



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

The Crisis of North Mali and Possible Outcomes

Dr. Sidi Ahmed Ould Ahmed Salem



Under the influence of armed jihadist groups and Tuareg separatists, north Mali separated from the south in March 2012. But security and political problems are not contained within this region. The south is also facing a political stalemate which, if not dealt with, can lead to the collapse of the state in which case would make it impossible to regain the north. Indeed, to prevent a crisis and to preserve what is left of the south, it is important for the state to limit the control and influence of the military over political affairs in Bamako.

The collapse of the state and growing military influence

Mali presents a particularly complex political and security situation. Until March 2012, this West African country was a democratic state led by an elected president, with flourishing multiparty democracy and freedom of expression. But that democracy and pluralism became a thing of the past after the ousting of President Amadou Toumani Touré in a military coup led by Major Amadou Haya Sanogo, leader of the military council, who called on the National Committee for a democratic rescue and rehabilitation of the state.

At the beginning of 2012, the region of Azawad became a centre of conflict between Sanogo's battalion and other Malian battalions, and the militant Tuareg recruits of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad. Sanogo's battalion withdrew as a result of attacks by Malian and Libyan Tuaregs who were active in Gaddafi's military until his defeat, after which they crossed through Algeria and Niger into Mali with their ammunition and equipment. Upon their arrival in Mali, they found an inefficient, ill-prepared Malian army with a weak infrastructure and obsolete weapons from the 1970s. The army was quickly defeated by the militants and fled, leaving a region that makes up more than 66% of Malian territory in the hands of the Tuareg militants. Soon, the Jihadist Salafi groups also came to know of the Tuareg movement.

Since Mali's independence from France in 1960, the north has often witnessed Tuareg rebellions. While many deals and treaties between the Malian government and the Tuareg were brokered by Algeria, this was the first time that the army withdrew completely from Azawad and left the area under the unrestricted control of armed groups.

Under external pressure, mainly in the form of sanctions from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Mali's suspension from the regional body, Sanogo appointed Dioncounda Traoré, a parliamentary speaker, as interim president of the Republic of Mali on 6 April 2012. Dioncounda Traoré appointed Sheikh Modibo Diarra, who was associated with former president Moussa Traoré (1968-1991), as prime minister. But it seems the 'handover' to civilian rule was only a tactical measure to allow Sanogo's revolutionaries to retain control over political affairs. The fact of the matter is that they seized power with the coup and remain in control of all political matters.

Prime Minister Diarra was overthrown on 11 December 2012 and replaced by Diango Cissoko, a move that was orchestrated by Sanogo and his fellow militants from their military base in the Bamako suburb of Kati. This move has come to be known as Sanogo's second coup and confirms the extent of the control that his group has on everything that happens in Bamako despite their seeming distance from public affairs.

Many international actors, especially the United States, believe that to avoid a crisis in southern Mali, multiparty elections must be held in April 2013. If successful, this could grant the political system constitutional legitimacy and prompt the army to return to its barracks in the north, thus freeing the newly elected government of the burden of dealing with that region.

This solution is not guaranteed and it may take longer than three months to implement. Meanwhile, the unstable situation in the south may attract further competition for influence between the military and the numerous civilian groups in Bamako. This means that the jihadi militants in the north will find more opportunities to consolidate their presence and grip on the Azawad territory. However, the centres of influence in Mali are

distributed between several divergent and competing parties, including the military – which is the most powerful – and civilian parties. As long as the influential roleplayers remain divided, they will be unable to find a solution to the crisis in the north and the revolutionaries will continue to control every aspect of public affairs.

There is also disparity in the regional and international positions on the proposed solutions to the crisis, making the problem more complicated and the solution even more remote.

Resolving the crisis: Diplomacy or armed conflict?

It is clear that regional and international attitudes about the crisis in north Mali are divided between two approaches. The first is a diplomatic position seeking dialogue between the conflicting parties and includes the most influential countries in the region. Countries calling for this approach are Algeria, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and, to some extent, the United States.

The second position calls for a military resolution and wants to execute a 'quick' war that would, in theory, expel the jihadi militants from the north and restore full control over all Malian territory to the government. Some ECOWAS members and other countries are enthusiastic about this option including Niger, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, South Africa, Morocco and France.

The diplomatic approach does not discount the option of adopting a military strategy should dialogue fail. It is based on encouraging militant Tuareg organisations (Ansar Al-Din and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) to enter into direct negotiations with the government in Bamako within the framework of these organisations' recognition of the legitimacy of the Malian state and negotiations for political and social solutions to the long unresolved issue of the injustices that the Tuareg have been subjected to since independence in 1960. Attempts to implement this approach began on 4 December 2012, when the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, representing ECOWAS as the mediator, gathered representatives of the Malian government, Ansar Dine and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in Ouagadougou.

