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The Intersection of Decentralized Security and Decentralized Governance: The
Offloading of State Responsibility in Northern Mali

by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of
Bachelor of Arts in International Relations



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Abstract

Since democratization in the 1990s, Mali has pursued governmental decentralization policies, ranging from administrative deconcentration to fiscal devolution. In many cases, governmental decentralization is seen as a post-conflict tool aimed at promoting various goals such as development or greater autonomy for some groups and regions. In Mali, several Tuareg rebellions in the northern regions of the country have been a major impetus for decentralization debates. To date, however, governmental decentralization has failed to bring peace and sustained development to the region. Under former Presidents Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), the central government has used decentralization as a means to appease citizens, donors, and peace treaty signatories while failing to make substantive progress on implementation. At the same time, the Malian state under ATT and IBK has been either unwilling or unable to establish a coherent, non-repressive security presence in the north, opting instead to offload security responsibilities to armed actors such as traffickers, ethnic militias, and international interveners, a practice that I term the “decentralization of security.” By forgoing this Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of force and continuously failing to implement governmental decentralization, the Malian state has severely damaged its credibility and legitimacy in the north, a region in which the state has only had very limited legitimacy since independence in 1960. Ultimately, the intersection of these policies and their failures has protracted the current crisis in Mali and destabilized the entire nation.

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“Words are nothing but words; power lies in deeds.”

–Sundiata Keïta, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*

List of Acronyms

ADC	<i>Alliance Démocratique du 23 mai pour le Changement</i>
ADEMA	<i>Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali</i>
AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
ANICT	<i>Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales</i>
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ATT	Amadou Toumani Touré
CMA	<i>Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad</i>
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
GATIA	<i>Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies</i>
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
HCUA	<i>Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad</i>
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta
IMF	International Monetary Fund
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organization
MAA	<i>Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad</i>
MAT	Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale
MIA	<i>Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad</i>
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	<i>Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad</i>
MUJAO	<i>Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest</i>
M5-RFP	<i>Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des forces patriotiques</i>
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Chapter 1 — Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

Politicians and scholars alike have lauded decentralization as a solution to instability and poor governance in Mali since the 1990s (Seely 2001). The heavy-handed state led by Moussa Traoré from 1968-1991 ended in a coalescence of crises in the country, most notably the beginnings of a Tuareg rebellion in the northern stretches of the country and a wave of demands for democratization. Ultimately, Traoré was overthrown in a coup d'état, and the government of Alpha Oumar Konaré oversaw the creation of a new, democratic constitution and began the largest decentralization reforms in Mali's history. This process of decentralization initially consisted of dividing the country into many small administrative units and the transfer of some administrative and organizational responsibilities out of Bamako but struggled as a solution to improving development prospects and quelling insurgency in the north due to the very limited transfer of authority (Seely 2001).

By the early 2000s, President Amadou Toumani Traoré, Konaré's successor, had largely abandoned any further implementation of decentralization reforms, although it remained in the constitution and laws. In 2012, Tuareg fighters in the northern desert region of Mali began a rebellion against the Malian state, principally stoked by longstanding marginalization and neglect on the part of the Malian government as well as the desire for an independent state called Azawad (Chauzal and van Damme 2015). These fighters aligned with various radical jihadist groups such as Ansar al Din and subsequently managed to capture large swathes of the country before being overtaken by their former jihadist allies. Throughout this period, the Malian army was entirely incapable of quelling the insurgency, thus requesting the assistance of various international forces: AFISMA (ECOWAS), Opération Serval (France), and MINUSMA (United

Nations). During peace negotiations in Algiers in 2015, three years after the beginning of the protracted northern Mali conflict, decentralization was again pointed to and utilized as a crucial step to bringing peace and development to the region (Agreement for Peace 2015). Nevertheless, it has remained largely dead letter, despite the promises of former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and the leaders of the 2020 and 2021 coups to deliver on decentralization. Furthermore, donor nations donor groups and nations have latched onto decentralization as a critical aspect in their quest to stabilize the country. However, progress on decentralization has been scant and the central government and donors seem to continue to be reluctant or unable to pursue decentralization of political control in the northern and central regions in favor of “forcing the birth of the Weberian state” (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 26). In other words, concrete autonomy for the north has been avoided and bypassed for thirty years despite the fact that Mali is in some ways more pre-Westphalian than a truly territorial state (Pham 2016; Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018).

The central puzzle I will address in this thesis primarily focuses on the time from the early 2000s to the present day and asks the following central question: what is the relationship between security decentralization and governmental decentralization in Mali and how does this dynamic affect state construction? Much of the following analysis will be predicated on the idea of an informal “decentralization of security,” wherein security is not monopolized by the state, but rather intentionally or unintentionally diffused among several actors through a mix of duty-sharing, multilateral coalitions, and opportunistic alliances. I hypothesize that the decentralization of security and the failure of decentralized governance opens exploitable gaps in state legitimacy in the heterarchical context of northern Mali, thereby further hindering and slowing the process of governmental decentralization, ultimately leading to a delegitimization of

the state and the peace process and opening the door for “overcorrection” by the central state through a return to actions that privilege the central state. Undergirding this analysis will be a dissection of the various ways in which decentralization is fundamentally understood and practiced by the various stakeholders, from local actors to the central state and donor nations and organizations in the context of the (re)constructed Malian state.

Defining “Decentralization”

Evidently, the most crucial term to be used in this thesis is “decentralization.” The term encompasses a wide range of ideas but can be broken down into several generalized variants, with an overarching definition as being a mechanism through which varying degrees of decision-making, fiscal, and administrative authority or autonomy are diffused from a central government to other entities. Due to the incredible range of ways this base definition of decentralization can be implemented, it is important to move beyond this amorphous idea in order to conduct a nuanced analysis.

One of the most frequently cited works dealing with definitions of decentralization is the book “Decentralization and Development” by Cheema and Rondinelli (1983). In their work, the authors identify four types of decentralization: “deconcentration, delegation to semi-autonomous or parastatal agencies, devolution to local governments, and transfer of functions from public to nongovernment institutions” (18). Deconcentration may be considered the least “decentralizing” variant of decentralization, primarily because it consists of the central government expanding its influence in a state by operationalizing more arms of the bureaucracy and shifting administrative work. Importantly, even as deconcentration may involve more input from local governance actors, appointments, authority over distribution of fiscal resources, and decision-making powers often rest with the central government. The second form of decentralization described by

Cheema and Rondinelli (1983) is “delegation to semi-autonomous or parastatal organizations” (20). Under this model of delegation, certain powers related to decision-making and management are given to entities other than the central government. Among these non-centralized authorities, the authors point to “public corporations, regional planning and area development authorities, multipurpose and single-purpose functional authorities, and special project implementation units” (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983, 20).

The next form of decentralization, “devolution,” suggests a much stronger level of autonomy for subnational units, buttressed by a strong level of independence from the central government. In devolution, significant control over finances, local governance, and even international relationships is given to these subnational units (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983). Lastly, the authors discuss the “transfer of functions of governance to nongovernmental institutions,” wherein there is a “transfer of some planning and administrative responsibility, or of public functions, from government to voluntary, private, or non-governmental institutions” (Cheema and Rondinelli 1983, 24). In this thesis, the corresponding variants of decentralization will be used where they apply when analyzing the various programs undertaken in Mali. A crucial purpose of the research question is to interrogate how the term “decentralization” is used as an umbrella phrase by stakeholders, leading to important questions about what is functionally promised by donors and the central government and the disconnects between expectation and reality as well as planning and implementation.

Decentralization and Security in Developing Nations

A large part of the corpus on decentralization focuses on how decentralization is employed in developing countries, a critical distinction when thinking about decentralization as a policy towards an ultimate objective of stabilization and economic growth. Edited by Connerley,

Eaton, and Smoke, *Making Decentralization Work: Democracy, Development, and Security* (2010) explores some of the potentially causal relationships between decentralization and these three eponymous central goals. While decentralization is not exclusively employed in the hopes of achieving all three, that has nominally been the case in Mali's recent history. The first chapter provides an overview of decentralization's implementation towards these ends, but with the qualification that "...political actors have embraced decentralization as a means toward many different ends...And as a result, it can be useful to those who are seeking to advance a broad array of economic, social, and political goals" (Eaton and Connerley 2010, 1). Good governance, development, and security have been at the forefront of Malian politics since the state's inception and, notably, these goals have been inseparable from decentralization in peace and national reconciliation accords since democratization.

Another critical observation made by Eaton and Connerley (2010) in the first chapter addresses the difficulty that authoritarianism poses in developing and democratizing states; "In some cases, advocates of democratization have endorsed decentralization in the explicit attempt to prevent possible relapses into authoritarianism by undermining the centralized practices that sustained nondemocratic rule" (4-5). The decentralization reforms in Mali in the 1990s largely coincided with the country's move toward an imperfect democratization, reinforcing this observation. Nevertheless, the increasing complexity of Mali's political and security destabilization in the 21st century significantly complicate this dynamic. Eaton and Connerley qualify their observation by stating that, in terms of democratization, holding local elections is not a comprehensive solution to authoritarian tendencies nor a harbinger of successful decentralization.

As Eaton and Connerley (2010) allude to, though, much of the scholarship on decentralization has had to contend with the presence and influence of subnational groups that may be able to subvert decentralization in the fulfilment of authoritarian tendencies. The authors also provide a brief literature review of how decentralized systems are particularly vulnerable to elite capture and how, oftentimes, decentralized developing countries have “a complicated patchwork of local authoritarianism mixed in with reformist municipalities and states or provinces that have used decentralized resources to make significant strides in broadening participation and enhancing accountability” (Eaton and Connerley 2010, 9). As an extremely large, geographically, and ethnically diverse country, Mali is particularly susceptible to this patchwork. The various Tuareg groups, only about 1.7% of the country’s population, exemplify this complication, especially when compared to the Mandé ethnolinguistic groups (the Bambara, Soninke, Malinke, and Bobo) that comprise over 50% of the country’s population and are primarily located in and around Bamako and the south (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). It is important, however, to note that the Tuareg groups are not a monolith and do not comprise a single alliance along ethnic lines, but rather are part of a dynamic setting of alliances and coalitions that has continually evolved over centuries (Bøas and Strazzari 2020; Hüsken and Klute 2015).

In terms of ongoing and post-conflict peace establishment processes, Eaton and Connerley (2010) state that “institutional reforms like decentralization that shift power downward have in practice played an important role in bringing armed conflict to an end” (16). The 2015 Algiers Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali precisely demonstrates this desire by the signatories, focusing on a commitment to “decentralized cooperation,” wherein “The State undertakes to transfer to the territorial collectivities those decentralized services

which are relevant to their areas of competence” and “the location of dispersed and decentralized public services in the North” (Agreement for Peace 2015, 7, 13-14). A thorough discussion of the promised forms of decentralization in this agreement will be subject to analysis in further chapters, but as a whole, the agreement suggests a strong affiliation with previous attempts at conflict resolution through decentralization as identified and studied by scholars (Eaton and Connerley 2010). The previous flurry of decentralization activity in Mali in the 1990s was largely a process of administrative decentralization and delegation, leading to the creation of 701 communes that were only ever intentioned to have, in essence, advisory powers (Rawson 2000). The Algiers Agreement, however, is notable in its commitment to a devolution framework, wherein more legal authority, decision-making, and policing is, at least in theory, transferred to localities.

Yet another complexity involving decentralization in post-conflict situations arises when, as in Mali’s case, the reforms are promised or implemented after protracted conflicts in countries where the central government is unable to exercise total sovereignty (Eaton and Connerley 2010). In these situations, a serious lack of accountability is injected into the decentralization equation. Ultimately, Eaton and Connerley conclude that

Decentralization may be ill advised where: (1) security agents who are responsive to the central government do not operate throughout the national territory; (2) national prosecutors, attorneys general, and representatives of the judiciary are not able to monitor the legality of governmental acts by the subnational authorities; and (3) subnational office holders are the targets of threats and acts of violence. (2010, 17)

Again, Mali is a case study in all three dynamics. Nevertheless, stakeholders at all levels continue to push for decentralization, a paradox that will be addressed in the following chapters. Eaton and Connerley (2010) effectively suggest that each of these preconditions must be met for successful decentralization, however there are various complications in the Malian context, most

prominently the extremely contentious and violent relationship between state security forces and the various ethnic groups in the central and northern regions (U.S. Department of State 2020; United Nations Human Rights 2020). Large-N qualitative scholarship done by others suggests that fiscal decentralization is effective at reducing transnational terror while political decentralization's effects are negligible (Dreher and Fischer 2010).

