



# TERRORIST SANCTUARY IN THE SAHARA: A CASE STUDY

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Joseph Guido





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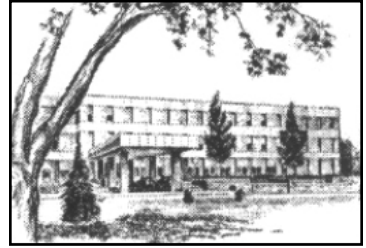
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A CASE STUDY**

**Joseph Guido**

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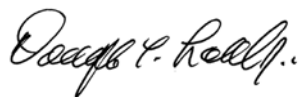
## FOREWORD

Sanctuary is a concept not encompassed in military doctrine or government policy, yet denying sanctuary has become the cornerstone of American counterterrorism efforts abroad and a pillar of U.S. defense strategy. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Guido's probing inquiry, exhaustive research, and innovative analysis on terrorist sanctuary in the Saharan Desert provides critical insights into this understudied idea underpinning so much contemporary defense policy.

History demonstrates the U.S. Army is no stranger to denying sanctuary. The recent surrender of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, ending a conflict lasting more than 50 years, reveals that terrorists and criminals using sanctuary can be defeated. Unfortunately, U.S. efforts to deny terrorist sanctuary in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya have fallen short. Through a detailed case study of a group of al-Qaeda terrorists who found sanctuary in the Saharan deserts of Northern Mali, Lieutenant Colonel Guido develops a schema to better understand sanctuary, as well as the ways and means to control and ultimately defeat terrorists who use sanctuary for protection.

Lieutenant Colonel Guido's contribution helps commanders, staffs, strategic thinkers, and policymakers understand and attack sanctuary. This monograph provides insight into the operational details, as well as the logic of sanctuary-seeking terrorists, which could be used to inform war games and staff exercises. Strategic thinkers and policymakers, on the other hand, will find much to review here regarding the objectives for future counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies and policies. Whether a practitioner or thinker,

Lieutenant Colonel Guido's study is a needed addition to the contemporary literature on terrorism and insurgency, and his work is long overdue after 15 years of war focused on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations – much of the brunt of which the U.S. Army has borne.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
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## SUMMARY

Denying terrorists sanctuary has become a pillar of U.S. defense strategy since the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks. Violent extremist organizations in North Africa, such as the group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have used remote and sparsely populated areas in the Sahara for protection from security forces to conduct a range of terrorist activities, such as training, planning, and logistics.<sup>1</sup> Despite the time elapsed since the 9/11 attacks, and the resources dedicated to denying sanctuary globally, the concept of sanctuary remains largely unexplored and poorly understood. This monograph proposes a functional understanding of sanctuary and offers fresh ideas to deny it using a detailed case study of the most notorious of these North African terrorists, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, from his arrival in Mali in the late 1990s, until the French intervention in early 2013. This interdisciplinary inquiry uses a wide range of open-source documents, as well as anthropological, sociological, and political science research, including interviews with a former Belmokhtar hostage, Ambassador Robert Fowler, to construct a picture of what a day in the life of a Saharan sanctuary-seeking terrorist is like in order to provide further insight into terrorist sanctuary and explore ways and means to deny or control it.

There are various actors involved in sanctuary, and understanding those actors and their relationships is central to a developing a method to deny sanctuary. There are those who own the space, sanctuary providers or owners, and those who seek to gain from providing the space, rent-seekers or landlords. The owners who control the space may not necessarily be the same as the landlords who are seeking rents to administer the space. The owners of the sanctuary in the region

being examined are the pastoral families who live in these areas. Rent-seekers, or landlords, whether chiefs, criminal kingpins, or political appointees from the government, are often imposed upon the owners. Finally, sanctuary-seekers require the space and are usually those paying for using it. While those using sanctuary may not necessarily be the same as those who are paying, evidence indicates Belmokhtar funded his sanctuary—a tenant who paid his own bills.

Geography and people matter. Terrorists, criminals, and insurgents use remote places in the Sahara because it offers protection. The operational effects of the size, scale, and diversity of Saharan geography cannot be overstated. Military operations across this vast expanse realize many elements of the failed Desert One rescue attempt in Iran: sandstorms, temperature, distance, communication, security, and interaction with local population. While the geography of this region is imposing, people matter more. Those in the Sahara live a difficult life but have a very keen sense of history, understanding of the terrain, and pride in their identity. Importantly, Saharan society is not inherently compatible with Wahhabism, Salafism, and fundamentalist Islam. Quite the opposite: the complex social structure specifically adapted to the difficult environmental and political conditions of desert life would be heretical to orthodox Islam. The variance and high degree of adaptability or flexibility in kinship relations means tribal politics are complex and dynamic.

It is often assumed that sanctuary is cost-free: lack of central authority or poor governance is interpreted to mean terrorists can move in and establish their operations. These Saharan sanctuary areas have existing social structures, however, and local populations with needs seek to impose costs on sanctuary-seekers. These costs, called rent, could be expressed through

cash transactions, through payment in providing services, goods exchange, or even political capital. Marriage and other social contracts could constitute a form of payment through alliance-building.

Actions since the 9/11 attacks indicate the U.S. response to sanctuary is to concentrate operations against sanctuary-seekers. In other words, the focus has been upon finding and destroying enemy forces: Operation NEPTUNE SPEAR—the raid on the Osama bin Laden compound in Pakistan—is the most famous example. The present analysis suggests an alternative approach may be worth considering, an approach that focuses on the costs of creating and maintaining the sanctuary which terrorists require for protection. One solution to terrorist sanctuary may be to increase the costs of sanctuary to the sanctuary-seeker or to change the relationship of sanctuary supply and demand to a point where the costs of sanctuary to the terrorist are unsustainable or unacceptably high. In three words: raise the rent.

## **ENDNOTES- SUMMARY**

1. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an Islamist militant organization founded in Algeria with the objective to overthrow the Algerian government and institute an Islamic state.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOSEPH GUIDO, Lieutenant Colonel, is a U.S. Army sub-Saharan Africa Foreign Area Officer (48J) currently working at the U.S. Army Africa Command in Vicenza, Italy. He has previously served as the Chief of Security Cooperation in Ethiopia and Djibouti, as well as the first Director of Intelligence for the Joint Special Operations Task Force Trans-Sahara. He executed the first Title 10 Section 1208 program in Africa, established the Foreign Area Officer In-Region Training site in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and played a key role in establishing the Defense Attaché Office in Djibouti. Lieutenant Colonel Guido has worked as a defense contractor in Afghanistan, as well as a private security consultant, he served as an intelligence officer in Iraq, and as an infantry officer in Germany and Kosovo. He is a graduate of the French Army staff school *Course Superior des Officiers de Réserve Spécialistes d'Etat Major at L'Ecole Militaire*, and he received a Master of Arts in African Studies from Yale University with a certificate in International Security Studies in addition to a Bachelor of Science in International and Strategic History from the U.S. Military Academy.





## TERRORIST SANCTUARY IN THE SAHARA: A CASE STUDY

Sanctuary as a military idea is undefined and remains poorly understood. Yet, denial of sanctuary has become a mainstay of defense strategy: The 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) described “the new strategic environment.”<sup>1</sup> This QDR outlined a course for the United States to become proactive in addressing security threats in order to prevent fragile states from becoming failed states, as well as change the conditions in fragile states that help terrorists conduct operations. These objectives led to the development of the *QDR Execution Roadmap*<sup>2</sup> to “reduce the drivers of instability, prevent terrorist attacks, or disrupt their networks” as well as “deny sanctuary to terrorists” and “separate terrorists from host populations.”<sup>3</sup> A decade later, the imperative to “deny sanctuary to terrorists” remains, but the questions “What is sanctuary?” “Who seeks sanctuary?” and “How can we deny sanctuary to terrorists?” heretofore remain not only unanswered, but also unasked.

Sanctuary is defense through other means. The aim of sanctuary is protection, and sanctuary is not an operation but a place, sometimes a series of places, sometimes cognitive or virtual places: sanctuary is space. People inhabit physical spaces and access to these places requires one to deal with the inhabitants. Such actions can be social in nature, resulting from the interaction, and often manipulation, of local power structures and fluid alliances. Physical sanctuary is transactional in nature—everything is negotiable and money talks. However, interacting and manipulating local power structures requires understanding. Military intelligence is necessary for locating the enemy,

but deep cultural and social knowledge is critical to interacting and working successfully with the groups who own the sanctuary where the enemy resides.

This monograph finds inspiration in Roger Trinquier's dictum, "To carry out a war effectively, to win it, it is indispensable to identify the adversary exactly."<sup>4</sup> This monograph focuses on a specific segment of the al-Qaeda affiliates operating in Northern Mali until 2013, concentrating on the activities of an Algerian named Mokhtar Belmokhtar – an experienced jihadist who came of age fighting the Soviet Army in Afghanistan and working with Osama bin Laden.<sup>5</sup> Belmokhtar has many *noms de guerre*: "one-eyed" after losing an eye to shrapnel; "Mr. Marlboro" from his regional cigarette-smuggling cartel; even "the Uncatchable" by French intelligence because of his ability to escape capture – he has escaped capture and been reported dead at least half a dozen times.<sup>6</sup> Belmokhtar is of particular interest because of his many previous successful operations, notably the capture of Canadian diplomats, as well as a large-scale attack on an Algerian oil facility.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Belmokhtar is a good case because his prolific activities have left a trail for us to follow – important when examining the underbelly of shadowy, criminal organizations.

A variety of sources indicate Belmokhtar used the area around the city of Aguelhok in Northern Mali for sanctuary until the arrival of French military forces in 2013.<sup>8</sup> Notably, Aguelhok was the first city seized by al-Qaeda in the Islam Maghreb (AQIM) and other groups in January 2012 using "Al-Qaeda-style tactics."<sup>9</sup> Aguelhok is significant because not only was it the opening battle between Belmokhtar and Malian government forces, but also because its geography, history, and local politics made it an ideal sanctuary

for Belmokhtar's group. Additionally, Aguelhok has struck an artistic chord: this tiny Saharan city was the dramatic spark for the film *Timbuktu* that the director noted "a 2012 incident in which militants in Aguelhok in northern Mali stoned to death an unmarried couple who had two children" inspired him to make a movie set in the much more famous city Timbuktu.<sup>10</sup>

Mokhtar Belmokhtar needed sanctuary for specific operational requirements: protection from hot pursuit and refuge from intelligence services, logistics, planning, and training. Belmokhtar only had sanctuary, however, because his income generating activities provided capital to pay for it. Illicit activities, such as cocaine smuggling and hostage taking, funded his extremist operations, as well as expanding and reinforcing his base of local support. Thus, income generation and public affairs that constitute more than half, and perhaps almost all his allocation, of available resources are not functions sanctuary serves terrorists, but necessary activities to maintain the sanctuary. Furthermore, the kinds of illicit activities Belmokhtar engaged in are not constrained by social norms or local conventions, because these extremists feel justified in using any available means to further their ends including unacceptable or forbidden activities. Finally, the markets for these illicit income generating activities are far away and generally in regions targeted by the extremists, principally Europe.

Sanctuary and operational capacity are not equivalent. Belmokhtar required sanctuary space but needed the means to pay for it. The functions which sanctuary served him as a terrorist did not include his fundraising activities, even though those activities enabled the sanctuary. Interdicting Belmokhtar's logistics could neutralize his operational capability, but not neutralize

his organization. Denying Belmokhtar sanctuary would neutralize his operational capability, as well as deny his ability to reconstitute that logistical system—at least at that location. However, an alternative objective could seek to control the underlying mechanisms that allow sanctuary—specifically Belmokhtar’s alliances with sanctuary-owners and rent-seekers. Increasing sanctuary rent provides alternatives other than destruction of enemy forces, such as decreasing resources for terrorist operations, coercing the group to move into a lower rent sanctuary area, bankrupting the group, transforming the terrorist group into a criminal enterprise, or fusing with the local society and becoming part of the local social landscape. Viewing sanctuary as a system of rents between sanctuary-space owner and sanctuary-seeker provides an innovative schema to understand, control, and deny sanctuary to terrorists.

