and the leaders of the Emirate shared an assumption that the state was going to be temporary, their different policy preferences represent different strategies to secure a favorable long-term outcome.

The case of the Islamic Emirate in Azawad highlights how political circumstances, as well as leadership preferences, may push jihadist groups toward lesser or greater pragmatism – an insight that is relevant also to other jihadist proto-states. The hyper-purist governance pursued by ISIS ensured that its "caliphate" was crushed only four years after it was declared, but at the same time, it attracted an unprecedented number of foreign fighters and created a global jihadist "brand" to rival that of al-Qaida. In contrast, the Taliban appears to have opted for a fairly moderate posture after its recent capture of Kabul.<sup>143</sup> This strategy makes sense, as Taliban's leadership aims to consolidate its gains after emerging victorious from its 20-year long struggle against the U.S.-led intervention. Embarking on an overly purist program to attract committed (national or foreign) fighters would make little sense when the war is over, while trying to appear moderate may give the new regime a chance to gain some degree of international recognition and shield it from further military interventions.

The Islamic Emirate of Azawad for its part attempted to strike a balance between pragmatist and purist approaches to secure support in a new front for jihad. In the

final reckoning, the expansion or survival of the Emirate in Azawad was less important than laying the groundwork for the subsequent spread of jihadism in the region and preparing for a protracted struggle against the West and its Sahelian allies. Nine years on, the Sahel region experiences ever-increasing levels of jihadist violence, while French popular support for maintaining its military operations in the region is dwindling. Even though nearly a decade has passed, it might still be too early to conclude that the Islamic Emirate of Azawad ended in failure.

## Notes

1. The terms “jihadist” and “jihadism” refer to Sunni Islamist militant movements leading an armed struggle with the goals of toppling regimes in the Muslim world that they regard as un-Islamic; and of deterring Western interference in Muslim affairs. The ultimate aim of jihadism is the re-establishment of the Caliphate and the application of Islamic law. For further definitions and typology, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis Or Revolutionaries?” in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 245–66.
2. Azawad is the name Tuareg separatists use to describe the parts of northern Mali over which they claim sovereignty, namely the administrative regions of Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao and parts of Mopti. In reference to the jihadist proto-state established in this area, the Arabic sources use both the term “state” (ar: *dawla*) and “emirate” (ar: *imāra*). For consistency, this article will refer to it as the “Islamic Emirate of Azawad,” or “the Emirate.” “Islamic state” will be used for the general concept of an Islamic state, while the moniker ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) will be used to denote the group that calls itself the “Islamic State.”
3. Brynjar Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 37.
4. The choice of these five practices is inspired by and adapted from Brynjar Lia’s characteristics of jihadist proto-states. See Lia, *ibid.*, 35–6.
5. If this framework is to be applied to jihadist groups in other times and places, it could be useful to include the issues of *takfir* and sectarianism, which has been a key area of division between different jihadist groups. However, since I have found no overt disagreements on these issues among jihadists in Mali during this time period, I have left out these dimensions in the current analysis. For other typologies and further discussion of these issues, see e.g. Anne Stenersen, “Jihadism after the ‘Caliphate’: Towards a new typology,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 28 November 2018, 1–20, Mohammed Hafez, “The Crisis Within Jihadism: The Islamic State’s Puritanism vs. Al-Qa’ida’s Populism,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 9 (September 2020)
6. Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States,” 37.
7. Thurston also mentions a third option, which is to carry out spectacular attacks to attract popular support, but this strategy lacks a programme for translating gains into political power. See Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 92.
8. “Norms, Non-combatants’ agency and restraint in jihadi violence in northern mali,” *International Interactions*, 20 March 2021, 1–18.
9. Isak Svensson and Daniel Finnbogason, “Confronting the caliphate? Explaining civil resistance in jihadist proto-states,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 2 (June 2021): 572–95.
10. Edoardo Baldaro and Yida Seydou Diall, “The End of the Sahelian Exception: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Clash in Central Mali,” *The International Spectator* 55, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 69–83.

