

Twins' diverging trajectories? Drug trafficking and political reordering in Mali and Niger

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Introduction

What is the impact of criminal smuggling on political ordering and stability in fragile states? With the relationship between organised crime and the states ranging from predatory, to parasitic, symbiotic (Lupsha 1996) and transformational (Strazzari 1998) scholars are far from unanimous when it comes to explaining why, how, and even if the proliferation of smuggling cartels and extralegal economies in fragile states is associated with rising levels of violence, and whether this is likely to bring about political instability (Meagher 2014).

Scholars focusing on the economic drivers of civil wars have long emphasised how the violent pursuit, protection and enforcement of extralegal transborder trade provide a major catalyser of conflict and state dissolution in fragile countries (Duffield 2000; Reno 2000). From this perspective, not only criminal profits are seen as fuelling longer-lasting conflicts (Fearon 2003), but also they distort peace negotiations (Cockayne and Pfister 2008) and compete against state-making (Felbab-Brown 2010), with the ensuing fragility of the states correlated to their inherent criminalisation (Bayart *et al.* 1997). Similarly drawing on economic analyses, more recent influential reports have further reiterated in policy debates the relationship between organised crime and conflict-proneness in fragile states (World Bank 2011; OECD 2012).

On the other hand, critical retrospective assessments noticed that the identification of a clear nexus between organised crime and conflict has proved elusive, with the causal arrow in the alleged correlation remaining unclear (De Boer e Bosetti 2015). While smuggling and extralegal economies may have bred armed violence and state disruption in a few well-known high-profile cases, the complex dynamics of protection and extraction have in other cases led to the adoption of informal regulatory frameworks to ensure some form of stability and predictability in the relationship between state authorities and smuggling cartels (Vlassenroot 2008). As a result, scholars that make use of sociological lenses have largely drawn on Tilly's (1985) historical comparative research (as well as post-Soviet Russia as a quintessential case - Volkov 2000) to sharpen their focus on the intimacy that often links – rather than antagonise – state apparatuses with those criminal actors devoted to plundering resources or circulating illicit commodities (Strazzari 2014a). From this perspective, the provision of protection on a private basis that often characterises fragile states' patronage politics can be seen as leading to the enforcement of a *pax mafiosa* (Gambetta 1996) that is more or less informally tolerated by the state: in this situation organised crime provides tools for social control (Albin-Lackey 2012) and therefore of stabilisation (Briscoe and Kalkman 2016), while illicit profits oil the machinery of a hybrid political order (Boege *et al.* 2008).

Noting that major cross-case variations and evolution across time and space prevent one from establishing a clear correlation, in this paper we seek to unpack the complex relationship that exists between (the proliferation of) smuggling networks and the stability or instability of fragile states, and we seek to find an explanation for either outcome as a result of a causal mechanism. Drawing on the categories introduced by scholars of historical political sociology (Tilly 1985) and criminology (Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009), we analytically distinguish between “smugglers,” fostering the cross-border clandestine shipment of (often illicit) goods to make profit, and “protectors,” striving to militarily control a territory and forcibly protect the economic activities in it, extracting (or extorting) a protection rent in exchange. Protectors can include non-state racketeers, but also state actors who derogate from their legal obligation to fight smugglers in order to maximise their own political and economic gains. In this framework, the profitability of protection depends on the one hand on the smugglers’ revenues, and on the other hand on the protection market’s competitiveness. The two are mutually interconnected, since the higher the profitability of smuggling, the higher both the demand and the supply of protection. While the smugglers’ revenues are exogenously given, and arguably influenced by the value of the smuggled goods, prospective protection suppliers strive to acquire a dominant position in the market in order to maximise the extraction opportunities. Competition is particularly open in fragile states, where by definition state authorities lack the capacity to project power, protection and more generally law enforcement across the totality of the territory. In this case, when smuggled goods are lucrative enough, competition among suppliers of armed protection is likely to turn violent and generate instability. As the context of state fragility rules out by definition the option of outfitting protection competitors and enforcing a state-sponsored monopoly of protection, the only viable alternative for states facing the realistic prospect of violent conflict and deflagration is to establish an appearance of state-sponsored protection racket by coopting, rather than fighting, non-state protectors.