In response to the difficulties presented by severe post-conflict instability, Eaton and Connerley (2010) also suggest the possible utility of beginning the decentralization process with the least intense form of decentralization—deconcentration of central agencies in order to provide vital resources and functions to subnational regions. Keeping this in mind, it's worthwhile to foreshadow the overwhelming complexity of the Malian conflict to frame how even low-level decentralization poses massive barriers. According to the U.S. State Department, "Most human rights abuses committed by the military appeared to target Fulani, Tuareg, and Arab individuals and were believed to be either in reprisal for attacks attributed to armed groups associated with those ethnicities or as a result of increased counterterrorism operations" (US Department of State 2020). Apart from state security abuses and Tuareg separatism, however, intercommunal violence largely between pastoralist Fulani and agrarian Dogon, exacerbated and stoked by the activities of extremist Islamist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has been gripping the central region for over five years (UN Human Rights 2020). Although not directly tied to the conflict in the north, the deteriorating security situation and its expansion southward could have serious ramifications for the central government's overall security strategy, as well as the interests of foreign actors eager to quell instability and jihadism. Furthermore, the extremely precarious and hardly legitimized central government has undergone two coups in the last year. Given the tenuous nature of Mali's security situation, approaching

decentralization with caution may be a successful path forward, but raises questions regarding the ultimate role of the central government in establishing a truly post-conflict Mali.

Chapter 6 of *Making Decentralization Work*, “Decentralization and Internal Conflict,” speaks directly to some of the most pressing considerations that stakeholders in Mali are contending with, especially concerning finding a balance between allowing subnational control, ensuring accountability, and fostering sustainable and peaceful foundations (Siegle and O’Mahony 2010). As Siegle and O’Mahony (2010) point out, armed groups can be a fundamentally destabilizing factor. The chapter proceeds with a thorough statistical analysis of some of the possible casual and predictive relationships between decentralization and intrastate violence across various decentralizing nations. Their results point to decentralization being a poor predictor of intrastate conflict except in cases of intercommunal conflict and how paramount local context is in any reading of their findings (Siegle and O’Mahony 2010). Despite the statistical significance of decentralization’s effects on intercommunal violence, Siegle and O’Mahony (2010) qualify this result by signaling that decentralization was not a single variable and that it was only certain aspects of a decentralized system that pointed to reductions in intercommunal violence. Ultimately, the importance of local context reigns in their conclusions. The authors conclude with several policy recommendations that largely seek to reinforce relationships of accountability and communication between national and subnational governments. Among them is the “need for multitiered decentralization strategy,” wherein “customization” of decentralization programs is critical and “demand special attention to creating protections for minorities, checks on local majorities, and incentives for strengthened ties with the center” (Siegle and O’Mahony 2010, 162). While this chapter does primarily address only intrastate conflict, Siegle and O’Mahony (2010) add that, in reference to the

extremely diverse conditions in which decentralization is pursued, “External actors should be sensitive to these differences and careful not to rush these processes prematurely” (162).

Another one of their policy recommendations comprises the central government taking control over security and that “Transferring financial resources and administrative and political authority to provinces where the central government is not in control of the security sector is a recipe for disaster” (Siegle and O’Mahony 2010, 163). The authors cite Colombia as an example where centralized security sector control was a necessary precursor to stabilization, but Colombia’s ideological factions differ significantly from Mali’s context of intercommunal violence. Acknowledging the limitations of their recommendations, the final lines of the chapter see the authors encourage problematization of their recommendations:

In conclusion, decentralization offers numerous advantages to developing countries. Yet decentralization is not a risk-free endeavor. Unconditional support for decentralization can easily play into dynamics of intensified group identification and political polarization that are major contributors to internal conflict in weak states. (Siegle and O’Mahony 2010, 164)

Further analysis in this thesis of the Malian context will explore the intense formal and informal negotiations that undergird how decentralization is understood in the contexts of disarmament and Mali’s “pre-Westphalian” status (Pham 2016; Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018).

In regard to donor activities, J. Tyler Dickovick (2014) provides a critical analysis of how foreign aid and decentralization are operationalized. He identifies two “categories of intervention”: “policy level” and “programming/projects level” implementation (1). Dickovick (2014) frames policy level intervention as a framework wherein the “quantity” of decentralization is prioritized over the “quality” that programming level intervention supposedly seeks (1). According to Dickovick (2014), in policy level implementation, decentralization is an end in itself, whereas programming level implementation understands decentralization as means

to an end. Referring back to Cheema and Rondinelli (1983), the introduction states that “As the authors of the following chapters point out, decentralization is not an end in itself” (17).

In the fourth chapter of “The Failure of the Centralized State: Institutions and Self-Governance in Africa,” Dele Olowu (1995) also provides a commentary on decentralization as a means “of achieving *central government programs* of economic and social development, especially in the countryside” (87). He suggests that this is one among various destabilizing assumptions made by decentralization programs, along with the idea that the central government is primarily responsible for instituting decentralization and that decentralization is only successful when the central state is endowed with sufficient resources (Olowu 1995).

What I term the “decentralization of security” is not a phrase utilized by scholars of political decentralization, but rather a union of the fundamental concepts of decentralization and an emerging body of literature surrounding “security governance.” According to Webber et al. (2004), “‘security governance’ as set out above, comprises four features: heterarchy; the interaction of a large number of actors, both public and private; institutionalization that is both formal and informal; relations between actors that are ideational in character, structured by norms and understandings as much as by formal regulations; and, finally, collective purpose” (8). While much of the literature on security governance is centered around European studies, I propose that it is an apt framework for analyzing Mali in conjunction with governmental decentralization because it involves various degrees of delegation and devolution in the context of international security actors, ethnic militias, and traffickers. The literature on heterarchy will be further discussed in the Malian context in the next section, but it has been shown as an effective way to understand the complex social sphere that makes up the northern part of the

country (Bellagamba and Klute 2008; Bøas and Strazzari 2020; Hüsken and Klute 2015; Molenaar et al. 2019).

Heterarchy is intrinsically related to the second dimension of security governance noted by Webber et al. (2004): “the interaction of large number of actors, both public and private” (8). This point is especially salient given the highly fragmented social landscape of northern Mali. As Webber et al. (2004) state, “The state may increasingly be pooling its sovereignty and decision-making capacity with other states in the face of transnational and globalising influence” (6). Although not termed “decentralization,” this phenomenon has many of the hallmarks of domestic, governmental decentralization to subnational authorities. While the decentralization literature has largely focused on the domestic, following Webber et al. (2004), I argue that state-sanctioned involvement of international actors operates in a strikingly similar manner as well.

The formal centralized government, given its position as the recognized legitimate government of Mali in the eyes of the international community, is thus empowered to transfer some of its sovereignty to other entities and has done so, both to subnational authorities and various international actors such as, but not limited to, ECOWAS, France, traffickers, ethnic militias, the United Nations, and now, the Wagner Group. In terms of security, this is salient when looked at through Max Weber’s (1919) conception of the state that holds that “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (1). While Mali does successfully *claim* the legitimate use of violence, it is not the only actor to do so in northern Mali due to its voluntary surrendering of its “monopoly” on violence. AFISMA, MINUSMA, Opération Serval, and the Wagner Group were all brought into the state in response to decisions by the central government to elicit help from outside actors in stabilizing its security situation, thus arguably imparting some of the Malian

central government's claim to legitimacy onto the outside actors' use of physical force in Mali, albeit to varying degrees. Notably, AFISMA and MINUSMA were endowed with another layer of "legitimacy" due to their explicit, unanimous approval by the United Nations Security Council in 2012 via Resolution 2085 and 2013 via Resolution 2100, respectively. The legitimacy of the UN Security Council is nevertheless not a given and, as scholars has noted, it enjoys more of a "rudimentary" legitimacy (Binder and Heupel 2015).

Lake and Rothchild (2005) hold that "the deployment of external peacekeepers can facilitate political stability, but they cannot create stable decentralization themselves... When the warring factions perceive themselves as relatively stronger, and each retains some hope of success on the battlefield, insisting upon political decentralization is likely to promote continued violence" (3). While this analysis isn't based on "decentralization of security" per se, the presence of peacekeepers implies a more fragmented security situation wherein the state and its opposition are not the only security actors. In Mali, the presence of the peacekeepers is in no small part due to the pleading of the Malian government, possibly signaling the ultimate desire of the Malian state to preserve its territorial integrity. Lake and Rothchild (2005) continue, stating:

The stronger party, with greater prospects of victory, will welcome external efforts to preserve the shell of the unified state—one that they are likely to organize and control with time. Here, the external advocates of peace and political decentralization become, perhaps unwittingly, the de facto allies of the more powerful actor group – but one that could not, nonetheless, achieve mastery of a unified state on its own (3).

As such, the decentralization of security by the central state to "legitimized" international actors runs the risk of emboldening the central government to renege on or simply abandon promises of decentralization. Ultimately, the decentralization of security to various international actors presents a formidable challenge to political decentralization. The networks through which power

is requested and allocated have significant consequences for the viability of decentralization and can further protract violent conflict.

In their concluding remarks, Lake and Rothchild (2005) state that “External actors can facilitate efforts at effective decentralization—they can help push regions and groups in the right direction—but stability is ultimately dependent upon what the local actors believe will happen when the outside parties and possibly peacekeepers leave” (25). In this way, the coalescence of decentralization of security and governmental decentralization is a very complex relationship that is greatly informed by the long-term expectations and goals of the primary domestic actors and, importantly, can lead to the instrumentalization of international actors in both intentional and unintentional ways. Long-term expectations and goals are rarely static in a state and, as evidenced by Mali’s volatile, coup-prone political climate, the aspirations of recurring iterations of similar peace agreements should not be taken at face value or be expected to be an unexploitable roadmap to peace.

The Malian Security and Development Context

Scholars have noted that the Malian security forces have often been repressive and acted extrajudicially to the point of fueling recruitment into extremist groups, meaning much of the securitization sought by the state and buttressed through training and funding by international actors runs the risk of being regressive (Venturi and Touré 2020). It has also been observed that the Malian state has in many cases offloaded its security objectives onto various militia groups (Venturi and Touré 2020; Whitehouse and Strazzari 2015). Whitehouse and Strazzari (2015) go as far as to say that “Thus the proliferation of violent nonstate actors and the undermining of state sovereignty in northern Mali have been in some ways a deliberate outcome of state policy” (220). I argue that this can be seen as the decentralization of security activity, a policy that Eaton

and Connerley (2010) are particularly wary of in decentralizing, developing nations. Venturi and Touré (2020) add that international securitization partners tend to rarely denounce the extrajudicial activities of state forces and the offloading of security work, adding to a lack of transparency and accountability with potentially dire consequences for state building and state legitimization.

Scholars have also begun to question the value of approaching governance and state (re)construction through the Westphalian lens. In their 2018 article “A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction,” Craven-Matthews and Englebert center their analysis precisely on this idea. They write, “Like Potemkin and his villages, we propose that the Malian government and donors enact reconstruction, contributing to Mali’s fictional dimensions more than to empirical foundations of statehood, and we suggest the combination of crisis and reconstruction represents an acceptable equilibrium for both sets of actors” (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 2). A critical part of their argument also rests on the idea that Mali is pre-Westphalian, meaning the state is simply unable to reaffirm its sovereignty through force projection or institutional and governmental control. Furthermore, they write that “Mali’s aid dependence illustrates its recurrent propensity to let others coadminister it though its recurrent crises” (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 13). As such, state (re)construction and decentralization Mali is stuck in a complex quagmire. The central government is unable to establish itself in the first place in many parts of the country, meaning there is no state *to* reconstruct.

Furthermore, in relation to anti-terrorism initiatives headed by donor countries in Mali, Craven Matthews and Englebert (2018) write that “the numerous reiterations of its sovereignty and territorial integrity in UN resolutions are for donor purposes as much as for Malian ones”

(22). Apart from official statistics provided by the World Bank on foreign aid reliance and data from donor missions and governmental agencies, Craven-Matthews and Englebert rely on participant observations and interviews in various parts of Mali. These interviews encompassed the perspectives of many stakeholders, ranging from Malian citizens to aid workers and politicians and reflects the common trend of interview-based fieldwork among scholars on Malian statehood

Bøas and Strazzari (2020) also question much of the state-centered analyses of the Sahel, offering a distinctly sociological analysis of how the Sahel is a place of constant contestation and social, political, and cultural networks rather than an unruly, anarchical warzone. In the social space of the Sahel, “the interplay of these [armed] groups, including their positioning *vis-à-vis* state authorities and their local emissaries, follows a logic of opportunity, territorial control and resources” (Bøas and Strazzari 2020, 2). Given this logic of opportunity amid the dizzying array of actors in central and northern Mali, the role of decentralization becomes blurred and more restricted as a tool for transferring authority to a point of contact (i.e., a governmentally formalized or elected traditional authority figure). Individuals are no longer singular points of contact, rather they represent just one thread in a more complex weave of actors that are constantly negotiating power and resources.

