

## Report

# Prospects of the Security and Political Situation in North Mali

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Since the outbreak of an internal, multi-dimensional, multi-factional war in north Mali, the world has wondered what the potential repercussions may be considering the coexisting terrorism, poverty, injustice and suffering. Each of the three directly involved parties seeks to maximise whatever is strategically accessible to impose a fait accompli that may force the others to resort to long and arduous rounds of negotiations during which the dominant party (i.e. the Jihadist Salafist movements, their allied smugglers, and arms traders) would have more time to entrench the status quo, strengthen its position, and put forward its own agenda.

## **Sudden War**

The current war started in north Mali – or what had been known for decades as Azawad – in mid- January 2012. Observers agree that it is a direct reflection of the collapse of the Libyan regime which had been an incubator for various separatist movements in the region, especially Tuareg movements that are active mainly in Mali and Niger. It also came to form a development in the state's collapse, which had begun gradually after the return of retired General Amadou Toumani Toure to power following the May 2012 elections.

Despite the severe congestion that has persisted for over a decade along borders with Mauritania, Niger and Algeria, and the dominance of organised groups (though not regarded as drug trafficking or illegal trade networks), a war of this magnitude was not anticipated even by the most discerning observers, especially as the balance of power was very dysfunctional and vague. Furthermore, the prospect of an extended war was ruled out because Mali continued to ignore the threats lingering on its boundaries, arguing that they were unsubstantial so long as they were far from Bamako and other large cities and thus were not conducive to any open confrontations. Accordingly, there was plenty of room for movement and action within their broad domain.

Although it is virtually a regionally- and internationally-recognised fact that armed groups labelled as terrorists and professional smugglers have managed to gain control of over 60% of the total area of Mali, and that it is impossible for a single state to eliminate and dismantle their alliance, regional powers and neighbouring countries continued to observe the situation (motionlessly and with the lack of serious coordination and a common will to come up with a military resolution), concerned that the desert has turned into a rear base for extremist militant groups and a safe haven for intercontinental smuggling networks. This may explain why the Toure administration was reluctant to fulfil its responsibilities and used the coup in the north as a card, despite its looming threat to neighbouring countries, to pressure all to collaborate militarily in order to liberate the "ungoverned portion" of Mali. However, the countries involved fabricated pretexts for the repudiation of "duty," ignoring the looming hazard. But developments in Libya rapidly transformed all balances and made what had not been foreseen a reality threatening the entire Maghreb-Sahel region, posing a challenge to the international community as a whole. Hounded by states, governments and intelligence services, the jihadist groups that were hiding in the deserts lived on ransoms from hostage-taking and "royalties" from protecting smuggling routes, now control a vast geographical area almost as big as France.

## **Libyan "Gifts" and the Berber Setting**

The Gaddafi regime for many years was the major driver of events in many Sahel countries, particularly Niger and Mali. It held the complex separatist Tuareg file and manipulated it to serve what it deemed necessary to ensure Libya's dominance in the region. The secret behind Libya's influence lies in the fact that Libya was the country that accommodated thousands of "masked" youth as a result of the devastating droughts that hit the region in the seventies and eighties. Such immense presence of uneducated and unskilled youth enabled the government to recruit and use mercenaries for expansionist wars – as was in the case with the Chadian regime of Hissene Habre in the early eighties – or to be dispatched as "jihad brigades" for the liberation of Palestine and Lebanon from Israeli invasion. They were also used in wars of attrition against

regimes whose orientations were not favoured by the then temperamental leaders of Tripoli, especially in Africa.

As soon as Libya withdrew those conflicts, the Tuareg seriously began to consider the revival of the "spirit of the revolution" in their countries of origin, thus sparking the renewable tendency of repeatedly aborted separatist trends. The first rebel movement was aborted in its initial stages in 1960, and another one broke out in 1990 under the command of Iyad Ag Ghali, the founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Azawad who later became a Salafist Sheikh leading the Ansar Dine (literally, "the Defenders of the Faith") movement, the most extreme and most popular arm of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Tuareg circles.

However, the separatist movement in the nineties soon split for religious or tribal reasons although it succeeded in imposing itself as an effective political partner in the Tamanrasset agreement with the Malian government in 1991 under the auspices of Algeria. The same agreement led to the signing of the National Charter of 1992 with the Malian government, in light of which the latter granted extended local powers to northern regions and allowed them design a development plan of their own. The plan included an increase of government investment in local development by creating infrastructure and securing jobs for Tuareg fighters and integrating them into Mali's administrative, military and security system.