11. Troels Burchall Henningsen, “The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 22 January 2021, 1–20.
12. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*.
13. Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012–2013*, The International Political Economy of New Regionalisms Series (London: Routledge, 2016).
14. Pascale Combelles Siegel, “AQIM’s Playbook in Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013).
15. Adib Bencherif, “Unpacking ‘glocal’ jihad: From the birth to the ‘sahelisation’ of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (3 July 2021): 335–3.
16. Alex Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2011), 461–2.
17. Bart Schuurman, “Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (3 July 2020): 1011–26.
18. See for example Nelly Lahoud et al., “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?” (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 3 May 2012).
19. See for example Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020), and Vidar B. Skretting, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib’s Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 24 September 2020, 1–25.
20. Rukmini Callimachi, “In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto,” *Associated Press (AP)*, 14 February 2013.
21. Nicolas Champeaux, “Exclusif RFI/«Libération»: le projet du chef d’Aqmi pour le Mali,” *RFI*, 6 October 2013.
22. Abd al-Malik Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma bi-khuṣūṣ al-mashrū‘ al-islāmī al-jihādī bi-Azawād” (Nukhbat al-i‘lām al-islāmī, 20 July 2012).
23. The name given is likely a *kunya*. He is identified with this name in the version of the text that first appeared on [www.marsadpress.net](http://www.marsadpress.net). In the book-version, no name is given. For convenience, this article will refer to him using this name.
24. For the first part of the series as it was published online, see, “Al-qiṣṣa al-kāmila lil-imāra al-islāmiyya fī shamāl Mālī min al-bidāya ila al-tadakhkhul al-Faransi,” *Marsad Press*, 17 November 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140405050920/http://marsadpress.net/?p=15795> (accessed 16 January 2020).
25. Zakariyya Bughrara, *Al-qiṣṣa al-kāmila lil-imāra al-islāmiyya fī shamāl Mālī min al-bidāya ila al-tadakhkhul al-Faransi*, 2nd ed. (Mu’assasat wā islāmāhu lil-i‘lām, 2014).
26. These are: Abd al-Ilāh Ahmad, *Ajwibat al-liqā‘ al-maftūh ma‘a al-shaykh Abī ‘abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad* (Shabakat Shumūkh al-Islām bi-l-tansīq ma‘a Markaz al-Fajr lil-I‘lām, 2012) and Sanda Ould Boumama, “Al-liqā‘ al-maftūh ma‘a al-shaykh Sanda Ould Boumama, al-mas’ul al-i‘lāmī li-ḥarakat Anṣār al-Dīn” (Shabakat Anṣār al-Mujāhidīn, 2012).
27. Skretting, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib’s Expansion in the Sahara.”
28. Morten Bøås, “Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM’s Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (April 2014).
29. Skretting, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib’s Expansion in the Sahara,” 15–19.
30. Lawrence E. Cline, “Nomads, Islamists, and Soldiers: The Struggles for Northern Mali,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8 (1 August 2013): 617–34, 618–21.
31. “Mali: Avoiding Escalation” (International Crisis Group, 18 July 2012), 10.
32. Traditional Tuareg tribal leader.
33. William Lloyd-George, “The Man Who Brought the Black Flag to Timbuktu,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 October 2012.
34. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 129.
35. See for instance Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 129–34. Ansar Dine members from the Ifoghas clan, such as Alghabass Ag Intallah and Ahmada Ag Bibi, had rather weak organisational connection with the hardline jihadists in AQIM, as shown by



