

Position Paper

Northern Mali Clashes Pose Threat of Regional Conflict

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Malian boy looks at troops in the northern town of Diabaly in Mali on 22 January 2013 [Nic Bothma/EPA]

Abstract

Armed clashes in the city of Kidal in northern Mali between the Azawad movements and Mali forces are part of a long-standing tension in Azawad; however, the present moment is particularly precarious. The French are giving serious thought to confronting jihadist groups that are becoming increasingly prevalent in the region, expanding from the north of Mali up to Libya. Libya is experiencing increasing levels of armed unrest and Niger is still in the midst of a fragile peace process. The region's governments are preoccupied with the war on Boko Haram, whose resources and activities have increased. In addition, numerous other parties have entered the crisis with conflicting agendas: Algeria, which has historically had a major influence in the Azawad region; Morocco, which recently began to creep economically into the Sahel region; and Mauritania, which has a close relationship with some of Azawad society's components and a hidden hand in the insurgency.

Introduction

The bloody clashes that took place recently in the city of Kidal in northern Mali, repercussions of which spread to the entire region of Azawad, are unsurprising given that the region has experienced fragility and volatility over the last few decades. Kidal is considered the capital of Adrar des Ifoghas, a remote area in the far northeast of the region whose demographic composition is dominated by Tuareg nationalism. The crisis was exacerbated by the delayed intervention of regional and international powers – their symptoms- based approach resulted in many fragmentary agreements which collapsed

before ever being implemented, creating a fire hazard that could ignite at any given moment.

Prime minister's visit ignites conflict

The city of Kidal was left in a state of uncertainty in June 2013 after the Mali government and armed Azawad movements signed an internationally-sponsored agreement in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. The provisions of the agreement neither permanently separated Kidal from the Republic of Mali nor did they return Kidal to self-governance. The area then remained the arena for the Azawad movement's activities and the seat of its political and military leaders, despite the presence of the Mali military ruler, his forces and French and African troops. Meanwhile, and in line with the agreement, groups of fighters belonging to armed movements remained in camps outside the city.

Recently, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) convened a meeting in Kidal that included the Supreme Council for the Unity of Azawad and a dissident faction of the Arab Azawad movement in order to discuss the future of the Azawad region and coordinate for the future. This sent a clear message to the Mali government that its sovereignty over the city of Kidal was incomplete and merely symbolic. In response, the Prime Minister of Mali, Moussa Mara, decided to visit the city on 17 May 2014, in an attempt to re-assert Mali governmental control. He was to visit the city under the protection of international troops, particularly a French contingent. The MNLA considered the visit an attempt to bless the city's assimilation into the state of Mali before any negotiations even started and thus provoked people to demonstrate against the visit. They then swept through the city with their forces on the morning which the prime minister was scheduled to arrive. Following clashes with the Mali army, the MNLA managed to expel the army from the city's centre and seized control of most of the neighbourhoods as well as the government headquarters in the city. It detained the prime minister at an African military base outside the city after preventing his plane from landing at the city's airport. The Prime Minister thereafter returned to the south to announce that his government had entered into war with separatist movements in the north.

In the immediate aftermath of the prime minister's declaration of war on the Azawadi militants, the Mali Military Command hurriedly sent reinforcements towards Kidal in order to support its forces controlling a few final strongholds on the southern outskirts of the city. The forces they sent were led by the Mali army's Assistant Commander of General Staff, General Al-Haji Ag Gamou, a Tuareg from the Imghad tribes that have historic animosity with the Ifoghas tribes controlling the region. The general arrived accompanied by dozens of gunmen from his own tribe and this was perceived as a form

of provocation by the armed movements and tribal groups in the region. In response, the MNLA hastily called for the mobilization of its ranks. Likewise, the Tuareg Ifoghas took offence that a commander from their historic enemies had been sent. The Supreme Council for the Unity of Azawad, which represents the political and military arm of the Ifoghas tribes in the region, then publicly announced these actions exacerbated the existing political and security concerns of the Azawadi movements and the Mali government by adding well-established and highly sensitive social complexities to the conflict.

Another response from the Council was to declare war alongside the Tuareg and Arab militants. Attention began to focus on the border areas adjacent to Azawad which constitutes a demographic extension of the Ifoghas groups and the Tuareg tribes sympathetic to them, and where hundreds of gunmen from those tribes control the Adharbas mountains and Tenere desert between Libya and Niger. These tribal groups are also widespread in the areas of Shanta Baradin between Niger and Mali, the Niger regions of Agadez and Arlit, the areas of Ubari and Ghat in Libya and the region of Ahaggar in southern Algeria.

Shortly after Mali reinforcements under the command of General Al-Haji Ag Gamou, reached the outskirts of Kidal, the Mali army began its operations on Wednesday morning, 21 May 2014, with a violent rocket attack that targeted the city's centre and neighbourhoods controlled by the rebels. The rebels responded with a counter-attack on Mali forces that led to the defeat of the latter and drove them out from their last strongholds by the evening. Dozens of Mali army soldiers fled to international peacekeeping forces' headquarters for protection, while others fled to the south. The battle resulted in the deaths of dozens of Mali soldiers, including Colonel Faisal Ag Kiba, a Tuareg from the Imghad tribes, once considered the right-hand man of General Al-Haji Ag Gamou.

