



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Report

# Conflict in Northern Mali: Internal Facts and Regional Impacts



**Elhadj Ould Brahim\***

19 February 2012

Mid-January marked a new stage in the long historical struggle between the Malian government and the Touareg rebels. This new chapter emerges at a time where Malians are preparing for legislative and presidential elections expected to be held on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2012. The Malian Constitutional Council has yet to make any decisions on whether it will hold the elections on the due date or adjourning them to a more proper time.

The recent clash between the two parties is the fourth of its kind since the start of the conflict in 1963 during the reign of Mali's first communist president, Modibo Keita. The second round took place from 1990 to 1996 and ended with a peace agreement between the rebels and the government during the rule of former president Moussa Traore in Tamanrasset, Algeria in January 1991 that was interpolated by appendixes entitled the "National Pact." The agreement addressed major Touareg demands concerning the "administrative autonomy" of the three regions composing the Azaouad territory – Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao – in addition to 47.3% of the annual national budget.

On 23rd May 2006, the third round of conflict erupted after the failure of the undeclared mediation of the rebel leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, who was then the former leader of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azaouad (MPLA). The mediation took place on 22nd May between Ag Ghali, who "voluntarily" represented the MPLA rebels, and the Malian leader, current president Amadou Toumani Toure at Koulouba presidential palace. A day later, the Touareg rebels attacked the three main military bases of the Malian army in Kidal, Menaka, and Tassilit. This chapter of the conflict ended with a new peace agreement signed in neighboring Algeria two months later (in July 2006) and was emended by a "Memorandum Understanding" two years later in Tripoli, Libya following light skirmishes exploding after the death of rebel leader Baraka Cheikh, a member of the May 23rd Democratic Coalition for Change – a fragment of the old MPLA.

### **Forces Driving the Last Insurgency**

This phase of Touareg insurgency is driven by a new Touareg coalition called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azaouad (MNLA). This coalition consists of four main components:

1. The first and major force in the new coalition is Touareg rebels originally from Mali and Niger armed with heavy weaponry from Libya. (They had fought in the 32nd unit of the Libyan military under the command of Khamis Gaddafi.)
2. The ex-rebel fighters of the 23rd May Coalition led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga before his mysterious death in a car accident last August as per Malian and Algerian officials. The majority of these fighters joined the official Malian army as the 2006 peace agreement required but fled to join their Touareg fellows in their current struggle. Most of these rebel fighters belong to the Afoughas tribe, a small but very influential tribe in Northern Mali.
3. The Ansar Dine Movement, an Islamist sect led by Iyad Ag Ghali (who can now be considered the oldest and most prominent Touareg leader after the death of Ibrahim Ag Bahanga and the killing of Baraka Cheikh, a member of the Democratic Coalition of the 23rd May Movement. Baraka was found dead in Kidal in April 2008, and his death caused some clashes between Touareg rebels and the Malian army that were put to an end by the "Understanding Memorandum" signed by both parties in Tripoli, Libya in April 2008. Ag Ghali is a comrade in arms to all historic Touareg rebel leaders. He was assigned by the Malian government to serve as consul in Jeddah. This move was perceived by many observers as an attempt of Malian leader, Toumani Toure, to distance Ag Ghali from his strongholds in Kidal. Later, Ag Ghali was expelled by the Saudi government for alleged "sabotage." Ansar Dine, an Islamist propagation as considered by some Touareg sources in Azaouad, seeks the necessity of demonstrating the Azaouadi people's Islamic identity through the application of Shari'ah and the initiation of Islamic rule in the conflicted north. The movement united with other Touareg movements who

have no religious orientations whatsoever for the sake of mutual interests and because they have a mutual enemy, the Malian government.

4. The implicit role played by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in providing logistical support to some Touareg leaders that are now active in this conflict despite the keenness of Touareg rebel leaders and spokesmen – whether at home or in diaspora – to deny any connection to this terrorist organization. Each party accuses the other of secretly cooperating its enemies in aims of gaining the support of neighboring and foreign countries whose interests are constantly threatened by the activities of the QAIM. Reports published by Malian sources confirm the participation of some leaders of the armed organization in gruesome killings targeting Malian soldiers.
5. The fifth party is not armed and does not participate in fighting on the ground. It consists of tribal leaders, governors, administrators, mayors and former diplomats - mostly Arab and Touareg – who live in northern Mali which represents 70% of Malian territory (1,241,238 Km<sup>2</sup>). Among these figures are Hama Ag Mohamed, a prominent minister who served in Moussa Traore's government for a long period of time, and Ahmed Ould Sidi Mohamed, a former diplomat. In addition to these two figures, there are civil and military figures who fled the battlefield fearing in fear of revenge killings by mobs after the eruption of recent crisis.