The extremely thorough analysis of Jennifer C. Seely in her 2001 article “A Political Analysis of Decentralisation: Coopting the Tuareg Threat in Mali” also provides a vital dimension to understanding the ongoing complexity of decentralization reforms and implementation in the context of Tuareg separatism. Seely argues that the impetus for decentralization across Mali in the early 1990s, while driven by Tuareg separatism in the north, represents a politically motivated process that was coopted by the central government to

legitimize itself in the eyes of all Malians. In this sense, the decentralization initiated by the Konaré government was first a foremost an end itself with the goal of quelling dissatisfaction with the central government (Seely 2001).

Bøas and Strazzari (2020) are also quick to draw attention to the European agenda of stemming migration and suggest that, due to the European desire to reinforce the Westphalian state, Sahelian defense budgets are inflated with security spending and funding. Similarly to Craven-Matthews and Englebert (2018), Bøas and Strazzari (2020) demonstrate the trend in which fragile Sahelian states rely on their fragility as a way of establishing a *status quo* that allows for an unabated and indefinite inflow of donor assistance. Furthermore, despite the plethora complications and pitfalls of negotiating and coordinating with Malian leaders “who are often strongly criticized by members of the donor community for incompetence, mismanagement, and tolerating corruption,” Bøas and Strazzari (2020) again claim that European preference for direct collaboration with the state takes priority over other alternatives (5).

Whitehouse and Strazzari (2015) also discuss the contested role of the central state, stating that “The question then is not whether ‘the state’ will continue to have a commanding role in this part of the world but rather how it will manage to articulate with powerful nonstate actors in a region where it does not exercise a monopoly in the use of legitimate violence and in fact has never enjoyed such a monopoly” (217). The plurality of forces in the Sahel region and Mali specifically supersedes simplistic state centered analyses that assume the primacy of an already established and legitimized state. Additionally, as the state is still mostly an abstraction, Whitehouse and Strazzari demonstrate how local elites are talented at instrumentalizing borders, particularly in regard to criminal enterprises. Ultimately, this allows for local socioeconomic and

political realms wherein forms of illegal, legal, and aid-based economies coexist. While the aid-based economies began due to increasing international donor activity following the droughts of the 1970s and 80s, the transnational economies of movement are much older and historically ingrained into the region (Whitehouse and Strazzari 2015).

Regarding heterarchy, significant fieldwork on the roles of traditional authorities such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders in northern Mali has led to observations of the splintering of traditional power structures in the heterarchical social space of the Sahel (Bellagamba and Klute 2008; Bøas and Strazzari 2020; Hüsken and Klute 2015; Molenaar et al. 2019). The rise of militant jihadist groups in the region has greatly complicated the landscape of power and legitimacy, meaning power is constantly contested and fluid; a traditional authority may have held legitimacy in the past, but new modes and sources of resource allocation introduced by other groups such as armed ethnic coalitions or jihadist groups have eroded the idea of a stable, uncontested system of hierarchy (Molenaar et al. 2019)

Methods

This thesis will focus primarily on the period of Malian history ranging from Amadou Toumani Touré's presidency until the present in order to capture the state policies that led to the present-day protracted crisis in the country. Nonetheless, historical background will be drawn on from earlier years, particularly the 1990s, as this was when the first major decentralization and democratization reforms were established in Mali. Tracking the progression of decentralization over time is crucial in order to understand how the country has constructed itself at various levels of social power and governance, but attention is primarily given to the last twenty years. Radical jihadists and foreign intervention in Mali were not significant until 2012 and 2013, meaning an entirely new dynamic of statehood and security operations was introduced. Due to travel

restrictions related to COVID-19, no original fieldwork will be presented in this thesis. As such, this thesis will primarily draw on a mix of primary and secondary sources to discuss conceptions of decentralization in Mali and empirical realities.

Two primary methodologies will be used for analysis: a temporal analysis of policy decisions and outcomes (intended and unintended) as well as content analysis of primary sources, including governmental and (I)NGO publications, speeches, press releases, and institutional studies. By combining the two methodologies, this thesis will look at how decentralization has been discussed, challenged, and implemented over time by actors in Mali since 1990, although the bulk of the analysis will center on Mali during the presidencies of Amadou Toumani Touré and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Tracking the aspirations of actors and expectations for decentralization's utility will undergird an analysis of why certain policies were pursued or avoided and what the practical implications of policy outcomes were. Understanding the relationship between security decentralization and governmental decentralization will involve identifying causal relationships through both content analysis and socio-political movements and moments that have occurred in the last two decades. I will not rely on an explicitly teleological or path-dependent analysis, as both have promising frameworks for understanding distinct decisions and outcomes in Mali.

In terms of primary sources, this thesis will discuss the Malian Constitution, various publications from Malian ministries, and other relevant legislation and proclamations to set up the codified, institutional domestic governance context of Mali. Also critical are the various peace and reconciliation agreements that have characterized recent Malian history.

Additionally, I will engage with documentation and evidence from the United Nations (MINUSMA and the UN Security Council), the G5 Sahel, various donor countries and groups,

and the nations involved militarily in Mali. Through these publications, I will analyze the various security initiatives and decentralization strategies and dissect the programming that the various actors have established and implemented. Organizations rarely self-critique, meaning this thesis will have to engage in some cross-referencing and triangulation in order to aptly judge how decentralization and security policies have been implemented at various levels, especially in relation to each other. For example, while the United Nations may be eager to criticize the Malian government for misuse of funds, it is much less likely publish information on its own failures. As such, this thesis will also make use of journalistic sources from outlets such as *Jeune Afrique*, *Le Monde*, and *Reuters*. Journalistic sources are also often critical sources of direct quotes and observer commentary, which are important parts of the ecosystem of policy formation.

In terms of further secondary sources, many scholars who have written on Mali have spent significant periods of time doing participant observations and interviews in the country with the goal of discerning what statistics cannot. I will be relying heavily on this fieldwork and the resulting articles. In many of these articles, direct quotes are used from interviews. Ultimately, this qualitative analysis will inform the majority of this research. Quantitative analysis will be used mostly as a framing device for the various demographic changes that Mali has undergone in recent years, as well as various budget and violence related figures.

Outline

The second chapter will construct a timeline of Malian history up to the early 2000s, particularly focusing on decentralization and general trends in the security realm in order to “set the stage” for analysis of security and decentralization activities. The third chapter will discuss the relationship between decentralization of security and governmental decentralization during

Amadou Toumani Touré presidency until the 2012 rebellion and coup. The fourth chapter will focus on decentralization of security and government to date, including how its failures and success have factored into subsequent decision-making. The fifth chapter will briefly synthesize my research and discuss the role of decentralization of security and governance given recent developments in Malian politics.

Chapter 2 — Background Information and Historical Context

Geography and Demography

Located in West Africa, Mali is the 8th largest country in Africa and the 23rd largest in the world, covering 478,841 square miles across both the Sahara and the Sahel. Mali borders seven other countries: Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, and Mauritania. While the northern reaches of the country are in the Sahara, the prototypical “Sahelian” environment occupies the areas around the Niger Bend. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes the Sahel as the “semiarid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal eastward to Sudan” that “forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2020). Mali also contains a long stretch of the Niger and Senegal rivers, which provide for the livelihoods of many Malians through fishing and agriculture. Along the Niger River in central Mali is the Office du Niger, a massive irrigation project on a natural floodplain created by the French after World War I to furnish a burgeoning demand for cotton in post-war Europe (Filipovich 2001). Today, the delta that the Office du Niger is located on is clearly visible on satellite imagery as the wide green swath in the center of the country amid the otherwise arid brown-yellow colorations of the Sahel.

The Sahara-Sahel north is the least populous area of Mali, comprising about 8.8% of the national population in 2009, the last year a census was conducted (Traoré et al. 2011). At the time of the 2009 census, there were three administrative regions in the north: Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. The Kidal region, notable for its large concentration of Tuareg, is the least populous region in the country with only 67,739 inhabitants as of the 2009 census (Thurston and Lebovich 2013; Traoré et al. 2011). Since the 2009 census, however, the north now includes two additional regions: Taoudenni and Ménaka. Since 2009, the country’s population has grown from around

14 million to roughly 20 million and is on track for further rapid growth due to its high fertility rate of 5.88 children per woman in 2018 (World Bank 2022).

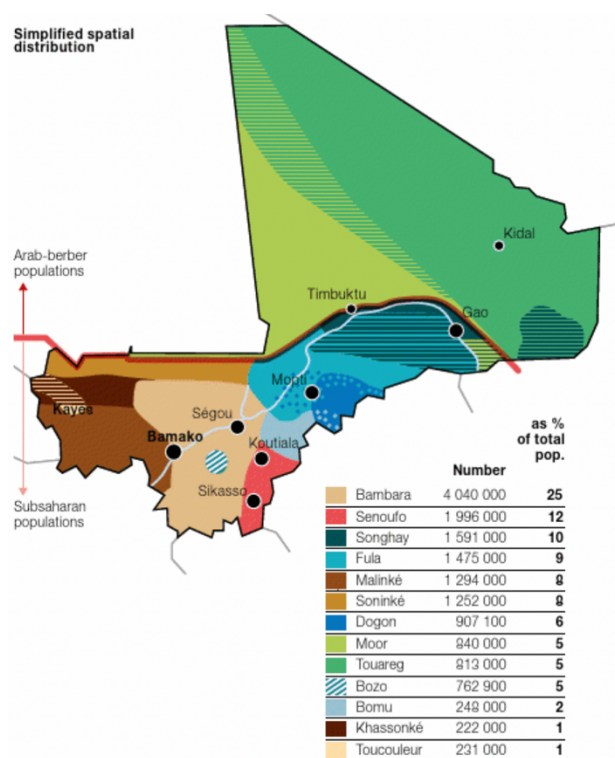
As shown in Figure 1, Mali contains a high level of ethnolinguistic diversity.

Additionally, many of these ethnic groups are not exclusively in Mali. The Tuareg (also known as the Kel Tamasheq after the Tuareg language Tamasheq), for example, live across the Sahara-Sahel in Algeria, Niger, Libya, Burkina Faso, with a small population in Nigeria. Northern Mali is primarily populated by Tuareg, Arab, Fulani, and Songhai peoples (Figure 1). Furthermore, the Tuareg in Mali primarily practice nomadic lifestyles involving herding and trans-Saharan trade, while the Fulani practice both sedentary farming and herding, and the Songhai primarily practice sedentary farming along the Niger Bend (Minority Rights Group 2017). Notably, however, pastoralism has decreased in recent decades. Lecoq and Klute (2019) write that “The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s changed Tuareg economy and lifestyle, away from pastoralism to agriculture or to an urban wage-earning existence in adjacent countries” (24). There are also important differences among the Tuareg:

Within its confederations, Tuareg society includes a hierarchical system of free and subsidiary classes. In simplified terms, these classes include *imushagh* (noble warriors possessing charted lineages), *ineslemen* (religious specialists), *imghad* (free people without charted lineages), *inadan* (craftsmen), and *iklan* (unfree). Another important term, *bellah*, can refer to formerly enslaved peoples. (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 10)

While Thurston and Lebovich (2013) note that this characterization of hierarchy is imperfect and increasingly contested, these delineations are useful as a rough outline of how Tuareg societies are generally structured. The leaders of two of the most prominent secessionist (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad, or MNLA) and jihadist (Ansar al Din) groups have been noble-warrior Ifogha Tuaregs.

Figure 1
Map of Ethnic Groups in Mali



Source: (Jeune Afrique 2010)

Religiously, Mali is nearly homogenous, as roughly 95% of the country is Sunni Muslim, with many of the Sunni practicing Sufism (US Department of State 2019). Religious leaders in Mali, however, are marked by important differences and play significant roles in local and national politics (Lebovich 2019). As will be demonstrated in further chapters, rising radicalism is on display in much of the country and, according to Chauzal and van Damme (2015), “the diffusion of Wahhabism and the *Tabligh Jamaat* doctrine in Mali since the 1990s has also played a role in Bamako’s suspicion regarding the north” (24). Furthermore, much of the increase in radicalism is attributed to Salafist groups that have operated in neighboring regions of Algeria for decades (Idrissa 2021).

Economy

Mali is among the poorest nations in the world, having the 20th lowest nominal GNI (Gross National Income) per person at \$830 in 2020 (World Bank 2020c). In 2020, the country's GDP was \$17.4 billion with a growth rate of -1.24% (World Bank 2020a, 2020b). Before 2020, the last time Mali's growth rate was negative was in 2012, but in the years in between, the growth rate averaged 5.27% (World Bank 2020b). A cursory glance at these indicators reveals the Malian economy's vulnerability to instability; a Tuareg rebellion, the subsequent jihadist takeover of the north, and a coup all occurred in 2012, and 2020 saw yet another coup.

