From Disfunctionality to Disaggregation and Back? The Malian Crisis, Local Players and European Interests

Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani

Abstract

The revolutions sweeping across North Africa in early 2011 led to an increase of regional instability in the Sahel. Mali is a key case in point: the Libyan war and the end of the Jamahiriya triggered a geopolitical chain reaction, bringing the country to the brink of implosion and stressing local political and ethnic fragmentation. After the Tuareg declaration of independence of the Azawad in April 2012 and the "narco-Jihadism" takeover of this area, the French-led military intervention in January 2013 pushed Jihadi forces back in their desert strongholds. This intervention can hardly be considered "European", despite the shared goals amongst member states, given the limited support to France provided by other EU member states. The eruption of the crisis in Mali represented a partial defeat and a serious blow to EU interests in the area. While an EU military option was never seriously considered, the EU decided to launch a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) training mission to address this crisis. Although dysfunctional and largely ineffective, a united Mali remains the best option for the EU insofar as partition would likely trigger wider geopolitical dynamics of fragmentation in the region and in the wider African continent, making the achievement of EU political, security and economic aims as distant as ever.

Keywords: *Mali / Malian crisis / Armed groups / Islamist groups / Ethnic groups / European Union / CSDP / France / Military intervention / Sahel*

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by Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani[*]

Introduction

In January 2013 France intervened militarily in Mali, supported by a small coalition of African troops. The aim of this intervention was to restore an acceptable degree of stability in the north of the country. Officially, French troops are due to leave the country in March, as the major aim of the intervention (pushing Jihadist forces back to their desert strongholds) has been largely achieved. However, the longer term challenges for Mali remain significant, as the country's heterogeneous ethno-confessional landscape has been strained by over a year of revolts and clashes, involving the military, Tuaregs, Arab (local and foreign) fighters, and Songhai militias amongst others. Mali is a typical case of a post-colonial state whose borders were drawn by colonial bureaucrats without accounting for the actual situation on the ground. This has represented, historically, a major element of structural weakness.[1]

This paper is structured into three parts. First we offer an explanation for the Malian crisis. The second part surveys the major players involved in this crisis. Finally we focus on the implications of this crisis for the EU and its ambitions in the region. The conclusion outlines the challenges ahead for Mali and the EU in handling the crisis, operating in such a complex national and regional environment.

1. From Benghazi to Bamako, through Gao: a three-level explanation of the Malian crisis

The revolutions sweeping across North Africa in early 2011 led to a major change of the regional landscape. The repercussions of these revolutions went well beyond the formal borders of the countries concerned, especially south of the Maghreb. Mali is a key case in point. The Libyan revolution, the ensuing bloody civil war in 2011 and the end of the ruthless 42-years long *Jamahiriya* interlocked with Mali's structural crisis and weakness, bringing the country to the brink of implosion. The Libyan revolution had a direct impact on the Saharian/Sahelian regional security environment, given the outflow of weapons from Qaddafi's arsenal,[2] exacerbating the structural (in)stability of the

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[1] For a history of nation and state building in Mali see Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert. Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali*, Brill, Leiden, 2010, p. 23-74.
[2] Dario Cristiani, Riccardo Fabiani, Ivan Ureta, "Il Sahel dopo Gheddafi", in *Limes*, n. 5/2012, p. 191-197.

regional environment[3] owing to a plurality of factors, ranging from local organized crime[4] to environmental degradation. Although not *sufficient,* the end of Qaddafi's rule was *necessary* in triggering the Malian crisis. Mali's security and economic dependence on Qaddafi's regime was substantial: from Qaddafi's instrumental patronage of local Tuareg groups to investments in the weak Malian economy. Qaddafi's support for the Malian government had been a major element of the Pan-African shift in Libya's post-Cold War foreign policy. The Libyan war triggered a *geopolitical chain reaction* that was possible given the complex and divided domestic environment in Mali. The crisis that erupted in Mali in late 2011 leading to the declaration of independence of the Azawad in April 2012, followed by the "narco-Jihadism" takeover of this area and the French-led military intervention in January 2013 was the result of three principal elements.

First, is the geo-physical challenge to Weberian-Hegelian statehood in Mali. Mali is part of a harsh geo-physical environment that has hampered the establishment of effective and centralized control over these territories.[5] Post-independence Mali has been unable to guarantee the full monopoly over legitimate force (the *Weberian* conception) and assert political control over its territory. Concerning the latter, the central government has granted a rather high level of autonomy to local communities through the so-called "parasovereignty", essentially based on the primacy of traditional and local codes and legal practices, where sovereign control was devolved to local tribal leaders.[6] This harsh geo-physical environment favoured the sedimentation of distinct communal identities. The geographical position of post-colonial Mali - at the intersection of White/Arab/Berber Africa and Black Africa - rendered this localism a major element of weakness, hindering the unity (the *Hegelian* conception) of the Malian state.