## ON SANCTUARY

*Sanctuarium*, a Latin word for containers that protect holy objects or holy people, connotes spirituality and implies a degree of divine sanction. While this monograph focuses upon sanctuary, other popular terms such as safe haven and refuge all illustrate a relationship between a place and safety.

The 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* made denying sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists a “second front” in the Global War on Terror.<sup>11</sup> The September 11, 2001 *9/11 Commission Report* published in July 2004 paid particular attention to terrorist sanctuary and the methods to deny it.<sup>12</sup> A Congressional Research Service study noted, “U.S. efforts to deny terrorists sanctuary were substantially

increased worldwide” after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>13</sup> In turn, Congress has held numerous hearings to identify policies and methods for denying sanctuary, but in 2008, the Government Accountability Office concluded the United States lacked a comprehensive plan to destroy the terrorist sanctuary in Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> What sanctuary is, and the specific functions it performs, however, remained unspecified.

### **Sanctuary and the U.S. Army Experience**

The U.S. Army has a longstanding, if often overlooked, relationship with sanctuary. The Continental Army under General George Washington effectively used sanctuary in areas like Valley Forge for protection from the British Army during the Revolutionary War. Washington selected Valley Forge because it was close enough to the British to keep their raiding and foraging parties out of the interior of Pennsylvania, yet far enough away to prevent British surprise attacks. This sanctuary area was easily defensible because of its densely forested plateau that provided firewood and timber to construct the thousands of log huts used for shelter. Politically relevant yet militarily secure, the Valley Forge encampment was the sanctuary the Continental Army needed to survive and prepare for the next campaign.

Later, the U.S. Army pursued Poncho Villa into his sanctuary areas in Northern Mexico; the Philippine Constabulary sought to pacify the Moros in mountain sanctuary areas; and the Cuban Constabulary attacked sanctuary areas of indigenous insurgents in various small wars at the turn of the century.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the Indian Wars, the U.S. Army pursued small bands of highly mobile Indian fighters, such as those under Geronimo, who used large expanses of the American

West as sanctuary. Geronimo and his band of 38 men, women, and children evaded capture from thousands of Mexican and American soldiers in a form of mobile sanctuary. This small band was highly mobile, foraged for provisions, and possessed an intimate knowledge of the terrain across Northern Mexico, Arizona, and New Mexico. Local populations were sympathetic to the cause of Geronimo and provided support in the form of horses and supplies, while some items, particularly weapons, were captured from U.S. or Mexican forces.<sup>16</sup>

The U.S. Army adopted a sanctuary denial strategy of exhaustion against Geronimo. John Bigelow, an Indian war veteran, and later a tactics instructor at West Point, explained:

What decides the campaign [against the Indians] is not so much physical exhaustion from long marches or scanty nourishment as their mental weariness from constant watching and devising and planning and their final despair of ever thoroughly resting or returning to wives, children, and sweethearts, unless it be as prisoners.<sup>17</sup>

General Nelson A. Miles, commander of the campaign to find Geronimo, summarized that U.S. forces would “find, follow, and defeat” the enemy wherever they would go.<sup>18</sup> Small units also adapted their tactics to the nature of the fight. Logistics were highly streamlined to give cavalry squadrons and mounted infantry increased mobility and speed. The wagon was abandoned in favor of the pack mule that did not require repairs and could traverse very difficult terrain. Soldiers adopted the lifestyle of Indian fighters, performing armed reconnaissance patrols over great distances lasting weeks, sometimes months, carrying fewer supplies, and having the ability to live off the

land. Units could be resupplied through a “hub-and-spoke” system from fixed bases or forts, but could also self-sustain, procure provisions locally, or forage to gain greater operational flexibility.

Command and control was highly decentralized and tactical decisions were made by commanders on the ground—often captains and lieutenants. Intelligence—an essential element of the campaign—was provided through local agents such as the “Kit Carson Scouts” who spoke local languages, understood local customs, and could maintain the operational tempo while coping with the hardships and dangers of frontier combat. Many of these scouts were former Indian fighters that the Army employed in tasks such as questioning the local population, man-tracking, and even as emissaries.<sup>19</sup>

U.S. Army operations to deny Geronimo sanctuary were successful because of a combination of factors including: tactical innovations like the use of mules, decentralization of command, speed or the pace of “find, follow, and defeat,” and removing material and moral support to Geronimo by resettling local populations. Denying water resupply by guarding watering holes also had a critical effect.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the knowledge of terrain and local populations possessed by U.S. leaders should not be overlooked. For example, Geronimo surrendered to First Lieutenant Charles B. Gatewood who spoke Apache and honored Apache traditions and values.<sup>21</sup>

Geronimo’s sanctuary provides several insights. First, the small scale of his force, a band of 38 people, indicates possible diminishing returns to scale for sanctuary-seekers. Larger groups may have greater combat power and can disperse across a greater range of space, but they also require more support and are more

difficult to control. Smaller groups are more cohesive, more mobile, and easier to hide. In sanctuary, size matters. Second, Geronimo initially used national boundaries to facilitate sanctuary—he would seek refuge from Mexican forces across the American border, and vice-versa. However, this was no longer effective once U.S. and Mexican military forces combined to search for Geronimo. This indicates an important concept for sanctuary—mobile sanctuary—where sanctuary-seekers find sanctuary not in one place, but many different places across a wide region. Denying mobile sanctuary, as the American experience in the Southwest indicates, is exceptionally difficult, and, therefore, can be an excellent form of sanctuary. Finally, if one is to believe the American accounts, the U.S. Army did not physically break Geronimo's group or defeat it in combat, but broke their will and induced mental weariness, which alludes to another important form of sanctuary: cognitive sanctuary.

### **Sanctuary in the 20th Century**

Sanctuary in the 20th century has denoted guerilla rear areas, such as the countryside base areas of Mao in China. The 20th-century understanding, therefore, is closely aligned with the history of insurgencies and counterinsurgency campaigns. Sanctuary, as a term denoting rural refuge, was applied later to other peasant-oriented, revolutionary, communist movements as in Cuba and Vietnam,<sup>22</sup> yet Mao referred to these zones not as sanctuary, but as “bases.”<sup>23</sup> Mao's key element remained not locations, however, but popular support, which was later echoed by the Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, who employed the concepts articulated in *Inside the Viet Minh* against U.S. forces in



South Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> The essential ingredient for success for these 20th-century social struggles, usually against a formidable state military, was local support regardless if their protective areas were called bases, sanctuaries, or safe havens.

Mao and the Chinese Communists escaped Chinese Nationalist forces in The Long March. Mao demonstrated a profound understanding of scale in choosing his sanctuary areas, since he knew exactly how far away to provide protection from the Chinese Nationalists, yet remain close enough to the Chinese population and Nationalist forces to be politically relevant and militarily effective. Mao's political competitor, Zhang, on the other hand, proved true the maxim, "isolation, military and political, is the great enemy of guerrilla movements,"<sup>25</sup> by conducting a retreat into the far and remote Northwest of China to the isolated high plateau of Qinghai and southern Ningxia. Zhang and his group were politically and militarily isolated and eventually became subsumed by the Soviet Union. Mao's retreat to the near Northwest of China, on the other hand, was far enough from the reaches of the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalists to remain viable but close enough to remain relevant.<sup>26</sup>

Mao settled on sanctuary areas along common boundaries of two or more provinces in order to "minimize the danger of attacks from provincial warlords or governors."<sup>27</sup> This positioned Mao in zones of weakest control by the local powerbrokers. Military parlance calls these seams boundaries that delineate the span of control from one organization to another. Interestingly, these boundaries often are located on important terrain features like ridgelines, roads, or rivers to aid in demarcating the precise location of the boundary to everyday people and often facilitates movement from

one area to another. Such boundaries often are more social than geographic, and social boundaries are particularly relevant regarding groups in Northern Mali when extended to ethnic and tribal identities, because communities are “ambiguous, anomalous, marginal societies that nestle in the interstices between normal societies and ethnicities.”<sup>28</sup>

The U.S. Army experienced sanctuary in Vietnam where fighters had a variety of sanctuaries ranging from sympathetic villages in South Vietnam, the internationally recognized territory of North Vietnam, and the remote border areas in Laos and Cambodia. This configuration of sanctuary areas—akin to Mao’s concept of base areas (North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) and guerrilla areas (communist controlled or sympathetic areas in South Vietnam) made it difficult for U.S. forces either to encircle or isolate the enemy. One example that posed particular tactical difficulties for American forces were the tunnel systems the North Vietnamese Army constructed, which afforded protection and blurred the distinction between sanctuary and fortification. These tunnel systems combined fortified defenses in sanctuary areas, such as the tunnels of Cu Chi.<sup>29</sup> Fortifying sanctuary areas is common, such as the caves and tunnels in the Tora Bora in Afghanistan, but defensive fortifications and fixed structures are not sanctuary per se.

### **Sanctuary, Islam, and Africa**

The Islamic world in Africa has a rich history of sanctuary as well. The Mahdi revolt, or Madhya, of Sudan in the 19th century was a violent movement led by the mystical Sufi known as the Mahdi. The Madhi revolt rapidly gained in popularity and defeated British

forces in 1885. The ability of the Mahdi army to move rapidly in the vast and harsh expanse of the Sudanese desert and the fanaticism of its fighters proved enormously difficult for the Egyptian government or British regiments to destroy, isolate, or contain. The idea that a nomadic lifestyle, austerity, and simplicity promoted virtues, such as honesty and courage, has a long tradition in Islam.

The 14th-century North African historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun describes sedentary people—or city folk—as “colored with all kinds of blameworthy and evil qualities . . . not deterred by any sense of restraint, because the bad custom of behaving openly in an improper manner in both words and deeds has taken hold of them.”<sup>30</sup> Nomads, in contrast, “are closer to the first natural state [of man] and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls (of sedentary people) through numerous and ugly, blameworthy customs.”<sup>31</sup> These ideas led Ibn Khaldun to summarize that “Bedouins are closer to being good than sedentary people,” “Bedouins are more disposed to courage than sedentary people,” and “The reliance of sedentary people upon laws destroys their fortitude and power of resistance.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Bedouins, or desert nomads who live in remote areas removed from civilization and government influence, are more free than those who live in cities and large social groupings.<sup>33</sup> Cities, civilizations, and populations by contrast are corrupting influences requiring redemption. In other words, desert and wilderness sanctuary promotes freedom and redemption.

Ibn Khaldun also theorized about the relationship between rural and urban, reasoning that states progress through five stages of development:

1. Success through military domination by a leader, normally from an armed revolution;

2. Consolidation of political power;
3. Consolidation of financial instruments, normally through the use of taxes;
4. Peace and productiveness; and,
5. Corruption and wastefulness resulting in grievances that lead to a new leader overthrowing the established order.

He also reasoned that states are weakest at their extremities, and the enemies of the state come from the regions furthest from state control. Scholars have found it “significant that all leaders of the jihad movements in West Africa came from the countryside and not from commercial or capital towns.”<sup>34</sup> The Muqaddimah provides historical and theoretical credibility to Islamic revolutionaries and militants while harkening to cognitive sanctuary, space to think freely. Cognitive sanctuary could offer subtle clues to the ideology of terrorists and the techniques they use to convert others to their cause.<sup>35</sup> Sanctuary in West Africa has deep cultural, social, and historical roots.