Mali's economy is heavily reliant on agriculture, averaging about 36.69% of national GDP from 2010 to 2020 (O'Neill 2022). Most of the value of Mali's exports comes from gold, followed by cotton and livestock (World Integrated 2017). Furthermore, remittances are also an important part of Mali's economy at about 5.7% of GDP in 2020, with nearly half of these remittances coming from the approximately 120,000 Malians in France (Migrants & Refugees 2020; Vincent 2013; World Bank 2020d).

Pre-Colonial History

Mali's history is as rich as it is complex, and the echoes of its ancient and medieval history are still heard today, notably through the continuing importance of distinct ethnic and regional cultures and traditions, trans-Saharan linkages, and "evocations of Mali's precolonial imperial past" that are "meant to provide cover and legitimacy to its leadership" (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 1). The Djenné area of central Mali is thought to be one of the earliest sites of the Iron Age in Africa and the Niger River has provided livelihoods for peoples in present-day Mali for millennia (McIntosh and McIntosh 1980). The first empire in Mali was the Ghana Empire (roughly 400 to 1150 CE), which was primarily located in Mauritania and Mali

and relied heavily on the lucrative salt and gold trade of the region (MacDonald 2016). Although it was led by Soninké rulers, the Ghana Empire practiced a federalist form of administration, wherein local chiefdoms of other ethnic groups maintained some level of authority (MacDonald 2016). It was also roughly during the rule of the Ghana Empire that Islam began to spread in West Africa; Muslim traders from the Maghreb, conquered in the 7th and 8th centuries by the Umayyad Caliphate, were responsible for much the initial spread of Islam in present-day Mali.

Following the fall of the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire rose to power in the region during the 13th century, ultimately controlling parts of present-day Mali, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, and Niger. The first ruler of the Malian empire was Sundiata Keïta, a member of the Mandé ethnolinguistic group (Sapong 2016). The Mali Empire is perhaps most well-known for one of its kings, the infamous Mansa Musa:

Mansa Musa (1312–1337) is the ninth Mansa after Sundiata but his reign saw Mali at its finest, both in wealth and fame. He is regarded as a great statesman who made Mali safe for traders and travelers. He also embarked on expansionist campaigns by establishing firm control over great trading centers such as Gao, Timbuktu, and Jenne. During his famed pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–1325, he was a very generous guest to many hosts on the way. His retinue included a hundred camels bearing 300 lbs of gold each. Most of the gold was given out, causing depreciation in the value of gold in Cairo. This pilgrimage contributed to the cultural development of Mali. Musa returned to Mali with Arabic scholars and architects who played a significant role in changing the intellectual, religious, and spatial landscape of Mali. (Sapong 2016)

The Mali Empire occupies an important yet contested place in the Malian national consciousness (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018). Since independence, Malian presidents have invoked the Malian Empire as the historical precursor to the current nation (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018). Craven-Matthews and Englebert (2018) write that “IBK [Former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta] evoked the Mali Empire during the signing ceremonies of the 2015 accord, and his ideology is largely one of “Make Mali Great Again” (18-19). Given the wide range of ethnic groups living in Mali, each with endogenous histories and cultures,

characterizations of Mali as a predecessor to a particular period of Malinke-Bambara domination is inherently problematic (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018). Finally, Wing and Kassibo (2014) claim that Malian Empire practiced a decentralized form of governance.

As the Malian Empire declined, the Songhai Empire rose to become a predominant regional power in the 15th and 16th centuries. After sacking Timbuktu, previously controlled by Tuareg and Berber merchants, the Songhai Empire began to derive significant wealth from Trans-Saharan salt and gold trade (Amoah-Boampong 2016). The Songhai Empire also supposedly practiced some form of decentralization:

He [The Songhai emperor] divided the empire into four regions, namely, Kurmina, Bala, Bangu, and Dendi. A regional governor, who was usually a member of the Askia family by birth or marriage, administered each region. The regions were subdivided into provinces in which local rulers exercised considerable authority under the close supervision of the regional governor. Distant territories like Kano and Katsina only paid tribute as vassal states. Significant cities like Timbuktu and Jenne had municipal status and were governed by mayors. (Amoah-Boampong 2016)

The Songhai Empire eventually fell to Moroccan invaders led the Saadi Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur in the 16th century (Amoah-Boampong 2016). Nevertheless, federalist-decentralized governance evidently has a long history in present-day Mali. Each of the three major pre-colonial empires in Mali practiced some form of decentralization, at least in part due to the difficulties of governing such wide swaths of territory and the diverse ethnic landscape of the region.

Mamadou Diawara, however, problematizes characterizations of Mali's pre-colonial empires as "decentralized," stating that, due to the lack of democratic debate and inequality, "none of these empires could validly claim to be decentralized structures" (Diawara 2011, 436).

Moroccan rule in northern Mali only lasted for a short period and was followed by several centuries of smaller empires and kingdoms such as the Massina Empire and Bamana Empire. The end of Moroccan rule also coincided with the development of oceanic shipping

routes and the subsequent decline of present-day Northern Mali's trans-Saharan salt, ivory, and gold trade (Pelizzo 2001). Perhaps the most well-known of Mali's northern cities, Timbuktu, experienced a significant economic and cultural decline at this time. The writings of René Caillié, the first European explorer to visit Timbuktu and return alive, noted that the city no longer resembled the thriving center of scholarship and trade that previous explorers such as Leo Africanus and Ibn Battuta had chronicled (Caillié 1830; Pelizzo 2001). Although Timbuktu has not regained the splendor it achieved centuries ago, it is still one of the most important historical, cultural, and religious sites in Africa owing to its iconic mud mosques and madrasas, Sufi shrines and tombs, and manuscripts. During jihadist occupation in 2012, however, many of these iconic symbols of the city's cultural heritage were destroyed or gravely threatened by jihadists, which ultimately resulted in the first International Criminal Court case in Mali (International Criminal Court 2015). While Timbuktu may be the most globally famous Malian city owing to the mystery attributed to it by Europeans after hearing the accounts of traders and explorers, other cities such as Djenné are also host to impressive architecture such as the Great Mosque of Djenné.

French Colonialism

By the closing decades of the 19th century, the French colonial empire had expanded from coastal holdings in West Africa to the inner reaches of the Sahel and the Upper Niger, ultimately leading to the creation of the French Sudan (part of the larger entity of French West Africa), the borders of which would delineate the future Malian state (Harris 1911). The administrative structure of French West Africa at the local level involved the incorporation of local chiefs:

...These chiefs had no formally recognized powers of their own, only those specifically accorded them by the French administration. Large chieftaincies were broken up, small chieftaincies were grouped together under a single chief and peoples without chiefs were given them for the sake of administrative uniformity. Where traditional chiefs were

incompetent, they were replaced by French nominees...The chiefs carried out the routine tasks of the administration—collecting taxes, rounding up forced labor, recruiting for the army, and servicing compulsory crop cultivation. (Crowder 1992, 78)

The French presence in present-day Mali was also notable for its privileging of certain ethnic groups. According to Chauzal and van Damme (2015), the French “decided to educate a ruling class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners” (17). This policy, combined with the arbitrary borders drawn by the French colonial administration and later maintained by the newly independent Mali, has proved especially destabilizing. Notably, Tuareg resistance and rebellion occurred during French colonization, but ramped up significantly after the independence of Mali in 1960 (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

Independent Mali

After World War II, endogenous nationalist political formations in Mali began to take shape through the creation of political parties, the most prominent of which was the Sudanese Union, a member of the larger African Democratic Rally (Imperato, Clark, and Baker 2021). Headed by the future first president of Mali, Modibo Keïta, the party advocated for decolonization and alignment with the communist nations (Englebert 1992; Imperato, Clark, and Baker 2021). Shortly before gaining total independence, French Sudan integrated with Senegal to form the Federation of Mali, a short-lived political entity that existed for just over a year between 1959 and 1960. While part of the Federation of Mali, the former French Sudan gained independence from France on June 20th, 1960. Shortly afterwards, Senegal left the Mali Federation, and the current Malian nation was formed on September 22nd, 1960.

After independence, Modibo Keïta and his Sudanese Union party ruled Mali as a socialist, one-party state for eight years before a military coup in 1968. The 1960 constitution included several provisions for deconcentrated administration, including “the election of

communal councils and mayors” and “the general principle that “territorial collectivities” (any subnational governmental unit) were to freely administer themselves by elected councils” (Wing and Kassibo 2010, 2). Wing and Kassibo (2010) note that, although these principles were in the constitution, Modibo Keïta and later Moussa Traoré’s governments chose instead to appoint local officials. During Keïta’s presidency, the Malian state experienced a Tuareg rebellion from 1963-4, which occurred due to Tuareg frustration at the lack of an independent state and intra-Tuareg disagreements over independence (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). Thurston and Lebovich (2013) write that, although the rebellion was relatively small, Tuareg communities faced harsh reprisals:

The rebellion, which largely involved raids on *goumiers* and ambushes of Malian troops whose tactics and equipment were unsuited to the terrain in the Adrar des Ifoghas, never mobilized more than a few hundred men. Yet the Malian government responded harshly. Malian troops poisoned wells, slaughtered the livestock so crucial to a pastoralist existence, forced civilians into work camps, and executed civilians (including family members of Tuareg combatants as well as Tuareg and Arab notables and religious leaders). (21)

Following the 1968 coup, Moussa Traoré assumed the presidency and ruled Mali under an authoritarian, one-party government for over twenty years. Traoré’s rule was marked by human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, and the lack of political and civil liberties for Malians (Englebert 1992). Under Traoré, Mali continued to suffer economically due to an overexpansive and inefficient bureaucracy, corruption, and two multi-year droughts in the 1970s and 80s (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018; Englebert 1992; Imperato 1977). Due to the severe economic fallout caused by the droughts, foreign aid to Mali accounted for upwards of 20% of GDP and “was almost permanently in economic receivership with continuous World Bank or IMF structural adjustment programs and facilities” (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 10).

The final years and months of Traoré's rule saw the beginning of a Tuareg rebellion, a rise in pro-democracy movements and, in March 1991, a military coup led by Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) that overthrew Traoré and established a committee for transition to democracy. A 1991 national conference resulted in a drafted constitution, which was approved by Malian voters in early 1992 and was shortly followed by municipal and legislative elections that marked the beginnings of multiparty democracy in Mali. The *Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali* (ADEMA) won a plurality of municipal seats and the majority of seats in the legislature and, ultimately, ADEMA's Alpha Oumar Konaré won the presidency in April 1992 (Englebert 2001).

The Tuareg rebellion, which began in 1990, initially sought autonomy but later changed its focus to autonomy and the development of local ownership of the north through empowered local governance (Wing and Kassibo 2010). The rebellion was initiated by Iyad Ag Ghali, a recently returned fighter from Muammar Gaddafi's Islamic Legion who led the *Mouvement Populaire de la Libération de l'Azawad* (MPA) (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). Shortly before Traoré was overthrown, the central government and armed Tuareg groups signed the Tamanrasset Accords, which "offered the rebels decentralization, with a 'particular status' for the three northern regions" and "provided for 'local assemblies with legislative and executive branches that will regulate all economic, social, and cultural issues'" (Wing and Kassibo 2010, 4). The Tamanrasset Accords, however, excluded several Tuareg groups and violence continued after the signing and the fall of the Traoré government (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). A new agreement, the 1992 National Pact, laid out plans for several decentralization policies such as "'particular status' for the north including local, regional, and interregional assemblies responsible for agriculture, livestock, water, urbanism, housing, environment, industry, transport, communication, health, education, culture, and tourism'" (Wing and Kassibo 2010, 3).

Implementation of the decentralization reforms was slow, and the central government reshuffled its ministries and agencies related to local governance several times before settling upon a Ministry of Territorial Administration and Local Collectives (Wing and Kassibo 2010). Today, the administrative structure reflects these changes, although several *régions* have been subdivided in the north following the various peace agreements related to the Tuareg rebellion of 2012. At the “top” of the administrative hierarchy is the central government, followed by the ten *régions* and the Bamako district, which are subdivided into 49 *cercles* that are further subdivided into 703 communes. These numbers are likely to change soon, however, as new legislation was passed in 2021 to create ten more *régions* as well as additional communes in the Bamako district (MaliWeb 2021).