Jihadist organisations, including the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, which is linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, were absent from the Ouagadougou dialogue. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa was also excluded although it was one of the first to call for such a dialogue in October 2011. Compaoré succeeded in gathering these groups, hoping to convince them of the need to put an end to the violence in Azawad. It is clear that the Ouagadougou process, which is still in its early stages, does not see the need to include Jihadists in the north and affiliated with Al Qaeda, making it likely that they will fail to reach a mutual understanding between all the concerned parties in the region.

This has reinforced the position in favour of a political solution and having the parties meet under UN Security Council Resolution 2085, which was adopted unanimously on 20 December 2012. While it allows for the deployment of African forces to Mali to help Malian authorities recover areas in the north, the resolution did not state how the force would be financed, leaving this up to voluntary contributions by member states. The resolution is also vague regarding its agenda, and allows the taking of "all necessary measures" in line with international law in order to regain control of north Mali. The resolution also encourages dialogue between Bamako, Ansar Dine and the National Movement and excludes other armed movements in Azawad. Furthermore, it stresses Algerian and Mauritanian involvement.

The United States has urged a diplomatic resolution as armed conflict may cause a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. The fighting has already resulted in the displacement of 370,000 people, including 167,000 internally displaced people within Mali. Thousands of Azawad refugees have also fled to Niger, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and southern Algeria. In the event of war, the humanitarian situation will worsen and will increase the number

of displaced persons both in and outside of Mali, a situation the Sahel states will not be able to tackle successfully.

In addition to seeking a swift diplomatic solution, ECOWAS, France and South Africa, seek to achieve decisive military action which would, if successful, regain the government's control of the rebellious north. To this end, ECOWAS held a summit in Abuja on 11 November 2012 to plan for military intervention, an agreement that would create a regional force of 3,000 troops and help the Malian army recapture the north. It is expected that western countries, especially France, will provide logistical support for the force and necessary strategic intelligence obtained by unmanned drones.

A successful and conclusive diplomatic solution seems unlikely as long as there is disunity among parties within Azawad and among its people with regard to restoring authority in the region to the government. Moreover, the ambiguity and lack of cogent strategy among the parties pushing for military intervention makes this a difficult option to implement. Countries supporting a military solution in north Mali have not disclosed the number of soldiers they would contribute or determined who will finance the war or lead the forces. The Malians want to assume leadership of the intervention forces while other ECOWAS states argue that each party should take charge of coordinating particular operations. In addition, the United Nations, which is supposed to contribute a large share of the material costs of the military plan, has not yet shown its willingness to enter the war.

Will ECOWAS be successful in expelling the jihadists?

The Chief of Staff in the Ivory Coast, General Soumaila Bakayoko, declared on 16 December 2012 that the leaders of the ECOWAS armies had finalised details of a coordinated military intervention in north Mali aimed at expelling what he called "terrorist groups." However, joint African and Malian forces will confront Jihadist groups that are familiar with the Azawad desert and mountains and have strong relations with the inhabitants of the region, making the task of the African military force very difficult. It is clear that Jihadist groups have benefited from the unstable situation in north Mali as rampant unemployment among Azawad youth enables armed groups to attract many to their ranks.

Stemming from the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is one of the oldest organisations in Azawad. Since late 2006, militants of the group, also known as the Emirate of the Desert, sought to make north Mali a haven for gathering western hostages who were abducted in the Sahel or Maghreb countries, a safe passage for convoys smuggling goods and drugs, and a rear base to put pressure on Algeria and Mauritania. Since the withdrawal of the Malian army, militants within Emirate of the Desert were concentrated in Timbuktu alongside militants of Ansar Dine, who form the Tuareg Front for the Salafi Group in Azawad. The movement is led by supporters of the former Malian consul to Saudi Arabia and a tribal and political leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly. An influential actor in the region, he was the field commander that led the rebellion against the government in Bamako. Through Algerian mediation he has, on occasion, reconciled with the government. Ansar Dine is considered a close ally of Algeria despite its Jihadist-Salafi orientation.

At the same time that Ansar Al-Din spread in Kidal and AQIM spread in Timbuktu, members of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) extended their influence to Gao. This distribution of territory is based on social and tribal ties. It is therefore natural to assume that Ansar Dine controls Kidal, the area of the Tuareg al-Fughas tribe from which Iyad Ag Ghaly descended. Similarly, the Arab Amhar tribe heavily populates the city of Gao and is the tribe Sultan Ould Bady Al Mekni Abu Ali, the leader of MUJWA, is from. Among MUJWA, there are volunteer militants who came from various Arab countries like Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco as well as militants from Nigeria (Boko Haram members in particular) Chad, Niger and so on.

It is difficult to determine the number of Jihadist militants in Azawad as their number has increased since the outbreak of the crisis in early 2012. It is common for Al Qaeda

recruits to assimilate with other groups out of ideological solidarity, making it difficult to define the groups' sizes. While some reports state the members of the jihadi movements before the crisis was no more than 3,000, this number has doubled and approached 6,000 when they were joined by members from Boko Haram, Chad, Sudan, Niger and Burkina Faso as well as the five Arab Maghreb countries. Many of these fighters may have obtained sophisticated weaponry from their participation in the Libyan war, and the ransoms they received after the release of western hostages and controlling the commercial networks both legally and illegally has provided them with a lot of money.