## **Sanctuary and Governance**

The absence of governance often referred to as ungoverned space or poorly governed spaces, is imprecise and complicated because scholars and practitioners discuss governance in a variety of contradictory and politically-charged ways. The concept of a failed state implies a recognized threshold of statehood below that constituting state failure, although there is no such consensus on what constitutes good governance, or even governance. There are a range of governance paradigms from the Westphalian International States System, “stateless” societies,<sup>36</sup> and even

state “disorder.” Some researchers list state functions as diverse as a monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, administrative control, public finances management, human capital investment, citizen rights creation through social policy, provision of infrastructure services, market formation, management of public assets, and effective public borrowing.<sup>37</sup> Sanctuary from these sophisticated elements of modern governance could include protection from any of these elements such as economic sanctuary, finance (tax) sanctuary, institutional sanctuary, or legal sanctuary.

An unusual example of sanctuary-seeking to avoid state control and governance is the “nation” of Sealand. British citizen Roy Bates declared independence on September 2, 1967, on a World War II naval “sea fort” seven miles offshore of the English coastline.<sup>38</sup> While this sanctuary offers little physical refuge, it does host a “data haven,” its main income-generating activity, and questions traditional concepts of governance. The location of internet servers in Sealand alludes to another form of sanctuary—virtual sanctuary—shelters from government and regulatory control in cyberspace. Virtual sanctuary is a growing threat as terrorist groups are exploiting the accessibility, audience, and anonymity of the internet to raise money, communicate, and recruit. For example, al-Qaeda’s publication *Al Battir* was a virtual terrorist training camp:

Edition nine of the publication was devoted to kidnappings. It suggests methods, potential targets, negotiating tactics, and even directions on how to videotape the beheading of victims and post the video on the Web.<sup>39</sup>

The “media guy” was an important member of Belmokhtar’s group and was present for the major events during Ambassador Robert Fowler’s captivity.

In the physical world, sanctuaries can be either stationary or mobile. Stationary sanctuaries can be supported by states, such as North Vietnam, or exist due to lack of state control in sanctuary areas such as in Mao’s case. State sanctuary requires the knowledge and support of a state actor and the legal framework and binding nature of international agreements. Nonstate sanctuaries, such as those in Northern Mali, are due to poor government control and security of those state-administered areas. Mobile sanctuaries, as Geronimo resorted to employing, are sanctuaries that cross a wide region but cannot be pinpointed to a specific place or delineated by a particular area or zone because the sanctuary-seeker constantly moves among different spaces.

Like Mao, Belmokhtar used sanctuary in Northern Mali for the purposes of protection and as his operational base to conduct logistical activities, command and control, planning, and training. Unlike Mao, however, Belmokhtar also used sanctuary for a range of criminal enterprises, such as smuggling and hostage taking. Belmokhtar also engaged in civil affairs operations, such as providing support to local populations, but had to recruit new fighters in distant urban areas via internet messaging and the influence of radical leaders rather than locals in the sanctuary area.<sup>40</sup>

The price of utilizing one sanctuary area over another involves a variety of costs besides the financial burden of operational expenditures and includes the rent for the sanctuary paid by gifts to the local population, cash donations, or even loans. There is an opportunity cost in time to develop and maintain close

relationships with the myriad of local power brokers, and even perhaps marriage, in order to solidify alliances. These relationships and locations are likely to involve certain risk, a cost hidden from analysis, yet essential to determine the operational reach of the organization. To deny or control sanctuary requires an understanding of what benefits the terrorists are receiving, as well as what the sanctuary costs them. Attacking the benefits will deny terrorists the underlying purpose of the sanctuary. Attacking the cost, or raising the rent, could make the price of using that sanctuary either unacceptable or untenable.

### **TERRAIN: GEOGRAPHIC AND HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS OF SAHARAN SANCTUARY**

The word “desert” connotes emptiness, absence, desertion, and is associated with extreme heat. It should come as no surprise that most people associate desert with a barren wasteland; the word desert, after all, is the root of deserted. At more than 3 1/2 million square miles—the largest desert on earth and almost big enough to swallow the territory of three continental United States—many imagine the Sahara as the world’s largest barren wasteland. This simplistic view is reflected in the cartography of American military maps of Saharan regions: most 1:250,000 scale “Joint Operational Graphic” in this region use contour intervals of 100 meters and are based upon hand-drawn data more than 50 years old. Some areas remain uncolored from the lack of certainty in the geographic information portrayed. The lack of precision and accuracy in these representations of the Saharan landscape reflects the American military’s general lack of interest in the Sahara and serves to reinforce our conceptions that the

barrenness of the desert and harsh climate equates to an abject lack of terrain – physical or human.

These preconceived notions of the Sahara and associations of emptiness are gross misrepresentations of the geology, ecology, and economy of the world's largest desert. The Sahara has open expanses of dunes towering more than 600 feet tall, huge dry lakebeds and salt flats, vast networks of dry washes or wadis, volcanic mountain ranges approaching 10,000 feet above sea level, high limestone plateaus, granite mountain ranges, and large plains covered with sharp gravel. Those who live in the desert have dozens of words to describe the different textures, colors, and even flavors of the sand and rock around them. The size and variation of the Sahara create large temperature and climatic variations as well as some of the largest sandstorms on Earth. The geologic history of the region gives the Sahara an enormous biodiversity, from migratory elephants who roam the desert and grasslands in northern Mali, to desert crocodiles in Mauritania who burrow deep in the desert sands.

The inaccuracies of U.S. maps of the Sahara are reflections of the errors in our mental maps of the region—how we perceive the terrain. These mental maps are important in how we see the world around us and hence respond to it. For example, Parisians often say that there is a tourist Paris and a real Paris. The geography is the same, but the human experience and impressions of the terrain are quite different for those influenced by prepackaged images of Paris and those who live in the complex human terrain.<sup>41</sup> Most existing American military maps do not differentiate between moving sand dunes, terrain elevation changes less than 300 feet, caves and ravines carved into the rocky desert floor, flat expanses of rocky outcrops



impassible by wheeled vehicles, and sinkhole-prone ancient lakebeds. More significant than shortfalls in physical geography, however, is that these maps do not aid planners to understand the layers and connections of human terrain of the Sahara. Our mental maps largely are dominated by a western, temperate, and metropolitan experience with a poverty of knowledge about the people who live in the Sahara. Most assume such barren landscapes are barren of people, and social groups in these places are therefore nonexistent or inconsequential.

### **Geographic Terrain**

The Adrar des Ifoghas is a large massif in Mali's Kidal Region, characterized by wide, shallow valleys, and small mountains strewn with piles of sharp eroded granite blocks, covering about 100,000 square miles and extending into the Hoggar region of Southern Algeria. The massif's valleys open to the Tamesna plain on the east, to the Telemsi fosse on the west, the western basin of the Azaouak valley on the south, and the Tanezrouft in the north. Settlements include Kidal, Aguelhok, Boghassa, Essouk, and Tessalit.

Aguelhok, a city of approximately 8,000 inhabitants, is located about 70 miles north across a desert track from the city of Kidal, and about the same distance south of the city of Tessalit. Tessalit and Aguelhok both have airfields, but Kidal is the nearest paved airstrip. Aguelhok is in the northern end of the Tilemsi Valley that runs south from Tessalit into the Niger River at the city of Gao. The low but steep granite mountains and dry wash networks rise on both sides of the river valley, west and east of Aguelhok respectively. Aguelhok's temperatures range from low 50 degrees Fahrenheit in

the winter, to well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, with extreme temperatures dropping below freezing and exceeding 120 degrees Fahrenheit. The desert winds can reach 40 miles an hour, and sandstorms can last hours, making movement impossible. Dry riverbeds with their high rock walls, crags, overhangs, and caves offer a multitude of places to provide excellent cover and concealment for people and equipment. In the words of AQIM: "That [Adrar des Ifoghas massif] is our Tora Bora."<sup>42</sup>

Aguelhok receives an average of 4.5 inches of rainfall per year, the majority in August that normally sees 2 inches, while the driest months of February and March normally receive no rain. Rainfall patterns require an annual trek for those living in the Aguelhok area to lands closer to the Niger River, possibly as far south as the cities of Bourem or Gao, a distance more than 200 miles. These southwardly spring migrations burden people living in the Niger River basin and often cause conflicts due to livestock grazing rights. Northern areas like Aguelhok are sparsely populated during these migrations, and there is little livestock or food available in the dry months. Weather causes these migrations so they can last an entire year during a drought, as in 2012, which may foment violence between groups converging on grazing pasture.

The Sahara is also prone to large rainfall fluctuations. More than a century of rainfall data from the Sahel and Sahara show an unusually wet period from 1950 until 1970, followed by extremely dry years from 1970 to 1990. From 1990 until the present day, rainfall returned to levels slightly below the 1898–1993 average, but year-to-year variability remains high. The most recent droughts occurred in 2012 after one of the most severe droughts on record in 2010.<sup>43</sup> The droughts

over the past 50 years have placed severe strain on the pastoral populations in the Sahara who normally migrate with their herds to the southern Sahel regions during dry periods, and climatic factors are significant elements in conflicts.<sup>44</sup>

The geologic structure of the Adrar des Ifoghas massif also plays an important role because the granite rock captures rainwater in underground channels and pools beneath the sand, allowing people to tap into these water sources through a network of wells. These wells are essential for life in the Sahara: daily life revolves around the well. Control of these wells, therefore, is a basic and essential security concern for landowners. Water sources are connected directly to livelihood, and defending these wells is a right of self-defense: "each hill and valley in it had a man who was its acknowledged owner and would quickly assert the right of his family or clan to it, against aggression. Even the wells and trees had their masters."<sup>45</sup> A 1952 study, commissioned by the U.S. Combat Studies Institute on desert warfare lessons learned by the German Army in World War II, forthrightly stated that availability of water is the decisive factor for desert operations.<sup>46</sup> During the same period, the British army used prepositioned water and ammunition stocks as one of the factors to determine their scheme of maneuver in operating against the German Army in North Africa.<sup>47</sup>

Belmokhtar understood the critical importance of water—washing is discretionary but drinking is not, even for his hostages.<sup>48</sup> Water was never to be wasted, and sand is used instead of water for washing purposes, to include ablutions before prayer. Ambassador Fowler observed his group performed a "water run" every 3 days, which would take 1 to 2 days to complete. He recorded an example of such a water resupply

when the group stopped in the “middle of a flat, featureless expanse of desert” at an “improved well” with a cement lip rising a meter from the ground. Sentries were posted, and the group manually retrieved water from the well, dumping buckets into containers one-by-one, very alert and vigilant, as they understood their vulnerability when stopping to resupply water. This group avoided contact with local populations, and their choice for a watering hole was one that was clearly remote and unobserved.<sup>49</sup>

### **Human Terrain**

Adrar is a Berber word signifying mountain, while Ifogha is the name of an aristocratic Tuareg clan, the Kel Ifoghas. Some historians have argued that the Kel Ifoghas date to the Roman Empire.<sup>50</sup> It is commonly accepted that the Saharan desert was unpopulated before the first century after the Common Era (C.E.) when dromedaries were introduced into North Africa, enabling long distance trans-Saharan treks. The Kel Ifoghas are not the only Tuareg group in the Adrar region: Kel Afella, Iredganaten, Ibatanaten, Chemenammas, Kel Essuk, Ifergumessen, Idnan, Taghat Melet, Kel Ghala, Kel Ouuzzeyn, and Kel Taghlit are distinct ethnic identities identified in the Tilemsi Valley.<sup>51</sup> Some ethnographers do not differentiate between the Adagh Tuaregs and the Ahaggar Tuaregs who live to the north in the Hoggar Mountain range of the Tamanrasset region in Southern Algeria. The term Adagh Tuareg is often used interchangeably with Azawagh Tuareg, a separate group locally known as the Iwlllemmedan Tuareg, a group further divided into the Iwlllemmeden Kel Dennek and the Iwlllemmeden Kel Ataram.<sup>52</sup> The use of the term Tuareg creates

significant confusion, as the Tuareg themselves do not identify themselves as Tuareg, but by their tribe or clan name. The word Tuareg is actually a derogatory term of Arabic origin, Tareq, allegedly meaning “those who have abandoned God.” The inherent challenge in categories like Tuareg leads most anthropologists to use tribe or clan names, such as Kel Adagh, or a much broader term encompassing all tribes such as Kel Tamasheq (“those who speak Tamasheq”<sup>53</sup>). This monograph focuses on the groups living in the Adrar des Ifoghas and will simply use the popular term Tuareg for the broader Kel Tamasheq people.

