

## ARTICLE

# Terrorist Group Dynamics Through the Lens of the Tigantourine Assault in Algeria

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## Introduction

The Algerian terrorist assault in January 2013 that was carried out by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his “Battalion of Blood” activists against a BP-Norwegian-Algerian-Japanese gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria, is worth considering as it provides a rare glimpse into several key dimensions of terrorist group dynamics that are important for scholars and counterterrorism practitioners to understand. These dimensions, (found at “systems,” “nation-state,” and “individual” levels), and their interplay are crucial determinants for how terrorist assaults galvanize and what their final structural shape will be when carried out. This analysis draws heavily on Joseph Nye’s neo-realist “three level analysis” that in turn draws on Kenneth Waltz’s notion of “third image” (“systems”), “second image” (“state”), and “first image” (“individual”) levels of analysis (Nye 1993: 58–73; Reiss and Roth 1993: 291–307; Waltz 1959: 12, 14, 16, 225–238). The use of this neo-realist framework makes it possible to isolate and identify explanatory factors at different levels of the international system and serves as the basis for further efforts in the future to depict possible sets of factor interconnections within and between levels as well as potential “feedback loops” that help determine terrorist event outcomes.

Explanatory factors at the “nation-state” level revolve around characteristics intrinsic to nation-states, such as demographics, “regime-type,” and political policy, while factors at the “individual” level of analysis include individual decision-making and small group decisions. Hence, it is primarily at the “individual level” of analysis that terrorist group decision-making, terrorist group “splintering,” intra-group “personal rivalries,” and links to other levels and factors are highlighted. It is beyond the scope of this paper to depict causal pathways of effect and mutual dependencies between explanatory variables that shape terrorist assaults. Instead, basic descriptions of these variables are presented as food for thought for future research projects to counter or otherwise affect terrorist attack formulation processes. These variables are presented as dependent variables, influencing the behavior of terrorist planning assaults. Hence, pivotal events, both political and economic in nature, that are intrinsic to thinking about terrorist assaults and their origins should be seen as part of a “sequencing of events” framework to be articulated in future research.

## The Tigantourine Terrorist Assault – A “Three Level Analysis”

There is much we do not know about the sources and origins of the Tigantourine gas facility terrorist assault, but what we do know proves useful for thinking about the sources and origins of terrorist attacks. On January

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16, 2013, a splinter group of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) called the “Battalions of Blood,” assaulted the facility and took several workers of that multinational joint venture as hostages. In the ensuing three days, negotiations were undertaken between the military backed Algerian regime of President Abdelaziz Boutiflika and the terrorists. These ultimately failed when the Algerian military, known for its “hard-line” responses to Algerian terrorism, stormed the facility; in the process, 37 hostages and 29 terrorists were killed (Nossiter and Kulish 2013: 1, 8; Nossiter and Gladstone 2013: A-1, A-9; Nossiter 2013a: A-1, A-8; Gordon 2013: A-1, A-8; Nehmeth and Mauslein 2013: 1).

The ways in which factor effects between and within different levels of analysis interact is significant, precisely because there is a predictive component to such analysis that allows for a determination of higher and lower risk of terrorist assaults. Several scripted accounts suggest a set of interconnections between political and military events in Mali in “short-run,” “middle-run,” and “long-haul” intervals, personal rivalries, and the Tigantourine terrorist attack in Algeria (Callimachi 2013: [<http://news.yahoo.com/ap-exclusive-rise-al-qaida-saharan-terrorist-200632673.html>]; British Broadcast Corporation News 2013: [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13881978>]). As Mathieu Guidere informs us, that gas facility had probably been isolated and identified as a potential terrorist target due at least in part to its location “in the home province” of Belmokhtar’s nemesis, AQIM commander Abu Zeid, in addition to its status as a “target of opportunity” in the desert. It was probably also targeted for its symbolic value as a multinational corporation (MNC) precisely because multinational corporations serve as overt manifestations of democratic capitalism and are also more concrete symbols of specific Western countries (Callimachi 2013 [<http://news.yahoo.com/ap-exclusive-rise-al-qaida-saharan-terrorist-200632673.html>]).