Second, the post-independence national borders failed to produce a new sense of national identity. The above mentioned local identities have hampered the ability of post-independence borders to produce new and more inclusive narratives able to promote a sense of nationality. Indeed, the dysfunctionality of the Malian state can be explained by this lack of national cohesion and the presence of strong territorial imbalances, notably the perceived neglect of northern communities by southern elites. Ethnicity has not always been an element of division, but in times of crisis it became the major signifier of identity. Added to this is the weakness of the Malian economy: its poverty, landlocked location and poor infrastructure and communications, which have isolated the country from global markets while adding to the difficulty of controlling the national territory. In this dysfunctional context, the Tuareg have emerged as one of the most resistant groups to central government control. The Tuaregs are nomadic people, belonging to the wider Berber ethnicity, that suffered from a "*double colonization*" first

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[3] Emmanuel Grégoire et André Bourgeot, "Désordre, pouvoirs et recompositions territoriales au Sahara", in *Hérodote*, n° 142 = 3/2011, p. 3-11.

[4] Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel. Drivers, Actors, Options", in *SWP Comments*, No. 2011/C 01 (January 2011), http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/organized_crime_and_terrorism_in_the_sahel.html.

[5] Dario Cristiani, "Anatomia del Sahara", in *Limes*, n. 5/2012, p. 27-37.

[6] Georg Klute, "De la chefferie administrative à la parasouveraineté régionale", in André Bourgeot (dir.), *Horizons nomades en Afrique sahélienne. Société, développement et démocratie*, Paris, Karthala, 1999, p. 167-181.

by the colonial and then by the post-colonial elites, triggering successive revolts and uprising.[7] In Mali, Tuaregs have recurrently revolted against the central government (1962-1964; 1990-1995; 2007-2009) and indeed some dynamics of the current crisis recall past rebellions (especially that of the early 1990s). The multiple cleavages in northern Mali - sedentary vs nomadic groups; dark-skinned vs light-skinned people, Songhai vs Tuaregs/Arabs; and masters vs "slaves" - have contributed to the Tuareg and then the Jihadist takeover of North Mali.

Third, is Narco-Jihadism and the war in Libya. Despite its structural weakness, Mali was considered as one of the few functioning African democracies. However, over the last decade a number of developments have led to the severe deterioration of security in the northern part of the country. These developments were:

- the establishment of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat GSPC) / Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali since the early 2000s, which became especially critical after the full "Sahelization" - the southward shift of AQIM's core of activities - after 2007-2008;[8]
- the persistent neglect by former Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) of the problems of the north, despite the launch in late 2011 of the largely unsuccessful USD 70m worth *Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement au Nord-Mali* (PSPSDN), aimed at restoring government authority in the north;
- the tacit acceptance by ATT and the Malian government of northern Mali as a safe-haven for AQIM and other *foreign narco-jihadists*;[9]
- the war in Libya, which brought about dire consequences for Mali's stability. Qaddafi was a major financial and political supporter of the Malian regime. This explains also why the Malian government was among the last African governments to give up support for Qaddafi. ATT was also part of the African Union quartet that tried to settle the conflict through a negotiated agreement in the early stages of the Libyan uprising.[10] Moreover, Qaddafi acted as a Tuareg patron and his demise meant the end of external control over Tuareg groups. Although his support was instrumental, Qaddafi was able to control these groups by using financial leverage, and used them to serve his regional interests. He mediated an agreement between Malian and Nigerien Tuaregs with their respective governments in 2009, signed in the Libyan town of Sabha. Actually, elements of the Libyan army in this city flew to Mali, contributing to triggering the crisis in the North. After the end of the conflict in

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[7] Alain Antil, "Le Sahel: une zone grise aux portes du Maghreb", in Khadija Mohsen-Finan (dir.), *Le Maghreb dans les relations internationales*, Paris, Editions CNRS, 2011, p. 291-308.

[8] Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations", in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 1107 (April 2011), http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiwp1107.pdf.

[9] May Ying Welsh, "Mali: The 'gentle' face of al-Qaeda", in *Al Jazeera*, 30 December 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/2012review/2012/12/20121228102157169557.html.

[10] The African Quartet included: Amadou Toumani Touré of Mali, Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania. See "Libye: la délégation de l'Union africaine reçue par Kadhafi", in *Libération*, 11 avril 2011, http://www.liberation.fr/monde/01012330847-libye-violents-combats-a-ajdabiya.

Libya, Tuareg rebels who had fought alongside Qaddafi's loyalists returned to Mali with money, weapons and the political will to change the *status quo* in the country.[11]

2. The domestic actors of the crisis

The current conflict in northern Mali is the most recent episode of a long series of uprisings that have traditionally pitted various ethnic communities against each other. Arabs, Tuaregs, Moors as well as Songhais and Peuls are among the most important ethnicities that have historically inhabited the three northern provinces of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal.[12] As a result, over the past few years several political and military groups have formed along these ethnic lines, while other foreign organizations have established themselves in this territory exploiting these divisions.[13]

Against this background, the 2012 Tuareg uprising, that later turned into an Islamist insurgency, triggered a series of reprisals reminiscent of previous conflicts in this region. In particular, the massacre of almost 100 Malian soldiers in Aguelhok in January 2012 catalyzed a sharp deterioration in inter-ethnic relations in northern Mali[14] - something that during the French intervention came back to haunt the area, as Malian soldiers were accused of looting and violence against local Arab and Tuareg communities.[15] Moreover, with the imminent resumption of talks between Malian authorities and northern rebel groups, these tensions are bound to affect the prospects for a successful political process. Hence, the importance of mapping and understanding the main actors involved in the northern Mali conflict: their leaders, agendas and constituencies.

