

Conflict & Security

Mali: This is Only the Beginning

Baz Lecocq

Finally, the situation in Mali was rotten enough for international intervention. First because the mujahideen of Ansar Dine, the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), along with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), only had to exercise a little pressure at the front in Konna, to let the last remnants of the Malian Army fall apart.¹ Second because the Malian Interim President, Dioncounda Traoré, installed after the coup d'état against President Amadou Toumani Touré of 22 March 2012, faced yet another coup d'état from this same decrepit army, set heavily against foreign intervention as it might upset its power within Mali, which led him to formally ask France for military support, believing he had nothing to lose.²

Undoubtedly, the French Ministry of Defense and French Military HQ *État-Major des Armées* had a plan ready despite President Hollande's public assurances that France would not pursue a neocolonial intervention in a sovereign state. France has historically intervened militarily in West Africa whenever the situation allowed.³ In the past decade, Mali had become more and more part of the U.S. sphere of influence in Africa as U.S. armed forces trained Malian troops in counter terrorism operations. This was

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without much success, as is now clear, but France must have looked with disquiet upon their loss of influence. Then there are the uranium mines at Imouraren in neighboring Niger, only a few hundred kilometers from the mujahideen controlled zone in Mali. A further degradation of the security situation in Mali would certainly pose a threat to these French strategic interests.

Now France is back in the game and with the support of the Malian population, at least for the moment. It has proven to be easy enough to free the cities of northern Mali from the mujahideen and their amputated interpretation of shari'a. The mujahideen hardly resisted as this is not their strength in war. Their strength lies in high-speed guerilla warfare in the desert, the whole desert. So what is next?

Both the intervention itself and the immediate post-conflict period will be determined by two main issues. The first is the state of Malian politics, its bureaucracy, and its army. At present, they are all in shambles and the subject of foreign interventions of various kinds, now and in the foreseeable future. The second is the geographic and socio-political position of the country. France and its allies are not fighting a containment operation in northern Mali, but a conflict on a Saharan scale.

Immediately after it became clear that Malian soldiers were preparing to stay in power after their coup d'état on 22 March 2012, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) reacted swiftly and efficiently with an economic boycott, forcing the putschists into negotiations

and a partial restoration of constitutional civilian rule, as House Speaker Dioncounda Traoré was installed as Interim President.⁴ ECOWAS has managed to keep the initiative in subsequent international efforts to end the crisis in Mali, to the detriment of traditional mediators such as France or Algeria, but with mixed results and uncertain prospects.

ECOWAS is an organization which partly serves as a platform for West African states, to play out their national and regional interests and influences. Mali's case is no different. ECOWAS' main negotiator, the President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, managed to have Malian Speaker of Parliament Dioncounda Traoré appointed as Interim President, according to constitutional rule. However, the constitutional legitimacy of this move has by now expired.⁵ The legitimacy of Malian state rule now fully depends on the credibility its leaders have in the eyes of ECOWAS and international leadership, possibly with destabilizing consequences. ECOWAS President Alassane Ouattara is the President of Ivory Coast, a position he won in elections intended to end a decade-long civil war splitting the country in half. Ouattara could only claim his presidency after foreign intervention by ECOWAS and France.⁶ The presence of large numbers of Malian and Burkinabe immigrants played an important role in the Ivorian conflict, and their continued political presence influences Ouattara's take on the Malian conflict. ECOWAS' main negotiator in Mali, Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré, is one of West Africa's longest-reigning dictators who has

to deal with a small Tuareg minority in Burkina Faso's border area with Mali and Niger, a desert area easily accessible to the mujahideen perhaps still present in Mali, but soon on the move. These two factors undoubtedly leave Compaoré with security concerns of his own, which influence his take on negotiations. The approaches of these two West African leaders to the crisis in Mali, and their direct interests, are therefore not necessarily the same, which could affect events on the ground. Especially Compaoré managed to gain a strong position of influence when he managed to have his long time friend Cheick Modibo Diarra installed as Prime Minister in April 2012.⁷