Moreover, Nossiter and Gladstone report that Algerian minister of communications

Mohand Säid Oublaïd made it unequivocally clear that French counterterror operations in Mali served to frame the essential timing of that terrorist attack. For Nossiter and Gladstone, “the abductions were meant to avenge France’s armed intervention in neighboring Mali, Mr. Oublaïd said, a conflict that has escalated since French warplanes began striking Islamist fighters who have carved out a vast haven there” (Nossiter and Gladstone 2013, A-1, A-9). From the start, what seems significant here is the confluence of “international” or “system” factor effects with connections to “nation-state” factor effects in Mali and more indirectly in Algeria. While it is not possible to articulate more specific stages of a process of terrorist act crystallization, an outline with possible sets of interconnections and effects might serve to strengthen some theoretical conceptualizations about how terrorist assaults are conceived of and carried out.

At the “systems” level of analysis, the January 2013 French intervention in Mali in support of the efforts of the Bamako government to push back battle-hardened Tuareg rebels (who had fought alongside Col. Muammar Qaddafi in his war against Libyan rebels) is an event that clearly influenced Mokhtar Belmokhtar. At the same time, the Hollande government’s action in Mali clearly traces an arc to the Global War on Terror and to the terrorism France experienced in the 1990’s. Intrinsic to the French decision to intervene forcefully in Mali were the residual effects of another “systems” variable that has since passed into eclipse; - namely, the French colonialist and imperialist presence in Africa (Cline 2007: 892; Emerson 2011: 671–672). At a theoretical level, the Global War on Terror is a “systems” variable with an indeterminate life cycle as was the case with the Cold war until 1991. In contrast, the “North-South relations divide” is a “systems” variable with a much longer life cycle that traces an arc to the Westphalian system of nation-states and will perhaps remain a more permanent feature of the international political system.

In ways that recall the case of Rwanda where French support for the Hutus served as a counterweight to Belgian support for the Tutsis and compelled the French to confront the Hutu regime militarily in “Operation Turquoise,” prior French involvement with Mali as a colonial power was one factor that led to French intervention in support of Mali’s central government in 2012–2013 (Chasdi 2013: 114–141). In much the same way as the French were given tacit support for their actions in Rwanda by the UN and the U.S., French action in Mali is provided with underlying support by the Obama administration. In fact, the mutual support in the region, generated and sustained by French and American authorities for one another’s counterterror actions can be traced back to 2002 with the American led USAID sponsored Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI). Its almost singular focus was on military training, and presumably the Trans Sahara Counterterror Initiative (TSCTI) that followed in 2005 placed greater underlying emphasis on economic and political development in Mali (Cline 2007: 894–895; Laremont 2011: 259–262; Emerson 2011: 680).

At the heart of the conflict and what compelled that French intervention in the first place are a set of nation-state and sub-national political dynamics that revolve around the continuation of a fierce struggle between Tuareg “activists” and the government in Bamako over self-determination rights. While Mali has experienced several attempts to tackle the violence associated with that conflict through elite level agreements, such as the 1992 “National Pact” and the subsequent Algerian sponsored July 2006 and 2009 “peace agreements” between the national government and Tuareg separatists, Robin-Edward Poulton suggests that political instability and social unrest remain because of what Ted Robert Gurr might call acute “relative economic deprivation” conditions. That is the case because the underlying economic needs of those in the North have never been addressed in effective and sustained ways by the central government

(Poulton 2012; Cline 2007: 891; Emerson 2011: 672–674, 676, 678–679; Collier 2000: 91–111; British Broadcast Corporation 2007; Diallo 2007: A-14; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2008; Diamond 1990: 360, 380–403).