- Olivier J. Walther and Dimitris Christopoulos, "Islamic Terrorism and the Malian Rebellion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 3 (27 May 2015): 497–519. The fact that the imposition of the Sharia in Kidal was relatively light-handed compared to Timbuktu and Gao, (Bouhleb and Guichaoua, "Norms, Non-Combatants' Agency and Restraint in Jihadi Violence in Northern Mali") not to mention the fact that Ag Intallah and other Ifoghas politicians left Ansar Dine to form a new, non-jihadist group, MIA (*Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad*) right after the French intervention began in January 2013, (Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 139–40) also suggests that these Ifoghas politicians did not share the same commitment to jihadist politics as e.g. Iyad ag Ghali and AQIM's field commanders.
36. See Andrew Lebovich, "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria & Mali" (al-Wasat, 23 January 2013), <https://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/23/primer-on-jihadi-players-in-algeria-mali/> (accessed 4 January 2021).
  37. "Ḥarakatān musallāḥatān tattafiqān 'alā "al-tawḥīd" fi muwājahat al-ḥukūma al-māliyya fi al-shamāl," *Sahara Media*, 10 January 2012.
  38. See Scott Stewart, "Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya" (Stratfor, 2 February 2012), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/mali-besieged-fighters-fleeing-libya> (accessed 30 November 2020).
  39. Afua Hirsch, "Mali rebels claim to have ousted regime in coup," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2012.
  40. "Mali Tuareg rebels control Timbuktu as troops flee," *BBC News*, 2 April 2012.
  41. "Mali Tuareg rebels declare independence in the north," *BBC News*, 6 April 2012.
  42. "Islamic State Declared in Northern Mali," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2012.
  43. "Iḥtifālāt wāsi'a bi-i'lān dawlat Azawād al-islāmiyya shamāl Mālī, Allāhu Akbar," *Shabakat al-difā' 'an al-sunna*, 28 May 2012.
  44. Adama Diarra and Laurent Prieur, "UPDATE 1-Mali Tuareg leaders call off Islamist pact," *Reuters*, 1 June 2012.
  45. MNLA, "Communiqué de Presse N°17 Du 04-06-2012," 4 June 2012.
  46. Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 23–4.
  47. "At least 35 killed in Mali clashes," *Times LIVE*, 1 July 2012.
  48. "Nord-Mali : comment le MNLA a été chassé de Gao," *Jeune Afrique*, 4 July 2012.
  49. "Ansar Dine Islamists oust Tuareg rebels from Timbuktu," *France 24*, 29 June 2012.
  50. Notably the town of Douentza in Mopti, which was held by the Ganda Izo militia until it was captured by the jihadists on 1 September, and Ménaka in the Gao region, held by MNLA until 19 November. See Baba Ahmed, "Mali : les islamistes prennent le contrôle de la ville de Douentza, dans le sud du pays," *Jeune Afrique*, 1 September 2012; , "Mali: le Mujao prend Ménaka," *BBC News*, 19 November 2012.
  51. The overall commander and leader of an emirate.
  52. Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 13.
  53. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 85–8.
  54. Abu Abd al-Ilah Ahmad says that MUJAO broke away from AQIM, but that their efforts were again united under Iyad ag Ghali's emirate. See Ahmad, *Ajwibat al-liqā' al-maftūḥ ma'a al-shaykh Abi 'abd al-Ilāh Aḥmad*, 91.
  55. "Letter to Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud from Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin)" (Abbottabad Compound Material, 17 October, 2010), 9–10.
  56. *Ibid.*, 12.
  57. *Ibid.*, 2–4.
  58. This letter was retrieved by journalist David Blair. (David Blair, "Mali: Telegraph finds al-Qaeda plan in Timbuktu," *The Telegraph*, 13 February 2013).
  59. AQIM, "Minutes of a Meeting of the Notables," 16 March 2012.
  60. "Azawād: aḥād qādāt al-Qā'ida yuwajjih fi tasjīl ṣawtī nasā'ih li-ḥarakat Anṣār al-Dīn," *Sahara Media*, 21 May 2012.
  61. See Abd al-Malik Droukdel, "Message to the Mujahideen in Sahara Azawad," 21 May 2012, <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/abc5ab-mue1b9a3ab-abd-a>