2.1 The Malian Army

The Malian government currently wields little influence over the Malian political and security environment. Much more important is the Malian army, that was pivotal in bringing the conflict from the regional to the national level. This conceptual and geographical shift occurred when a group of young military officers overthrown former president ATT, establishing the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (*Comité national pour le redressement de la démocratie et la restauration de l'Etat*, CNRDR),[16] headed by Captain Amadou Sanogo.[17] The Malian army has been in

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[11] "Des centaines de combattants touaregs pro-Kaddafi rentrent au Niger et au Mali", in *Jeune Afrique*, 30 août 2011, http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/artjaweb20110830085808.

[12] Zeidan Ag Sidalamine, "De la question Touareg au Probléme du Nord du Mali: Ma part de témoignage", in *Maliweb.net*, 5 novembre 2012,
http://www.maliweb.net/news/contributions/2012/11/05/article,102663.html.

[13] International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation", in *ICG Africa Report*, No. 189 (18 July 2012), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/west-africa/mali/189-mali-avoiding-escalation.aspx.

[14] Ursula Soares, "Mali: éxecutions sommaires à Aguelhoc, selon Paris et Bamako", in *RFI*, 15 février 2012, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20120213-mali-executions-sommaires-aguelhok-selon-paris-bamako.

[15] "Exactions, règlements de compte: la grande crainte d'un débordement au Mali", in *RFI*, 30 janvier 2013, http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130129-mali-accusations-exactions-crainte-fabius-ayrault.

[16] Fabien Offner, "Comment les militaires ont pris le pouvoir au Mali", in *Slate Afrique*, 22 mars 2012, http://www.slateafrique.com/84479/une-nouvelle-junte-militaire-prend-le-pouvoir-au-Mali.

[17] Bruce Whitehouse, "Captain Amadou Sanogo: Power is his Middle Name", in *Think Africa Press*, 29 March 2012, http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/captain-amadou-sanogo-power-his-middle-name-coup.

a state of disarray for a long time: since the early 1990s, the army has suffered "from underfunding, nepotism, corruption, under training, poor pay and a failure to maintain its aircraft and armor".[18] Indeed, allegations emerged shortly after the takeover of the north by the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad*, MNLA) suggesting that the army had only about 1,500 guns for 3,000 soldiers operating in the north, a ratio of half a gun for each soldier. The rapid takeover of the north by the MNLA and its Islamist allies at the time seemed to confirm this. The army is now divided between the pro-junta "Green Berets" (to whom Sanogo belongs) and the anti-coup "Red Berets".[19] Their weakness was exemplified by the scarce involvement in retaking the north of the country, which was led by French and Chadian troops. However, the Malian army, in the wake of the alleged withdrawal of French forces expected in March, will have the duty to enforce security in the liberated north. The enduring factional rivalries, personal revenges and ethnic frictions do not bode well for the success of this task.

2.2 The Islamist front

Ansar al-Din

Founded by Iyad Ag Ghali, Ansar al-Din is an Islamist organization that aims to impose Sharia across the whole country (and not only in the north). Although it initially accepted to restrain itself to promoting Islamic law in the northern provinces, the group's stated goal remains to implement its Islamist agenda in the rest of Mali too. The organization's ethnic composition includes mostly Tuaregs and Arabs.

Ag Ghali is one of the longest-standing and most prominent Tuareg leaders in the region and has been involved in northern Mali's political and military affairs since 1990, when he took part in a Tuareg rebellion and later signed a treaty with the central government. In 1999 he embraced a radical interpretation of Islam under the influence of the Tablighi Jama'at,[20] but continued to play a largely peaceful and constructive role in intra-Malian relations. Indeed, in 2007 he was appointed as Mali's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia - although he was banned a few months later allegedly due to his links with Islamist circles unpalatable to the House of Saud.[21]

His decision to found Ansar al-Din was mainly a consequence of the MNLA's refusal to collaborate with him, owing to his role in the previous unsuccessful rebellions in the country. As a result, in early 2012 Ag Ghali established his own group and initially cooperated with the MNLA. In the following weeks, Ansar al-Din came to control

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[18] Andrew McGregor, "Intervening in Mali: West African Nations Plan Offensive against Islamist and Tuareg Rebels", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 10, No 13 (29 June 2012), p. 10, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39553.

[19] Andrew McGregor, "Red Berets, Green Berets: Can Mali's Divided Military Restore Order and Stability?", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (22 February 2013), p. 7-10, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40493.