In Mali’s first democratic transfer of power, ATT became president in 2002. In 2006, yet another Tuareg rebellion occurred, initiated by former members of the MPA, and on this occasion lasting for three years. While Iyad Ag Ghaly, the initial leader of the previous rebellion, had since become “increasingly religious since the 1990s,” his MPA¹ was never a jihadist group (Thurston and Lebovich 2013, 10; Pezard and Shurkin 2015). Ag Ghaly and several other Tuareg groups joined together to form the Alliance Démocratique du 23 mai pour le Changement (ADC) (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). Bamako quickly negotiated with ADC, resulting in the 2006 Algiers Accords, which “specifically addressed issues in the region of Kidal... but most provisions are largely similar to what had been promised in the Tamanrasset Accord and the National Pact” (Pezard and Shurkin 2015, 17). Just as in 1991 and 1992, not all Tuareg stakeholders were involved in the peace process, leading to several years of violence that ended

¹ A year after the beginning of the 1990 rebellion, the MPLA dropped “Libération” from their name, thus becoming the MPA.

with the defeat of the remaining rebels at the hands of Imghad Tuaregs, Tilemsi Arabs, and the Malian Army (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

By 2011, discontent among northern communities was again at a boiling point. Late 2011 saw the creation of several new armed groups, most notably the jihadist groups Ansar al Din and the AQIM splinter group *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) as well as the secular MNLA. Ag Ghaly, the founder of Ansar al Din, was fully radicalized by 2011, which scholars have pointed to as a likely reason that he was denied leadership of the MNLA (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). The next chapter will take a closer look at ATT's leadership and investigate how the relationship between the state's informal decentralization of security and governmental decentralization set the stage for the instability that persists to this day.

Chapter 3 — Opportunistic Alliances, Corruption, and Decentralization

Under ATT

Traffickers, Militias, and the Central Government

The previous chapter has outlined the various Tuareg rebellions that occurred under French colonial government and the Malian state over the last century, as well as subsequent policy changes related to the north and decentralization. The shortcomings of the Malian central state, however, were not adequately addressed in the eyes of many Tuareg and other northerners in the years and months leading up to 2012 rebellion due to a complex set of reasons. Firstly, the economic situation in Northern Mali was still perceived by many in the region as markedly worse than that of other regions; regions such as Kidal faced significant barriers to accessing development money and saw the lowest project participation rate and funds transfers of any region in 2010 (Wing and Kassibo 2014). Wing and Kassibo point to the difficulty for poorer, less stable regions such as Kidal to meet the prerequisites for funding from institutions such as the *Agence Nationale d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales* (ANICT) as a likely reason for the mounting frustration among Tuareg with decentralization policies leading up to the 2012 rebellion. Citing Timbuktu's relatively high voter participation rates in the years before the rebellion, Wing and Kassibo also note that, due to decentralization's origins as a post-conflict stabilization mechanism, local government in the north was given particular importance, leading to an even greater frustration as the new system was perceived as too slow or ineffectual (Wing and Kassibo 2014).

A 2006 report conducted for USAID covering Mali's decentralized governance similarly shows general local frustration with the central government's convoluted presence and oversight:

Local office is still not attractive to competent and committed citizens. Most of the things that go on now appear as if local elected officials are set up for failure. The latter are subjected to state administrative supervision that exercises little control, and state services that demand payment for service. They are invited to multiple training sessions that take them away from their communes and keep them from working on issues of interest to constituents. All these elements combine to dampen the self-confidence and self-esteem of local elites. (Management Systems International 2006)

Accordingly, it is no surprise that the Malian state was perceived as making “bad choices” (Pezard and Shurkin 2015). The experience of local elected officials with newfound responsibilities in decentralization programs was that of sidelining, corruption, and Byzantine bureaucracies. Misgivings with the central state were also not isolated to the elite and Tuareg separatists. In extensive interviews with internally displaced persons conducted by Bleck, Dembele, and Guindo (2016) in 2013, respondents overwhelmingly indicated a belief that Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal were the most marginalized regions of the country. The authors write that “This data demonstrates a shared sentiment of marginalization despite this population’s largely pro-government (and anti-secessionist) orientation (Bleck, Dembele, and Guindo 2016, 9). The authors also asked interviewees to record a message to the US and Malian governments, resulting in their observation that “The quotes above link poor governance and corruption with the broader security crisis” (Bleck, Dembele, and Guindo 2016, 10).

Gaasholt (2004) argues that the 1999 municipal elections, intended to be the realization of decentralization policies outlined after democratization, were in fact only a tool for the central government to reduce expenditures. According to Gaasholt’s fieldwork in the majority Tuareg town of Gossi in the Timbuktu region, those elected to municipal councils were primarily chiefs who, given new authorities, were able to co-opt their positions in order to enrich themselves through local and international NGOs (Gaasholt 2004). Additionally, NGOs began to take on an entirely new importance in the local context as, against promises made in 1999 legislation, the

central government did not match decentralization of power with a transfer of funds, thus creating a new gap in the state to be filled by other actors. Finally, Gaasholt (2004) states that the consequence of the new municipal councils was the further fractionalization of local society in the north through competition for resources and, in some cases, the threat of violence as a tool “to exercise pressure on the state to provide resources” (87). As a whole, scholarship on decentralization in Mali coalesces around several central issues, but namely the lack of good governance emanating from Bamako. The flaws and corruption that have marked the Malian central state, in many ways the impetus for decentralization, has only morphed into an exploitable and ineffectual system at the local level.

Furthermore, instability in bordering Algeria ultimately played a critical role in the introduction of radical Salafism. Various scholars such as Rahmane Idrissa (2021) have pointed to the fleeing of radical Salafists after the end of the Algerian Civil War in the beginning of the 2000s as the catalyst of radicalization in Mali. He writes that “The Algerian Salafi exiles were left free to make a sanctuary of the area [northern Mali], prospering in the early 2000s through an industry of abduction (of Westerners) and ransom, and stakes in illicit or unofficial trade with Algeria. From the viewpoint of the Malian state—and very likely of Algeria as well—things could be left thus indefinitely, especially since northern lawlessness provided a haven for drug trafficking, from which many a bigwig in Bamako richly lined his pockets” (Idrissa 2021, 25). The tacit relationship between Salafi actors, the future instigators of widespread terrorism, and the Malian state underscores the culture of clientelism that has plagued Mali for decades. The Salafists represented a fundamental challenge to the sovereignty of the Malian state, yet still received support from political elites and established a system of corruption that “represented a

political settlement in which various actors helped each other entrench power” (Thurston 2018, 10).

Pezard and Shurkin’s (2015) 2013 fieldwork with Malian traditional authorities further shows that state meddling with militia groups and traffickers prompted widespread frustration in the north:

It is widely believed that the Malian state has, at the very least, shown itself to be remarkably tolerant of trafficking... Many sources go further and accuse the state of colluding with traffickers and other illicit actors... For example, a Berabiche notable claimed that the Malian state created the MAA [Mouvement arabe de l’Azawad] to defend certain business interests, and he added that Bamako has consistently acted in way that exacerbated intercommunal tensions in pursuit of pecuniary interests. (42)

Lacher (2012) has also written that the Malian state under ATT deliberately pitted various communities against one another in order to maintain some control over the north, stating that “to counter the Ifoghas and Idnan Tuareg rebels, the leadership around the then president, Amadou Toumani Touré, allied itself with those rebels’ rivals—primarily leaders from the Arab Berabiche and Lamhar tribes (11-12). According to Lacher’s work, however, Malian state complicity in informal security arrangements went beyond alliances, at times involving members of the Malian military in command of Arab militias in the north (Lacher 2012).

By and large, the political and economic picture of northern Mali leading up to the 2012 rebellion was a recipe for combustion. The Malian state was only not entirely absent due to its corrupt negotiations with traffickers and terrorists. From the point of view of traditional authorities and citizens, the state was nothing more than a machine for the personal enrichment of the Bamako elite. The perceptions of Tuareg and Songhai elite also speak directly to the disruption caused by the state’s callous maneuverings and opportunistic relationships with traffickers and jihadist groups:

Tuareg notable similarly argued that, whereas the French were generally careful about the choices they made, Mali “makes bad choices,” uninformed choices, or, worse, choices intended to disrupt northern society. Thus, according to Salair Touré, the mayor of Bara in Songa Circle, ATT created new powers that went against the traditional chiefs (chefferie), “but that is no way to organize a society . . . you need hierarchy.” (Pezard and Shurkin 2015, 26)

The mayor of Bara’s assertion that hierarchy is necessary for societal cohesion likely points to the empowerment of nonstate, nontraditional authorities such as narcotraffickers and jihadists. The contributions of other scholars (Bellagamba and Klute 2008; Hüsken and Klute 2015; Molenaar et al. 2019; Bøas and Strazzari 2020) mirror the fact that “new powers” were at play and that hierarchical, local control had become seriously contested. However, the key word in Pezard and Shurkin’s paraphrasing of Salair Touré’s comments is “created.” The perception of ATT intentionally empowering disruptive new powers in the north only served to further delegitimize the state in a region where most of the citizenry was already skeptical at best about Bamako’s intentions.

These observations are also supported by Peter Tinti (2020), who writes that “In the early 2010s, the Malian government increasingly outsourced the role of providing security and regulating informal economies in northern Mali to various military commanders and leaders of ethnic militias” (4). According to Reitano and Shaw (2015), this outsourcing fit neatly into ATT’s supposed advancements on decentralization:

The former Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), found accommodations with Tuareg leaders by decentralizing authority in such a way that it would permit and sustain control over key trafficking routes. ATT reportedly created a new administrative region in northern Mali in order to allow overt control over trafficking routes and access to the state: “Traffickers used their influence to persuade the government to create new factions, and decentralization provided cover for narco-traffickers who could buy all the local offices,” a prominent Arab from Timbuktu reported. (24)

Lacher (2012) echoes Reitano and Shaw’s observations that decentralization facilitated the informal relationship between ATT’s government and traffickers, writing that “Figures

associated with drug smuggling successfully lobbied Malian leadership for the creation of a separate administrative region (Taoudenni) and several new districts in an administrative reform adopted just before the outbreak of the rebellion” (12). Furthermore, Lacher (2012) calls ATT’s relationship with traffickers and organized crime a “resource for the exercise of influence in the north” (11). Signaling the long-term effects of this informal policy, Lacher (2012) states that “It [the state] eventually lost control over the conflicts this generated, while the rule of law and the legitimacy of state institutions were eroded through complicity with organized crime” (11). Lacher’s work points squarely to how the central government under ATT prioritized personalistic, corrupt, and self-enriching “governance” over genuine reform through decentralization. By engaging in this informal policy, the government under ATT effectively decentralized power, both fiscal and military, to other actors in an extreme form of devolution wherein informal and clientelist backdoor relationships, regulated only by a rapidly shifting network of priorities among a growing number of actors, formed the base for security and “governance” in the north.

The general picture of the central government’s role in northern Mali leading up to 2012 is thus one of a corrupt state empowering traffickers and simultaneously pitting these groups against one another, all while touting decentralization policies that, in effect, only “provided cover” for the illicit, informal economies and militias that flourished in the north or allowed the state to shirk fiscal and administrative responsibilities. Here, I emphasize the value of the phrase “decentralization of security.” While violence was still widespread before the 2012 rebellion, the security situation had not devolved to the point that it would and remains at today. The 2012 rebellion and subsequent coup were clear signs that this heterarchical security situation was unsustainable and, perhaps even more consequently, an intentional yet feckless policy that

further delegitimized a central state that had not taken genuine responsibility for improving its credibility in the north. As shown above, this lack of credibility and legitimacy ultimately set the tone for many in the north vis à vis the central state. Governmental decentralization's role as a political asset was severely delegitimized in the sense that, for many political elites and civilians, the only observable transfers of power were to violent actors that actively undermined state construction. As such, Mali in 2012 was in no way a Weberian state, a fact that would severely complicate the influx of foreign interveners and aid agencies following the jihadist takeover of the north.

International Aid

International aid's role in Mali's development has been massive and represents a sizeable portion of the country's GNI at an average of about 15% between 1967 and 2013 (Craven-Matthews and Englebert 2018, 13). Craven-Matthews and Englebert (2018) note the serious structural issues that hamper Mali's endogenous development, including a lack of developed industrial sector, sparse natural resources, and a population primarily engaged in agriculture. Bergamaschi (2014) claims that donor aid has "sustained" decentralization, but that it became a "donor-driven, technocratic issue" that aligned with European expectations and priorities (Bergamaschi 2014, 354). Additionally, Bergamaschi notes that northern regions received the most aid from the ANICT. Despite this fact, Wing and Kassibo's (2014) work suggests that northern populations were increasingly frustrated with the ANICT in the years preceding the 2012 rebellion due to the difficulty of meeting preconditions for funding. Taken together, these two observations are not contradictory, rather illustrative of how even perhaps the most successful regions at securing development assistance still faced enormous bureaucratic and fiscal programmatic hurdles.

Nevertheless, Bergamaschi explains that donors became less involved in the north during the 2000s due to security issues, a development that emboldened ATT's personalistic management of the north by way of initiatives ostensibly engaged in decentralization such as the *Agence de Développement du Nord-Mali* and *Programme special pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement dans le Nord-Mali* (Bergamaschi 2014). In her analysis of Mali as a "donor darling," Bergamaschi (2014) comes to the conclusion that donor nations and organizations engaged with Mali in an inherently problematic manner in which the Malian state was broadly accepting of donor priorities while donors maintained flexible interpretations of "progress," an arrangement that blinded international actors to the host of governance and corruption issues that cropped up in the years before the 2012 coup.