In addition, what Larry Diamond would call a set of “coincidental cleavages” that revolve around ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and region seem to be at work. As Tiemoko Diallo reports, “the nomadic, light-skinned Tuaregs in Northern Niger and Mali, who staged an uprising in the former French colonies in the 1990’s, have long complained of being marginalized by black-dominated governments ruling far away in the south” (Diallo 2007, A-14). It follows that “elite agreements” by themselves are inadequate and that what Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall call “deep transformative” conflict resolution measures associated with “grass roots” efforts to change underlying perceptions and “attitudes” about “out-groups” need to augment any “elite agreements” between Malian parties in conflict.

It is clear from scripted accounts that the continuation of conflict in Mali was made even more complex by a “spillover effect” or contagion emanating from two sources: first, from the involvement of Islamic revivalist extremist organizations that primarily emanated from Algeria; and, second, from the employment of Tuareg paramilitary forces by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi to enhance his own security. In large part because Colonel Qaddafi was a crucial champion of Tuareg self-determination efforts, especially significant for Tuaregs when he was the African Union’s Chairman, he used Tuareg separatists in Libya to protect his regime. After his death, Tuareg activists returned to Mali with a storehouse of Libyan weapons and a high dosage of enthusiasm to use these in pursuit of an independent state in the North (Emerson 2011: 677, 682). In the meantime, connections between Tuareg separatists and Islamic revivalist extremist organizations (or groups connected with such organizations) grew apace (Alexander 2012: 1–52; Hashim,

Patte, and Cohen 2012: 11–17; Laremont 2011: 256–257, 260; Chasdi 2012).

While the growth of Islamic revivalist extremist groups and the role of Tuareg separatists in Libya are both essentially “nation-state” factors with effects found in a regional framework in no small part because of the presence of “artificial borders,” it seems apparent that, in each case, these nation-state dynamics amplified or reinforced underlying factor effects at the international or “systems” level, associated with the Global War on Terror (Emerson 2011: 682). In this case, heavily armed Islamic revivalist extremists “pushing south into Mali”, such as Ansar Dine, -(itself a “spin-off-group” of the Azawad People’s Movement (MPA)), elicited the consternation of President Obama and his advisors and ultimately led to President Hollande’s French intervention (Nossiter and MacFarquhar 2013: A-1, A-8; Nossiter and Tinti 2013: 1, 10). Indeed, reverse pathways of effect also seems plausible, as it seems likely that amplified efforts within the context of the Global War on Terror (i.e., at the “systems” level) worked to generate and sustain opportunities for “alliances of convenience” between nationalist and Islamic revivalist extremist groups that in the process intensified the political and “splintering” dynamics of terrorist groups within countries like Mali and Algeria.

### **Terrorist Group Chieftains as Rational Decision-makers**

If the analysis of the interconnections between “international,” “nation-state,” and “individual” level factors provides a backdrop to the decision-making processes of terrorist group chieftains, what little data is available about the Tigantourine terrorist assault in In Amenas suggests that rational decision processes were at work. For Jorge Nef, what constitutes rational decision making is that there is an “instrumental relationship” between the objective of an action and the means used to obtain that goal. For Nef, “unfortunate as it may seem, from a moral viewpoint, terrorism

turns out to be quite a ‘rational’ technique, if by rational we assume an instrumental relationship between ends and means” (Nef 1978: 19–20). Put another way, while it is not necessary to understand the specific reasons why violence has been used, what is significant here is what is commonplace to note in the literature; - namely, that, for the terrorist practitioner, there is a “logical connection between ends and means” (Crenshaw-Hutchinson 1972: 383–396; Oots 1989: 149–150; Drake 1998; Bremer 1988: 1–4).

In the case of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, otherwise known as Khaled Abu al-Abbas, his decision to attack the Tigantourine plant appears to have been the result of a sequence of events beginning with the decision made several months ago by Islamic revivalist extremists and their Tuareg allies to advance from positions in northern Mali, such as in the northern town of Kidal, into other towns such as Timbuktu and Gao, to take control of those geographical locales in the pursuit of a fledgling “Islamic state” (Polgreen 2013b: A-1, A-9; Polgreen 2013a: A-10; Laremont 2011: 245, 258; Cline 2007, 890). As strains and tensions increased, the French government, with the support of the Algerian government of President Boutflia, who reportedly allowed French military aircraft to fly over Algerian airspace, began operations against those Malian paramilitaries.