[20] The Tablighi Jamaat is an offshoot of the Islamic Deobandi movement and was originally established in South Asia. The Tablighi Jamaat is conservative and apolitical, although in the past there have been allegations of links with terrorist organizations.

[21] Andrew McGregor, "Bringing Militant Salafism to the Tuareg: A Profile of Veteran Rebel Iyad Ag Ghali", in *Militant Leadership Monitor - Quarterly Special Report*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (December 2012), p. 17-20.

Timbuktu and established close ties with two other Islamist groups, AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA). Its ranks swelled considerably as the group acquired an increasingly high profile in the conflict and exploited its connections with local smugglers and traffickers.[22]

However, the MNLA's growing suspicions towards its Islamist allies led to clashes in June 2012 that culminated in the "Battle of Gao", where Ansar al-Din, AQIM and MOJWA inflicted a decisive defeat on to the MNLA and thus secured the control of the three northern provinces. Under increasing international pressure, in the following months, Ansar al-Din opened talks with Algerian and Burkinian negotiators and distanced itself from its allies, AQIM and MOJWA. That said, the talks were eventually interrupted after the attack on Konna, opening the way to the French intervention.

Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA)

The Islamic Movement of Azawad is a splinter group originating from Ansar al-Din and founded by Alghabass Ag Intallah in January 2013, after the beginning of the French-led military operations in northern Mali. The movement's main goal is to negotiate with the central authorities a peaceful solution to the current crisis, as they reject Ansar al-Din's military confrontation with French troops and its alliance with Islamist terrorists.[23] The MIA is the former moderate wing of Ansar al-Din and the vast majority of its members are Tuareg.

Ag Intallah is a high-ranking Tuareg notable from Kidal who played a considerable role both in national and regional politics over the past few years, having also served as a member of the Malian parliament. After joining the MNLA at the beginning of the insurrection, the rising political significance of Ansar al-Din and Iyad Ag Ghali's decision to rescue him from the wrath of Tuareg loyalists in Kidal led Ag Intallah to switch to Ansar al-Din in February 2012, within which he played an important counterbalancing role *vis-à-vis* the more hardline Ag Ghali. He also took part in the negotiations brokered by Burkina Faso that later floundered, eventually leading to the French intervention and the birth of the MIA.[24]

One of the first acts by the MIA was to establish contacts with the French military in order to avoid clashes in the Kidal area, which the movement claimed to control along with the MNLA. This has enabled the MIA to position itself as a potential partner for dialogue after the end of the military operations. That said, the Malian authorities have so far shown a significant resistance to this idea, as they seem to prefer opening talks with the MNLA only, which they consider as a more malleable interlocutor in future negotiations.[25]

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[22] International Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation", *cit.*

[23] "Mali: scission au sein d'Ansar Eddine", in *Le Monde*, 24 janvier 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/24/mali-scission-au-sein-d-ansar-eddine_1821602_3212.html.

[24] Andrew McGregor, "A Profile of Alghabass Ag Intallah: Reasserting Traditional Tuareg Leadership at the expense of Ansar al-Din", in *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (30 January 2013), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40383.

[25] "Mali: Bamako refuse le dialogue avec les dissidents d'Ansar Eddine, pas avec le MNLA", in *Jeune Afrique*, 31 janvier 2013, http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/artjaweb20130131085500.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

AQIM is the most important terrorist organization in North Africa and the Sahel and the heir of Algeria's former Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Although many members of this group originate from Algeria, AQIM has become a transnational organization that includes militants from Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya and other countries in the area. AQIM is a terrorist organization bent on exporting jihadism and imposing Islamic law across the region. The group operates in northern Mali within the framework of its "Saharan Emirate" - a military region that, according to AQIM's internal structure, is currently headed by Yahya Abu al-Hammam.[26]

AQIM's presence in this area is not new, as the organization has gradually established a series of ties with local tribal groups over the years. Moreover, for years AQIM has used local smuggling and trafficking routes as well as kidnappings of foreigners to finance its activities. With the 2012 Tuareg uprising and the group's close ties with Ag Ghali (whose cousin is AQIM Commander Hamada Ag Hama), AQIM and Ansar al-Din began a fruitful collaboration, although the details of this alliance (in terms of weapons, members straddling the two movements, military coordination etc.) remain unclear to date.[27]

In addition, the organization went through a series of internal problems, with local kingpin Mokhtar Belmokhtar reportedly quitting AQIM to establish his own group after a spat with leader Abdelmalek Droukdel.[28] As a result, in late 2012 Belmokhtar split from AQIM to form his own group, the Signatories in Blood. Another major AQIM leader, the Algerian Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, was reportedly killed by French forces in early March 2013. At the time of writing Algerian authorities are still conducting DNA tests on the remains said to belong to Abou Zeid, although AQIM sources confirmed to the Mauritanian agency Sahara Media that Abou Zeid was killed.