Further complicating the mission, the military coordination of the African Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) is in the hands of Nigeria, but the largest contingent is delivered by Chad, which is not an ECOWAS member and which so far has over 2000 troops on the ground.⁸ Undoubtedly, Chad's president, Idriss Déby Itno, did not send such a strong contingent to Mali only for humanitarian commitments or his desire to see Malian democracy restored. There are strategic positions to be gained here in a future denouement of Saharan politics. This might lead to squabbles over leadership in the field, which the Chadians might win simply because they have far more experience in the kind of high-speed desert warfare required in the Sahara (a tactic they practically invented). Moreover, Chad is not an ECOWAS member, which will further complicate coordination, unless the AFISMA mission will be transformed into a

UN peace keeping mission, as is now projected.⁹

Under the leadership of ousted President Touré from 2002 to 2012, Mali developed externally as a success story for democracy and development. This could not hide what was evident for the Malian population: the creation of a patronage network through which the political elite enriched itself by, among other things, participating in the growing international drug trade passing through the country.¹⁰

Few would regret that Touré's second presidential mandate would end with the upcoming April 2012 elections, in which both Interim President Dioncounda Traoré and former Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra ran.¹² However, when these elections were cancelled after the putsch, neither man put his political rivalry aside for the good of the country. Instead, they worked antagonistically as if they were still engaged in the struggle for votes in Mali's annulled elections.

To their credit, both Traoré and Diarra tried to curb the power of putsch leader Captain Amadou Sanogo behind the scenes, mainly by lobbying actively for international intervention. Sanogo feared international intervention as it might lead to a restoration of democratic civilian rule, to the detriment of his power, which he gained by violating Mali's constitution and military law. On 10 December 2012, Prime Minister Diarra was arrested on vague accusations by the military and forced to step down, mainly as he had pleaded openly at the United Nations for foreign intervention.¹² It is almost a miracle that Traoré found the courage to call for French help after the

advance of the mujahideen in early January 2013 since he was clearly facing a coup d'état, a second in less than two years, at that same moment.

The political infighting has lowered Malian voters' already low confidence in their government and the country's democratic institutions, hampering the necessary confidence building in the new democracy that is so badly needed after the end of the conflict. Presidential elections are now projected for July 2013, but the question remains as to whether Mali's old political class will muster enough confidence from voters to stay in power, or whether the political landscape will be drastically altered, making way for a new but inexperienced generation of leaders. Neither option will provide the necessary stability needed for the country's post-conflict reconstruction efforts to achieve success.

As for the military, the putschists arrested the entire Malian General Staff during the coup.¹³ A number of them have been released and subsequently co-opted by the putschists, who have taken control of operations. This means the logistic and strategic aspects of national defense are in the hands of men hardly trained for the job. The Malian armed forces had two well-trained and experienced elite combat units. The best known is the airborne regiment, nicknamed 'the Red Berets', which also forms the presidential guard. The Red Berets were especially loyal to ousted President Touré who commanded the regiment before entering politics in 2001. In late April 2012 members of this unit staged an aborted counter-coup, after which the regiment was officially disbanded,

its members disarmed and integrated into regular army units under control of the putschists around Sanogo. Some were arrested and tortured. Following the Islamist offensive in early January 2013, the Red Berets pleaded long in vain to be reformed and sent to the front. Instead they were further engaged in violent conflict with troops loyal to the former junta in the streets of Bamako in March this year.¹⁴ Only in April was the regiment reformed, but on less than its former strength and probably without sufficient equipment, which sheds doubt on their efficiency in securing Northern Mali.