Indeed, it is within the context of Algeria’s longstanding and continuously evolving fight against Islamic revivalist extremism that the Tigantourine terrorist assault must be framed. At the heart of the matter, was the ferocious struggle during the Algerian civil war between the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), itself a “splinter group” of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), and the Algerian government. Likewise, the Salafi Group for the Call and Combat (GSPC) was a “spin-off” group cobbled together as an alternative to the GIA. In turn, the interactive processes of Algerian counterterror policy, the effects of the Global War on Terror, and personal decisions by top echelon terrorist chieftains

spurred on efforts to craft al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. While it is commonplace to note the fierce struggle associated with Algeria's "hard-line" stance against terrorism, Torres Soriano reports that Algeria was also able to take the wind out of the sails of the GSPC by means of "partial" and full blown amnesty programs such as the "Charter for National Peace and Reconciliation" that was implemented in 2005 (Torres Soriano 2011: 284–285). What is significant here is that the Tigantourine assault was a rational decision, given the political standpoints of both the terrorist groups involved and the Algerian government's time honored position of fighting terrorism.

In addition to the personal rivalries and target characteristics previously mentioned, such as the personal rivalry between Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid, the target of the assault also represented Algerian and international stakeholders; equally important it represented the West in general as a multinational corporation (MNC) conducting business. The profound and lasting hatred of France and French policy elicited by the GSPC as it continuously evolved into the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb cannot be overstated. Indeed, Torres Soriano conducts a "content analysis" of Salafi Group for the Call and Combat-AQIM communications and finds that France, not the United States and not even Israel, was the most reviled of nation-states (Torres Soriano 2011: 289). As previously described, it is probably no exaggeration to say the decision when to assault Tigantourine was a direct by-product of French intervention and Western support of French actions in Mali (Nossiter and Gladstone 2013, A-1, A-9).

### **A Set of Explanatory Factor Connections - The Role of Terrorist Group "Splintering"**

In the case of Algeria, the growth of AQIM is as good an example as any of the "coalescence" and "splintering" processes that are intrinsic to understanding terrorist group "life-cycle" phases. Plainly, that process is also

crucial for understanding terrorism in Mali and, ultimately, the terrorist assault against the Tigantourine gas plant. In the broader sense, the set of factor effects found at the "nation-state" level and at the "individual" level of analysis converge, and the formation of "splinter" groups that have more direct connections to parent organizations - by means of political ideology, and lineage, or personnel than "spin-off" groups, - is triggered by generally recognizable "precipitating" factors or events.

Governments can manipulate the "splintering" (and therefore "coalescence") processes of terrorist groups to their advantage, with the potential to reduce lethality rates and terrorist group evolution dynamics (Chasdi 2002; Collier 2000: 91–111). Olson-Lounsbury and Cook have conducted an empirical study of the relationship between "group change" (e.g., "splintering") and mediation, and find *inter-alia* that government policy of mediation increases the likelihood of "group change" (e.g., "splintering"), primarily within the context of "high intensity conflicts" that reflect territorial disputes where "rebel groups" have already undergone the "splintering" process or another "change event" (Lounsbury and Cook 2011: 81, 79–80).

The "Battalions of Blood" is seemingly the latest permutation of a cycle of terrorist group "splintering" (Torres Soriano 2011: 291). With its source and origins in Algeria, AQIM evolved in 2007 from the GSPC, which itself was a group established and funded by Osama bin Laden in 1998 (Tizgart 1999; Chasdi 2002: 78; Laremont 2007: 243). The purpose of AQIM's creation was to serve as an alternative to the GIA, whose horrific violence against Algerian citizens in Algeria's "civil war" was unacceptable even to Bin Laden (Chasdi 2002: 80, 83; Tizgart 1999). In an earlier cycle of "splintering," the GIA was itself a "splinter" group of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which contested the 1990–1991 Algerian elections (Torres Soriano 2011: 279, 288, 290, 294; Callimachi 2013a). In the aftermath of those thwarted national elections,

the military backed government sponsored a series of negotiations that started in 1994 and evolved into the Sant' Egidio talks with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Italy, and continued past June 1999.