- l-wadc5abd-abd-al-malik-drc5abkdc4abl-22to-the-mujc481hidc4abn-in-sahara-azawad22.mp3 (accessed 4 November 2020).
62. *ḥudūd* (sg. *ḥadd*) is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* as “A punishment fixed in the *Quran* and hadith for crimes considered to be against the rights of God. The six crimes for which punishments are fixed are theft (amputation of the hand), illicit sexual relations (death by stoning or one hundred lashes), making unproven accusations of illicit sex (eighty lashes), drinking intoxicants (eighty lashes), apostasy (death or banishment), and highway robbery (death).” See John L. Esposito, ed., “Hadd,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford Islamic Studies Online) (accessed 30 November 2020).
  63. Droukdel, “Message to the Mujahideen in Sahara Azawad.”
  64. Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma.”
  65. The first three generations of Muslim believers, considered to epitomise Islamic ethics and religious purity. See John L. Esposito, ed., “Salaf,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford Islamic Studies Online) (accessed 30 November 2020).
  66. Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma,” 10.
  67. See “Iḥtifālāt wāsi‘a,” <http://www.dd-sunnah.net/forum/archive/index.php/t-151101.html> (accessed 11 September, 2020), for a copy of the text of the Gao Agreement.
  68. Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma,” 10.
  69. It is worth noting that Droukdel further complains that he has not received any direct communication from AQIM’s people in the Sahara as to why they chose to fight MNLA, saying that he thus far, that is almost two months after the outbreak of hostilities, only had followed the events through the news and through official statements published by the jihadists in Azawad. Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma,” 6–7.
  70. See Droukdel, 10–11. The *ṣaḥwa* (ar: *awakening*) refers to an uprising of Iraqi Sunni tribes in 2006–2008 against al-Qaida in Iraq, which dealt a major blow to the group.
  71. *Ibid.*, 12.
  72. *Ibid.*
  73. See Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma,” 13. *Da‘wa* in general refers to Islamic missionary works. In this specific context, it should also be understood as propagating jihadist ideology.
  74. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
  75. *Ibid.*, 10.
  76. *Ibid.*
  77. As mentioned, AQIM’s Abu Zayd was the governor of Timbuktu. Iyad Ag was governor of Kidal, but as overall emir he was also directly involved in policy-decisions in Timbuktu, as for example with the destruction of the Sufi shrines. When the article refers to the “leaders of the Emirate,” it refers to Abu Zayd and Ag Ghali in particular.
  78. Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 15.
  79. *Ibid.*; Ould Boumama, “Al-liqā’ al-maftūḥ ma‘a al-shaykh Sanda Ould Boumama, al-mas’ūl al-i‘lāmī li-ḥarakat Anṣār al-Dīn,” 11, 20–21, 41.
  80. See Ould Boumama, “Al-liqā’ al-maftūḥ ma‘a al-shaykh Sanda Ould Boumama, al-mas’ūl al-i‘lāmī li-ḥarakat Anṣār al-Dīn,” 20–1. The text of the Gao Agreement says that the parties would work *towards* building an Islamic state, but the new state is referred the Islamic state of Azawad in a subsequent clause. See “Iḥtifālāt wāsi‘a.”
  81. “Iḥtifālāt wāsi‘a.”
  82. See for example Hafez, “The Crisis Within Jihadism”. As late as 2020, ISIS criticised AQIM for cooperating with MNLA during the 2012 rebellion, see Héní Nsaiba and Caleb Weiss, “The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa’ida Finally Came to West Africa,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (July 2020).
  83. “Mali: War Crimes by Northern Rebels” (Human Rights Watch, 30 April 2012).
  84. See for instance Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Third Edition, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 92.
  85. “Islāmiyyūn fi Tūmbuktū yamna‘ūn al-tadhkhīn wa ḥalq al-liḥā,” *Sahara Media*, 23 May 2012.
  86. Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 66.

87. Intisar A Rabb, "Reasonable Doubt" in Islamic Law," *The Yale Journal of International Law* 40 (2015): 45.
88. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 66.
89. *Ibid.*, 68–9.
90. The schools of law (ar. *madhhab*, pl. *madhāhib*) refer to the four major traditions of jurisprudence in Sunni Islam.
91. Droukdel, "Wathīqat tawjihāt 'amma," 11.
92. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 70.
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Ibid.*, 69.
95. *Ibid.*, 71; International Criminal Court (ICC), "Version Publique Expurgée: Rectificatif à La Décision Relative à La Confirmation Des Charges Portées Contre Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud," 13 November 2019, 64, footnote 373.
96. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 70.
97. There were two police forces in the Emirate, the Islamic police (*al-shurṭa al-islāmiyya*) and the *hisba*. Both engaged in typical police work, enforcing the law, investigating crimes, arresting criminals and the like. However, the *hisba's* work tended more clearly towards matters of religion and morals. For simplicity, I refer to both of the as Islamic police. See Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 44–9.
98. *Ibid.*, 50.
99. Perhaps in response to the recommendations given by Droukdel, Abu Zayd wrote these instructions in a memorandum that was distributed to all the members of the Islamic Police in Timbuktu. See (ICC), "Version Publique Expurgée", 62–3.
100. "Islāmiyyūn fī Tūmbuktū yamna'ūn al-tadkhīn wa ḥalq al-liḥā."
101. "Saint's tomb desecrated by Islamists," *The Times*, 7 May 2012.
102. "Timbuktu shrines damaged by Mali Ansar Dine Islamists," *BBC News*, 30 June 2012.
103. Pascal Fletcher, "Timbuktu tomb destroyers pulverise Islam's history," *Reuters*, 3 July 2012.
104. Droukdel, "Wathīqat tawjihāt 'amma," 7.
105. Amir Ahmed, "Mali Islamists destroy tombs in Timbuktu," *CNN*, 19 October 2012.
106. "Ansār al-dīn tuhaddim aḍriḥa akhfathā al-aziqqa al-ḍayyiqqa fī Tinbuktu," *Sahara Media*, 23 December 2012.
107. "Another saint's tomb destroyed in Mali," *News24*, 29 September 2012.
108. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 54.
109. *Ibid.*, 52–4.
110. International Criminal Court, "Decision on the confirmation of charges against Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi," 24 March 2016, 23.
111. "Iḥtifalāt wāsi'a."
112. Ould Boumama, "Al-liqā' al-maftūḥ ma'a al-shaykh Sanda Ould Boumama, al-mas'ūl al-i'lāmī li-ḥarakat Anṣār al-Dīn," 9, 11–12.
113. Tiemoko Diallo, "Mali Islamists capture strategic town, residents flee," *Reuters*, 10 January 2013.
114. "France confirms Mali military intervention," *BBC News*, 11 January 2013.
115. Thomas Fessy, "Key Mali town secured by French," *BBC News*, 31 January 2013.
116. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 105–6.
117. Baba Ahmed, "Mali : le massacre de seize prédicateurs islamistes, du pain bénit pour Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, 11 September, 2012; Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 97–100.
118. Bughrara, *Al-qışsa al-kāmila*, 100.
119. See, "Security Council Authorizes Deployment of African-Led International Support Mission in Mali for Initial Year-Long Period" (United Nations Security Council, 20 December 2012), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10870.doc.htm> (accessed 20 December 2012).
120. See, "February 2013 Monthly Forecast: Mali" (Security Council Report, 31 January 2013), [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2013-02/mali\\_4.php](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2013-02/mali_4.php) (accessed 2 January 2021).