Libya promised to harbour the opposers of the 2006 agreement, and integrated them into its military institution by overloading some of the security units with Tuareg personnel. These included Colonel Mohamed Ag Najim who subsequently became a commander of one of Gaddafi's most notorious brigades. Later, during the revolution against the regime, Ag Najim played an important role in smuggling arms to the rear front where Ibrahim Ag Bahanga (an ally) and his troops had already been present and were preparing to expand an armed rebellion launched in 2006 and resumed in 2009 with the participation of regional forces that were anxious and frustrated at Bamako's helplessness in dealing with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. However, Ag Bahanga died in a car accident in August 2011 before the mission was accomplished. His supporters had to quickly adjust to the factor his death.

Two months after Ag Bahanga's death, two Tuareg movements – namely the National Movement for Azawad (constituted mainly of intellectuals living in Europe, Mauritania and Burkina Faso) and the military faction of the Ag Bahanga movement, known as "The May 23, 2006 Democratic Alliance for Change" – decided to merge into the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad. The report was signed on 16 October 2011 without provoking the interest of any parties. The World Amazigh Congress (based in Paris) played an important role in the agreement and contributed effectively through a huge media machine to the imposition of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, presenting it to the world as a liberal liberation movement with secularist democratic thought as a term of reference.

It is widely held that the movement's members who were enrolled in the military units of the defeated Libyan army, heavily equipped with hardware and weapons, are the ones who launched a war on 17 January 2012 from Menaka to the suburbs of Aguelhok. Due to their quick operations, the members also received considerable support from al-Qaeda and its allies in the field. The movement's "conquests" proceeded steadily until it gained control over major northern cities with the cautious blessing and support of jihadist movements; and now it holds a tight grip on a strip that extends thousands of kilometres from Menaka to Lira.

Amidst the ecstasy of its quick victories against the collapsed Malian army, the movement hastened to unilaterally declare the independence of Azawad on 6 April 2012, declaring Gao its capital. It also appointed a transitional council of 28 members under the leadership of Bilal Ag Sharif (who belongs to an aristocratic family from the al-Fughas tribe and has close ties to Burkina Faso) to take over temporarily. The council also appointed Ag Najim as defence minister from among other several figures. But the

movement found itself in complete international isolation as it is not recognised by any country in the world. This is due to many factors, including the fact that the Tuareg, the spearhead of the separatist movement, do not constitute more than 10% of the population of the territory they share with other ethnic groups like the Songhai, the Fulani and the Arabs. In addition, the puritanical nationalist approach that some of the movement's leaders used to defend their venture triggered the concern and reservations of other groups, including the Arabs, who see the Republic of Azawad as Tuareg in terms of culture and orientation and Berber in terms of "identity." Furthermore, the frequent accusations of neutral humanitarian organisations against guerrillas of committing atrocities and outrageous violations of human rights in north Mali (including the Aguelhok massacre of over a hundred Malian soldiers, and other heinous murders, execution and rape) against other ethnic groups. Such accusations do not serve the image of the Azawadi political project.

Less than three months after the declaration of independence, the "sweeping" force of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad was defeated by the jihadist supporters of Ansar Dine and the Tawhid and Jihad movement, the allies of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (which was found later to be the actual master in the region). The National Movement's repeated attempts to reconcile with al-Qaeda's Tuareg battalion, Ansar Dine, were not sufficient to provide it with political legitimacy on the ground or accomplish what could be considered an indirect truce with fundamentalists that rejected the principle of secession and seek to establish an Islamic caliphate across West Africa and thus implement "the Law of God."

### **The Jihadists' Temporary Victory**

The hype about the allies of National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad overshadowed many details of the actual scene. Active affiliates in Paris supported by the World Amazigh Congress, "attachés" of the French government, and activists in nearby countries like Mauritania and Burkina Faso portrayed all victories the achieved as the result the movement's work, ignoring the fact that al-Qaeda's fighters are in fact the ones who are out in the battlefield. Al-Qaeda followed a smart strategy in this regard, namely to "let lesser adversaries enjoy their alleged victories and take on greater ones;" and so far, they have actually achieved what they had planned for in the ongoing round of debate. The movement's followers evacuated from Gao and the whole north and resorted to the hills north of Kidal where fighters camped, waiting to regroup. According to a number of reports, nearly 600 volunteers have joined the movement.