The second elite combat unit is the Standing Battalion of the Gao Military Region, under command of Colonel Elhaj Gamou. Like their commanding officer, most men in this battalion are former Tuareg rebels who integrated the Malian Armed Forces after the rebellion of the 1990s. The battalion is complemented with an auxiliary force equipped from the Malian Armed Forces arsenals, called 'Delta Force' (in reference to US Special Forces), consisting entirely of men with Colonel Gamou's own tribal affiliation. These units are extremely loyal to the Malian state as they were backed by President Touré in recent years in their decades old local and very deadly struggle with the Tuareg Ifoghas tribe, which dominates the MNLA, Ansar Dine, and the recently created Islamic Movement of Azawad (IMA). Elhaj Gamou and Ansar Dine leader Iyad ag Ghali have been sworn enemies for over a decade. Gamou's battalion defended the city of Kidal against mujahideen forces in early 2012 but were outnumbered and outgunned. Gamou nev-

ertheless managed to negotiate safe retreat in exchange for surrender.¹⁵ This battalion has spent much of 2012 demobilized in Niger's capital Niamey, but have remained ready to engage the enemy. They are in fact the only military unit capable of engaging their former brothers in arms, whose tactics and terrain they share. Gamou's reinstated and rearmed battalion entered Gao alongside French troops in early February, and its men served as guides to French and Chadian forces for operations in the Tigharghar Mountains, but they are eyed with great suspicion by their Malian brothers in arms for two reasons. The first is that they are Tuareg fighters, former rebels at that.¹⁶ The second, and more importantly for the future political field, is that

operational level means starting from the ground up, restoring a well-trained officer corps, restoring trust between units, restoring the army's loyalty to the Malian democratic state, and restoring trust between the army and the nation it is supposed to defend.

The mujahideen retreat from the cities and villages of the north has already led to small-scale acts of vengeance by civilians and army elements alike against people suspected of supporting them. It is feared by local civic leaders and analysts alike that such acts of vengeance will develop into large scale ethnic violence between the various peoples of the north: the Arabs, the Tuareg and the Songhay.¹⁷ The region witnessed similar such violence in the mid-1990s. Then too, the Malian army

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Colonel Elhaj Gamou is among the few superior officers of the Malian armed forces who has not been under arrest or under control of the putschists. Additionally, he is very popular and respected by Malians despite being a Tuareg. This status would perhaps allow him to mobilize forces against Captain Sanogo and his henchmen, and even have them arrested and court martialed for insubordination, mutiny and high treason.

Whatever else was left of the Malian armed forces after the coup was scattered by the first advances of the mujahideen in early January 2013. Rebuilding the Malian military to an

did nothing to protect its citizens from bloodshed. To the contrary, soldiers of Songhay origins effectively helped to organize and carry out pogroms, while soldiers of Tuareg and Arab origins - rebels integrated in the armed forces - made counter strikes against Songhay villages.¹⁸ It is clear by now that Malian soldiers have again committed acts of vengeance and atrocities against civilian populations in the current conflict, leading to further fears for ethnic conflicts. It is unlikely that Chadian or Nigerian soldiers will be able to halt such violence once it starts. The deployment of Nigerian soldiers in ECOWAS forces in Liberia and Sierra

Leone in the 1990s has shown that they are more likely to become part of the problem than help solving it.

What many observers do not appreciate is that northern Mali forms part of the Sahara, an internally coherent socio-political and cultural space with a long history of internal political struggles and alliances. National borders within the region are politically disputed and create opportunities for smuggling, but do not in any way restrict the movement of goods or people. Indeed fighters are able to easily move from country to country, with or without the tacit support of state organizations.

The Tuareg have been fighting for autonomy or independence of their homeland of Azawad since before Malian independence in the 1960s. The current conflict is the fourth episode in this ongoing struggle. They are not the only ones disputing existing political borders. The most important disputed border is that between Morocco on the one side, and Algeria and the Western Sahara on the other. Morocco and Algeria fought the undecided 'War of the Sands' over their border in 1963. Since then, relations between these countries have been extremely tense. Morocco annexed the former Spanish West Sahara in stages in the 1970s.