Plainly, it was that set of negotiations that was the predominant factor leading to the splintering process of FIS "hard-liners" from FIS "moderates" and the crafting of GIA (Chasdi 2002: 78–79, 80, 83; Cline 2007: 890). As previously mentioned, in the case of AQIM, "nation-state" factor effects, such as Algeria's "hard-line" and "soft-line" counter-terror programs, most likely interacted with "individual" factors such as decisions made by GSPC chieftains Abdelmalek Droukdel or Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud or both, and al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri to blend GSPC and AQIM. At the same time, it seems plausible that a series of connections between those sets of interactive dynamics found at the "nation-state" and "individual" levels, and global factor effects associated with the "systems" variable Global War on Terror, exist. Indeed, perhaps there is also a "two-way directional effect" where those "national" and "individual" factors influence the Global War on Terror as well as the other way around to produce specific terrorist group formation outcomes (Torres Soriano 2011: 279, 286, 292; Laremont 2011: 242–244; Emerson 2011: 669–687; Chasdi 2010).

In the narrower sense, it is important to consider the range of factors that inextricably bound up these terrorist "splinter" groups, as some are found at the "individual" level and others at the "nation-state" level of analysis. While the development of the GSPC was in a large part the result of decisions made at the "individual level" by Bin Laden himself and, equally importantly, by a small group of GIA leaders who were divided about the decision to carry out copious bloodletting operations, it was, by contrast, an act of national policy, namely the Algerian military government's successful efforts to thwart national elections in December 1991 that spurred on the growth of the GIA for "hardliners" who refused to negotiate with the new govern-

ment of Mohammed Boudiaf (Chasdi 2002: 69, 78; Cline 2007: 890; Emerson 2011: 672).

Interestingly enough, similar dynamics within very small groups essentially found at the "individual" level of analysis, led to efforts to craft Ansar Dine in Mali. Ansar Dine remains one of the most predominant terrorist groups in Mali because it wedds Islamic revivalist extremist thought with time honored Tuareg nationalism in what amounts to be the latest incarnation of Tuareg political efforts to establish an independent state in Azawad. Its "antecedent" or "parent" organization is the MPA and it appears that "individual factor" effects, such as rivalries and personal ambition, also spurred on the formation of Ansar Dine. Ansar Dine is a group that was crafted in 2012 and is presently led by the Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali (Lambert and Warner 2012; Olson-Lounsbery and Cook 2011: 76–78; Emerson 2011: 681).

Indeed, Ansar Dine is reported to have been cobbled together by Ghali as an "alternative" to the MPA in the aftermath of Ghali's failed election attempt to become leader of his particular group of Tuaregs (Nossiter and MacFarquhar 2013: A-1, A-8; Lambert and Warner 2012). What is significant here is that at a functional level that "alliance" between the more secular MPA and Ansar Dine, with its Islamic revivalist extremist nature, poses additional challenges as Olson-Lounsbery and Cook report that such "alliances" essentially expand the scope of demands and aspirations made on government, thereby in effect working to complicate political resolution (Olson-Lounsbery and Cook 2011: 77).

In addition to the challenges and opportunities made available to Ghali because of unresolved economic and political integration issues at the "nation-state" level, there was another direct set of connections that Ghali and Ansar Dine had to critical "national level" factors, which included powerful ties to the Algerian government that allowed Ghali to build Ansar Dine into a powerful organization with joint control in Northern Mali alongside MPA (Lambert and Warner 2012; Collier 2000: 91–111). As Nossiter and

MacFarquhar report, the Algerian ruling elite used Ansar Dine as a “counterweight” in Mali to promote political stability and to reduce the likelihood of terrorist assaults in Algeria and nationalist demands and aspirations from Algerian minority populations (Nossiter and MacFarquhar 2013: A-8). Clearly, these are another set of interconnections and pathways of effect between “individual” and “nation-state” level factors to be mapped out in future research. In both cases, the continuously evolving condition of the GSPC and Ansar Dine showcases the interplay and roles of “individual” level and “nation-state” level factors at work that include intra-group rivalries, the activities of other sub-national stakeholders (i.e., intergroup rivalries of terrorist groups) and political decisions taken by government.