Now that the battle for control of the north ends, balances are determined, and Azawad is ravaged, one realizes, at first glance at least, that the dominant groups are jihadists under the command of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of al-Qaeda's leaders in the region and the main coordinator and field commander of al-Qaeda's activities. These activities are empowered by nearly two thousand fighters as follows: 600 al-Qaeda fighters, 700 Ansar Dine fighters, 300 Tawhid and Jihad Movement and Boko Haram Volunteers, and about 300 volunteers that recently flowed in from Asia (especially Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan) and some Arab countries. A number of these factions have initiated the implementation of shari'ah, carrying punishment in cases of adultery, drunkenness, and theft despite their outstanding failure to provide basic daily services, establish security, and facilitate people's livelihood thus causing the numbers of displaced Malians in neighbouring countries to exceed half a million distributed mainly between Algeria, Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.

With the latest developments and variables, it appears that there were prearrangements between the Salafi jihadists and their three divisions (Ansar Dine, Tawhid and Jihad, al-Qaeda) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad behind the blitz that took place in north Mali to set aside their differences, eliminate the military grip, and then be able to establish understanding and joint action. However, the arrangements suddenly flopped when the movement, at the behest of its strong supporters in Paris and some neighbouring countries, wanted to contain al-Qaeda and tried to limit its role in the field as a prelude to expulsion from the territory as per the strategy that had been

adopted in Paris and Nouakchott as a condition for the support of the movement since its launch. However, what actually happened is that al-Qaeda and its associates strengthened their position and doubled the criticalness of the threat it has been posing to the region and the world, having dominated the arena and operating as a state with an area of over 830,000 square kilometres.

## The "Centre" in Crisis

The collapse of the Malian army's "front defenses" and units before the separatist alliance of Tuareg and jihadist movements resulted in the sequential fall of major cities and villages in the north, creating a wave of wide resentment in all the political, security and popular circles in the country. Toure was accused of "running from the battlefield," weakening the army, disregarding Tuareg rebels, and even colluding with al-Qaeda and hiding bribes it offered to senior officers and staff to extend its influence and tighten control on the economic fabric of the region.

On 21 March 2012, the Green Berets stationed at the Kati barracks on the outskirts of Bamako attacked the presidential palace. Toure spared his life with the help of the U.S. Embassy, which sent him an armoured vehicle and sheltered him after his young bodyguards succeeded in getting him out from the palace stealthily. He had been preparing to hold presidential elections in April 2012 and then hand over power to a new elected president. His opponents adopted a populist discourse based on the immediate commencement of reorganisation and armament of the collapsed army, and taking control of all the capabilities at his disposal for the restoration of the north and the expulsion of armed groups.

With the new leaders' inability to identify the tools and mechanisms of implementing their program, it seemed self-evident, since Toure's overthrow, that what had happened in Bamako was, only the exploitation of some thirsty junior officers to turn the balances of electoral power that seemed to be in favour of Toure, and thus prevented the anticipated event. The coup deepened the rifts of internal differences and turned attention away from the Jihadists as they advance on all northern battle fronts after having subdued the remaining army units that defend what they could without the support of a central command. It also left the civilians living in the three northern states (i.e. Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu) to face the wrath of "separatist" terrorism alone through successive crises due to the decrease of basic necessities such as water, medicine, electricity and so on. The imposition of shari'ah on the population only worsened and complicated the situation.

In this complex development, all the influential international (e.g. the United Nations, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the European Union) and all neighbouring countries unanimously condemned the coup. Having frozen Mali's membership, ECOWAS formed a liaison committee chaired by the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaore, to oversee mediation and reach a compromise that could end the constitutional and political crisis in the south and restore the country's territorial integrity. It condemned the separatist efforts and threatened to use force to restore the control of central authority in occupied areas. However, acute polarization in the south between the supporters and opponents of the coup befuddled Compaore's diplomatic efforts despite his breakthroughs. He conducted rounds of painstaking talks and reached a constitutional formula to resolve the crisis by applying the merits of the constitution, curtailing the role of the coup and the formation of a transitional government as a prelude to the rearrangement of internal issues and the creation of circumstances conducive to the restoration of the north.

Under the plan, Dioncounda Traore, President of the National Assembly and a close associate of the ousted president, was appointed interim president while Modibo Diarra, an astrophysicist and the son of the former president, Moussa Traore, was appointed interim prime minister. The reluctance of the military junta jeopardised the endeavours and paralysed government action. The interim president was even physically assaulted grotesquely in his office on 21 May 2012 by protesters affiliated with the military and

opponents of his leadership plan for the interim period and had to be transferred to Paris for treatment. After more than two months of a "treatment exile," he returned to Bamako on 27 July 2012 with a new political plan to end the crisis and strife, giving the rebels in the north enough time to prepare for any military action that may be taken against them.