Signatories in Blood

This splinter group from AQIM was founded by Belmokhtar in late 2012, as a result of his difficult relations with AQIM's leadership. That said, Belmokhtar's departure from AQIM did not result in a severing of ties between the two groups. Reports indicate that members moved relatively freely between the Signatories in Blood and AQIM (as well as MOJWA), while the two groups collaborated during the January 2013 Amenas attack in Algeria.[29] This operation has been so far the most important attack carried out

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[26] Ali Abdel Aal, "Islamist Groups in Mali... An Overview", translated and published by *The Arabist*, 28 January 2013, http://www.arabist.net/blog/2013/1/28/in-translation-on-malis-islamist-groups.html.

[27] Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM and its allies in Mali", in *The Washington Institute Policywatch*, No. 2033 (5 February 2013), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/aqim-and-its-allies-in-mali.

[28] "Al Qaeda's N.Africa branch reshuffle leadership", *AFP*, 15 October 2012, available at: http://www.rnw.nl/africa/bulletin/al-qaedas-nafrica-branch-reshuffles-leadership.

[29] On 16 January 2013 a group of militants linked to the Signatories in Blood took 800 hostages at a gas facility near In Amenas, near the border with Libya. The crisis ended four days later, after that the Algerian security forces stormed the facility. The final death toll amounted to 39 foreign hostages and 29 militants. See also Andrew Lebovich, "Primer on Jihadi Players in Algeria & Mali", *al-Wasat blog*, 23 January 2013, http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/23/primer-on-jihadi-players-in-algeria-mali.

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by this group. In early March 2013, Belmokhtar was reportedly killed and his death was announced by Chadian military forces involved in Mali.[30] However, in the past the death of Belmokhtar had been announced several times, each time being unfounded.[31] At the time of writing, controls are still ongoing to verify the truth of this announcement and actually French sources have been extremely cautious in confirming his death.[32]

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA)

MOJWA is a splinter group from AQIM that became known in late 2011,[33] when the organization claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Italian and Spanish aid-workers near Tindouf, Algeria. Its leader is the Mauritanian-born Hamada Ould Kheiru. Although initially it distanced itself from AQIM, blaming this group for its inability to expand its activity and membership beyond Algeria, with the uprising in northern Mali MOJWA quickly reached an understanding with both AQIM and Ansar al-Din.[34] It was also involved in the kidnapping of a group of Algerian diplomats in northern Mali in April 2012.

*The Independist Tuaregs: National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
(Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad, MNLA)*

MNLA[35] emerged in October 2011,[36] four days before the killing Qaddafi. Its leader is former Libyan army Col. Ag Mohamed Najem, who hails from the Ifogha tribe, historically one of the keenest Tuareg tribes to be involved in armed opposition against the Malian government, together with the Idnans and Chamanesse. The group was largely composed by remnants of former Tuareg opposition movements such as the United Fronts of Azawad (which led the 1990s uprising), and the Tuareg Movement in northern Mali led by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga (leader of the 2007-2009 rebellion)[37] and had many young people among its ranks.[38] The aim of the MNLA was the independence of the area called Azawad, traditionally referred to the large plain north of the Niger Bend between Timbuktu and the town of Bourem northwest of Gao. Today the geographical

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[30] Madjiasra Nako, "Chad says kills Algeria hostage mastermind in Mali", *Reuters*, 2 March 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/02/us-mali-belmokhtar-idUSBRE9210B920130302.
[31] Indeed, in June 2012 there were several allegations claiming Belmokhtar was killed. See Lamine Chikhi, "Algerian Qaeda commander believed killed in Mali", *Reuters*, 29 June 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/29/ozatp-algeria-qaeda-death-idAFJOE85S02S20120629. Moreover, over the last 15 years there have been repeated announcements and then retractions concerning either his surrender or death.
[32] "France sceptical over Mali rebel-leader death", in *Al Jazeera*, 4 March 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/03/20133483652748758.html.
[33] Dario Cristiani, "West Africa's MOJWA Militants - Competition for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb?", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (6 April 2011), p. 6-7, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39234.
[34] Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, *Al Qaeda and its allies in the Sahel and Sahara*, Doha, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 1 May 2012, http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/04/20124301421966601.htm.
[35] See MNLA official website: http://www.mnlamov.net.
[36] *Communiqué N° 1 du MNLA*, 16 octobre 2011, http://www.mnlamov.net/projet-politique/37-projet-politique/72-communique-nd-1-du-mnla.html.
[37] Scott Stewart, "Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya", in *Stratfor Security Weekly*, 2 February 2012, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/mali-besieged-fighters-fleeing-libya.
[38] Stéphanie Plasse, "Une nouvelle rébellion touarègue menace le Mali", in *Slate Afrique*, 5 décembre 2011, http://www.slateafrique.com/74087/gouvernement-malien-mouvement-national-liberation-lazawad.