Turning back to analysis of the evolution of AQIM, while factors at the “nation-state” level of analysis worked to shape the coalescence of the GSPC and the “splintering” of the FIS with the creation of the Armed Islamic Group (AIG), it was, by contrast, within the context of international factors, namely the Global War on Terrorism, that muscular U.S. led counterterror operations spurred on the growth of AQIM and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. To be more specific, U.S. operations in the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan, coupled with U.S. allied operations, severely shackled the capacity of the core of al-Qaeda to launch or direct attacks from those regions and, as a result, al-Qaeda “affiliate organizations” in the Maghreb and Arabian Peninsula grew apace.

In the case of the formation of the “Battalion in Blood” force, even though scripted accounts point to a set of “personal rivalries” between Mokhtar Belmokhtar and AQIM leaders, solid and reliable information appears to remain extremely sketchy (Erlanger and Nossiter 2013: A-1; Lambert and Warner 2012; Callimachi 2013a; Callimachi 2013b). What we know is that Belmokhtar was an activist in both the Salafi Group for the Call and Combat and a chieftain in AQIM. To be sure, a definitive account of the sequence of events

and the tenor of that rupture of relations remains shrouded in uncertainty.

Notwithstanding that, the final step in the process, namely the splintering off of Mokhtar Belmokhtar from AQIM probably happened because of: personality differences with AQIM chieftain Abdelmalek Droukdel and possibly others; differences in opinion about the direction that terrorist operations should take; or, both (Erlanger and Nossiter. 2013: A-1; Lambert and Warner 2012; Callimachi 2013). For example, Callimachi suggests that the rupture between Belmokhtar and other AQIM chieftains essentially revolved around a difference in thinking about the geographic scope of activities, where “... Belmokhtar wanted to create a pan-Saharan movement, and the North African chapter [AQIM] was too narrowly focused on countries in the Maghreb or North Africa” (Callimachi 2013a; Torres Soriano 2011: 288–289). Other analysts essentially point to Belmokhtar’s “personality traits” or the special attention he placed on common criminal activities to otherwise buttress or support the primary ideological mission of AQIM to confront the West by means of terrorist assaults (Collier 2000: 91–111; Laremont 2011; Chasdi 2010: 309–310; Allen, DiGiuseppe, and Frank 2013: 1–40). My graduate student Erik Guloien at the University of Windsor uses Paul Collier and Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler’s “greed and grievance continuum” for “civil conflict,” and Tamara Makarenko’s “Crime-Terror Continuum” as a springboard to evaluate terrorist group motivations in his MRP work, “Greed Grievance Continuum: the influence of funding on terrorist motivation” (Guloien 2013). There is insufficient data to attempt to fit “the Battalion of Blood” into the Collier or Collier and Hoeffler framework in this article, but such work might be undertaken in future research.

What is significant here is how personal loyalties and strains and tensions, as well as loyalties to family and clan, are overlaid against national factor effects and international factor effects that provide the back

drop to that series of interconnections between stakeholders and dynamics to produce terrorist outcomes. If it is possible to understand more completely the modalities between such “multi-factor” effects, it will be possible to craft more targeted counter-terror offensives against fledgling groups and fledgling terrorist campaigns at pivotal moments of the terrorist assault formation process. A more complete work to trace this Belmokhtar terrorist assault and others like it, such as the May 23, 2013 twin suicide assaults against a Nigerien military facility and French uranium mining operation in Niger, to events and dynamics in Mali, Algeria, and Libya would be a research project with great potential to illuminate more clearly what the dynamics of terrorist assault formation are all about (Laremont 2011: 256–257; Cline 2007: 889–899; Emerson 2011: 674; Callimachi 2013b; Nossiter 2013b: A-11; British Broadcast Corporation 2013c).

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