Presented by the interim president in a public speech on 29 July 2012, the plan is based on the formation of a supreme council of state consisting of the president and two deputies – one to be responsible for political affairs, particularly the arrangement for general elections, and the other to coordinate security work and the reform of the military institution by developing a plan to restore the north. A government of national unity comprising various political and social figures was to be appointed to ensure the proper functioning of the government at this stage and give the international community an acceptable, reliable partner. The president also suggested the formation of a national transitional council comprising representatives of all segments of society, political, intellectual and social trends in the country as a consultant body for pressing issues.

To overcome the debacle of secession in the north, the president's plan suggested the establishment of a national committee that would coordinate with regional mediators negotiations with armed groups in hopes of finding political and diplomatic solutions to the crisis that may spare all parties the evil of resorting to force.

Finally, the president highlighted his confidence in the security forces that had previously compromised his safety by announcing that they would ensure the safety of institutions and political figures in Bamako. This move reveals that he implicitly rejects regional organisations' proposal to deploy special forces to secure the transitional institutions and ensure the safety of officials.

Until this article was written, endeavours and negotiations were under way to implement the plan's first steps, which are the establishment and composition of the proposed bodies, and which will have the legitimacy required to handle the situation seriously at all levels, particularly the military.

## Neighbours and Conflicts of Interest

Neighbouring countries have taken positions that vacillate between concern and caution about the war in the north and the political crisis in the south. Each country adheres to its own agenda, thus intensifying the underlying rifts that often prevent serious coordination for the confrontation of what has become known as terrorism in the region. Despite the "field state" mechanism that unites Mali with Mauritania, Algeria and Niger, and the fact that they have declared their will to tackle the security challenge, interaction with developments on the ground is still limited. This is due to the fact that Algeria, which is the most important regional military power, blatantly disapproves of any military action beyond its borders. It also disapproves of any form of cooperation with non-"field state" parties that may directly result in the deployment of foreign troops to its borders. Some observers believe that Algeria, which exported radical Islamism to the region in the nineties, does not want jihadist fighters encircled militarily, which means they will abandon their positions in the remote deserts and jungles of Mali under military pressure and return to Algeria's inland, thus intensifying pressure on Algerian security.

Algeria had attempted earlier to contact Ansar Dine and the Tawhid and Jihad movement directly and frequently to reach a truce and free three of its diplomats who had been abducted from its consulate in Gao on 5 April 2012. France's continued pressure (the most recent of which being on 5 July 2012 when the new French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, visited Algiers) could not force Algeria to reconsider its position on potential military action for the liberation of north Mali and the elimination of jihadist presence. Algeria still insists on giving priority to political and diplomatic solutions to overcome the political crisis in Bamako and the problem of north Mali, and may consider other ways of containing al-Qaeda in the region when the time comes. In anticipation of

an emergency, it has sent more than 10,000 soldiers to close its borders with Niger, Mali and Mauritania and control remote desert routes.

Mauritania, however, was until recently the only country in the region that prompted its armed forces to fight al-Qaeda in inland Mali in response to the previous attacks in Limgheti (2005), Ghalawiya (2007) and Tourin (2008) as well as other operations such as the assassinations of French tourists in Aleg (2007) and an American in Nouakchott (2009), failed bombing attempts in Nouakchott and Nema, and the kidnapping of Westerners from Mauritanian territory. The immediate goal of Mauritania's military operations as declared was to prevent al-Qaeda members from gathering on its borders with Mali.

The current government blames the ousted regime in Bamako for not being resolute in its fight against terrorism and leaving the north under the control of "rogue groups," which encouraged it to adopt a strategy based on supporting separatist movements in the north in terms of supervision and funding to create an alternative to the central government in Bamako that could be relied upon later to contain al-Qaeda and expel it from the region. It is thus no coincidence that Nouakchott is the first centre and temporary political capital of Azawad and where the leaders of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad are based. Separatist leaders are taking advantage of their proximity to the field and enjoy considerable support from many movements, political parties, civil society organisations, and local figures that influence the ruling regime's orientations.

The humiliating collapse of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad fighters at the hands of al-Qaeda overturned all of Mauritania's considerations, causing the extent the country's leaders to seek political and diplomatic solutions to break the impasse and avoid participation in any military action in north Mali as long as the jihadists keep away from its border – despite having originally been in favour of ardent military action against al-Qaeda and its allies.