Looking back before democratization in the 1990s, Mann (2015) demonstrates how NGOs helped foster new modes of (non)governmentality after the droughts of the 1970s that began to "subtly and slowly recondition Sahelian states and redefine what government was" (Mann 2015, 207) According to Mann (2015), this redefinition led to "nongovernmentality" in Mali, wherein the expectations and goals of the central state were formed in the context of NGOs and international aid, eventually leaving much of the work of governance and financing to external forces. Looking at Mali in the years leading up to 2012 and after through this lens is revealing in many senses, especially when paired with Bergamaschi's observation that the state and donors formulated aid and governance programs at a mostly superficial level. Conditioned to allow NGOs to take on much of the responsibility for governance, the state under ATT was comfortable diffusing responsibilities for governance and development through decentralized institutions and policies in the north. NGOs thus became representative of decentralization in Mali; with the central government largely relieved by NGOs of the hard task of reaching and

aiding local communities, NGOs propped up perceptions of veritable development and decentralization. Given the fact that many NGOs began to leave the north in the early 2000s, perceptions of progress on decentralization and development likely evaporated and the strawman of decentralization policies was laid bare. ATT's aforementioned disruptive policies of conflict management through security decentralization and rampant clientelism were therefore just fuel to the fire of grievances felt by northern communities.

The End of a Tenuous Equilibrium

I argue that the effects of this delegitimization of decentralization and the central government combined with the decentralization of security and fiscal power before 2012 was a long-term setback, the ramifications of which have severely hampered state construction and security stabilization due to an intensification of heterarchy in the north. To be sure, decentralization did not create the jihadist groups, Tuareg separatists, and traffickers that operate in and around northern Mali—these groups operate in specific sociocultural and historical contexts that find their origins decades and centuries before the advent of the Malian state. As various scholars have pointed out however, the Malian government's push for decentralization has often been disingenuous (Pezard and Shurkin 2015; Reitano and Shaw 2015; Seely 2001).

The consequences of disingenuous decentralization in pre-2012 Mali, however, broke a shaky equilibrium between the state, traffickers, Tuaregs, local elites, and jihadists, the result of which was a breakdown in Mali's appearance of Weberian statehood. The fractionalization of northern society because of disingenuous decentralization highlighted by Gaasholt (2004) only introduced new axes for competition and realignment, causing the north to only become more susceptible to protracted violence. Pezard and Shurkin (2015) echo Gaasholt's observations over a decade later, writing that "The phenomenon of armed struggle most likely has also added to the

general overturning of tradition in that it has provided young men with new avenues of social and economic advancement, as has the influx of international aid organizations, whose money has, in some ways, become just another resource to contest” (Pezard and Shurkin 2015, 28).

While northern Mali was not a conflict-free state before 2012, as evidenced by several Tuareg rebellions, it was also not reminiscent of the total collapse of security in the north that persists today. The empowerment of non-state actors through decreased oversight, legitimized pre-2012 as “decentralization,” opened avenues for non-state groups and militias to grow and contest the tenuous, semi-peaceful equilibrium of power.

Chapter 4 — Decentralization of Security and Governance in the Current Crisis

The Beginnings of the Crisis in Northern Mali and the 2012 Coup

2012 marked the beginning of an entirely new phase of Malian statehood and represented the culmination of the central government's failings both in the north and in Bamako. As the previous two chapters have shown, the seeds of the current Mali conflict were planted decades, if not centuries before 2012. Nevertheless, January 16th of that year represents the beginning of the protracted violence that has swept the nation since. This violence, beginning with the capture of Ménaka by the MNLA, has undergone countless permutations and shaken the nation's political, security, social, and economic foundations to the core. The 2012 rebellion represented the strongest and most coordinated rebuke of the Malian state in years and was in large part fomented by the promises and subsequent failures supposedly enshrined by Mali's decentralized system. Various other forces were at play, however, due to the historically transnational sphere of the Sahara (Hüsken and Klute 2015). General discontent with the Malian state among Tuaregs, the fall of the Gaddafi regime, and the growth of Salafist terrorist groups contributed to the rapid decline of the security situation in Northern Mali in late 2011 and 2012.

Gaddafi's Libya represented an undesirable pillar of stability in Mali for several reasons, each of which would complicate the rickety decentralization and security system that had been established in northern Mali. Thousands of Tuareg fighters from Mali had enlisted in Gaddafi's army over the past several decades, where there were given a significantly higher quality of life, money for remittances, and weapons. Following the collapse of Libya in 2011, these fighters returned to Mali well-armed (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). As the previous chapter also highlights, Mali had not yet successfully integrated northern communities into the fold of the

state. This is not to say that many people in the north didn't feel allegiance or commitment to the Malian state, but rather that the heterarchical landscape prevailed, whereupon allegiance to clan, ethnicity, and locality still held significant sway over the personal alignments of the returning fighters. It's also crucial to again emphasize the ethnic diversity of the north; not all Tuaregs subscribed to secessionism and many other groups, notably the Songhai, were not allied to the Tuaregs or the quest for independence.

Led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, the 2012 coup has been characterized as “improvised” and a “surprise” (Mann 2012; Peterson 2012; Whitehouse 2020). The authors of the coup had a long list of frustrations that led to their decision to topple ATT, ranging from mismanagement of the military in the north to corruption and the façade of Malian democracy. Describing the Malian state as “hollow,” Whitehouse (2020) writes that “the head of state vanished into the night, there was little support left for Mali's republican institutions. The military, security services, police and state media immediately lined up behind the junta, which dissolved Mali's 1992 constitution. Nobody seemed to want ATT back” (44). The Malian state's “hollowness” resonates strongly with Thomas Carothers' characterization of states that are outside of the democratic transition paradigm; Mali's democratic project since 1992 represented “feckless pluralism,” wherein political freedom exists, but civic participation is low and rarely extends outside of voting (Carothers 2002). Carothers (2002) emphasizes that states in this “gray zone” between outright dictatorship and functioning democracy often display a “frequent emphasis on diffusing power...encouraging decentralization, and building civil society—they were more about the redistribution of state power than about state-building” (17). Although he attributes it to dominant-power systems rather than feckless pluralism, Carothers (2002) highlights the fact that aid programs “Merely helping finance the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations is

an inadequate approach” (19). This chapter will proceed with Carothers’ observations at the forefront; the general approach to governance and development in Mali after 2012 has resulted in the redistribution of power without concrete, concurrent state construction. The consequences of the failure to construct the state while redistributing power, whether due to the failure to devolve fiscal resources or elite capture, have arisen in the context of the heterarchical north that, after 2012, only became more fractured due to the interventionist internationalization of the conflict. In this context, the Malian central state has continued to lean on informal relationships and corrupt practices that opened exploitable gaps in the state’s decentralized order and political rhetoric.

By March 22, 2012, the day soldiers led by Sanogo overthrew ATT, the MNLA had already captured Ménaka and Tinzawaten. Less than two weeks later, Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu fell to the rebels, resulting in the total loss of central state control over the north (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). Sanogo’s force was initially motivated by a severe disillusionment with commanding officers and the government’s mishandling of the rebellion, although a host of other issues such as corruption and Mali’s weak democracy also came to the forefront of the junta’s reasoning in the days and weeks after the coup (Whitehouse 2020). Whitehouse (2020) notes that the democratic electoral legitimacy of ATT had worn so thin that for many Malians, “his failings as a leader, and his own disrespect for the law, had rendered his rule illegitimate” (47).

Despite the coup’s gripes with the state’s handling of the north, Tuareg rebels and jihadist groups continued to capture territory in the north and, by late spring and summer of 2012, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al Din led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, and the MUJAO had wrested control of most of the north from the MNLA. Horrific stories of violence against civilians committed by the various jihadist groups, including public stoning incidents and the

destruction of several of Timbuktu's fabled mausoleums and tombs, were given heavy international media coverage. Only several months into the crisis, it had become increasingly clear that an international intervention would be necessary in order to halt the rapid southward advance of the jihadist groups. On September 18th, the transitional government requested just such an intervention from the UN and other international forces (UN Security Council 2012). By October, ECOWAS and the UN had begun the necessary steps towards formulating an intervention plan and on December 20th, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 2085, the authorization of intervention by international forces (UN Security Council 2012). The first French strikes of Opération Serval were conducted on January 11th, just one day after Ansar al Din captured Konna in the northern part of central Mali (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). The jihadist advance towards the center of the country was over before it began in earnest, and within two months most of the north had been secured by France, AFISMA, and Malian security forces. From this point forward, jihadist groups shifted tactics, moving towards suicide bombings and isolated attacks on security forces and civilians (Sandor 2017).

The differences in the motivations of the MNLA and jihadist groups are paramount to contextualize the motivations and grievances of northern Mali's armed actors. While the MNLA and the jihadist groups did operate under an uneasy alliance initially, essentially the only shared goal between the two factions was taking control of the north. Within the jihadist groups, there were significant differences as well. Ansar al Din was composed of numerous Tuareg fighters and led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg of noble descent who had played important roles in Tuareg rebellions in the 1990s and 2006. As demonstrated in second chapter, following a failed attempt to lead MNLA in the years preceding 2012 and increased radicalization, Ag Ghaly founded Ansar al Din at the end of 2011 (Thurston and Lebovich 2013). AQIM, on the other hand, is a

regional branch of al-Qaeda and was initially composed of primarily Algerian-Arab fighters engaged in al-Qaeda's push for jihad. MUJAO broke off from AQIM in 2011 and had very similar goals to al-Qaeda, although under a separate leadership structure. For its part, the MNLA is composed of majority ethnic Tuareg and was not promoting jihad or the application of Sharia law, rather the independence and later autonomy of the north. Of these four main actors, three were founded in the final months of 2011, while AQIM had been operating since around 2007. Nevertheless, these groups did not suddenly appear out of thin air in 2011, rather they are the products of shifting alliances and former groups that had operated in the Sahara-Sahel region for decades (Hüsken and Klute 2015).

The nature of these alliances during the current crisis has been the subject of intense scholarship as the violence in Mali has become protracted and, in many areas, increased. This increase in violence is largely attributed to the failure of the Malian state to maintain control over security in the north. As shown in the previous chapter, the government under ATT was notorious for decentralizing the state's security responsibilities to various armed actors in the north, the consequence of which has been the implosion of the tenuous, semi-stability that existed pre-2012. For those in the north, this has complicated daily life due to the constant reorganization of power structures and service provision. Sandor (2017) writes that, in the absence of a coherent state presence,

...local populations have had to provide for their own security and economic opportunities and have relied on various para-sovereigns for protection and to secure their varied sedentary or semi-nomadic lifestyles and mobility. The absence of Malian state institutions remains to this day, leaving the governance of security north of Ségou to a coterie of competing violent entrepreneurs, recognized armed groups, and armed Islamist movements. (9)

According to Sandor, as local populations have been thrust into this increasingly complex system of alliances and security governance, local trust between northern communities has suffered,

leading to growing intracommunal violence. Sandor also adds that this new reality has made those in the north “hesitant to speak with either national or international authorities” (Sandor 2017, 9). The ramifications of this hesitancy has serious consequences for development and decentralization. While in theory decentralization confers more power and resources to local actors, it does not mean that local decentralized authorities and the state communicate and coordinate less. On the contrary, legitimate decentralization policies in Mali require significant trust between local populations and the central government, a fact that has become a persistent issue due to decentralization being a central feature of peace negotiations and conflict resolution.

The first significant step towards the re-establishment of democratic leadership and peace in Mali after 2012 was the 2013 Ouagadougou Accords, signed in June 2013, that recognized the grievances of northern communities, disarmament of various groups, and a framework for discussions two months after the presidential election touching on territorial and administrative organization, governance reform, justice, and reconciliation (Accord Préliminaire, 2013). Only two of the armed groups involved in the crisis were present at the negotiations and signed the final agreement: Bilal Ag Cherif of the MNLA and Alghabass Ag Intalla of the *Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) (Accord Préliminaire, 2013). Alghabass Ag Intalla was initially a member of Ansar al-Din before creating breakaway Islamist group, *Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad* (MIA) in January 2013, and subsequently merging MIA with the HCA (Haut conseil de l'Azawad) to form the HCUA. The HCUA notably differs from other Islamist groups in the north because of its engagement with the peace process and renunciation of terrorism. The 2013 Ouagadougou Accords were an important step forward in the resolution of the northern crisis and led to the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) and the Estates General of Decentralization in late 2013.