We therefore hypothesise that the likelihood for smuggling and extralegal economies to generate violence and lead to political instability is closely linked to: a) the profitability of smuggling opportunities, and b) the fragility of the state and its inability to monopolise protection. Building on this hypothesis, one can formulate the expectation that the smuggling of valuable goods (most notably illicit ones) across fragile states faces very high chances of stirring violent competition among protectors and generate instability, unless state authorities manage to coopt non-state actors in a protection assemblage that provides smugglers with a solid partnership and few alternatives.

We qualify this outcome as a hybrid order that is dominated by a state-sponsored protection racket, or “hybrid state-sponsored protection racket-based”. This combines a hybrid political order, in which “the ‘state’ does not have a privileged position as the political framework that provides security, welfare and representation; it has to share authority, legitimacy and capacity with non-state actors and institutions” (Boege *et al.* 2009: 10); and a state-sponsored protection racket, defined as an “informal institution through which public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals

of a criminal organisation, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organisation” (Snyder and Duran-Martinez 2009: 254). In a hybrid state-sponsored protection racket, then, the state embeds non-state actors with a view to protecting a smuggling organisation in exchange for stability and revenues.

We explore the plausibility of this hypothesis by in-depth investigating two country cases exhibiting major structural similarities – in terms of state fragility, contested state building processes, penetration by smuggling organisations and spatio-temporal coordinates – but divergent outcomes in terms of political stability and contribution to regional instability. We argue that the different relationships between smugglers and protectors in the two cases, and crucially the presence/absence of a hybrid state-sponsored protection racket, can contribute to explaining the diverging trajectories of the two cases.

In particular, we focus on two “quasi-twin” country cases in the Sahel region – i.e., the Republic of Mali and Niger. Significant commonalities that could be referred to as ‘most similar case design’ sustain the comparison: geographically, both Mali and Niger are landlocked countries belonging to the African region of the Sahel, yet stretching deep into the Sahara Desert to the North: one can easily distinguish in both Mali and Niger a southern savannah region, where agriculture and pastoralism are practiced by the majority of the population, and a drier and less populated North, where mobility is a fundamental source of livelihood and social prestige (McDougall and Scheele 2012); historically, both countries were former French colonies, which gained independence in the early 1960s’, were ruled by authoritarian regimes in the 1970s’ and 1980s’, went through democratisation processes in the 1990s’, and since then faced the challenge of repeated armed insurgencies of northern-based minority ethnic groups (largely Tuareg) claiming greater autonomy, if not outright independence. The subsequent peace deals, that both countries have concluded with the help of foreign brokers, have struggled to keep a balance between centrifugal tendencies and unfulfilled promises of integration (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017).

In addition to their shared history and environment, Mali and Niger display remarkable similarities in terms of governance. Fragile states *par excellence*, Mali and Niger rank systematically at the bottom of international indexes such as the Fragile State Index,¹ the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) Human Development Index,² and the World Bank’s governance indicators.³ These weaknesses help explain Mali’s and Niger’s oft-noticed tendency to outsource some of their sovereign functions to non-governmental actors, including foreign donors and international security partners, but also tribal chiefs and local leaders (Raineri and Ba 2019). In some cases, state authorities have secured the loyalty of unruly tribal elites in the peripheries by forbearing their involvement in extralegal economies, including the smuggling of licit and illicit goods. The combination of geographical, political and social factors has led to the gradual creation of a permissive environment which has reportedly made of both Mali and Niger important hubs of international

¹ <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/2018/04/24/fragile-states-index-2018-annual-report/>

² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-index-hdi>

³ <http://worldbank.org/EXTLICUS/Resources/511777-1269623894864/HarmonizedlistoffragilestatesFY14.pdf>

drug trafficking, including of hashish from Morocco, cocaine from south America, and synthetic drugs from Nigeria (see for instance UNODC 2013; Shaw *et al.* 2014).