Tuareg class structure is defined by social roles. Nobles, the Ihaggaren, serve as protectors in exchange for payments by the Imghad, or the vassals. The relationship between the Ihaggaren and Imghad is more complex, however, because of the various roles each plays and the different types of payments or tribute. For example, Imghad can serve as warriors, and hence have noble status, but cannot exact tribute. The Iklan, or Bellah, constitute an indentured servant, or slave, class.<sup>54</sup> In addition, there are other ethnic groups in the region such as Arabs, like the Maurs and Berbeshe; but also black or African groups, such as the Songhai, Fulbe, Sonike, Dogon, Bamana, and Hausa.

The Tuareg social system is significant because of its closed nature, often referred to as a caste system. A true caste system, however, requires socially ranked groups associated with particular occupations where membership is determined at birth, and marriage is restricted to members of the like caste.<sup>55</sup> While often discussed in these terms, the reality of Tuareg social interactions and organizations are much more fluid, varied, and subject to interpretation. Some groups are matrilineal, while others are patrilineal; some groups

have remained exclusive of others, while some have changed significantly over time.<sup>56</sup> These relationships are difficult to study, understand, and categorize since they are dynamic: individual and group identities are constantly changing within a framework of family identities, social segments, and alliances.<sup>57</sup>

Linguistic studies indicate the Tuareg have been in North Africa for thousands of years. Tamasheq, the language of the Tuareg, is a family of very closely related languages and dialects, understood in large parts of Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Libya. These dialects belong to the South Berber language group, and they are commonly regarded as a single language distinguished mainly by a few sound shifts. The Tuareg varieties are unusually conservative in some respects; they retain two short vowels where Northern-Berber languages have one or none and have a much lower proportion of Arabic loanwords than most Berber languages.<sup>58</sup> The word *afri*, the Latin term for the Carthaginian Berber speaking people who inhabited parts of modern-day Tunisia and Libya, is the root for the word Africa. While Tamasheq can be written with either Latin or Arabic script, it has its own alphabet resembling ancient Syro-Phoenician script—the precursor of the first modern alphabet system, classical Greek. Ethnographers largely agree that today's Tuareg are descendants from Berber tribes who arrived in North Africa several thousand years Before the Common Era (B.C.E.).

Therefore, categorical propositions about Tuareg society should be treated with suspicion. The flexibility of local narratives and social modes testify to the adaptability of the Tuareg, an adaptability that has often been interpreted as heresy or untrustworthiness:

The Tuareg, like their neighbors on all sides, are Moslem. They are noted, however, as infamous and unregenerate back-sliders who observe neither proper law nor custom, who misperform the ritual postures in prayer, fail to make ablutions, eat and drink during the fasting days of Ramadan, and who have few of the wise and holy in their ranks. Despite the best Tuareg efforts to simulate orthodoxy in the presence of their censorious neighbors, these charges are substantially true.<sup>59</sup>

The obstinate persistence and endurance of these desert nomads account for their value of independence and was a critical factor in their ability to conduct long-distance trade across the Sahara. Their pastoral life patterns, overland routes, and trade networks, were built upon the desert well systems and watering holes, crisscrossing the length and breadth of the Sahara, and likely have remained largely unchanged for hundreds, possibly thousands of years. Historians have established that this trade network included the North-South route from the city of Gao, along the Niger River through the Tilemsi Valley, and then north across the desert into present day Algeria. This locates Ageulhok along well-established and historical trade routes for lucrative products like gold, salt, and slaves.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, commerce has been the primary occupation for hundreds, even thousands, of years, and it gave rise to the banditry that reinforced the protector-vassal class distinctions. The rugged and difficult terrain offers countless locations for bandits, smugglers, and criminals to hide, while the geology provides limited water supplies. A former British soldier, traveling across the Sahara by foot in 1986, found that the Tuaregs of the lower Tilemsi Valley were suspicious of him.<sup>61</sup>

The Kel Adagh have been the cornerstone of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali since independence,<sup>62</sup>

including: 1962–1964, 1990–1995, 2007–2009, and most recently in 2012 with the Kel Adagh rebel group, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), operating simultaneously with Islamic militant groups, such as AQIM and Ansar Dine. After seizing Timbuktu and other cities in April 2012, the MNLA declared Azawad’s independence from Mali. However, after the French military intervention in February 2013, the MNLA renounced their claim of independence for Azawad. The perception by Malians that the Kel Adagh are criminals and troublemakers persists: “It is evident that in the Adagh, the Ifoghas are the only tribal group still capable of creating tensions between tribes.”<sup>63</sup>

AQIM exists in an alien society: there were few, if any, Tuaregs in AQIM, Ambassador Fowler noting, “none of our captors appeared to be Tuareg.”<sup>64</sup> Also noteworthy were the racial divides within Belmokhtar’s fighters: despite Islam’s unifying message, racism seemed to be a substantial problem in an organization led mostly by white North Africans. Ambassador Fowler noted, “There was a big gulf between those who were black and those who were not,” which constituted a distinct, if informal, hierarchy since “officers were almost all Algerian,” while “enlisted men were from sub-Saharan countries or very young Algerians.”<sup>65</sup> AQIM is racially mixed but ethnically divided, where “racism is a problem,” with very few local or indigenous members with the sanctuary-seekers.<sup>66</sup>

Belmokhtar and his group could not easily blend in with local nomadic tribesmen and may have had problems even communicating with them. Furthermore, their extremist activities and ideology are not compatible with traditional Tuareg practices. For example, many groups are matrilineal – not congruent with



Salafist preaching calling for an absolute return to the literal teachings of Mohammed. Tuareg rebels, such as the Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ), do not identify with the religious precepts of Islamic fundamentalists.<sup>67</sup> Two French journalists held captive by the MNJ in December 2007 asked about the MNJ's identification with jihad and Islam. The MNJ rebels responded, "We have nothing to do with these extremists. Everyone practices their religions at their own convenience. My journeys have nothing to do with religion."<sup>68</sup>

## **SANCTUARY SEEKERS IN THE SAHARA**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is from a group of Algerian terrorists known as the Afghani who fought against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan and returned to Algeria. From the perspective of Belmokhtar and the other Algerian Afghani, the tide was receding on secular and Western governments, and they founded a violent extremist organization named the Islamic Armed Group (GIA) after the 1992 secular military coup in Algeria.<sup>69</sup> This coup voided the democratically elected Islamist government of the Islamic Salvation Front, the largest Islamic opposition party in Algeria, after the first round of legislative elections held in December 1991.

The GIA grew into a notoriously violent organization renowned for torturing and indiscriminately killing Muslim civilians. The GIA, like its famous predecessor from the Algerian war of independence against France, the National Liberation Front (FLN), operated in areas largely outside of government control, such as the difficult and mountainous terrain of the Algerian Atlas.<sup>70</sup> These mountain sanctuary areas had provided protection for FLN insurgents fleeing

from French forces, as well as places to train and equip fighters, plan, organize, and prepare operations. In addition to these operational functions, the FLN sanctuary areas were an important political demonstration of Algerian solidarity against France and the establishment of a legitimate Algerian government. They provided social services to Algerians, including Islamic marriages, legal processes such as settling of disputes and claims, and even charitable distribution.

Many in the GIA, including Belmokhtar, worked with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and must have been aware of bin Laden's activities to establish the al-Qaeda brand and organization in Sudan. This close relationship between bin Laden, the al-Qaeda franchise, and the GIA is made strikingly evident when the GIA hijacked Air France Flight 8969, from Algiers to Paris, in December 1994.<sup>71</sup> Algerian security services placed enormous pressure on the GIA, and the Algerian military became very adept at using helicopters to move troops rapidly to remote locations and raid sanctuary areas. The effectiveness of these operations, and fear of helicopters, is lasting and real. A Senegalese terrorist who kidnapped Ambassador Fowler remarked, "If the government helicopters find us before dark, we are all dead."<sup>72</sup> The Algerian military's successful tactics of pursuit and penetration, supported by intelligence activities and robust policing, pushed the GIA from loss to desperation, and then increased violence. This spiraling violence alienated the population, however, and isolated the GIA from local and foreign support. The success of the Algerian government and demise of the GIA gave birth to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC); a new organization inspired more by contemporary transnational terrorism formulated

by Osama bin Laden than the historical FLN freedom fighting.<sup>73</sup>

The GSPC formed in 1998 as a breakaway movement of the GIA that had been neutralized by an amnesty and disarmament deal with the Algerian government. Throughout this period, however, Belmokhtar and other GIA fighters had been pushed south out of the Atlas Mountains by Algerian military pressure. Belmokhtar was likely well established in Northern Mali by the time GSPC was created, and his turn southward should have been expected. "One of the best known warlords of the Sahara," Belmokhtar was raised in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage site of Ghardaia, a walled city which lies in the M'Zab Valley in Eastern Algeria, which provides clues to Belmokhtar's logic. Ghardaia was founded by an Islamic sect of Berbers, known as the Ibadis, whose purist doctrine dominated part of the Maghreb during the 10th century. After their capital, Tahert, was destroyed by fire in 909 C.E., they settled first at Sedrata and finally in the M'Zab Valley. UNESCO notes that, under military pressure, the Ibadis built these fortified cities in the M'Zab because of the "defensive possibilities that it offered a community that was concerned with its own protection and fiercely dedicated to the preservation of its identity, even at the expense of isolation."<sup>74</sup> Ghardaia, in short, offered the Ibadis protection because of its isolation and fortification, similar to the kind of sanctuary Belmokhtar sought from the Algerian security and military services in the 1990s.

Throughout this period, Belmokhtar increasingly participated in criminal enterprises, including smuggling cigarettes, food, and fuel. In time, these activities expanded into schemes that were more lucrative, such

as smuggling narcotics and kidnapping for ransom. The first significant such kidnapping action in the Sahara was by a GIA member named El Para who kidnapped 32 European tourists in Algeria in 2003 and eventually was chased and captured in Chad. He was extradited to Algeria where he remains in custody. El Para's kidnap-for-ransom scheme established a model for Saharan terrorists to emulate later.

GSPC changed their name to AQIM in early 2007 and formalized their relationship and allegiance to Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda franchise. There have been many arguments regarding the significance of this name change. Some have reasoned that it was merely a tactic by GSPC to garner additional attention, notoriety, and support from al-Qaeda.<sup>75</sup> Others have made the case that GSPC and AQIM were actually tools of the Algerian security services to promote their security-focused agenda, clamp down on local opposition to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and gain additional U.S. support.<sup>76</sup> Still others have offered evidence that AQIM is not a terrorist organization, but opportunistic profiteering in the name of Islam.<sup>77</sup>

Algerian journalist Mohamed Mokeddem has provided substantial evidence that AQIM is fundamentally a transnational trafficking network.<sup>78</sup> This argument is very convincing, especially with the well-documented nexus between cocaine smuggling and AQIM. This thesis presumes, however, that AQIM is driven by profit motive and not ideology. The actions of Abu Zaid, and many AQIM fighters, who died fighting in the opening stages of the French intervention, as well as the goals of AQIM and beliefs of its members, indicate they are true believers. Ambassador Fowler emphasizes the total commitment of Belmokhtar's group to jihad and not personal gain.<sup>79</sup> The fact that

cocaine smuggling generated vast sums of money, and that AQIM members admitted kidnapping was “all about ransom (about, that is, raising money for the cause) for jihad,”<sup>80</sup> indicate that these for-profit activities had specific, calculated purposes based upon material requirements while grossly simplifying the term “banditry.”<sup>81</sup> Mohamed Mokeddem’s argument begs the question, “Why does Belmokhtar’s group require so much cash (and, therefore, engage in so many money-making schemes)?” The answer is most likely the most obvious and perhaps most mundane: Security concerns drove Belmokhtar into the deep desert, but criminal enterprise provided the means to pay for it, as well as future attacks. Belmokhtar had to engage in criminal enterprise to fund both AQIM terrorist operations, as well as pay the rent for sanctuary.