121. See Abd al-Malik Droukdel, “Ghazwu Māli: ḥarb faransiyya bil-wakāla” (Mu’assasat al-Andalus lil-intāj al-i’lāmī, 15 November 2012), <https://jihadology.net/2012/12/03/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-abu-mu%E1%B9%A3ab-abd-al-wadud-abd-al-malik-drukdil-the-mali-invasion-frances-proxy-war/> (accessed 16 December 2020).
122. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 86.
123. Sergei Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 925–6, 930.
124. “Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence Between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar”, 3 October 2012, published with an English translation by Rukmini Callimachi/Associated Press, 7.
125. Though it should be noted that these statements come in the context of a heated exchange where Belmokhtar criticises AQIM’s leadership for its handling of events in the Sahara. Thus, one should consider the possibility that AQIM’s Shura Council overstates the extent to which its other commanders in northern Mali heeds its recommendations. See “Al-Qaida Papers”, 11.
126. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 90.
127. Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 27.
128. Droukdel, “Wathīqat tawjihāt ‘amma,” 11.
129. Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States,” 37.
130. Nasir al-Wuhayshi, “First Letter from Abu Basir to Emir of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb” (Associated Press, 21 May 2012).
131. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 101.
132. Boeke, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” 930.
133. Benjamin Roger, “Nord-Mali : l’UA s’apprête à solliciter l’ONU pour une intervention militaire,” *Jeune Afrique*, 8 June 2012.
134. See Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States”, 37, for further discussion of this topic.
135. Habib describes the considerable effort and resources put into *da’wa* in Bughrara, *Al-qīṣṣa al-kāmila*, 90–4.
136. Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, 92, 235–36.
137. Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Fursān taḥt rāyat al-nabī, al-juz’ al-awwal* (al-Saḥāb, n.d.), 269.
138. Usāma Ibn-Lādin, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, ed. Bruce B. Lawrence, trans. James Howarth (London: Verso, 2005), 242.
139. “Letter to Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud from Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin),” 4.
140. “Abū al-Hammām fi awwal muqābala lahu ba’d al-tadakhkhul al-faransī bi-Māli,” *Al-Akhbar (Mauritania)*, January 2, 2016.
141. As suggested also by Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States”, 38.
142. Both of the main jihadist groups operating in the Sahel today, *Jamā’at nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-muslimīn* (JNIM) and ISGS (*The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*) can trace their origins to the Emirate. JNIM is led by former Ansar Dine-leader Iyad ag Ghali, while ISGS’s late founder and leader Abu Walid al-Sahrawi was a prominent member of MUJAO during its occupation of Gao. JNIM’s fairly pragmatist policies have recently come under attack from ISGS, and the group also denounces Ansar Dine and AQIM’s cooperation with MNLA in 2012. Open conflict broke out between the JNIM and ISGS in 2020, but this does not appear to have significantly hampered jihadist capabilities in the region in the long run. See Nsaiba and Weiss, “The End of the Sahelian Anomaly.”
143. See e.g. Ahmad Seir, Kathy Gannon, and Joseph Krauss, “Taliban vow to respect women, despite history of oppression,” *Associated Press (AP)*, 18 August 2021.

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