These dynamics have ignited a lively debate on the implications of drug smuggling for the stability of a region where transnational security challenges abound, including organised crime, irregular migration, jihadist insurgencies, cross-border Tuareg irredentism, communal fights, but also high vulnerability to pandemics and climate change (Scheele 2009; Lacher 2013; Raineri and Strazzari 2015; ICG 2018). What is striking, however, is that although all these factors are equally present in both Mali and Niger, Mali has undergone major destabilisation dynamics since 2012 with no end in sight; by contrast, Niger has proved remarkably resilient, and – in spite of distinct foci of Islamist insurgency along its peripheries and an escalation in armed confrontation – its overall stability has been substantially preserved since the end of the last Tuareg insurgency, that swept the north in 2009. The analysis of the Mali and Niger cases and their diverging trajectories, thus, is taken here as a valuable opportunity to test the plausibility of the hypothesis that hybrid state-sponsored protection rackets have the potential to dilute protectors' competition and avoid state disruption even when other major drivers of destabilisation are present. From this perspective, Mali and – more specifically – Niger can be seen as not only quintessential cases, but also as a hard test, given that the unparalleled profitability of drug smuggling opportunities and the extreme fragility of the states in question would lead one to expect a situation of profound destabilisation as very likely.⁴

Our case analysis and discussion build on a systematic and critical reading of the scholarly and policy literature on the topic, but also on the evidence collected through several weeks of fieldwork and a hundred plus interviews carried out in both Mali and Niger since 2013. Interviewees in both countries included security and defence forces; investigative journalists, media and local civil society organisations; local, international and regional public officials; insurgents of various obedience and 'former' Tuareg rebels; as well as members and 'former' members of smuggling organisations. As a note of methodological cautiousness, this article does not ambition to corroborate media allegations nor to support investigation by providing a scientifically certified picture of Sahel's extralegal economies. Instead, we deem access to qualitative evidence key in order to capture those "non-events or lower profile cases" (Andreas and Wallman 2009) which crucially help one grasp the complex phenomenology of the extralegal and criminal world proliferating beyond, below and in spite of sensationalistic media accounts.

From caravan trade to the ATNMC: smuggling, protection and drugs across the Sahelo-Saharan space

⁴ In recent years, the smuggling of migrants across the Sahel, including Niger and Mali, has attracted a growing attention. As numerous reports have highlighted, however, its revenues seem more dispersed and overall less profitable than those of drug trafficking (see for instance UNODC 2013; UNSC 2018), and therefore less likely to generate instability. As a result, we argue that migrants smuggling provides less of a hard test and is less relevant to explore the plausibility of our hypothesis. Accordingly, this paper discusses the trans-Sahelian smuggling of migrants only to the extent that it connects to drug trafficking dynamics.

Smuggling in the Sahelo-Saharan region has its roots in the centuries-old caravan trade which made of the Sahara a connective space of transnational exchanges long before the colonial conquest of Africa. Combining economic ambitions and missionary zeal, Arab merchants were able to connect Saharan shores to the north – with the Mediterranean – and to the south – with the Sahel (*sahil* in Arabic meaning shore) with a thick network of routes for the shipment of salt, slaves and gold. While the local ramifications of transnational trade formed the economic basis of traditional Saharan livelihoods, the raids (*razzias*) of local bandits and dwellers soon prompted the need to complement trans-Saharan trade with armed protection.

The territorial fragmentation of the Saharan space fostered by colonial empires and even more so by the decolonisation process fostered a reconfiguration, but not a discontinuation, of trans-Saharan trade. As the institutionalisation of borders was poorly enforced in practice, the introduction of state subsidies financed by hydrocarbons revenues in North African countries provided new opportunities for a thriving black market to develop. Although accurate figures are hardly available, the smuggling of licit subsidised goods (fuel, foodstuff, textile, etc.) proved extremely lucrative. The value of informal trades among Mali, Algeria and Niger in the mid-90s, was estimated to be worth 18 billion f CFA (Grégoire 1998). In 2011, that figure reached a value estimated between 130 and 150 million US dollars per year, only for the Mali-Algeria informal trade (Bensassi *et al.* 2015). In particular, tobacco smuggling came to represent a growing share of this market, amounting in the mid-2000s to an estimated 27 billion f CFA in Niger only (Brachet 2009) and booming thereafter across the entire region (Global Initiative 2015). Supported by extensive political connections, and facilitated by the cross-border spread of family, tribal and religious networks, Arab traders soon occupied a prominent position in these flourishing exchanges (Scheele 2012).