Indeed, Mauritania's concern stems from several factors, the most important of which is the relatively large number of Mauritaniens involved in jihadist organisations, particularly the Masked Battalion or the Tareq ibn Ziyad battalion. Many have taken on influential leadership functions and responsibilities in the Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa such as Mufti Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou. Mauritania also fears that the growing influence of its nationals in jihadist organisations that are active in Mali may attract youth within the social and religious fabric of society; and this may affect a number of issues in the country, including the overtaking of the historical role of dominant Sufi Islam to a new "superfluous" version of Islam that may feed the tension and friction that exist within the local religious establishment.

With the possibility that the country may turn into a haven for jihadist groups in the event that they are attacked by regional powers, the government proceeded to close its border with Mali at the outbreak of battle, leaving only certain points open for the reception of refugees from north Mali that amount to nearly one million refugees. All this is happening because of frequent news about the status of the military forces on high alert with the presence of elements of the French and U.S. armies for technical support and supervision.

Niger's calculations were more accurate and had more impact on the scene. With its Tuareg population, Azawagh is subject to the contagion of secession as was the case in the nineties when Nigerien Tuareg movements, like their counterparts in Mali, launched insurgencies against the central government in Niamey. Despite the minor – and almost intangible – differences between Nigerien and Malian Tuareg, the Nigerien government seemed more willing and organised than the Malian government to contain any potential internal mobility. Accordingly, Niamey did not hesitate to join the states advocating military force for the defeat of separatist Tuareg movements and the elimination of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In fact, it has been pushing for it on all fronts through the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the "field states," and bilateral frameworks with either France, the United States, the European Union.

In any case, the Nigerien government openly expressed its willingness to cooperate with its armed forces in any international or regional military efforts to expel al-Qaeda from north Mali, and thus facilitate the abortion of the secession project (which is a violation of the principle of respecting and maintaining the borders inherited from colonialism as provided by the Organization of African Unity in 1963).

### **International Efforts and the Apparition of War**

The international community seems confused about what is going on in Mali due to the overlap of the political dimensions of the Malian crisis and the issue of secession in the north with the control of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb over the entire northern territory. While ECOWAS seeks to rearrange internal matters southward to overcome the political crisis and create as much of a consensus as possible to then demand military intervention in the north, other international stakeholders, including some neighbouring countries, seem to be very pessimistic about the potential results of any military interventions. Only France is pushing for a quick military solution, pledging to provide all the military and financial supplies the armies of the region need. The armies themselves plan to deploy about 3,300 troops to carry out the mission provided that Mali restore at least some of its political wellbeing and stability in its institutions beforehand and start to adjust its crumbling military institution.

Such intervention would remain subject to an international umbrella through a Security Council decision. ECOWAS sought to have such a decision issued twice but to no avail. This is due to the fact that the military plan submitted and deadlines of intervention, sources of funding and targeted objectives are still vague to many influential international actors, such as the United States and the United Nations itself.

Observers noted the United States' lack of enthusiasm to rush into direct military action in a matter that has been partly classified as 'combating terrorism,' choosing to wait and see what will come from regional efforts regarding the preparation for military intervention. Perhaps the U.S. assessment of the situation is influenced by the position of countries like Algeria. In any case, the United States can, if it wants, be actively involved in the war on al-Qaeda through its huge arsenals and hidden but strong presence in many countries in the region through the deployment of troops and the use of stealth drone aircraft as well as support and framing assignments for the armies involved in the operations. However, the United States still seeks to avoid military solutions and encourages political and humanitarian action to contain the crisis.

As for ECOWAS, it appears that those who are in favour of war in parallel with the French position are frequenting consultations and coordination in order to convince international organisations of the need to take mass military action to eradicate terrorism on the coast and to end separatism. In a meeting in Bamako on 12-13 August 2012, the army leaders of the ECOWAS member countries adopted a military plan to be implemented in three phases:

1. Deployment of ground troops in Bamako and in areas adjacent to the north to secure the institutions and carry out examinations and preparations
2. Formation of the unified command which shall be entrusted with field coordination of military action  
Nigeria is likely to be in the lead because it is the only country capable of securing air cover for any field operations in the region
3. Actual commencement of military operations targeting the strongholds of dominant movements on the ground to free north Mali of their grip

Some circles believe that ECOWAS may request air and logistic support from NATO. NATO is not likely to take part, even symbolically, in any military activity in the region without the endorsement of a Security Council decision. This brings us back to square one: Will the Malian government be ready within the time-frames set by the international community to come up with the political and diplomatic initiatives necessary to push the Security Council to take action in such situations?

The Sahel region is on the verge of serious developments that will have significant implications and chilling effects on all of its countries. This is because the expanding Jihadist Salafist trends in Africa and the flourishing factional tendencies for secession have no boundaries and will certainly not be confined to Mali.

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