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meaning of Azawad has expanded considerably, to include the entirety of northern Mali. In the 2012 rebellion, the MNLA broadened the geography of Azawad even further by including a swath of the northwestern Mopti region, up until the town of Douentza,[39] which was actually the city where Islamist groups were heading before the French intervention. On 6 April 2012, MNLA declared the independence of the Azawad,[40] that was immediately rejected by the entire international community.[41] After collaborating with Islamist groups, however, MNLA was quickly defeated and overthrown by the coalition of radical Islamist actors operating in northern Mali,[42] leading also to its partial shift in aims and rhetoric. The movement has in fact eased its rhetoric concerning independence, although it has officially declared it will not give up its independence ambitions.[43] MNLA allegedly supported also the French, Malian and African troops during their operations against radical Islamist groups[44] although this was a tactical, temporary change, insofar as achieving independence from Bamako will remain the major strategic goal of this movement.

2.3 Pro-state Arab militias

The Arabs of northern Mali have largely remained loyal to the concept of a secular and unified Malian state and have no wish to come under Tuareg rule, whether secular or Islamist. The National Front for the Liberation of the Azawad (*Front national de libération de l'Azawad*, FNLA, also known as al-Jabhah al-Arabiya, "the Arab Front") is composed of about 500 Arab fighters from Timbuctu, whose aim was to preserve the city from Islamist and Tuareg forces, while maintaining a secular, non-secessionist and non-Islamist identity.[45] They want northern Malians to self-determine their future (autonomy, independence or maintaining the status quo), possibly through a referendum, in a similar fashion to what happened in Sudan.[46] Another Arab group is the Bérabiche Arab militias, composed of members of the Marabout tribe of the Bérabiches, populating the areas of Tombouctou and Taoudeni from the 8th century.

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[39] Derek Henry Flood, "Between Islamization and Secession: The Contest for Northern Mali", in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (July 2012), p. 1-6, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/between-islamization-and-secession-the-contest-for-northern-mali.

[40] MNLA, *Déclaration d'indépendance de l'Azawad*, 6 avril 2012, http://www.mnlamov.net/component/content/article/169-declaration-dindependance-de-lazawad.html.

[41] "La communauté internationale rejette l'indépendance du nord du Mali", in *Le Monde*, 6 avril 2012, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/04/06/mali-les-rebelles-touareg-du-mnla-proclament-l-independance-du-nord-du-pays_1681483_3212.html.

[42] Andrew McGregor, "International Community Cools to Intervention as Islamists Defeat Tuareg in Northern Mali", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 22 (30 November 2012), p. 3-4, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40175.

[43] Sébastien Badibanga, "Moussa Ag Assarid: Nous n'avons pas renoncé à notre revendication de l'indépendance de l'Azawad", in *Afrik.com*, 15 juillet 2012, http://www.afrik.com/article26218.html.

[44] "Les rebelles touaregs du MNLA 'prêts à aider' la France au Mali", in *Jeune Afrique*, 14 janvier 2013 http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/artjaweb20130114153057.

[45] Andrew McGregor, "'The Sons of the Land': Tribal Challenges to the Tuareg Conquest of Northern Mali", in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 8 (20 April 2012), p. 8-11, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39290.

[46] May Ying Welsh, "Making sense of Mali's armed groups", in *Al Jazeera*, 17 January 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/20131139522812326.html.

2.4 Pro-state Songhai-Peul/Fulani militias: Cadre de concertation, de réflexion et d'action

Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso

The Patriotic Movement Ganda Koy is a Songhai ethnic group, which emerged originally in response to the second Tuareg rebellion of the early 1990s.[47] After that, it was involved in a harsh struggle against Arabs and Tuaregs (the "whites" in Ganda Koy's terminology).[48] Although some civilians were among the founders, the major leaders were all deserted army officers, members of the elite airborne division: the already mentioned "Red Berets". This group was created in reaction to the repeated attacks by Tuareg rebel forces on the villages in the Niger Bend and in the surroundings of Gao as well as to the self-perception of exclusion triggered by the legal arrangements made following the agreements of Timbuktu in 1995 order to integrate Tuaregs in the national political and legal consensus.[49]

Since the mid-1990s they have allegedly committed massacres against Tuareg civilians. The anthropologist Hélène Claudot-Hawad, close to the Tuareg, denounced the rhetoric of these movements as something recalling the anti-Semitic discourse in Europe.[50] Although it emerged as a self-defence group, it soon acquired also a rather pro-active stance, attacking Tuareg and Arab people in what became an ethnic conflict, although the Ganda Koy also became a magnet for Tuareg and Peul/Fulani slaves, who found in this group a way to express their disappointment against their Tuareg masters.[51] In the 1990s, this group enjoyed weapons and logistical support from members of the military, as well as economic support from the wider Songhai economic network in West Africa.[52] However, since 1996 the group entered in a sort of dormant phase and was successfully infiltrated and weakened by some anti-Ganda sections of the Malian army, specifically by the action of Colonel Amadou Baba Touré. In the wake of the revolt leading to the collapse of the north, the founder of the movement, Imam Mohammed n'Tissa Maiga, declared his intention to rearm and confront the growing threat posed by Tuareg rebels.[53] During the latest phase of the conflict, there were several allegations that the Malian army regained patronage over the Ganda groups, handing out cash and arms to Songhai men. Reports from the ground suggested that the army urged members of Ganda Koy to attack anyone suspected of sympathizing with the MNLA and indeed, Human Rights Watch recently released a report warning

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[47] *Ibid.*

[48] Andrew McGregor, "'The Sons of the Land'…", *cit.*

[49] Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, *cit.*, p. 280-298.