How the political and economic resources connected to the trans-Saharan smuggling of licit goods have helped establish a neo-patrimonial system of rule in north Mali and Niger is today well documented (Tidjani-Alou 2012; Bensassi *et al.* 2015). At the same time, though, the spatial practices and infrastructures originally set up for the smuggling of licit goods, and of large-scale tobacco smuggling in particular (Shaw *et al.* 2014), paved the ground to the rise of trans-Saharan drug trafficking, including most notably cannabis resin (hashish) from Morocco and cocaine from South America. Until the 1990s, the Saharan borderlands were only at the fringes of the global supply chain of illicit drugs. This situation abruptly changed since the early 2000s, when Saharan hallways became targeted by international drug traffickers as a preferential hub for onward shipment to North Africa and Europe (UNODC 2008; Ellis 2009). The tensions between Morocco and Algeria resulted in enhanced border controls, which prompted Moroccan hashish smugglers to carve out new routes circumventing Algeria across Mauritania, north Mali and north Niger, where poor state control and political connivance could ensure a safe passage. By 2010, an estimated one third of Morocco's overall hashish production, amounting to about 300 tons per year, reportedly ran through this route, generating a projected income of up to 1.2 billion euros (Peduzzi 2010). At the same time, local tribal leaders report that

'Peruvian' agents were sent to north Mali to explore the potential for cocaine smuggling development.⁵ And in a few years, the estimated cocaine flow across West Africa skyrocketed from approximately 3 tons to 40-50 tons per year, representing more than one fourth of the total annual consumption in Europe, with an estimated commercial value of 1.8 billion US dollars at retailers' price (UNODC 2008). Cocaine was reaching Mali's Saharan borderlands by convoy from West African ports, or by plane directly from South America, before proceeding onwards to Algeria or to Libya via Niger.⁶ The famous Air Cocaine incident of November 2009, when the burnt-out fuselage of a Boeing 727 believed to carry 10 tons of cocaine was found in the Malian region of Gao, probably represents the apex and the epitome of this evolution. Subsequent investigations suggested that Air Cocaine was not an episodic oddity, but part of a well-established operational pattern (UNODC 2013).

With hashish being reportedly 12 times more lucrative than tobacco, and cocaine 25 times more lucrative than hashish (ICG 2018), the entry of drug flows in the Saharan extralegal economy represented a radical game changer, and a potential destabiliser for the entire region. In the turbulent Saharan regions of Mali and Niger, it did not take long before these resources attracted the appetites of armed group leaders and violent entrepreneurs. Since the settling in north Mali of jihadist *kataib* expelled from Algeria is concomitant to these developments, questions about the alleged involvement of Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in trans-Saharan drug trafficking have surfaced. Scholars have argued that AQIM had been providing armed protection to drug smugglers cutting across the territory it controlled to raise funds for the jihadist cause (Tisseron 2011); that drug trafficking had perverted the political ambitions of AQIM and become an end in itself, prompting the complete criminalisation of the movement (Daniel 2014); or that AQIM's entanglement in drug trafficking had been largely exaggerated, while in reality the movement's leadership would have always recommended its pious fighters to stay away from *haram* commodities (Ould Salem 2014). While the debate on the 'drug-terror nexus' in the Sahara remains lively, scholars tend to agree that the first documented case of armed protection offered (or more probably extorted) to Saharan drug smugglers must be traced back to the Tuareg rebellions of the years 2006-2009 (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017; ICG 2018). In this context, the smuggling and protection dynamics are closely interconnected across Mali and Niger. Yet the two countries responded in a different way to the risk of a military escalation prompted by the 'scramble for armed protection', opting for a strategy of *divide et impera* in the case of Mali, and cooptation and integration in the case of Niger. We argue that these different strategies – that were implemented across a social landscape that is highly segmented – contribute to explaining the diverging trajectories and different degrees of resilience and stability of the political ordering observed in the two cases.

⁵ Interview with tribal leader from Kidal, Bamako, November 2014.

⁶ Information corroborated in several interviews with law enforcement, smugglers and international observers, in Bamako and Niamey, October-December 2015.

In May 2006, disgruntled former Tuareg rebels from the North of Mali formed a new armed rebel front, the ADC (*Alliance Démocratique pour le Changement*) to protest against what they claimed to be the non-implementation of the subsequent peace agreements which had put an end to the insurgencies of the 1990s. The rebels reportedly ‘encouraged’ local drug traffickers to support the rebellion, in exchange for a safe-conduct for the continuation of traffic through the Kidal region (ICG 2018). The imposition of a rebel-enforced protection racket thus represented a first step towards the militarization of drug trafficking. The rebellion proved short-lived, however, with a new peace agreement between the ADC and Mali brokered by Algeria in July 2006.