Decentralization Discussions in Mali under IBK

IBK, who was Prime Minister from 1994 until 2000 and President of the National Assembly from 2002 until 2007, was widely perceived as a part of the traditional, Bambara, Bamako political elite. IBK beat his challenger, Soumaïla Cissé, a technocrat born in Timbuktu, in a landslide. As reported by RFI, IBK was not willing to consider amnesty for leaders of the MNLA, and his campaign centered heavily around the unity and indivisibility of the Malian state (Soares 2013). IBK's stance on decentralization, however, was very much in line with the goals of many in the north, as evidenced by his opening speech at the Estates General on Decentralization in 2013 and subsequent government proposal on decentralization in 2014.

IBK's speech included a recognition of the failures of the central government and a commitment to create a "new Malian model" and "refound the state" (Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale 2013, 108; hereafter MAT). Additionally, he discusses the various issues plaguing decentralization, ranging from a lack of capacity, financing, and technical expertise at the local level to a reevaluation of the role of traditional authorities in decentralized governance. The recommendations of the Estates General are wide reaching and complex and touch upon many of the issues mentioned by IBK in his opening speech, while also echoing previous recommendations made at previous forums on local authorities and decentralization (MAT 2013). One such meeting, the 2012 "*Forum des Collectivités locales sur la gestion de la crise au Mali : Une décentralisation immédiate et intégrale pour la sortie de crise,*" resulted in a set of recommendations that included the transferal of 30% of the national budget to local governments, an increase in accountability across all levels of government, support and funding for technical expertise at the local levels, the clarification of responsibilities, empowering local authorities to conduct conflict resolution within a new set of legal provisions, and the creation of

new administrative regions (MAT 2013). A similar conference only a year earlier in 2011 resulted in roughly the same conclusions, highlighting the persistence of these issues and a general consensus among stakeholders of the most pressing issues facing Mali's decentralization experiment thirty years after its creation (MAT 2013).

Following the Estates General on Decentralization, the central government proposed a framework for decentralization that includes many of the recommendations put forth in previous proposals. Among these propositions is the conferral of authority to the regions to create their own taxes tailored to local context, transfer of state revenue from natural resource exploitation, allocation of 30% of the state budget to the various regions by 2018, the improvement of technical expertise to region and collectivities, the creation of regional development agencies under the control of the presidents of the regional councils, making public service more attractive, and a quota for traditional authorities at the High Council of Collectivities (Eléments de Proposition 2014). Notably, the proposal also links administrative decentralization with the return of a state security presence:

Dans le but de rapprocher davantage l'administration des populations, d'assurer une occupation rationnelle de l'ensemble du territoire et une meilleure sécurisation du pays, et de promouvoir la pacification des relations intra et intercommunautaires, il est prévu une réorganisation territoriale dans une approche inclusive impliquant les représentants des communautés et des collectivités concernées. (Eléments de Proposition 2014, 1)

The proposal does not offer insight into how administrative decentralization might support the successful return of state security forces to the north in practice, but across three years and four different frameworks for decentralization, the linkages between decentralization and security are apparent.

In terms of governance, these notable decentralization proposals since 2011 have shown very little variance, especially the allocation of 30% of state budget to regional decentralization.

The 2015 Algiers Agreement cites the exact same target and mirrors the goals of full implementation by 2018 (Agreement for Peace 2015). According to a 2015 International Monetary Fund report on fiscal decentralization in Mali, this 30% figure is “ambiguous” and “Government officials interviewed by the mission were not able to clarify the exact objective pursued by the government, or its rationale. The above-mentioned aggregates and their ambiguity apparently stem more from negotiation talks than from a financial prior evaluation” (International Monetary Fund 2015, 23; hereafter IMF). This observation points to a serious policy level issue; if recommendations made during stakeholder talks are automatically introduced into state policy proposals without a coherent analysis and direction, the expectations of stakeholders and the actual implementation capacities of the state may be mismatched. Here, it’s worth recalling Bergamaschi’s (2014) findings that, during ATT’s presidency, donors engaged with the Malian government in an inherently problematic manner wherein indicators were manipulated in order to keep aid flowing to Mali despite lack of substantive progress. Nevertheless, an undertaking as large as the devolution of a third of the state’s budget has the potential to be a substantive step in the right direction, but the fact that the same 30% goal was left untouched and unjustified for four years likely signals the institutional difficulties and roadblocks surrounding policy study and development at the national level. Additionally, since 2013, the amount of the national budget transferred to the collectivities has only increased by 1.1%, although between 2011 and 2012 it jumped 7.1% (Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances 2016). Nevertheless, an increase of only 1.1% since the Estates General in 2013 represents a serious complication in the state’s attempts to reassert itself. The possibility of mismatched expectations and state inertia, as evidenced by the ambiguity of the 30% goal, is likely a contributing factor in the Malian state’s troubled attempt to build legitimacy and

credibility in the north. Moreover, Wing (2017) writes that “There is a clear record of donor aid earmarked for central and northern Mali that never left Bamako and relief supplies bound for the north that were instead diverted and sold for profit in markets in the capital,” demonstrating that the central government is, as under ATT, still engaged in corruption that directly jeopardizes the peace process and state legitimacy in the north (191).

Furthermore, entrenched insecurity is resulting in a vicious cycle as it relates to development staff’s ability and (dis)inclination to access northern communities for purposes of technical assistance related to decentralization. The same 2015 IMF report on fiscal decentralization finds that “Officials are unwilling to accept assignments in the regions owing to the difficult security and climatic conditions, the distance and isolation, and a level of development and equipment that is significantly inferior to that found in Bamako” (IMF 2015, 54). The report also found that the net number of central government officials has decreased significantly in four of Mali’s nine regions, with the three northern regions losing a combined 65 officials (although Gao had a net inflow of fourteen officials) (IMF 2015). Similarly, a 2018 USAID report found that “Matters such as access by project personnel have been increasingly constrained. Hence, even while it is relatively costlier to implement activities in insecure environments, their impacts are at the same time likely to be less than in the more favorable regions” (Payne 2018, 10).

The 2015 Algiers Agreement

As illustrated above, ambiguity and the reiteration of decentralization goals without substantive progress by stakeholders has presented a significant challenge to genuine reform and implementation of decentralization and development in the north. The 2015 Algiers Agreement, which brought together the Malian government, the *Plateforme*, and the *Coordination des*

mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA), was a highly touted peace process that ostensibly aimed to solve the crisis in the north once and for all. The *Plateforme* and the CMA are comprised of various armed groups that were created before and after the outbreak of the Malian security crisis and reflect the constantly shifting dynamics of alliances across ethnicity and religious ideology. For example, among the members of the CMA are the HCUA, and Islamist Tuareg group, the MAA, a primarily Arab and nominally secular group, and the secular MNLA, led at the time by Bilal Ag Cherif. Not invited to the Algiers Agreement discussions, however, were the jihadist groups such as MUJAO and Ansar al Din.

The Algiers Agreement outlined a number of ambitious decentralization goals including, as noted above, the transferal of 30% of the state's budget to the territorial collectivities, as well as, among numerous other provisions, an overhaul of regional authority to set taxes, the improvement of technical capacities of regional and local administrations, a commitment to a DDR program (Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) for combatants, a police force under the control of collectivities, and the redeployment of state security forces supported by MINUSMA (Agreement for Peace 2015). From this sampling of objectives, the equally comprehensive and ambitious scope of the agreement is clear. As in previous peace frameworks and decentralization summits, security and development through decentralization were presented as inseparable and mutually reinforcing.

These linkages are important in addition to their implications for a revamped Malian state and decentralization system; they concretize expectations for local actors and armed groups in the north. Considering that the Algiers Agreement was the most widely publicized and touted peace agreement after the outbreak of the crisis, the legitimacy and credibility of the central state was now effectively structured on a set of goals and indicators of progress. The following section

will contextualize the importance of expectations for decentralization with the Malian state's relationship with armed forces involved in the security stabilization of the north.

The Proliferation of Armed Forces and Security Responsibilities

Since 2013, Mali has seen the involvement of several major international forces in its conflict. While Opération Serval was the first intervening force to enter Mali in 2013, it would later be joined by a wide array of actors. Several days after the beginning of Serval, AFISMA, organized by ECOWAS and the African Union, began its first deployments in Mali. In April 2013, the United Nations Security Council created MINUSMA to replace AFISMA, entailing the deployment of 12,600 peacekeepers comprised of 11,200 troops and 1,400 police (UN Security Council 2012). Additionally, while Serval was explicitly focused on pushing back the jihadist forces that had occupied Northern Mali, its successor, Opération Barkhane, was mobilized in August 2014 with the intent of establishing a significant French military presence across the Sahel in partnership with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (also referred to as the G5 Sahel) in order to conduct counterterrorism operations (BBC 2014). Finally, in 2014, the leaders of the G5 Sahel formed an eponymous organization for regional development and security coordination which launched its own security force in 2017, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, with a focus on the border regions (International Crisis Group 2017). The thousands of troops committed to providing security in Mali points to the profound concern of regional governments and the international community vis à vis the security situation in the north, as well as the possible spillover and destabilization effects in the rest of the region (Bøas 2018).

The return of the state to the north and the reestablishment of Mali's territorial integrity was arguably the primary goal of international actors after the crisis began (Venturi and Touré 2020). The desire of the Malian state and armed forces to itself establish control over the north,

however, is highly debatable due to the wide array of Bamako-aligned security forces that proliferated in post-2012 Mali. Due to the nature of the international interventions in Mali as “invited” forces, they are broadly considered legitimate and legal (Wing 2016). Despite this legality, however, these forces are representative of the state’s failings and indicative of a new system of decentralization of security. As shown in the third chapter, ATT effectively managed the north by decentralizing state security responsibilities and sovereignty to various traffickers and militias, an arrangement that sidelined the Malian security apparatus and delegitimized the central government as an actor engaged in good political and security governance. Now, post-2012, the Malian north presents an entirely different security landscape that is marked by the internationalization of the conflict and the primacy of counterterrorism missions such as Opération Barkhane.

The Malian state under IBK also did not fully separate itself from clientelist control over the north, as evidenced by alleged working relationships between militias and the Malian security forces and international forces (Farge 2016; Roger 2015; Venturi and Touré 2020). One of the groups that the state has allegedly coordinated with, Dan Na Ambassagou, is a Dogon ethnic militia that primarily carries out attacks against Fulani and is located in central Mali (Venturi and Touré 2020). While not explicitly part of the crisis in the north, the willingness of Bamako to take sides in intercommunal violence speaks to the continued informal policy of decentralized security with severe, destabilizing results. *Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies* (GATIA), a Tuareg self-defense group founded in 2014 and part of the *Plateforme*, is also allegedly involved in security coordination with Bamako (Boisvert 2015; Farge 2016; Roger 2015). Given that, under *Plateforme*, GATIA is a party to the 2015 Algiers Accord, it is especially concerning that the central state is engaging in clientelist decentralized security. As

Sandor (2017) writes, “if agents of the Malian Armed Forces tend to pick sides in inter-ethnic tensions, enacting violence against groups in support of ethnic brethren instead of acting according to its republican ideals, the wedge between the central state and ostracized communities will deepen, as the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and all of its previous iterations have taught us” (26). Decentralizing security in this manner jeopardizes the peace process designed to promote state legitimacy that was lost in large part because of this very tendency in the years leading up to the crisis.

Furthermore, understanding the extended presence of intervening foreign forces such as the French and MINUSMA as results of the state’s decentralization of security and symptoms of an institutional inertia and incapacity to engage in good security governance of the north is revealing; the central state has relied on foreign forces for much of its security stabilization since January 2013. For the French, this informal decentralization of security helped legitimize the long-term mandate of Barkhane; the Malian state, unable to provide security throughout its territory and establish itself as a Weberian state, “needed” the French presence, while the French were able advance their counterterrorism goals. Further complicating the return of the state as a credible authority in the north is what Wing (2016) describes as “an overall lack of coordination between forces” and, in one case, local frustration in Gao that MINUSMA and Serval were not adequately supporting the Malian army (66). Wing also notes that, early in the crisis, the French began to lose credibility due to controversial hostage negotiations and military coordination with the MNLA. The consequences of this decentralized security approach as it relates to governmental decentralization are significant, in large part because its foundation represents a feckless multilateralism which has been executed in a way that has excused the central state from

taking ownership of the stabilization of the north, leading to the continued inexistence of the state credibility required for local trust and successful decentralization policies.

Finally, the Malian security forces have been implicated in severe human rights abuses; Human Rights Watch, the UN, Amnesty International, and the U.S. State Department have all raised the alarm about arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and torture committed since the beginning of the current crisis (Amnesty 2013; Human Rights Watch 2017; Marsh and Carrozza 2021; State Department 2020). The Malian state forces are not a feature of decentralized security due to their position as actors of the central state, but abuses by security forces are nevertheless extremely destabilizing to the peace process and state legitimacy building efforts. Given that the decentralized security approach involving foreign actors is a tenuous short-term solution, the remobilization of Malian security forces in the north combined with good faith reforms and professionalization is critical to endowing all state-led efforts towards reconciliation, stabilization, and development in the north. Because the state has been unable to project its power without the aid of foreign forces and continues to commit human rights abuses, trust among local populations and armed groups suffers, thereby legitimizing the presence of jihadist groups and leading to their “Malianization,” a worrying trend in that jihadist groups are only becoming more entrenched in the country (Sandor 2017).