### **Sanctuary as Protection**

The FLN used mountain hideaways in the Atlas for a variety of purposes, including: operational and strategic planning, training, and hiding weapons and supplies. These locations were effectively outside the span of control of government forces, and French military forces won the battle of Algiers due to superior firepower and technology—including radio communications, artillery, helicopters, and close air support aircraft—to dominate parts of Algeria, particularly metropolitan centers. Aggressive patrolling and intelligence gathering—to include the famous use of torture—provided critical insight into FLN operations.<sup>82</sup> These early defeats forced the FLN to adapt their tactics to seek sanctuary further from urban areas, but more importantly, to change their strategy to bring the war to domestic France and to seek wider international

attention and condemnation of French human rights violations.<sup>83</sup> The FLN's strategic shift, and not better tactics or operational reach, ended the French Fourth Republic, and eventually gained independence for Algeria.

Belmokhtar moved to the Sahara for similar reasons his ancestors in the 11th century moved to M'Zab Valley, fleeing superior military force. Today, Algerian military forces use modern technology and combined arms maneuvers with air power to fight terrorists and insurgents like AQIM.<sup>84</sup> After traveling to make cell phone calls, Belmokhtar informed Ambassador Fowler that, "To make such calls from their satellite-phones would be to invite an Algerian air strike."<sup>85</sup> In fact, Algeria used helicopters in response to the attack on the Algerian In Amenas oil facility in 2013. The attackers clearly feared the aircraft, as they demanded the Algerians ground them.<sup>86</sup> AQIM is well informed about the technical capabilities of Algerian military forces, such as electronic surveillance and air power.<sup>87</sup> The importance of air power in modern desert warfare is not new, however; Field Marshal Erwin Rommel remarked about "the paralyzing effect which air activity on such a scale had on motorized forces."<sup>88</sup>

The key reason why Belmokhtar moved his operation into Northern Mali was the inability of GIA, and later the GSPC and AQIM, to maintain secrecy or adequate operational security, from Algerian intelligence services. Poor operational security rendered these groups defenseless when surprised and overwhelmed by the capabilities of Algerian military and security forces, most notably air power. Aguelhok is outside the range of attack helicopters like the Russian Mi-35 "Hind D" which could operate from Southern Algeria. To reach Belmokhtar, Algeria would have to

put troops into Mali, something they did in late 2011.<sup>89</sup> The nearest paved runway to Belmokhtar's sanctuary is at Gao, which is outside the range of rotary-wing close air support. While much faster and higher-flying attack aircraft could strike locations around Aguelhok, these aircraft would need detailed target information normally provided by ground reconnaissance units or surveillance drones. Such information would be very difficult for the Algerians or the Malians to obtain with current reconnaissance resources, and it remains highly unlikely such surveillance could remain undetected for long. Aguelhok provided a cloak from curious governments for Belmokhtar's operations, refuge from hot pursuit, and safety from government security forces.

### **Sanctuary for Training and Planning**

Mobility requires competent drivers who are used to driving in these conditions. The ability to traverse the varied and difficult terrain in the region, as well as navigate using stars and landmarks, means good drivers are essential—and difficult to train and replace. Remote desert cache locations are useless if you cannot find them, and quick egresses are fatal if you get hopelessly lost in the desert and run out of fuel and water. Additionally, AQIM fighters proved to be deficient when using modern navigation technology.<sup>90</sup> Competent and skilled drivers, who also maintain the vehicles and direct maintenance efforts, are critical ingredients to this logistics system.

Belmokhtar's group used a variety of communication security protocols, including moving locations and avoiding telecommunications altogether if possible. Vehicles would move a day's distance to perform

tasks such as communication.<sup>91</sup> It can be inferred that communicators either would move to use their satellite phones from a different location or connect to a local cell phone tower. It also seems likely AQIM used runners or messengers for communications, requiring large amounts of time and effort to facilitate communication. Other tactical communications are simple, however, such as using the flashing of headlights to meet at predetermined places or even small radios to guide into a secured area.<sup>92</sup>

Belmokhtar's core group of fighters—referred to as *les frères*—accounted for approximately 60 fighters. This many fighters required at least 12 vehicles, 12 heavy weapons, and around 100 assorted small arms as well as all the fuel, water, and ammunition to support them. The number of facilitators, individuals who assist with logistic functions, as well as trained and loyal individuals in the immediate vicinity or even further afield who could be called upon for larger operations, is unknown. These trained and loyal individuals could be equipped quickly with additional weapons and equipment hidden in the desert and mobilized for combat. Some studies indicate there are twice as many key facilitators as core fighters and three times the number of core fighters in an “operational reserve.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, 200 fighters and another 100 facilitators comprised the entire Belmokhtar fighting organization at the time of Ambassador Fowler's capture.<sup>94</sup> Fighters require training. Images available of posing AQIM fighters portray disciplined jihadists who are proficient in tactical planning and basic fire and movement techniques. Ambassador Fowler noted that experienced fighters would often perform opportunity training with the youngsters, which consisted primarily of basic fire and movement drills or small unit tactics,



emphasizing physical fitness and utilizing the rocky desert terrain for tactical advantage.<sup>95</sup> Belmokhtar and his fighters are proficient in basic defensive security measures, such as the use of terrain for masking movement or providing observation and 360-degree security.<sup>96</sup> While there is no first-hand information available about other types of combat training, such as marksmanship and weapons proficiency training, it is evident that both formal and informal weapons training is conducted – particularly because of the importance of accurately employing direct fire over long distances in the desert. Drivers are trained through a mentorship process, as well as on-the-job training.<sup>97</sup> Training and experimentation with explosives must be performed in order to construct the various devices that are used, ranging from truck bombs to suicide vests.

Analysis of videos and historical information about events, such as the combined MNLA and AQIM assault on the Malian military garrison at Aguelhok, demonstrate that these groups understand tactical planning and the importance of rehearsals. This composite group of fighters never trained or operated together previously and successfully besieged the garrison on January 18, 2012, 2 days later evading Malian air strikes, while establishing a blocking position that successfully defeated an armed relief column.<sup>98</sup> Video from the dawn assault on the garrison on January 25 shows an attacking force that was disciplined, well-armed, well-coordinated, informed by intelligence or personal knowledge of the terrain, and may have conducted rehearsals.<sup>99</sup> The assault force moved quickly into assault positions and breach points based upon the garrison's defensive weaknesses, while being covered by direct fire. This battle demonstrates, even though it was not exclusively Belmokhtar's forces, that

the violent groups operating in this region understand tactics and the use of terrain and fires, operational planning, and logistics. Such proficiency has been demonstrated numerous times, as in the kidnapping of Ambassador Fowler or the attack on the In Amenas oil facility in Southern Algeria.

The dispersion of supplies over a wide area, lack of efficient communications, and reliance on a limited number of skilled drivers and vehicles requires planning and time in order to execute large operations. Belmokhtar's logistical system offered a large amount of short-term tactical flexibility and speed, but sacrificed operational scale and reach. Belmokhtar's operations remained limited in range and finite in scope, while requiring thorough planning and coordination. Belmokhtar probably only had enough manpower, equipment, and experience available to manage one major operation, while planning two to three others. Furthermore, his group could be overextended easily in resources and control when engaged in current operations. Fleeing hot pursuit would have likely consumed his readily available supplies and greatly constrained his freedom of action. It would take additional time and resources to resupply and refit. In sum, Belmokhtar's operational reach was limited and largely constrained by his logistical system of dispersed cache sites and resources, such as fuel and water.

Sanctuary provides protection from hot pursuit, but is not a fortress. Mobile sanctuary is a series of places covering a wide space, which allowed Belmokhtar to evade detection and capture through speed and unpredictability. The cost to pay for sanctuary comes in many forms, whether financial costs for supplies and equipment or social costs for access and influence to local decision makers. Payments may

be distinct—sometimes cash, sometimes goods or services, and sometimes social obligations like marriage. Social costs are important, but probably can be offset with other forms of payment—requiring cash. The lack of significant external sponsorship means these groups must finance their operations creatively by harnessing profitable criminal activities. Omar Ould Hamaha, the jihadist who captured and held Ambassador Fowler for Belmokhtar, publicly announced that AQIM did not receive external support or funding, claiming AQIM “has no need of Qatar and has not been financed by Qatar. God provides our funding.”<sup>100</sup> Yet the historical record is clear that it was crime, and not God, which provided funds to pay for operational and sanctuary rent costs, the nexus between crime and terrorism.<sup>101</sup>

### **The Logistics of Saharan Sanctuary**

U.S. Army General Omar Bradley once remarked “Amateurs study tactics; professionals study logistics.”<sup>102</sup> The importance of logistics is not limited to military operations, however. The British expedition that summited Mount Everest, for example, was managed and led by John Hunt, an experienced English military officer, who brought meticulous planning and robust logistical support, as well as new technology, (like closed-circuit oxygen) to an expedition lasting several months, numbering more than 400 personnel, and requiring more than 7 tons of equipment and supplies.<sup>103</sup> Deliberate planning and logistics rather than the physical abilities of the climbers themselves were decisive in reaching the summit after decades of failed attempts and lost climbers.

The first motorized expedition to cross the Saharan desert demonstrated the utility of technological

innovations to operate in the harsh and remote Northern Mali. On December 17, 1922, French mechanical engineer and automotive pioneer André Citroën launched an expedition of half-tracks he designed to traverse the difficult terrain from Algeria to Timbuktu. This first motorized crossing of the Sahara took 21 days and relied upon extensive maps and aerial reconnaissance provided by the French military. These half-tracked vehicles were the basis of the U.S. Army M2 and M3 half-tracks of World War II, and each carried a heavy machine gun while team members were equipped with pistols and rifles for self-defense since the region had been dangerous for a long time. The team was self-sufficient and carried almost all their supplies, including: food, water, and fuel, while military aircraft occasionally flew overhead to provide observation and emergency communication. The team arrived in Timbuktu on January 7, 1923, to much fanfare.<sup>104</sup> Technical feats of mechanical engineering were repeated later in daring automobile endurance races such as the Paris-Dakar rally raid, which began trans-Saharan races in 1978 but stopped in Africa due to threats from AQIM in 2008.

Instead of tracked or heavily modified race vehicles, groups in the Sahara today use the Toyota Land Cruiser or smaller Hilux models.<sup>105</sup> These vehicles were used extensively in the “Toyota War,” the Libyan-Chadian conflict from 1978 until 1987, and they continue to be used today by virtually everyone, such as tourists, nongovernmental organizations, embassies, and traffickers.<sup>106</sup> Toyotas are not unique to Africa, and American soldiers have encountered them in Iraq and Afghanistan. These trucks are exceptionally reliable and have a well-established reputation

for simplicity, robustness, functionality, and relatively cheap maintenance.