Nevertheless, the precedent of the ADC contributed to igniting the rebellion that was brewing just across the border among the Nigerien Tuareg, leading to the creation of the MNJ (*Mouvement Nigérien pour la Justice*) in early 2007. Just like the ADC, the MNJ claimed to fight for the rights of Saharan dwellers, including a fairer redistribution of the revenues of uranium mined in northern Niger, and the full implementation of the 1995 peace agreement which had put an end to the first Tuareg rebellion in Niger. Notwithstanding the political claims, in the case of the MNJ, too, indications of the collusions with the local networks of drug smuggling are not in short supply (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017).⁷ According to former MNJ combatants, the MNJ had forged a solid partnership with drug barons based in Algeria, who helped the movement with logistical and financial support,⁸ while even Tuareg authorities in Agadez go as far as to contend that “the second rebellion was only a cover for drug trafficking”.⁹ Indeed, the leaders of the MNJ included the brothers Alambo, Aghali and Boubacar, with Amoumoune Kalakouwa being the military chief of staff. Aghali Alambo was the second in command of the first Tuareg rebellion, who at the end of the hostilities had managed to become the mayor of Niger’s northern town of Arlit, at a time when Arlit reportedly turned into a regional hub of drug trafficking (Kohl 2013). In the same years, Aghali’s brother Boubacar Alambo and Amoumoune Kalakouwa were known to perform ambushes against traders and caravans transiting in the area to extort the ‘right’ to protect the convoys (thus mimicking the traditional *‘droit de passage’*). While these activities had relegated them to the status of “little bandits”, Alambo’s and Kalakouwa’s involvement in the MNJ reportedly gave them access to unprecedented resources, stirring speculations about a plausible upgrade to the protection of more lucrative drug convoys.¹⁰

In 2007, the MNJ formed an alliance with ADC hardliners rallied around the leadership of Ibrahim ag Bahanga, who had refused to lay down weapons, giving rise to the transborder ATNMC (*Alliance Touareg Niger-Mali pour le Changement*). The reasons behind Bahanga’s uncompromising attitude, MNJ’s strategy, and their mutual transnational connections are diverse and complex (Lecocq 2010). While reducing them to

⁷ Information corroborated in several interviews with former MNJ rebels, local observers and Nigerien security experts, done in Niamey and Agadez between December 2013 and November 2018.

⁸ Interviews with former MNJ combatant and former MNJ leader, Agadez and Niamey, November 2018.

⁹ Interview with Tuareg traditional leader, Agadez, November 2018.

¹⁰ Interview with former MNJ combatant, Niamey, November 2018.

drug trafficking alone is too simplistic, the question of resource extraction certainly played a role in the continuation of their struggle. The cooperation between Bahanga and Alambo, in fact, could ensure the smoothness of drug flows and the continuity of protection along subsequent segments of the trafficking route. According to a then-combatant of the MNJ: “Bahanga and his men were with us from times to times, in large groups of 40-50 vehicles with heavy weapons. However, they only came when mysterious convoys passed, that we were not allowed to approach. That is how we came to realise that the MNJ and the Tuareg cause had been hijacked to cover drug trafficking”.¹¹

By 2009, the Tuareg-led insurgencies in north Mali and north Niger were eventually quelled, and Aghali Alambo and Ibrahim ag Bahanga forced to seek protection in Libya. However, the precedent of non-state armed groups capturing drug resources by enforcing a protection racket had launched a powerful message. Malian and Nigerien leaders did not fail to realise that the prospect of insurgents with secessionist ambitions propelled by drug money represented a formidable challenge to their countries’ stability. Facing the same threat, Mali and Niger put in place different strategies, which led to different outcomes, as demonstrated by the two countries’ different degree of resilience to the shockwaves produced by the conflagration of Libya in 2011. With the toppling of the Gaddafi regime, in fact, thousands of Malians and Nigeriens who lived in Libya, including large Tuareg communities, came back to their countries of origins, in many cases bringing with them superior military equipment and skills (Strazzari 2014b). These are largely credited to have provided a key contribution to the conflict dynamics that exploded in the North of Mali immediately thereafter, leading to Bamako’s loss of control over two thirds of the country in 2012, the empowerment of non-state armed actors including rebel and jihadist groups, and persistent insecurity across the central and northern regions until the time of writing. While Mali’s and Libya’s instability are certainly interconnected, this association fails to explain why Niger, standing in the middle of both countries and facing the same challenges of Mali, was not swept over, too. We argue that a focus on the different drug protection systems in place in each country can contribute to providing an answer to this puzzle.