Local Trust, State Legitimacy, and Decentralization

Governmental decentralization has not yet brought peace to Mali, the security crisis in the north is still dire, and violence has spread southward. The Human Development Index (HDI) at the subnational level shows that one region, Gao/Kidal, declined between 2011 and 2019, and that among the other regions, Timbuktu has improved the least, only increasing a net of .003 (Global Data Lab 2019). Furthermore, international aid organizations and scholars have

commented on the severe roadblocks and lack of progress on decentralization in post-2012 Mali (Djiré et al. 2017; IMF 2015; Schmauder 2020; Wing, 2016). Schmauder (2020) writes that “Since the 2012 crisis, governance in northern Mali has been determined more by a logic of territorial control than by decentralised structures. In that sense, armed actors define the scope of administrative governance” (2). Schmauder argues that governmental decentralization is too easily co-opted by elites and armed actors, leading to the marginalization of those not in power in the diverse social landscape of the north, and that the state has been too slow in implementing decentralization. Schmauder notes that a 2016 administrative decentralization policy designating Ménaka and Taoudenni as regional districts had yet to be operationalized by the legislative elections of spring 2020, thus preventing the increased representation of northern communities at the national level (Schmauder 2020). Besides administrative decentralization typically being one of the least technically challenging forms of decentralization to implement, the theoretical increase in influence and power that northern communities would see is most likely limited, as the bureaucratic obligations of development projects have become increasingly complex following the influx of foreign aid assistance (Djiré et al. 2017).

As both Schmauder (2020) and Hüsken and Klute (2015) note, “informal decentralization” marked by elite capture and privileging of pro-Bamako groups by the state is increasing competition over resources, a dynamic that closely follows Wing and Kassibo’s (2014) observation that “some political elites apparently pursued decentralization precisely for access to rents that would multiply as layers of bureaucracy increased” (114). As the previous chapter demonstrates, these complications are in many ways a continuation of the policies and informal networks established by the state under ATT. Contextualizing the decentralization of security and governance across Mali’s 21st century history reveals that the interplay between

both forms of decentralization results in exploitable gaps in state legitimacy; the state pursues self-destructive management strategies in the north that may achieve short term goals, but the ever-increasing number of actors, from armed groups to international aid programs and security forces, distances the state from the most difficult yet critical task of all, that of building credibility and legitimacy, both of which are essential to successful decentralization programs and the formation of a coherent and legitimate state security presence. As the project of building legitimacy founders, local populations are increasingly torn away from genuine political dialogue and jihadist groups and self-defense militias begin to fill the void.

Ultimately, the coalescence of increasing insecurity and the long-term presence of the French, linked by Wing (2016) to the radicalization of northern populations, has led to the creation and entrenchment of more armed groups (Boisvert 2015; Wing 2016). Additionally, Chebli (2017) points to how, during the period that Islamists controlled major cities in the north, the experience of local populations was easily juxtaposed against the largely absent Malian state of the recent past:

Faced with the security chaos, the nostalgia for the Islamist occupation surfaces among some. “There weren’t any problems with security, when the state returned the impact was glaring,” comments a doctor that practiced in Timbuktu in 2012. In effect, the Islamist governance left its mark on people’s minds, and not always in a negative way. Free water and electricity, weekly food distributions, free care and medicine at the hospitals, financed religious marriages, and the abolition of taxes. A farmer in Timbuktu testified to the transportation system put in place by AQMI, which permitted him to reach his fields at a lower cost. After complaining about the condition of women under the Islamist occupation, a young girl from Aguelhok asserts that “the Islamists have done more things for the population than Mali.” A former MNLA combatant summarizes: “Socially, they help people, but the problem is that they force you to do things that you don’t want to do.” (Chebli 2017)

As the final quote of this excerpt indicates, the jihadist groups were by no means ideal occupiers, but the point holds that, at least on the anecdotal level, they showed some local populations measurable improvements to material living conditions and governance. The “Malianization” of

jihadist groups and their radical interpretations of Islam means that it's very possible that their presence will be increasingly legitimized as the state's decentralization programs do not show significant enough improvement.

Finally, the issue of trust between the central government and the local populations plagues bona fide implementation of and progress on decentralization, development, and the return of peace to the north. There are innumerable axes of mistrust in Mali, but some general ones include: local populations and armed groups often do not trust the intentions of the state and vice versa, local actors didn't trust the French due to their privileging of the MNLA over other groups, donors have added layers of bureaucracy to their aid programs out of mistrust of stakeholders on the ground, and mistrust between ethnic groups is on the rise. Within each of these general axes, there are more multi and bilateral relationships of mistrust between specific actors. This lack of trust and mutual suspicion is one of the foremost challenges to effective governmental decentralization and security stabilization and, unfortunately, decentralization is exposed to these axes of mistrust due to its inherent need for cooperation between national and subnational groups. A study conducted for USAID in 2018 identifies this mistrust as an "insidious" obstacle and states that "Despite the progress made on regulatory norms and strong commitment at the top of the political system, decentralization by those responsible for its actual implementation has currently devolved into being perceived by all sides as a struggle for limited resources, rather than envisaging shared solutions" (Payne 2018, 11). While the government worries about corruption at the local level, "On the community side, the lack of tangible benefits resulting from decentralization to date, along with the near complete lack of transparency, stymies community participation and further contributes to suspicions and bad faith" (Payne 2018, 11).

The increasingly multidimensional nature of the Malian crisis cannot be overstated and, metaphorically speaking, there is very little light at the end of the tunnel. While program level implementation of decentralization remains fraught and foreign intervention has failed to resolve the crisis in the north, the role of the central government appears unclear outside of a critical need for legitimacy and credibility building. Given the failures of decentralization to date, the state likely must approach governmental decentralization with new perspectives if it is to serve the purpose it was nominally designed for in the early 1990s. Similarly, the security sector has a fundamental role in any attempt at successful governmental decentralization. Decentralization of the security sector has only resulted in tenuous management of the north, whether through armed traffickers, militias, or foreign forces, thus preventing the state from showing a genuine commitment to good faith security to northern communities. Unfortunately, Mali's future is that of continued instability as evidenced by the coups of the previous two years, the rising frustration of international security and aid partners, the increasing violence perpetrated by the state, and the introduction of the Wagner Group in the country as a security partner.

Chapter 5 — Conclusion

The previous chapters have illustrated the relationship between decentralized security and governance as it relates to the current crisis in northern Mali. While scholars have debated whether the pre-colonial empires in present-day Mali actually practiced a decentralized form of governance, it is evidently clear that the region's heterarchical sociopolitical context has been a defining factor in attempts to rule over the past millennia and a half, and subregional administrative entities have arisen in each iteration of either empire, colony, or state. Northern Mali is an increasingly complex space and, unlike the rebellions and instability of recent history, the current conflict has stretched on for over ten years without a clear end in sight.

While the origins of Mali's instability can be traced back centuries, the decentralization of security during ATT's presidency, combined with shortsighted and poorly implemented governmental decentralization has severely exacerbated the current crisis. As the state, saddled by widespread corruption, offloaded responsibility for economic development and security provision to armed actors, notably traffickers and ethnic militias, it became increasingly delegitimized. Despite the problematic policies and failures of the early 2000s, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's government failed to revolutionize Mali's approach to the north. Prioritizing short-term security goals, accomplished in many cases by foreign interveners or pro-government militias, and falling short on timely and substantive progress on development and decentralization have only further hurt the state's credibility and trustworthiness in the north, a dynamic that has entrenched violent actors and drawn local populations into violent combat and resource competition, either through membership in ethnic militias, jihadist groups, or self-defense groups.

In August 2020, Mali experienced yet another coup at the hands of a group of disillusioned and self-serving military officers. The coup, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, followed months of protests led by Imam Mahmoud Dicko and *the Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des forces patriotiques* (M5-RFP) decrying corruption, the unresolved security crisis, and electoral irregularities during the 2020 parliamentary election (Fornof and Cole 2020). Despite many Malians' support of the coup, international condemnation, including ECOWAS sanctions, swiftly followed, and a framework for a democratic transition within eighteen months was established (The Africa Report 2020; Melly 2021). In May 2021, only a few months after power had been transferred from the military to the civilian-led transitional government, officers again led by Goïta overthrew the transitional government, claiming “sabotage” of the transition (Akinwotu 2021).

Goïta's brief rule has already ushered in an entirely new era for Mali. In late 2021, the junta outlined a plan for a democratic transition to begin in December 2026 and, after the protestations of ECOWAS, revised the end date to December 2025 (Aubyn 2022). The 2012 and 2020 coups resulted in relatively quick transitions to civilian-led governments—in both cases less than a year—suggesting that Goïta may have long-term military rule in mind for Mali going forward. ECOWAS has since launched a massive sanctions package:

The latest sanctions include recall of ECOWAS member states ambassadors accredited to Mali; closure of land and air borders; suspension of all commercial and financial transactions except for food products, pharmaceutical products, medical supplies, and equipment, including materials for the control of COVID-19, petroleum products and electricity; freezing of Malian assets in ECOWAS central banks; and the suspension of all financial assistance and transactions. (Aubyn 2022)

Additionally, the European Union has placed sanctions on five members of the junta (European Union 2022). Mali's progress towards full democratic governance, which began only thirty years ago, has halted entirely. Although the ATT and IBK presidencies were deeply flawed and

corrupt, elections occurred and there was space for democratic debate. These hallmarks of democracy are now gravely endangered. It remains to be seen if the junta will reassess decentralization in Mali and make substantive progress, but recent developments on the security front indicate that genuine state legitimacy-building is not likely to come soon.

In September 2021, reports emerged of a partnership between the Malian junta and the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company notorious for its close connections with the Kremlin and human rights abuses (Irish and Lewis 2021). Many of Mali's aid and security partners across Africa, Europe, and the United States condemned the move and, according to analysts, the partnership fulfils many of Russia's strategic economic and political interests in Africa while "coup-proofing" the Malian junta (Thompson, Doxsee, and Bermudez 2022). The move towards the Wagner Group also came as the French began a troop drawdown in Mali. Less than a month after *Opération Barkhane* forces transferred the airbase in Timbuktu to the Malian Armed Forces, Russian forces were seen in the city, ostensibly to train Malian troops (Reuters 2022; Thompson, Doxsee, and Bermudez 2022).

The French, initially seen as saviors by many Malians in 2013, began to lose popularity among Malians as *Opération Barkhane* dragged on without solving the ongoing jihadist insurgency. Tensions between Mali and France reached an apogee in late January 2022 when the French Foreign Minister lambasted the Malian junta as "illegitimate" and "out of control" (Sykes 2022). In dramatic fashion, the government gave the French ambassador to Mali 72 hours to leave the country, a move that was immediately followed by the French foreign ministry's decision to recall the ambassador (Sykes 2022). Two weeks later, France, alongside other EU members and Canada, began final troop withdrawals from Mali.

In a horrifying display of what may be to come for Malians, reports emerged in early April 2022 of a massacre of 200 to 400 unarmed civilians at the hands of the Malian Armed Forces and the Wagner Group (Peltier 2022). The massacre was allegedly carried out as an operation against suspected jihadists in the town of Moura in central Mali and has been harshly condemned by the UN, the United States, and the European Union. At this point in time, MINUSMA effectively stands alone in providing limited counterweight to the abuses of the Malian Armed Forces and the Wagner Group. MINUSMA may not be a sustainable mission, however, as it is often referred to as “the most dangerous UN mission” due to over 268 fatalities among personnel to date (UN Peacekeeping 2022). Ultimately, given the authoritarian track that Mali is now on, prospects for meaningful governmental decentralization may take a backseat to the junta’s repressive security goals.

In many ways, the Wagner Group represents yet another iteration of decentralized security in Mali. With structural issues of development and regional autonomy left unresolved during the ATT and IBK presidencies, the stage was set for popular frustration and the entrance of centralized, authoritarian rule in Mali. Given the findings of this thesis however, the junta may be playing a losing game. Further repression and marginalization of northern communities by the armed forces and the Wagner Group will likely only deepen resentment of the central government, increase radicalization, and delay peace, development, and governmental decentralization. Ultimately, this thesis finds that it matters immensely who provides services and security just as it matters that those services and security are provided in the first place. Mali’s current path is a far cry from the reconciliation and decentralization promised in the past, and the future may only hold intensifying rebellion, terror attacks, repression, marginalization, and impoverishment for not just the north, but the entire nation.

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