[50] Hélène Claudot-Hawad, "'Négrafricanisme' et racisme", in *Le monde diplomatique*, an. 42, n° 493 (avril 2005), p. 30, http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1995/04/claudot_hawad/1372. See also Fabien Offner, "Ganda Koy, une milice pour libérer le Nord-Mali", in *Slate Afrique*, 17 décembre 2012, http://www.slateafrique.com/99993/nord-mali-la-lutte-des-ganda-koye-contre-les-islamistes-touaregs.

[51] Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert*, *cit.*, p. 280-298.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] "Le Gandakoye mobilise ses troupes", in *Mali Demain*, 22 décembre 2011, http://www.maliweb.net/news/la-situation-politique-et-securitaire-au-nord/2011/12/22/article,40217.html.

that ethnic militias like Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso are compiling kill lists of MNLA, Ansar al-Din and other groups' members and collaborators.[54]

Ganda Iso (Ganda Izo) literally means *The Sons of the Land*. Ganda Iso was created officially in September 2009 but it has been active at least since 2008. It is composed largely of Fulani people, although the group includes also other ethnicities. The group includes two branches: a military branch originally led by Sergeant Amadou Diallo and a political movement headed by Seydou Cissé.[55] In 2008, Diallo was arrested in Niger - where he flew - after the group killed five Tuareg civilians in early September 2008 in the city of Hourala.[56] A few days later, Malian authorities carried out a major security operation, arresting 31 Ganda Iso members, seizing also large quantities of guns, in a raid in the village of Fafa in the Ansongo region, historically the major stronghold of Ganda Izo.[57]

Since its onset, relations between the military and political branches of Ganda Iso have been strained: Cissé often accused Diallo of deviating from the goals of the group and being more focused on gaining personal rewards rather than defending dark-skinned sedentary people against Tuareg and Arab attacks. Diallo was reportedly killed, together with at least 10 members of his militia, in clashes at Saina, 120 km from Gao, a major northern town which was defended by Ganda Iso fighters and attacked by rebels in March 2012.[58] The role of the group in the current conflict is similar to that of Ganda Koy: supported and nurtured by the army, the group was active in fighting against Tuareg and then Jihadist fighters. They are likely to remain active in the aftermath of the French intervention, attempting to defend dark-skinned people against what they perceive to be the Tuareg and Arab threat, but also conducting violent activities against Tuareg and Arab communities, straining further the fragile ethnic balances of Mali.

Other groups

Currently, there are several other minor groups operating in the hyper-fragmented domestic landscape of Mali. Two groups are worth a mention: the *Mouvement patriotique de résistance pour la libération de Tombouctou* (MPRLT), a Timbuktu militia allegedly formed by Songhai and Tuareg ethnic groups having the ambition to expel the Islamists from that city, and the *Zasya Lasaltsaray*, an association of sedentary dark-skinned groups living in the areas of Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal and Mopti. This association is brought together by "ZASYA", an acronym that stands for the alliance of the descendants of three dynasties, the Za, the Sony and the Askia. The group

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[54] Human Rights Watch, *Mali: Rising Ethnic Tensions Threaten New Violence*, 20 December 2012, http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/20/mali-rising-ethnic-tensions-threaten-new-violence.

[55] Andrew McGregor, "'The Sons of the Land'…", *cit.*

[56] Bokari Dicko, "Attaque de Hourala (cercle d'Ansongo): Les vrais dessous d'une mésaventure", *Mali Demain*, 6 septembre 2008, http://www.malijet.com/actualte_dans_les_regions_du_mali/rebellion_au_nord_du_mali/6196-attaque_de_hourala_cercle_d_ansongo_les_vrais_dessous_d_une_mesa.html.

[57] Tiemoko Diallo, "Niger arrests Mali militia leader after killings", *Reuters*, 27 September 2008, http://mobile.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE48Q2Z120080927.

[58] David Lewis and Tiemoko Diallo, "Mali's capital returning to normal, north threatened", *Reuters*, 25 March 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/25/us-mali-army-idUSBRE82O0BE20120325.

produced a political manifesto released in late August 2012, rejecting Mali's partition, supporting a secular and democratic state, and calling for a revision of the agreements concerning the *Collectivités territoriales* - the administrative organization of Mali made of eight regions and one capital district, 49 cercles and 703 communes, the respect for minorities but also rights of the majorities on that territory.[59]