Divide or Integra

As Arab traders had largely monopolised trans-Saharan smuggling in both Mali and Niger, for the Tuareg-led rebel groups such as the ADC, the MNJ and the ATNMC, the rebellion was an opportunity (or a pretext, one may speculate) to challenge the hegemony of Arab networks over drug smuggling and trafficking routes.

The prospect of a Tuareg rebellion dramatically emboldened by drug revenues alarmed Malian authorities. However, these relinquished to fight drug trafficking altogether and discontinue smuggling flows across the country. Several factors contribute to explaining this attitude. One could argue that the forbearance of smuggling was part of an informal social contract passed between Bamako’s authorities and northern dwellers to weakly suppress (and de facto tolerate) informal trade and smuggling, and allow border

¹¹ Interview with former MNJ combatant, Niamey, November 2018.

communities to benefit from the revenues, jobs and social mobility generated by these activities (Bensassi *et al.* 2015). In exchange of Bamako's permissive approach, disadvantaged northern populations implicitly renounced to resort to weapons to make their grievances heard. As an illustration of this, the 2006 peace agreement with the ADC forbade Malian security forces to patrol the northern borderlands, creating an enabling environment for unchecked extralegal enterprises to arise, develop and thrive.¹² At the same time, Malian authorities could informally tap into the resources generated by these flows to foster a clientelist governance (Boas 2012).

With political, economic, and military constraints eroding Malian authorities' resolve to enforce either a disruption or a protection of drug trafficking in the North, balancing seemed the only option left in Bamako's hands in order to undermine the rebels' takeover bid for the control of regional drug smuggling. As a result, the Malian government undertook to provide an informal support to loyal tribal networks competing against the Tuareg for the protection of trafficking routes (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017). Through a classical mechanism of selective cooptation, hierarchically subordinated groups, such as the Tuareg Imghad or the Arab Berabish and Lahmar, were substantially favoured: this often meant glossing over their controversial proximity to jihadist movements (Boilley 2012; Ould Salem 2014). And while well-known Arab businessmen who were rumoured to be prominent drug traffickers rose to prominence among Mali's President trusted advisors, drug revenues helped create armed factions which Bamako manipulated to contend the rebels' territorial claims and foster its *divide et impera* policy among local communities. It is in this framework that one must understand the rise of Imghad and Berabish-based communal militias featuring opaque connections with both drug traffickers and state authorities (Lacher 2012; Morgan 2012).

Bamako's political manoeuvring thus contributed to bringing about the fragmentation and increasing militarisation of drug protection. At the same time, it also fostered a distinctive mode of security governance in the North of Mali (Husken and Klute 2010). Militias acting as governmental proxies, in fact, not only projected Mali's indirect rule over the Saharan borderlands and Saharan trafficking, but also became a key vector of Bamako's networks of patronage politics. The capital accumulation generated from smuggling protection rents, in fact, fuelled the progressive displacement of power away from the neo-patrimonial private appropriation of public resources, favouring instead the rise of 'bigmen' mobilising their private resources – both material and symbolic, licit and illicit – to build networks of loyalties and penetrate the public sphere (Utas 2012). According to a high-ranking officer of a Malian armed group, "in Mali drug traffickers penetrated high level of state bureaucracy, with the complicity of President Touré and his nomadic mounted troops."¹³ Nevertheless, redistribution networks, as widespread as they may be, could not be universal in reach, and they inevitably fostered exclusion. Furthermore, bigmen networks' logic of inclusion

¹² Interviews with Tuareg northern dwellers, done remotely, Kidal and Gao 2015.

¹³ Interview with officer of a Malian armed group suspected of being involved in drug trafficking, Niamey, November 2018.

and exclusion is not “impersonal” and theoretically neutral, but rather it is structurally linked to personal and social bonds, and thereby likely to stir frustration, anger, and potentials for unrest.