The annexation was directly opposed by the Western Saharan POLISARIO movement, which has been fighting for national independence ever since, operating from Algerian soil with Algerian support. POLISARIO has been kept alive by Algeria and the international community. A UN-organized referendum should decide on the political future of the Western

Sahara, but this is eternally postponed on ever-more obscure grounds, much to the despair and disillusionment of the Sahraoui youth. Living in permanent refugee camps without hopes for a political solution or improvement in their living conditions, these youths have turned abroad for salvation. While the vast majority turn to Western Europe, especially Spain, a small minority living in the El Aayoun camp have turned to jihadi-salafism and to trans-Saharan smuggling.¹⁹ An unknown number of Sahraoui's have integrated into AQIM and have been active recently in northern Mali, along with tribal kin from Mauritania. It is generally estimated that Mauritanian Arabs provide the vast majority of mujahideen fighters active in AQIM's Saharan battalions or its offshoot MUJWA, although part of its leadership is believed to be of local origins, especially from the Arab Lamhar tribe.²⁰

Some analysts, and some jihadists, believe that MUJWA is supported by Moroccan Secret Services as part of its campaigns against POLISARIO.²¹ Similar theories on the creation and/or support of AQIM's predecessor (the GSPC) and of AQIM itself by Algeria's intelligence service have been in circulation for about a decade.²² Support of either secret service for either movement has never been definitively proven or refuted.

These various political struggles make the political and economic problems of the vast Saharan borderland between Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Morocco key to understanding the current conflict in Mali: this region may be the next to explode once France

and its allies have managed to chase the mujahideen from Mali to their respective homelands.

The borders and border conflicts between Saharan states and peoples have never disrupted Saharan tribal political and commercial relations. The trans-Saharan and intra-Saharan trade has been strongly revived in the past decades. Efficient trucks and fast four-wheel-drives ship food, migrants, cigarettes, arms, and drugs.²³ Mounted with extra gas tanks, 4x4's can cross the vastness of the Sahara in only a few days, which makes the interception of smugglers a near-impossible task, which is unlikely to be carried out at all. Customs officers, soldiers, bureau-

rupting food supplies to northern Mali, exacerbating an already dire food situation.

In addition to this commerce, the political world of tribal feuds and alliances has remained alive and well and plays an important part in the current conflict. The tribes have modernized over the past decades. They form political structures with effective political representation and power in the cities, as well as in the Saharan plains. In Libya, tribes formed the backbone of Khadafi's internal politics. At present many militias still operating in the country are based on tribal affiliation.²⁵ In Mauritania, Mali and Niger, Tuareg and Arab tribes constitute formal units

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crats, and politicians of the various Saharan states are actively involved in the trans-Saharan trade, or look the other way in exchange for a share in the profits.²⁴

The various trade and smuggling networks in the Sahara are not necessarily as strongly connected to the different Saharan political and military opposition movements as is generally thought, but they are at least facilitating the logistics of these movements at present. At the same time, they have provided the populations of northern Mali with a minimum of affordable bare necessities over the past months. Disrupting the smuggling means dis-

rupting food supplies to northern Mali, exacerbating an already dire food situation.²⁶

The living areas and political domains of these tribes often stretch over national borders. The Arab Lamhar tribe, believed to be leading in MUJWA, for example, is transnational in nature with many connections and actual tribe members living in southern Algeria. The same holds for those so-called 'Mauritanian Arabs' in MUJWA and AQIM, or those in Ansar Dine: many belong to tribes such as the Berabish, Rgeybat, Kunta or Tajakant, which have always lived dispersed between West Sahara, Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali. They are

not so much foreign as they are simply choosing between nationalities, while sometimes holding multiple ones. The mayor of Timbuktu in the late 1990s, for example, was a member of the Tikna tribe, living between Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali, and he was locally known to hold both Moroccan and Malian citizenship.

Trade, tribal loyalty and jihad are closely intertwined. These political alliances now gain shape in the form of the MNLA, Ansar Dine, the MUJWA, and AQIM, but the differences between these movements remain subtle and dependent on tribal alliances. This helps to explain the dynamics of the factional splitting and regrouping witnessed over the past year, with first one group rapidly gaining dominance and then another, depending on where the commercial and political interests of the Saharan communities lie. At present, the Ifoghas tribe of Kidal and its allied Tuareg and Arab tribes from Mali, Algeria and elsewhere seem to have the upper hand again after some skillful political maneuvering by its ruling family.