### **Gaddafi's Death and its Regional Implications**

This round of fighting came only a few months after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime and the return of thousands of armed Touareg fighters that were armed and employed by Gaddafi internally in the Libyan Armed Forces, regionally such as in the war with Chad, and sometimes externally like in Lebanon. The new episode of the continuous struggle erupted on 17th January after Touareg rebels united under the new MNLA coalition suddenly attacked Malian forces in Menaka, a strategic city in eastern Mali. Menaka is considered the third most populated city in the Azaouad region after Timbuktu and Gao. The MNLA is described by a Touareg expert as the largest armed group in the history of the Touareg rebellion. It unites Arab and Touareg groups for the first time under the umbrella of one united front that represents the three regions that form the Azaouad region. The new coalition consists of unknown names that do not belong to the first generation of Touareg leaders like Bilal Ag Cherif, the MNLA's Secretary General, Mahmoud Ag Ali, head of its political bureau, and Abdulkarim Ag Matava, head of its revolutionary council.

Historically, Touareg demands found legitimacy in the lack of development and political representation of the Touareg groups inhabiting northern Mali. Rebel leaders accuse the central government in Bamako of practicing systematic political and economic discrimination against them. The government denies these allegations, arguing that the economic resources of the country are limited and that it has no policy of discriminating against its citizens based on race or ethnicity. However, the return of thousands of fighters from Libya in the backdrop of the Arab spring encouraged the rebels to demand "self-determination" and "independence" for the first time. As stated in the first statement issued by the 23rd May Movement, the movement has attacked Malian troops in response to provocations by the Malian government which – instead of focusing on building schools and roads – chose to militarize the Azaouad region by building more military bases and bringing more troops. The movement, therefore, has different aims than its predecessors in the nineties and Ag Bahanga, whose aims were easily suppressed by Malian government in 2006. The movement's political leader added that it "had benefited from all these experiences and will not accept any convolution of its demands." Ag Ali also maintained that the movement's main goal is to separate from the state of Mali "because the population of the region are ethnically and culturally different from that of the rest of the country."

In fact, the upper limit of the Touareg rebels' demands reaching "independence" and "self-determination" represent an immense threat to the unity and harmony of neighboring and non-neighboring countries including Senegal, Mauritania, Algeria, Chad, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Morocco, and Libya. If ethnic or cultural differences as mentioned in Ag Ali's statement are considered a principle for separation, every country in the Sahel and North Africa will split into at least two parts as a byproduct of the complicated and diverse ethnic, cultural and sometimes religious backgrounds of the populations. This situation is probably what pushed all neighboring countries except Mauritania to try to contain the crisis, hoping that it would be transient as it was in the past. On the humanitarian level, the recent conflict caused a massive crisis whose repercussions escalate day after day because of the influx refugees inside and outside the country. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement issued in this regard that more than twenty thousand refugees had fled – 10,000 to Niger, 9,000 to Mauritania, and 3,000 to Burkina Faso.

### **Senegal: A Friend Indeed**

Manifestations of the conflict in Northern Mali are enormous. In Senegal, the political situation is very intense in parallel with the situation in Mali. Casualties are claimed daily in protests organized by the oppositionist 23rd June Movement coalition for the renomination of the current president, Abdoulaye Wade, for a third term. Meanwhile, the Senegalese Constitutional Council did not approve the candidacy of the famous African singer, Youssou N'dour, who many see as Wade's chief rival in the elections, whose first round is expected to take place on 26th February 2012. Despite these concerns, the Senegalese government expressed its total support for its eastern neighbor and sent military reinforcements to help Malian troops overcome Touareg rebel forces that inflicted considerable losses upon the Malian army and expelled it from its chief sites in the north, as Mauritanian press reported.

### **Negotiation in Algeria**

Algeria had sponsored all previous peace agreements signed by the Malian government and the Touareg rebels exclusively. A few days after the recent clashes erupted, the Algerian government called for a cease-fire and invited both parties to negotiate to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. The Malian government in Bamako quickly responded to the call by sending a delegation headed by its Foreign Affairs Minister, Sumaylo Maiga. Maiga arrived in Algiers on 2nd February to meet representatives of the Touareg rebels in Azaouad including members of the 23rd May Movement and members of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azaouad.

The keenness of the Algerian government to have the two parties negotiate can be explained by its fears that any separation that may occur in its southern neighbor may affect its territorial integrity because of ethnic and historical links between the Tamazight people in all five of the Maghreb countries. Observers have great hopes that Algerian diplomatic efforts will ease tension between the two parties.