AQIM has proven highly proficient in using these trucks in the desert, and insights about vehicular operations in this region can be gained by examining expeditions and rally races. Whether Citroën's 1920s half-tracks or 1990s Paris-Dakar racers, carrying sufficient supplies to traverse the myriad of Saharan surfaces, enough equipment to self-recover, and supplies to survive has proven critical. The logistical requirements for these expeditions and races across the Sahara are consistent with military experiences: German Army commanders in North Africa during World War II, for example, required troops to carry all supplies during combat operations, while fuel and ammunition was stored at widely scattered points—buried and camouflaged.<sup>107</sup> These experiences reflect the techniques and procedures of smugglers, criminals, and groups like AQIM that must self-sustain to survive.

The need to perform vehicle maintenance for self-sustainment poses its own challenges. Dust makes vehicle maintenance constant but difficult; thorns puncture tires, and sharp stones shred them. Ambassador Fowler noted changing tires was a routine affair, and AQIM fixed flat tires and repaired bent tire rims all night on one occasion.<sup>108</sup> The average life of a light truck tire is approximately 30,000 miles, but the life expectancy of the same tires under the off-road driving conditions in this region is around 12,000 miles. As such, AQIM maximizes tire life by driving on tires until they are destroyed completely. Toyota Land Cruisers can operate without a major overhaul for several 100,000 miles if maintained properly, but given the difficult conditions and hard driving, such trucks will not last more than 5 years, and groups who

rely upon these vehicles for quick getaways need to replace their vehicles every year or so, probably selling older vehicles and purchasing new ones.<sup>109</sup> This practice minimizes larger vehicle maintenance tasks such as engine overhauls, gearbox and differential rebuilds, and changing hubs. These tasks would require maintenance equipment that would be difficult, if not impossible, for AQIM to move across the Sahara.

Belmokhtar's competent drivers were capable of performing basic maintenance tasks, such as changing fluids, filters, tires, and even suspension springs. They could not do shop maintenance in the field, like that of army units or race teams, however, because they did not have the skills, experience, or tools. These groups constantly had to replace used or destroyed vehicles and incurred substantial cost. Determining logistical requirements based upon vehicle capabilities and limitations in this environment can illuminate that these operational costs are significant due to the wear-and-tear of equipment. Belmokhtar operated vehicles day and night, sometimes at speeds over 130 kilometers per hour, for extended periods of time. He also traversed very difficult terrain, including difficult rock formations, and even across plowed fields if necessary.<sup>110</sup> Such operational costs, however, are not inclusive of the rents needed for sanctuary, but do detract from available funds. In other words, increasing operational costs for sanctuary-seekers causes further difficulties in paying the rent.

The U.S. Army employs a "push-pull" system of field logistics. Services and support are pushed to forward locations from secure rear areas where equipment and parts are consolidated. This is known as a hub and spoke system, where material is consolidated at a hub and then moved along lines of communication

or spokes. Currently, tactical prepositioning is not used in the U.S. Army since units typically move forward across potentially hostile terrain and generally seek to maintain a degree of freedom of maneuver, operational flexibility, and security. This occasionally requires air operations or other methods to “leap-frog” requirements, such as fuel, to maintain forward momentum or conduct resupply operations through field link-ups. Commercial desert races, such as the Paris-Dakar, on the other hand, use a series of base camps with extensive mobile maintenance services prepositioned at various stages of the race, while the race vehicles themselves often are trailed by support vehicles and staff. The locations are all predetermined and distances known so this method is practical for minimizing the cost and complexity of maintenance, rest, and refueling, while providing quick services and additional safety for stranded vehicles.

Smugglers, such as Belmokhtar, cannot use a hub and spoke system of logistics because it would require having supporting infrastructure in place. This means they would need to stockpile and warehouse parts, keep mechanics and other technicians at hand, as well as move the quantities of fuel and other equipment rather quickly and efficiently—also requiring excellent communications. They cannot use the Paris-Dakar model of logistics because that would require significant service and support capabilities, as well as restrict their operational freedom to predetermined sites. Both logistical models depend on secure and static areas where logistic functions can be performed. Instead of these relatively sophisticated logistics systems, Belmokhtar uses a simple system of caching or hiding needed material at many different predesignated locations spread across a wide area. The advantage of this

system is that it allows Belmokhtar a great range of operational freedom and agility – enabling his unpredictability and probably greatly contributing to his survivability.

Belmokhtar's vehicles carried two drums—one with fuel and the other with water—swapping as needed with filled drums hidden buried in the sand.<sup>111</sup> All equipment was tied down in the vehicle, and AK-47s were carried by everyone, including children, at all times. Other small arms, such as PK belt-fed machine guns, RPG-7s, and pistols were also readily available and carried on the vehicles. Every fighter had an ammo vest with 8 to 10 spare magazines kept close at hand, and any items not carried such as additional uniforms, weapons, and ammunition were buried in the sand at cache points.<sup>112</sup> Disadvantages of this system include: the expense of maintaining dispersed way stations throughout the region, the requirement for local acquiescence for those sites (security), and the inefficiency of dispersing equipment in many different locations and difficulty to access (and perhaps find) the right equipment in a timely manner.

The security for these caches was not free and required substantial enterprise by Belmokhtar. He married into local power hierarchies and furnished services that the government did not provide. Ambassador Fowler noted at one friendly stop with locals:

These meet-and-greet interludes were obviously exercises in community relations, something our captors knew was important and unfailing good at. I suspect that the nomads saw far more of and received more support—however rudimentary—from Al-Qaeda warriors than they ever got from government representatives.<sup>113</sup>



In this way, Belmokhtar sought to replace functions the state normally provides. These good-will gestures and support required a significant investment of resources – time and money – by Belmokhtar. Fowler noted that Belmokhtar was:

very careful about maintaining good relations with the local population, sharing what little food and medicines they had and generally treating the nomads with openness and respect, a policy that clearly paid dividends.<sup>114</sup>

Belmokhtar's group had to be self-reliant to recover from illness or injury – one fighter had to go to a city for several weeks to receive treatment from medicine women or traditional healers who hung him upside-down and beat his feet with sticks.<sup>115</sup> Basic supplies, such as medicine, were unavailable to Ambassador Fowler during his captivity, and the medical supplies he did have access to, such as vitamins, were specifically provided by external agents, such as the President of Burkina Faso or the Canadian government.

The diet of these groups is also austere. Ambassador Fowler estimated that his daily intake was less than 1,000 calories and was largely based on dry foods, such as rice or pasta. One fighter informed Ambassador Fowler: "We eat out of necessity, not pleasure."<sup>116</sup> Access to water remains essential: "When the theatre of war is a desert with only a few scattered wells, water becomes a matter of supply. . . . A failure of the water supply means disaster, if not annihilation."<sup>117</sup> While other supplies like food, ammunition, and even fuel can be variable, water is absolutely critical and requires constant resupply.

An analogy for desert operations comes from the age of sailing, where relatively small ships crossed vast oceans carrying all essential supplies required to

get to the destination, and oftentimes with little or no information about the outside world. The word *Sahel* is derived from the Arabic term for shore, as the desert nomads who crossed the Sahara referred to the green lands south of Gao and Timbuktu on the Niger River as the “shore” of the desert vis-à-vis the shores of the Mediterranean from an ocean of sand. The importance of logistics in the Sahara cannot be overstated.<sup>118</sup>

### **The Financing of Saharan Sanctuary**

Sanctuary rent pays for popular support. Belmokhtar contributed by being a friend to local groups and by providing rent to the communities in his sanctuary, including: cash payments, fuel, food, even delivery of supplies for things like mosquito netting. Due to the rather large area Belmokhtar traversed for operations and money-generating enterprises, it is likely this cost was financially very high, as well as in manpower and time consumed. This goodwill is absolutely critical, but probably not sought from every social group in this vast region. Instead, Belmokhtar selects specific, probably small, groups who would be most sympathetic to his cause – only support from certain groups is required. Therefore, mobile sanctuary would appear as an archipelago of many distinct islands of sanctuary in the Sahara.

Many of the traditional societies in the region differentiate between illegal and illicit activities. Illegal smuggling, for example, is the trafficking of items across borders without regulation or duty. Illegal smuggling ranges from pasta to cigarettes. Illicit smuggling includes trafficking in items that are widely accepted as amoral or haram, such as narcotics or hostages. While essential items restricted from import

and export, such as pasta, may arouse little interest, illegal narcotics are socially destructive and serve no beneficial purpose. They are actually banned in Islam. Therefore, trafficking in such illicit items is generally not accepted and (but was tolerated only under exceptional circumstances) even referred to in the region as *al frud* or *al-haram*.<sup>119</sup> While the transit networks across the Sahara, largely following ancient well systems unchanged for hundreds of years, are similar among illegal and illicit smuggling groups, the people involved and modes of trafficking are distinct.

Hostages and narcotics movement techniques also differ from illegal but licit trafficking. Belmokhtar used a small number of heavily armed, light, and very fast vehicles to traverse long distances, sometimes at night with the headlights blacked out, conducting resupply operations at remote cache sites. Terrorists avoided contact with other people and traffic. By contrast, smuggling and other commerce is conducted with heavy trucks, at much slower speeds, and usually only in the day. Drivers have social connections to families and other drivers along the route and stop often to visit friends and family.<sup>120</sup> The merchants who smuggle to make a buck for their families are entirely different in social status, equipment, material to be smuggled, and techniques than the terrorists who are smuggling to fund their operations.<sup>121</sup>

Money also needs to be moved. AQIM claims it is “all done with a few computer keystrokes—a simple bank transfer . . . finished in 30 seconds.”<sup>122</sup> Such bravado oversimplifies international banking and the limitations on transactions—and access to such funds in the Saharan desert. Such money must be laundered and moved to the sanctuary, probably through various means including the hawala informal banking system

and commodity exchanges such as new vehicles and weapons. However, the specific payment mechanisms for sanctuary, as well as methods for financing terrorist operations, require more study.<sup>123</sup>

## **DENIAL OF SANCTUARY: ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS**

Vagueness in operational terminology and understanding has hindered progress to deny sanctuary. To deny sanctuary suggests denial operations to dislocate, isolate, disrupt, or destroy sanctuary-seekers. Sanctuary-seekers are assumed to be enemy forces, like terrorists, but distinctions between sanctuary-seekers, sanctuary-owners, rent-seekers, enemy forces, and others in the sanctuary area remain unclear. Contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine seeks to deny sanctuary to insurgents and terrorists by establishing security, restoring essential services, supporting democratic governance, and supporting economic and infrastructure development. Terrorist sanctuary could be denied by destroying terrorist forces or seizing key terrain to prevent terrorists from using these zones that would likely disrupt terrorist operations or dislocate them. This does not destroy the organization or the local support to the organization, however, as the French intervention in Mali has demonstrated.

AQIM understands the importance of plans and alliances. "Alliances are essential," wrote AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel when he counseled Belmokhtar that his strategy should allow local groups to share the burden of management for the jihad as well as any blame for its failures.<sup>124</sup> "The aim of building these bridges," Droukdel wrote, "is to make it so that our Mujahedeen are no longer isolated in society, and to

integrate with the different factions, including the big tribes and main rebel movements and tribal chiefs.”<sup>125</sup> The U.S. Army often uses the shorthand of ends-ways-means for strategic discourse,<sup>126</sup> and Droukdel’s admonishment indicates a profound understanding of ends-ways-means:

Experience has shown that the application of Shariah without calculating the consequences drives away local population and sparks hatred against the Mujahedeen and leads to the failure of any exercise.<sup>127</sup>

Droukdel acknowledged that Belmokhtar lived on the fringes of Saharan society and urged him to make alliances and pay the rents necessary to maintain positive relationships with the local population, the sanctuary-owners.