But the MNLA, Ansar Dine, the MUJWA and even AQIM are not the only movements of significance in the Sahara. Next to tribal militias, the ongoing power struggle in Libya involves a number of jihadi-salafi movements, the most notorious of which is the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). One of the spearheads of the 2011 revolution, the LIFG was also implicated in the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on 11 September 2012.²⁷ The date of the attack is symbolic for the LIFG's declared alliance with Al-Qaeda. Although very little is known about

the movement and its further alliances, it is not unlikely that the LIFG will try to gain control over the unruly Libyan south in a coalition with local tribal militias, in which Tuareg from the Ajj-er Mountains, Berbers from the Jebel Nafusa and Tubu from the Kufrah oases (get used to these names, you'll read them more often in the coming years) play alongside Fezzani Arab tribes who were loyal to Khadafi and who have no choice for their political survival but to form a block against those who want to undo every Khadafi legacy in politics, including those who were loyal to him. Khadafi's death has not dissolved all Khadafi powerbases.²⁸

The southern Libyan Fezzan and Kufrah regions have been the turning points in trans-Saharan movements for centuries. Controlling the Fezzan means controlling a large part of the Sahara, something that local players have known for long, but which France, ECOWAS and other interested parties might realize too late. It is by now clear that a large part of the logistics of the movements in northern Mali ran via jihadi-salafi and tribal networks between Mali, Tunisia and Libya, via the Fezzan and the Tamesna Plain - a borderland between Libya, Algeria, Niger, and Mali entirely controlled by Tuareg tribesmen and international smuggler networks. Tuareg and AQIM fighters who left Libya in late 2011 to return heavily armed to Mali took this road. They were not the first, nor will they be the last to do so.

However impressive the advance of Operation Serval might have looked, the French and African troops moved at a turtle's pace in comparison with the high-speed guerrilla tactics of their

adversaries. Moreover, where the forces of Operation Serval and its successors MINUSMA and AFISMA are bound by national borders, their mujahideen opponents feel no such restriction. By the time the French arrived in Timbuktu, the various movements in northern Mali had had ample time to reorganize themselves, withdraw men and materiel into the desert, and move across borders. The attack of

casualties, strengthening support for the mujahideen as it does in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s new jihadi Brigade ‘Those Who Sign in Blood’ at the gas fields of In Amenas is proof of that speed and tactical efficiency over a vast terrain.

Unless the Chadian and Nigerien forces within Serval teach their comrades how to drive a ‘technical’ combat vehicle at close to 200 km/h over rocks and through mull sand, the ECOWAS allies have no chance of effectively beating the mujahideen. They might, however, have managed to disperse them over the various Saharan states until the situation is ripe for them to return to northern Mali, or until the situation in southern Libya is rotten enough to take over local power in ways not unlike we have seen in Mali in the last year. Permanent drone and air warfare, as waged in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, will undoubtedly lead to many civilian

and economic networks of national, tribal, economic and jihadi-ideological nature. Unless this viewpoint is taken and unless all the various alliances, conflicts, and political contestations in the Sahara are taken into account, any solution to the current crisis in Mali will be ephemeral.

Building stable - let alone good - governance in Mali, to say nothing of building a viable democracy, or establishing peace and prosperity in northern Mali, will be a task of many years comparable to that in Afghanistan. The difference is that while the international community at least pretends to be interested in making an effort in Afghanistan, it has yet to realize this effort needs to be made in Mali on a similar scale.

In recent months there has been much talk of the “Afghanisation” of West Africa or “Africanistan”.²⁹

Until the start of Operation Serval these comparisons were out of place. With every step the international com-

munity takes in Mali, “Africanistan” could become more of a reality. Politics is largely a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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