### **The Neutrality of Mauritania?**

In Mauritania, the northern neighbor of the conflicted Azaouad region, the government has distanced itself from the conflict in Mali. Mauritanian Foreign Minister Hamadi Ould Hamadi described the conflict as "an internal Malian issue that does not concern neighboring countries" in Nouakchott on 24th January during a press conference at the end of a routine meeting of Sahel countries known as "field states" that are concerned with fighting the activities and presence of the AQIM in the region.

However, the Mauritanian Foreign Minister, who served in the Ministry of Defense for a long period of time, made a second declaration to Radio France International in which he stated that "the Touareg rebels are not fighting a foreign country and have clear demands concerning identity." Here he compared the position of the Touareg rebels in Northern Mali and the activities of the AQIM. Many observers that followed his first

declaration considered this announcement controversial if not supportive of the Touareg rebellion.

Before the current regime of General Mohamed Ould Abdul Aziz, Mauritanian diplomacy had always refrained from interfering negatively in regional (African or Arab) conflicts. This changed when the General – accused by opposition of taking hold of all governmental authority – himself participated in compromise initiatives in Cote d'Ivoire and Libya. The declaration of the foreign minister (who is close to military circles) came to support claims of a secret role played by General Abdul Aziz in supporting the Touareg rebellion. Many Mauritanian political and media sources accuse him of providing logistic and political support to the rebellion in the neighboring country, which would be unprecedented in the country's history.

The accusations, with details in Malian newspapers, are suggested in a secret plan presented to the Touareg rebels by Mauritanian security and military apparatuses to initiate an independent state in the Azaouad region. Malian sources confirm that Mauritanian military and security forces are working with Arab and Touareg figures to put this plan into action. The limits and aims of this plan are still restricted to some press leaks and reports. Like its Mauritanian counterpart, the Malian government did not address these allegations officially but their implications on the ground were very immediate as they subjected the Mauritanian community living in the country to mob attacks in the beginning of February as a result of the press reports.

However, the recent visit of Henri de Raincourt, French Minister of Cooperation to Nouakchott, on 10th February in a regional tour that also led him to Mali and Niger can be read in the context of containing this delicate tension before it becomes overt. The French radio station, RFI, cited that the French minister will ask authorities in Nouakchott to soften their tone with their neighbors in Mali and use their good relations with the MNLA rebels to facilitate talks between the two parties.

### Regional Implications of the Crisis

The independence of the Azaouad region will open the region to scenarios for Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Algeria, Burkina Faso and Niger. The question of identity and ethnic minorities poses a big threat to the unity and stability of all Sahel and North African countries.

For Senegal, for instance, separation in Mali will add fuel to the burning fire between the Senegalese government and the separatists of the Democratic Forces Movement in Casamance province.

Meanwhile, for Mauritania – which has a 2000 kilometer-long border with Mali – the separation of the Azaouad region will pose more challenges to its internal situation regarding harmony between Arab and Negro components; and within the Arab-Moorish component itself, there is an emerging divide between the Arab-Berber community and the "Haratine," who are hybridized community that are ethnically Negro but culturally Arab. Although they subside, racial and ethnic conflicts reemerge routinely every once in a while. The main reason for this was the illegal executions orchestrated against hundreds of Negro soldiers and officers in the 1990s in what is named now "humanitarian heritage". In this tense and complex ethnic composition, calls are made making difference in identity and political and social marginalization a justification for the separation of blacks from the fragile Mauritanian entity. Recently, these calls found legitimacy in a controversial national census organized by the Mauritanian government and opposed by an unauthorized black movement called Ne Touche Pas a Ma Nationalité. Similarly, there are unofficial reports about a call launched by an abolitionist movement called I 'Initiative de Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste"(IRA), to organize a regional conference that unites the Haratine community under an International Haratine Congress similar to the International Tamazight Congress at the end of this year in Nouakchott.

All in all, the credibility and validity of the fears of separation are dependent on the outcomes of the ongoing crisis and the results of negotiations between the two parties stated on a moving ground. Hopes are limited the seriousness of both parties to find solutions that meet the demands of the Malian party whose president declared to soldiers participating in battles in the north that the unity of the Malian territory they defend is nonnegotiable. However, any new agreement should take into consideration the serious questions of development and political rights raised by the Touareg people who found in the return of their comrades from Libya a trump card they quickly used in their historic fight against central government in Bamako.

---

\*Mauritanian journalist and researcher

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

*Copyright © 2012, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.*