Mali’s limited resilience to the collapse of Libya manifested the fragility of this assemblage, and the short-sightedness of fostering fragmentation and competition over drug smuggling protection. Subsequent studies have pointed out that precisely these factors were among the key drivers of the military escalation in north Mali since 2011. The fact that Ibrahim ag Bahanga was the prospected leader of the refurbished Tuareg secessionist armed group MNLA (*Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad*) suggests a continuity with the stakes of the 2006-7 rebellion, of which drug trafficking protection was not the least (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017). At the same time, the competition for the control of key drug smuggling hubs represented not only one of the first targets of military contention between loyalists and rebels marginalised by Bamako’s patronage networks, but also a long-lasting legacy of the 2012-13 conflict in north Mali and a source of persistent animosity between the MNLA and its adversaries (ICG 2018). In an interview, MNLA leaders went as far as to acknowledge the importance of controlling drug trafficking, if only to extract resources, finance the military efforts and foster the movement’s political objective: “MNLA is not endorsing traffickers at all costs, nor fighting them at all costs. We know them, and we control them. [...] With this, I am not saying that no one in the CMA [*Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad*, MNLA’s coalition] is actually involved in trafficking”.¹⁴ The competition over drug smuggling protection has not reportedly led to the discontinuation of the traffics, due to the ability of traffickers to forge tactical alliances with competing protectors and buy a safe passage across territories controlled by armed groups opposed to each other.¹⁵ However, rising tensions have prompted the need for traffickers to protect themselves (ICG 2018) and form their own armed groups (Raineri and Strazzari 2015), thereby exacerbating the patterns of militarisation and mobilisation in the north of Mali. At the same time, the ever more evanescent grip of Mali’s state authorities over large portions of the country made the prospect of establishing some form of protection monopoly less and less realistic, with fragmentation and rivalries spiralling and fuelling each other.

Taken together, these observations suggest that, in line with the hypothesised expectations, in Mali the very high profitability of smuggling and the extreme fragility of the state have brought about an intense competition among prospective protection suppliers, which the deliberate pursuing of a balancing rather than coopting strategy by Malian authorities have only exacerbated, leading to the complete destabilisation of the country’s precarious political order.

Niger’s management of the same threat proved entirely different. Many among the former leaders of the rebel front were progressively integrated in the state apparatus after the end to the so-called ‘second Tuareg rebellion’. The political leaders, including Aghali Alambo and Rhissa ag Boula (a leader of the first Tuareg rebellion who had later joined the MNJ) had initially sought protection in Libya. With the collapse of

¹⁴ Interview with senior MNLA leader, Bamako, November 2017.

¹⁵ Interviews with smugglers from Ansongo and Gao, done in Bamako, November 2014 and November 2015.

the Gaddafi regime, they returned to Niger with large military contingents. However, the newly installed government of President Issoufou proved prompt to dismiss all charges against them, offering instead honorary positions and special advisory roles within the administration (Raineri 2019). The military commanders, too, were offered to integrate the state security sector with informal positions – including Amoumoune Kalakouwa and Goumour Bidika, the military chief of staff of an MNJ splinter group.¹⁶ This co-optation was supervised by the HACP (*Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix*), a sui generis peace-building institution that was internationally praised for its effectiveness at “allocating rents allow[ing] to integrate actors potentially hostile to the state and ensure their loyalty in the short term” (Guichaoua and Pellerin 2017: 72). Noteworthy is that the then-leader of the HACP was Laouali Chekou Korey, a Nigerien army general of Tebu origin, whose reputation was one of being significantly involved in drug smuggling.¹⁷