### **Denial of Sanctuary: Ends in Controlling Saharan Sanctuary**

Sun Tzu noted, “the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.”<sup>128</sup> Images of B-52 strikes in the Tora Bora Mountains of Afghanistan or U.S. soldiers fighting in the streets of Fallujah, Iraq, illustrate the difficulty in implementing Sun Tzu’s counsel. While the *Art of War* is required reading for many students of strategy, U.S. efforts to deny sanctuary have concentrated on attacking and destroying individuals or strongholds rather than the plans and alliances of terrorists.

AQIM’s sanctuary-seeking strategy seeks to create alliances with groups having historical grievances against the local government in order to gain

protection from security forces so they can conduct terrorist operations outside those sanctuary areas. Droukdel concluded, as Mao and Giap had, that the support of the local population remains the center of gravity when conducting anti-government activities. Raising the rent seeks to control sanctuary areas by changing the dynamics between sanctuary-seekers, rent-seekers, and sanctuary-suppliers as local popular support is more transactional than ideological.

Planners must first determine what the object of sanctuary is in order to determine the nature of the transaction. France's actions in Northern Mali indicate it determined the object of sanctuary was terrorist protection and support to overthrow the Malian government. In turn, France sought to support the government and deny such sanctuary in Northern Mali by eliminating the terrorists. This counterinsurgency strategy, known popularly as the ink spot strategy, was coined by British counterinsurgency thinkers and used by the British in campaigns from South Africa to Malaysia, although the term has been appropriated recently by the U.S. Army in Iraq. When enemy forces could not be located and isolated in South Africa and Malaysia because of their mobility, the ink-spot campaign shifted focus to resettle local populations in order to deny insurgents local support—as the U.S. Army did with Geronimo. The U.S. applied the population resettlement scheme in Vietnam under the name “strategic hamlet,” where it failed because resettlement only alienated the Vietnamese population.<sup>129</sup> The center of gravity in the ink-spot scheme is neither terrain nor enemy forces; but instead, the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the local population. The object of control is the enemy force and the method of control is through the local population.

The French campaign against AQIM did not actually deny terrorist sanctuary, but destroyed enemy forces in sanctuary areas using superior military force. Denying sanctuary is a nuanced objective revolving around control and requiring a practical understanding of the dimensions of control: the object, the purpose, the nature, the degree, the scheme, and the beginning and end of control.<sup>130</sup>

### **Denial of Sanctuary: Ways for Controlling Saharan Sanctuary**

The purposes of controlling the enemy are to destroy, disrupt, or defeat enemy forces in the sanctuary area in order to prevent them from conducting terrorist activities outside sanctuary. The purposes of controlling the sanctuary rent would be to degrade, bankrupt, transform, integrate, or displace the sanctuary-seekers. This scheme seeks to control sanctuary-seekers by attacking their weaknesses, their financial and logistical vulnerabilities. The advantages to this scheme are numerous: lower costs to the United States, building alliances with local communities rather than alienating them through attacks, and a greater degree of control of the terrorist sanctuary-seekers themselves because sanctuary-seekers can be contained by knowing their location and operational methodology. Controlling sanctuary by raising the rent could also herd or displace terrorists into other low rent sanctuary areas. The purpose of controlling Belmokhtar's rent, therefore, would be either to bankrupt the terrorist organization so it can no longer function, or to displace them into a low rent zone where there is a decreased risk of terrorist attack due to decreased operational capability.

## *Degrade and Bankrupt*

Bankruptcy would raise rents to a level Belmokhtar could no longer afford while continuing his terrorist operations. This is the nature of control Algeria has employed against GSPC and now AQIM in Northern Algeria. AQIM in Algeria is no longer a functional terrorist organization because the pressure from Algerian security forces have made it too difficult to conduct terrorist operations in Algeria. Direct control by security forces has created an environment where the price for AQIM to operate is too high. However, increasing sanctuary rent to terrorists in places like Northern Algeria comes at a high cost for the government and is not feasible for the government to replicate in the remote reaches of the Sahara. Raising the rent through direct intervention would require engaging with community leaders and increasing the cost for the goods and services Belmokhtar offers to these communities. France has raised the rent through its military intervention in Northern Mali, but has done this by attacking terrorists directly rather than engaging with local communities to delegitimize terrorist activities and enable the government to support local populations. Raising the rent seeks to create the friction between landlords—those who profit from terrorist rents—and owners—those who live with the terrorists. The social disdain from illicit profits, such as drug smuggling and human trafficking, is one way to disrupt Belmokhtar's existing alliance structure. Another would be to prevent cognitive sanctuary by engaging with community leaders on religious affairs—militant Islam is not the only alternative to redress grievances.<sup>131</sup> A final way would be to attack his virtual sanctuary and prevent him from communicating to include recruiting



and promoting violence and anti-government messages through the internet. These actions would force Belmokhtar to reengage with the local communities where he uses sanctuary and raise the rent to continue to operate in those areas.

### *Transform and Integrate*

Transformation from a terrorist organization into a for-profit organization is possible. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, for example, has transformed from a revolutionary group to a terrorist group into a criminal group, and today seeks peaceful resolution rather than violence. Social integration for AQIM seems unlikely because they would need to transform into a fundamentally different organization or abjectly give up their jihadist identity to become integrated or fused into local communities. Belmokhtar has never demonstrated such an inclination, and the zeal of his followers indicate commitment to jihad.<sup>132</sup> AQIM actually mentions integration as a deception plan:

We should also take into consideration not to monopolize the political and military stage. We should not be at the forefront. . . . Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a 'domestic' movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no reason for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, al Qaeda, or any other sort of project.<sup>133</sup>

If anything, the pride of Belmokhtar and his fighters could offer an alternative weakness: hubris. Furthermore, transformation or integration of violent groups like Belmokhtar begs the question, "To what would it be transformed?" Such predictions would be speculative, but the cure may be worse than the disease. A highly profitable and organized transnational criminal

enterprise in Northwest Africa could pose larger security concerns than the relatively small and dispersed AQIM affiliates at present—as unpleasant as they are. Transformation and integration do not seem viable objectives for individuals like Belmokhtar, and such objectives must be considered carefully.

### *Displace*

If rents were raised even moderately, it is most likely that Belmokhtar would seek new sanctuary areas with greater protection, but lower rents so he would have adequate funds to conduct terrorist operations. Thus, a scheme to control sanctuary through increasing sanctuary rents in order to displace sanctuary-seekers provides a degree of indirect control over the terrorists by disrupting their operations, degrading their capabilities, and potentially bankrupting them.

The nature of the sanctuary control explains how the relevant actors are affected—understanding the environment. These principal actors are the landlords, or rent-seekers, and the tenants, or sanctuary-seekers. The owners or sanctuary providers and rent-payers are also important, depending upon the specific circumstances of the rent and space relationship. In Belmokhtar’s case, the sanctuary landlords are the established local hierarchy that is a combination of traditional leaders in ethnic groups, government officials exerting authority, and criminal networks or local kingpins. The owners are the groups and families who fall under the traditional leaders and could exert increased power under pressure, particularly to raise the rents as they see little direct benefits from the sanctuary rent relationships.

One dilemma when enemy forces are the object of control in sanctuaries is that friendly forces are eliminating a source of income for both sanctuary landlords and owners – alienating both groups. Worse, landlords and owners suffer from the consequences of combat through the destruction of property and lives, further angering those groups against friendly activities. Sanctuary-seekers cannot be destroyed completely because they are dispersed and, therefore, will continue terrorist activities even if the high-value targets or percentage of terrorists are eliminated: one cannot “kill their way to victory.” Externally supported groups make destruction of terrorists even more difficult: new sanctuary tenants (i.e., terrorists) can be found and replace those destroyed. Conversely, using rent as an object of sanctuary control means that friendly forces have increased incomes for landlords, and potentially owners, by increasing the rent. The sanctuary-seeker must either respond to this new price or move out of the market and seek sanctuary elsewhere. If the tenant reacts violently to the increased rent, it may either cause additional frictions with the landlords and owners or may provide opportunities for the tenant to be more easily captured or killed – it would be easier to identify and isolate the enemy at this point due to increased alienation from the local population.

The final consideration to control sanctuary is the duration of control. Raising the rent can begin once the determination is made to assert control over enemy groups and adequate funding is allocated – which should be substantially less than offensive military operations. This allows the duration to be affected over a longer period of time, as well as makes the scheme of control flexible to adapt to enemy changes. The duration of control will be until the desired effects of

degrade, bankrupt, transform, integrate, or displace have been achieved.

### **Denial of Sanctuary: Means for Controlling Saharan Sanctuary and the U.S. Army**

The U.S. Army has significant roles at the tactical and operational levels of war for controlling terrorist sanctuary areas. Key considerations for Army commanders and staffs when seeking to control sanctuary in the Sahara include: the value and use of intelligence, decentralization of command and control, operational integration, mobility, and emphasis upon whole-of-government activities.<sup>134</sup>

#### *Military Intelligence*

Knowledge about the enemy remains paramount in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and sanctuary control operations. Intelligence capabilities are as important as intelligence dissemination—getting the information to the people who can act upon it quickly. Commanders must ensure that critical information can flow quickly up and down the chain of command. Critical information in the Sahara includes the locations of wells and cache sites, because controlling these locations will deny enemy resupply. Another example of critical information includes the acquisition and movement of new Toyota trucks that could be observed to provide information about who needs and can afford new vehicles. It will also be necessary for U.S. forces to collaborate with local security forces and employ “Kit Carson Scouts” to assist in identifying and locating individuals.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, critical vulnerabilities, such as personnel required for navigating and crossing these remote and difficult areas, including the best

and most experienced drivers, should be identified, and targeted. Other vulnerabilities such as communication networks, including internet activities, could be monitored or attacked. Finally, local communities and the sanctuary owners must be identified and protected from sanctuary-seeking groups.

### *Decentralization of Command and Control*

Raising the rent to control sanctuary primarily requires influencing local actors to demand more from terrorists like Belmokhtar for sanctuary space. The ability to operate independently and communicate directly with various groups and cultures are critical skills in denying sanctuary. The milieu for such operations is diverse and complex; controlling sanctuary will result from team efforts uniting a range of individuals and organizations under the common goal of denying access to sanctuary areas and displacing sanctuary-seekers. Dispersion in this terrain is important, and units will need to move in small teams instead of large formations. Due to the speed that small units can move in open desert terrain, air power is valuable because it can move rapidly and employ precision firepower, as well as collect information.<sup>136</sup> Unity of effort is more important than unity of command, and effects will be achieved at lower levels of command, in turn requiring the knowledge, skills, and empowerment of subordinate leaders.<sup>137</sup> Decisive battle will remain elusive, if not impossible,<sup>138</sup> and the lessons of the U.S. Army campaign against Geronimo apply today; the fight to control sanctuary will involve difficult, time-consuming pursuit, and it will ultimately be won by sergeants and lieutenants.