The Kidal defeat was the beginning of a major breakdown in the Mali army's ranks in the north. Units deployed in the cities of Manika, near the border with Niger, Aguelhok, west of Kidal, and Onviv, north of Gao, quickly abandoned their positions after receiving information that the Azawadi gunmen were making their way toward those cities and towns. Simultaneously, Arab Azawad forces advanced towards the city of Gao, the largest city in the Azawad territory. More forces moved towards the city of Lira in west Azawad, on the border with Mauritania, and stationed themselves on the outskirts, waiting to attack.

Immediately after Mali forces' defeat in the north, the government announced that there would be three days of mourning in Bamako for soldiers and officers who had fallen in battle. Mali's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, also announced a unilateral cease-fire

and appealed to the French and international community to assist his government in confronting the Azawadi separatists.

Foreign intervention is likely to occur in the future due to the uncertainty experienced in the region since the expulsion of jihadist movements at the beginning of 2013. French and African troops have been engaged in confronting these movements, yet the root causes of conflict have remained because France has given priority to its “war against the jihadists” over resolving the decades-old crisis in the region.

Separation and Jihad

With the fall of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011, the region has seen an influx of fighters and arms. Libya was home to thousands of Tuareg fighters and imposed its influence on the region by hosting rebel leaders and curtailing Azawadi activists’ movements. Military activity in Azawad has once again returned to the fore, accompanied by Salafi Jihadist military activity which formed its first nucleus in the region at the beginning of the last decade with the arrival of the first Saharan Emirate of Al-Qaeda battalions in the Islamic Maghreb.

After about ten months of regional control by jihadist movements and the MNLA, French forces appeared in early 2013 under the pretext of fighting terrorism and restoring sovereignty to the Republic of Mali over its territory. The French selected the MNLA as their partner in the war against jihadist groups, but it was a partnership defined in vague terms, with both parties being prematurely forced into a deal without due consideration to future repercussions. The French took advantage of the entrenched feud between Jihadist movements and the MNLA and thrust it into their war against Al-Qaeda and its allies without providing guarantees of the war’s duration.

Since the southern region of Azawad is dominated by the Songhai nation’s black population who are pro-Bamako, regaining control of Mali was not difficult with the presence of French troops. The Mali administration therefore returned easily to the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, Purim and Gaussian; but those areas witnessed many murders on the basis of colour and race in the process. Many whites were detained at that time and they continue to languish in Bamako’s prisons. The French specifically maintained the city of Kidal and allowed the Azawadi movements to remain within the city with complete freedom of movement, returning partial control to the Mali government through a military ruler who lives in the protection of a battalion comprised of the Mali army, French troops and MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) forces.

France's relationship with parties to the conflict

Mali's refusal to make any concessions to the Azawadi movements is an attempt to exploit the French's presence in the region to its advantage. Since France seeks to resolve the situation and is devoted to the "war on jihadist movements", Mali believes France needs it and anticipates its indulgence in the region. On the other hand, the Azawadi movements, especially the MNLA, hold the view that they have amply supported the French in their war against jihadist groups and that France is indebted to them for their participation. Thus, they believe France should pressure Mali to make concessions to their advantage to put an end to the "historic injustice" suffered by their population over the last few decades.

In contrast, the French see themselves as the dominant party and Mali realizes the reason it was able to return to the north is the French troops' presence and that once those troops leave the region, Azawadi re-occupation by jihadist and separatist movements is a possible and likely scenario. Such a position is borne from the 2012 experience when those movements managed to forcibly remove the Mali authority from all Azawad lands.

If the French abandon the region, the Azawadi movements will not be able to simultaneously withstand the jihadist movements on the one hand and the Mali army on the other. This is evident from the clash between them and the jihadists in mid-2012, when jihadist movements were able to remove the MNLA from major cities within a short span of time after a few minor clashes.

The recent events in Kidal force the Mali government to review its relationship with the French and African troops on whose support it has relied to extend its control over the city and to allow the Prime Minister to travel there. When the armed movements prevented the Prime Minister from entering the city, it was assumed that international troops had come to support the Mali government to extend its control over the entire territory. However, the French only sought to send a message to the Mali government that matters are not as Bamako desires and that Mali's return to the north as leaders, as they were in the past, is unlikely. Hence, they seek to force Mali to review their obstinate stance towards the north and to make concessions. In turn, Mali will realize that any concessions made will have far-reaching consequences, because any concessions on Kidal, however small, will lead to similar demands in other cities and areas of the region.

Prelude to a mass upsurge

Developments in Kidal could simply have been a fleeting display of the long-standing tension in Azawad; however, the present moment is particularly precarious. The context of the current conflict, with French and international involvement, intensifies the conflict

in Azawad and is a warning sign of outbreaks which may be part of a mass upsurge. There are, however, some factors that could curb such an outbreak. First, France has the ability to prevent the escalation of conflict between the government and the Azawad movements. It has already succeeded in persuading Algeria to co-operate in dealing with northern Mali. Secondly, the countries in the region and outside powers concerned with the crisis agree that Jihadist movements are a danger to everyone and that they must be dealt with by force. Thirdly, the situation in Libya may attract Jihadists present in northern Mali, because it is far from French pressure and the Algerian army. Hence, France's need for the Azawad movement will decline and it will be able to compel them to make greater concessions.

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