Local observers contend that this integration process should be read as a sort of informal pact of mutual non-aggression, as the former rebel chiefs were reportedly “given free-hands in the supply chain of drug smuggling in the North”,¹⁸ with the Tuareg-inhabited region of Agadez progressively becoming a hub of trans-Saharan drug smuggling.¹⁹ Agadez-based authorities further confirm that “the regime in place has its own men involved in drug trafficking, its own *protégés*”.²⁰ Interestingly, this protection regime has proved twofold, targeting both drug smugglers and protection providers. On the one hand, Nigerien authorities at national and regional level reportedly protect drug smugglers so as to benefit from their resources to foster their own political ambitions. Former Tuareg rebels are candidly ready to acknowledge that “if the PND [Parti Nigerien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme – i.e., President Issoufou’s party] is in power today, it is also thanks to the drug traffickers”,²¹ and that “the state holds only through the black funds that oil the bureaucratic machinery. And most of these funds come from illegal activities, such as fraud and trafficking”.²² Regime protection of drug smugglers is a well-established practice, as the case of Mali also illustrated (Lacher 2012; Daniel 2014). And in fact local observers seem aware that this configuration is likely to foster a transformation of governance from state-centred neopatrimonialism to bigmen-centred patronage networks, just akin to that experienced by Mali: “in one single night, Chérife [i.e. Chérife Abidine, Agadez’s drug trafficking kingpin who died in 2016, and to whom a roundabout is dedicated in the city] could make

¹⁶ Interviews with former Tuareg rebels, Agadez, November 2018.

¹⁷ Interviews with Tebu leaders, Niamey and Agadez, November 2018. Laouali Chekou Korey is currently the head of the Nigerien intelligence, and considered very close to the Minister of Interior Mohamed Bazoum.

¹⁸ Interview with international security advisor, Niamey, November 2018.

¹⁹ Several sources interviewed in Niamey in 2015, 2017 and 2018 confirm that this was undoubtedly the case until at least 2016. Since 2018, however, conflicting reports make the extent of drug trafficking flows in Agadez less easy to assess. While national and regional authorities tend to emphasise that drug trafficking is declining because of state-sponsored interdiction efforts, Agadez dwellers reported in November 2018 that one gram of cocaine in town could be purchased for 25-30,000 f CFA. Interestingly, this is comparable to the price of cocaine in In-Khalil in 2015, i.e. in a key regional hub during a peak year, as confirmed by interviews done remotely in the region of Kidal in December 2015. If confirmed, these figures question the presumption of a significant decline of cocaine flows in Agadez.

²⁰ Interview with Tuareg traditional authority, Agadez, November 2018.

²¹ Interview with former Tuareg rebel and current member of the PND, Niamey, November 2018.

²² Interview with former Tuareg rebel and current local authority, Agadez, November 2018.

with drug trafficking the money the regional council struggled to earn in one entire year”;²³ “smuggling revenues are much more readily available and easy to obtain than the embezzlement of development aid funds. [...] Take the case of Chérife Abidine: he dictated what to do to the governor of Agadez. It was a situation akin to that of Mali under President Touré”.²⁴ Noteworthy, the post-2011 social contract did not offer protection to drug smugglers only, but also to more or less formalised smugglers of migrants (Raineri 2018), with the two networks led by prominent Arab businessmen and sometimes overlapping (Raineri 2019).

On the other hand, what is perhaps more interesting to underline is that partnership and integration opportunities appear to have been granted not solely to drug smugglers, but also to protection suppliers. According to a Nigerian security officer, “the DDR process which followed the civil wars was ineffective and did not meet international standards. This is also because it was the result of a political compromise, whereby a part of the leadership of the rebellion preferred to surrender to protect its traffics». ²⁵ In this context, many Agadez observers hold that Bidika’s armed men have retained their weapons by playing an increasingly prominent role in the escort of drug smuggling from the borderline with Mali across the region of Agadez since the end of the second Tuareg insurrection, establishing a solid partnership with their Malian suppliers.²⁶ Ensuring the safe shipment of drug convoys and their protection from banditry and razzias is arguably one of the tasks of co-opted non-state armed groups. Just as importantly, however, the latter also contribute to ensuring the cohesion of Niger’s hybrid state-sponsored protection racket by enforcing compliance and deterring defections of potential competitors. One could read in this light the string of interceptions of drug convoys performed in early 2017 by a hybrid coalition of Niger’s national guards and Kalakouwa’s armed men against drug smugglers operating outside established circuits, around the locality of Aderbissinat.²⁷

To be continued

²³ Interview with former Tuareg rebel and current member of the PND, Niamey, November 2018.

²⁴ Interview with former Tuareg rebel and current local authority, Agadez, November 2018.

²⁵ Interview with the national anti-weapons proliferation commission, Niamey, October 2015.

²⁶ Interviews with local authorities, former Tuareg rebels and international security advisor, Niamey and Agadez, November 2018.

²⁷ See: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/435824/politique/drogue-agadez-colombienne-niger/>

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