## *Operational Integration*

Combined and Joint operations are needed to combat the financing of sanctuary but are not the hallmarks of Army units. Integration across the warfighting functions, specifically intelligence and aviation, as well as other types of organizations such as special operations will be essential; and integration was specifically cited by the French as being critical to their successful operations in Northern Mali.<sup>139</sup> Direct contact between aviation elements and ground elements, whether for close air support or intelligence purposes, is vital, and the integration of airpower with elements on the ground, particularly with partner nation forces, will be necessary. Thus, incorporating partner nation elements also will characterize sanctuary control operations and require superior communication and leadership, particularly at the lowest levels of command.<sup>140</sup>

## *Mobility*

Combat in this environment is characterized by speed and mobility. Soldiers will need to adapt to the environment and use non-tactical equipment or off-the-shelf technology, which is better suited and easier to maintain in such environments. Belmokhtar retained operational flexibility because AQIM carried a minimum amount of ammunition, enough to conduct a hasty ambush or fight a meeting engagement and then disengage.<sup>141</sup> Instead of overwhelming firepower, AQIM used relative superiority, or surprise with limited but concentrated firepower, to achieve success.<sup>142</sup> Belmokhtar's decentralized logistics system enabled his mobility and relative superiority but relied upon dispersed cache locations and a network of informants

and facilitators. These sanctuary-seeker characteristics, combined with difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure, make unit-level resupply difficult and could require units to live off the land. Such operations will demand unpredictability, tactical flexibility, and iron but imaginative and adaptable leadership.<sup>143</sup>

### *Whole-of-Government Activities*

Raising sanctuary rents could be performed by partners who pursue terrorist elements, as well as exploiting vulnerabilities like racism in AQIM.<sup>144</sup> The terrorist groups are not representative of the cultures or values in their sanctuary areas: AQIM's brand of religion and governance are incompatible with the local population. Army elements, like civil affairs, could provide essential services or bring critical assistance to marginalized groups. Units could partner with host nation forces to improve their capabilities, as well as leverage cultural advisors in the form of anthropologists to determine the relationships between sanctuary landlords, owners, and tenants to create frictions or leverage. Harmonization of civil and military activities is the essence of successful sanctuary control efforts because such efforts seek to find and exploit weaknesses in the relationship among the sanctuary-seeker, the sanctuary-payer, the sanctuary-owner, and the rent-seeker.

## CONCLUSION

Belmokhtar's Saharan sanctuary was realized through a complex system of transactional relationships paid through rents. Altering this system by increasing the cost of sanctuary and disrupting the alliances between sanctuary-owners and sanctuary-seekers

will disrupt terrorist operations and neutralize their effectiveness.

French efforts to deny terrorist sanctuary in Northern Mali, like U.S. operations elsewhere, focused upon the destruction of enemy forces, not the control of sanctuary areas. While destroying significant numbers of fighters and equipment, these operations ultimately have had limited effects upon terrorist organizations and the wider popular movements they exploited. Some estimates conclude the French military destroyed less than 20 percent of AQIM fighters in the region, and most survivors have simply moved to other terrorist sanctuary areas in southern Libya or Northern Niger. Thus, seeking to control or deny the functions of sanctuary through the destruction of enemy forces is likely to have immediate and local effects on enemy personnel, but unlikely to eliminate those groups or have long-term positive effects on regional security. Several years after major French combat operations ended in Northern Mali, terrorist attacks in Mali continued, and “Malian patience with the negotiation process is running thin. Some are losing hope that the government will be able to achieve a lasting peace.”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the French and American ways to deny sanctuary in Northern Mali have been and continue to be costly. France still has troops in Mali and recently announced a significant investment of \$50 million of security assistance<sup>146</sup> for regional partners, while the United States continues to increase its regional posture<sup>147</sup> and build partner nation capacity programs — although the long-term impacts of military capacity-building remain in dispute and controversial.<sup>148</sup> More worrisome is that terrorist attacks in domestic France have increased. In spite of the destruction of terrorists and their equipment, continued international security investment,



and increased military footprints, violent extremists seem more capable than ever of projecting terror from sanctuary areas in Northwest Africa.

Denying terrorists sanctuary is not about killing terrorists in sanctuaries, but about controlling sanctuary space to control the terrorists further and deny them the protection they require. Controlling terrorist sanctuary, therefore, does not require direct military intervention, offensive military operations, or nation-building, but seeks instead to prevent terrorists from using their sanctuary to perform the key functions which sanctuary serves. Instead of denying sanctuary everywhere, as the ink-spot methodology presupposes, sanctuary could be controlled indirectly by raising the rent on terrorists and forcing them out of business or moving them to lower rent areas that offer fewer possibilities to conduct training, planning, and operations.

## ENDNOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

4. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006, p. 23.

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2011, p. 146. This treatment was much more severe for their captive Muslim driver, Soumana, whom “after being summoned one evening to prayer, stumbling past us muttering to himself, ‘I’m going crazy . . . crazy.’” Ibid., p. 144. These are clear examples to deny cognitive sanctuary and overwhelm mental space with the extremist beliefs and values, preventing free thought and open exchange.

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70. FLN – The French acronym for *Front de Libération Nationale*, or National Liberation Front.

71. Information gathered by the police eventually uncovered the ultimate intention of the GIA was to crash Flight 8986 into the Eiffel tower, a frightening predecessor to the 9/11 attacks, in order to scare the French population into preventing further French intervention in the Algerian conflict.

72. Fowler, p. 13.

73. GSPC – The French acronym for *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. GSPC changed its name to AQIM in January 2007.

74. "M'zab Valley," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, available from [whc.unesco.org/en/list/188](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/188), accessed February 23, 2015.

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105. According to internet images and reports, AQIM only uses Toyota trucks for their operations. Ambassador Fowler recounted he only saw AQIM using Toyota Land Cruiser full size pick-up trucks (HZJ-79). He did see another AQIM leader, Abu Zaid, driving a new, blue Toyota Hilux—still with the plastic shipping covers on the seats.

106. Called the Toyota War from the change in tactics by the Chadian Armed Forces in 1987 to use unarmored but swift Toyota pick-ups with heavy weapons mounted, now referred to as “Technicals.” These tactics used speed and all-terrain mobility to outflank and outmaneuver heavy or dug-in Libyan forces. The Toyota War demonstrates the importance of speed and maneuverability in the Sahara, while serving as an example of the effectiveness and lethality of light forces against a more heavily armed but slower and less maneuverable opponent in such terrain.

107. Toppe, pp. 72-100.

108. Fowler, p. 238, and author interviews.

109. Furthermore, payments in these remote areas, especially for criminal activities, often are made with goods rather than cash. Vehicles, weapons, and supplies make excellent forms of payment or currency. See Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

110. Fowler, pp. 13-15. It is noteworthy that Belmokhtar only seems to do destructive activities like this outside the sanctuary area. Destroying crops or livestock would likely anger local people and incur additional rents.

111. Ibid., pp. 38-39.

112. Ibid., pp. 70-73, 181-182.

113. Ibid., p. 23.

114. Ibid., p. 99.

115. Ibid., pp. 124-125. Belmokhtar actually seized two of Zeid's hostages and released them with Ambassador Fowler in order to save their lives. These two European women, Marianne Petzold and Gabriella Greitner, were likely only days away from dying in captivity due to their illnesses and injuries.

116. Ibid., p. 90.

117. Callwell, p. 61.

118. Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Walenstein to Patton*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 1-2.

It may be that this requires not any great strategic genius, but only plain hard work and cold calculation. While absolutely basic, this kind of calculation does not appeal to the imagination, which may be one reason it is often ignored . . . [and] armies frequently seem capable of moving in any direction at almost any speed and to almost any distance once their commanders have made up their minds to do so. In reality, they cannot, and failure to take cognizance of the fact has probably led to many more campaigns being ruined than ever were by enemy action.

119. Scheele, pp. 1-18.

120. Ibid., pp. 95-124.

121. Ibid., pp. 100-102.

122. Fowler, p. 32.

123. Terrorist financing is the subject of ongoing study but needs additional attention. See Colin P. Clarke, *Terrorism, Inc., The Financing of Terrorism, Insurgency, and Irregular Warfare*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015. See also Walter Enders and Todd

Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 2012.

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128. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Ralph D. Sawyer, trans., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, p. 177.

129. Although the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong retained their state sanctuaries outside South Vietnam, the strategic hamlet program had no impact on sanctuary areas in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. This monograph will not consider resettlement schemes because they do not seem politically feasible or sustainable. Some have challenged this assumption like Martin Van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War: Lessons of Combat, From the Marne to Iraq*, New York: Ballentine Books, 2006. Van Creveld acknowledges that both counterinsurgency resettlement schemes as well as strategies of annihilation (destroy the population) historically have proven successful in some cases and should not be excluded from analysis. See also Russell W. Glenn, *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency: Lessons from post-colonial conflict*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

130. Scott A. Boorman, "Fundamentals of Strategy: The Legacy of Henry Eccles," *Naval War College Review*, Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Vol. 62, No. 2, Spring 2009.

131. For example, see Lamin Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

132. Author interviews.

133. Rukmimi Callimachi, Associated Press, "In Timbuktu, Al Qaida Left Behind a Manifesto," *The Boston Globe*, February 15, 2013, available from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2013/02/15/timbuktu-qaeda-left-behind-manifesto/Z3LaPkhWY5dJRgsRo373yK/story.html>, accessed March 21, 2016.

134. Recent analysis has offered specific recommendations and lessons learned from the French experience in Mali for the U.S. Army. See Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014.

135. For analysis for Army units working with foreign security forces, see Jefferson P. Marquis, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Justin Beck, Derek Eaton, Scott Hiromoto, David R. Howell, Janet Lewis, Charlotte Lynch, Michael J. Neumann, and Cathryn Quantic Thurston, *Developing an Army Strategy for Building Partner Capacity for Stability Operations*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010. See also Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-22, *Army Support to Security Cooperation*, Washington, DC: The Government Printing Office, June 21, 2013.

136. Douglas A. Macgregor, *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997.

Increasingly lethal weapons lead to greater dispersion of combat forces and to increases in individual unit mobility. The necessity for command, control, and sustainment of dispersed formation increases reliance on subordinate officers' and soldiers' judgement, intelligence and character.

137. Terrence K. Kelly, *Security Cooperation Organizations in the Country Team: Options for Success*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Arroyo Center, 2010.

138. See Stephen L. Melton, *The Clausewitz Delusion: How the American Army Screwed Up the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (A Way Forward)*, Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009.

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140. These elements are consistent with the conclusions from the Carlisle Scholars Program, *Elihu Root Study: The Total Army*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2016.

141. Author interviews.

142. William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, New York: Presidio, 1996.

143. See Christopher Kolenda, *Leadership: A Warrior's Art*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Foundation Press, 2001; and Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews, ed., *The Future of the Army Profession*, New York: McGraw and Hill, 2002. The need for outstanding leadership at the lowest levels in such circumstances is not new, however. See General Sir Andrew Skeen, *Passing It On: Short Talks on Tribal Fighting on the North-West Frontier of India*, Quetta, Pakistan: Nisa Traders, 1978 (1st ed. published in 1932), "because in frontier fighting the junior officer's problems are many and varied, and their correct solution far more important in immediate results than in any other form of war," preface.

144. See McGovern; see also Stephen Brown, "Al-Qaeda's Anti-Black Racism," *Front Page Magazine*, 2013, available from [www.frontpagemag.com/2013/stephenbrown/al-qaedas-anti-black-racism](http://www.frontpagemag.com/2013/stephenbrown/al-qaedas-anti-black-racism), accessed April 4, 2015.

145. Kristen Dennison, "Some Malians See Little Progress in their Fragile Peace," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State Office of Opinion Research, OPN-181-16, October 6, 2016.

146. Emma Farge, "France to Invest \$47M in Sahel Counter-Terror Training," Reuters, October 7, 2016, available from [uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-africa-security/france-to-invest-47-million-in-sahel-counter-terror-training-idUKKCN1272I2](http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-africa-security/france-to-invest-47-million-in-sahel-counter-terror-training-idUKKCN1272I2), accessed September 1, 2017.

147. Nick Turse, "U.S. Military is Building a \$100 Million Drone Base in Africa," *The Intercept*, September 29, 2016, available from <https://theintercept.com/2016/09/29/u-s-military-is-building-a-100-million-drone-base-in-africa/>, accessed October 1, 2016.

148. For example, see Michael J. McNerney, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventative Tool*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014; Christopher Paul, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Beth Grill, Colin P. Clarke, Lisa Saum-Manning, Heather Peterson, and Brian J. Gordon, *What Works Best When Building Partner Nation Capacity in Challenging Contexts?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015; and Dafna H. Rand and Stephen Tankel, *Security Cooperation & Assistance: Rethinking the Return on Investment*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, August 2015.



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