In addition to the three jihadist movements, there is a secular Tuareg movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which announced the independence of Azawad in April 2012 after victories against the Malian army. Although the group is mostly Tuareg, it contains a small number of Arab Azawad locals. Although the number of militants is estimated to be 2,000 troops, most of whom worked in Libya and crossed through Algeria after the fall of Gaddafi, they were the first to face the Malian army and expand their control over most of Azawad. However, their military influence on the ground has since been replaced by that of the Jihadist Salafi movements. The MNLA's political wing is active, mainly in France and Belgium, and continues to have a presence in some media and diplomatic spheres. The MNLA's separatist goals are unlikely to see the light of day as its influence was displaced by those of the jihadist movements and their differing approach. Ansar Dine, for example, wants to implement Islamic law in Azawad and spread it to other parts of Mali; its members, thus, do not want separation. The MNLA's aim of separation is also subject to other obstacles such as Algeria, a powerful and prominent country in the region, and Niger, neither of which would allow the establishment of a Tuareg state on their borders as this would threaten their security especially since the population of southern Algeria and western Niger are mainly Tuareg.

Many reports agree that, if war broke out, the ECOWAS military might be able to regain control of the three cities in Azawad – Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao – but it would still be unable to control the vast Azawad deserts that could provide a safe haven for armed Jihadist movements. The terrain of the region is favourable for armed gangs, offering a variety of shelters (canyons, caves and overhanging rocks), and there will be alternate and inaccessible sites that ECOWAS forces will have a difficult time penetrating. The mountainous region in the northwest highlands of Adrar Ifoghas in northeastern Azawad, for example, is a perfect hideout and an excellent point for surveillance and early warning.

Azawad: The heart of strategic interests

The Azawad region has attracted a high degree of international attention because of its rich mineral resources and strategic geographic location. Oil, gas and uranium phosphate reserves have already been discovered, and all of this wealth increases the desire of foreign powers to secure their interests north Mali.

Investigations carried out by the French company, Total, in the Taoudeni basin in Mauritania, east of Azawad, proved the existence of important oil reserves. During the presidency of Toumani Touré, the government granted exploration contracts to six foreign companies. In addition, the United States hopes to control the region to effectively combat Colombian drug traffickers passing through the Azawad desert under the protection of armed Jihadist organisations. To the European Union, however, control of this aspect may allow better monitoring and surveillance of the flow of illegal immigration through the Mediterranean.

At the regional level, a clear disagreement arose between Algeria and Morocco with regards to this crisis. While Algeria supports the effort to negotiate, trying to persuade its Azawad allies (i.e. Ansar Dine) to engage with Bamako, the Moroccans stand firmly behind ECOWAS and support a military solution.

Some Algerian media sources accuse Morocco of being affiliated with MUJWA but this has not been confirmed by neutral sources. The operations of this group have targeted

Algerian interests since October 2011 when members of MUJWA kidnapped three western hostages (two Spaniards and an Italian) from the desert refugee camps near the city of Tindouf in southern Algeria. Also, there was a recent operation that led to the kidnapping of the Algerian consul and six of his aides in Gao.

Conclusion

Clearly, the political crisis and security situation in north Mali are closely linked to the Libyan revolution and the resulting smuggling of arms to north Mali after Gaddafi's death, and it continues to take on disturbing proportions regionally and internationally.

The region of Azawad, which is a point of contact between the countries of the Maghreb and West Africa, is about to become an "Islamic emirate" controlled by a collection of Jihadist groups. In addition to the monopoly of military power, these groups have close relations with civil society groups through whom they have also woven close relations with Azawad locals through their provision of medicine, transportation and food. There has also been intermarriage between members of Jihadist groups and Azawad families. However, the local population's feelings toward the Jihadists may change because of their tendency to demolish graves in regions they control, especially Timbuktu which is famous as the city of the 333 saints – an act that does not sit well with a large portion of the Sufi-oriented population. They have also prohibited games and have imposed the Afghan-style veil on local women, an affront to their local culture. Moreover, they have enforced arcane laws which they believe to be based on Islamic legal tenets such as flogging and chopping off thieves' hands, without taking into account the strong and just judicial conditions under which such practices should be held. It is expected that a persistence of such practices will result in outrage that will end with a rupture between the Jihadist groups and the local population.

ECOWAS is seeking an urgent military solution to expel the Jihadi groups from Azawad and restore the government's control over the north. However, its intervention could result in further racial and ethnic tension, perhaps dragging the region into a civil war between negroes, Tuareg and Arabs. The Arabs might see ECOWAS soldiers as coming to support the Songhai and Fulani at their and the Tuareg's expense.

Igniting the conflict in Azawad will affect the entire Sahel region which has already seen a lot of conflict in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Togo, Guinea, Casamance (southern Senegal) and the Darfur crisis in western Sudan. This could cause Azawad to become a source of instability in the region.

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Copyright © 2013, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.