3. The EU and the Malian crisis

The EU unsurprisingly adopted a rather slow and largely reactive stance concerning the crisis in Mali and, more generally, the deteriorating security environment of the Sahel over the past three years. Despite the institutional innovations brought about by the Lisbon Treaty, the EU's response was characterized by deep disagreement among its member states. In the end, the EU produced a European *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*[60] (whose conceptual roots can be traced back to the discussions on the region launched in 2008 by the French EU presidency), that focuses primarily on economic development and security.[61] However, although theoretically this strategy was meant to be comprehensive, the EU's major preoccupation has been the eradication of the terrorist threat. In fact, the only geographical map included in the European strategy on the Sahel is a map of Al Qaeda activities in the region: a visible example of how the terrorist threat represents the primary EU concern. This approach emerges also in the EU's approach towards Mali: attention to the crisis rose only after the north fell in the hands of Islamist groups. Indeed France decided to intervene[62] only when Jihadist groups took over the strategic town of Konna, located 600 km from Bamako, and started heading southwards,[63] despite the fact that President Hollande had trumpeted the end of the *françafrique age* only months earlier.[64]

The eruption of the crisis in Mali, the Tuareg takeover of the north, the coup d'état in Bamako and the ensuing takeover by Jihadist groups represented a partial defeat for the Europeans and a serious blow to EU interests in the area for four reasons. First, the crisis led to an end of one of the most important democratic experiences in recent

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[59] *Manifeste Zasya-Lasaltaray*, Bamako, 30 août 2012,
http://www.malidiasporavoice.com/attachment/382012.
[60] European Union External Action Service, *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, March 2011, http://eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf.
[61] Raffaella Del Sarto and Simone Tholens , "Conflict at the EU's southern borders: the Sahel crisis", in *openDemocracy*, 1 February 2013, http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/raffaella-del-sarto-simone-tholens/conflict-at-eus-southern-borders-sahel-crisis.
[62] French Presidency, *Statement by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic, following the select defence council*, Paris, 12 January 2013,
http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2013-01-14.html. See also "Hollande: l'opération au Mali 'n'a pas d'autre but que la lutte contre le terrorisme'", in *Le Monde*, 12 janvier 2013, http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/12/la-france-demande-une-acceleration-de-la-mise-en-place-de-la-force-internationale-au-mali_1816033_3212.html.
[63] "Mali: tirs de sommation sur la ligne de démarcation", in *RFI*, 8 janvier 2013,
http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130108-mali-bruits-bottes-ligne-demarcation-ansar-dine-aqmi-mujao-boko-haram-al-qaida.
[64] French Presidency, *Speech by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic, to the National Assembly of Senegal*, Dakar, 12 October 2012,
http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2012-10-19.html.

African history, notwithstanding the fragility of Malian democracy. Second, the crisis was a catalyst for further instability in the region. The Sahelian strip has emerged over the past decade as a major hotspot for all those asymmetric threats which have characterized the global security agenda since the end of the Cold War: terrorism; smuggling; trafficking of drugs, human beings and weapons; famine and the spillover effects of poverty and underdevelopment on the security landscape; environmental degradation; ethno-confessional grievances; kidnappings; and the security of European - and more generally Western - citizens and investments in the region. Third, the crisis has represented, in spite of the successful French and African military action, a serious danger for the stability of Africa as a whole. The crisis in northern Mali was primarily a crisis of statehood and national unity: the post-independence, colonial-drawn borders failed to produce a national identity and the crisis in northern Mali was the peak of this incapacity. As such, it represents a peril for the national integrity of several African countries. It is no coincidence, for instance, that some groups in Mali have called for a *Sudanese solution* to the situation in North Mali. Finally, this crisis has sparked a serious humanitarian crisis, in a region already suffering from structural shortcomings.

With the outbreak of the crisis, the EU condemned the coup and the takeover of the north by rebel forces, calling for an immediate end to violence, the protection of civilians and the restoration of a civil, constitutional government. It supported the efforts of ECOWAS - thus stressing the importance of collaborating with regional countries. The EU welcomed also the inauguration of Dioncounda Traoré as interim President and the appointment of Cheick Modibo Diarra as interim Prime Minister.[65] In October 2012, the EU backed United Nations Security Council Resolution 2071, and the development of a UN integrated strategy for the Sahel.[66] At the end of the same month, European officials were also finalizing their plans for a mission of about 200 experts to train the Malian armed forces, providing technical assistance to improve military chains of command and the civilian oversight of the army.[67] However, an outright EU military option was never seriously considered and France alone responded to the request for military support by the Malian authorities. EU member states provided only limited support to France, meaning that this intervention can hardly be considered "European", despite the shared goals amongst member states.

The EU simply finalized its plans for the training mission in early January, shortly after the start of the French intervention. The Council established on 17 January 2013 a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission to support the training and reorganization of the Malian military, creating the legal basis for the operation and thus taking another step towards its deployment.[68] The EU's declared aims are in line with the guidelines of the EU *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*: restoring

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[65] Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on Mali/Sahel*, 3159th Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 23 April 2012,
http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/129711.pdf.
[66] Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on the situation in Mali*, 3191st Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 15 October 2012,
http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132850.pdf.
[67] Laurence Norman, "Europe's Response to Mali Threat", in *The Wall Street Journal. Real Time Brussels blog*, 31 October 2012, http://blogs.wsj.com/brussels/2012/10/31/europes-response-to-mali-threat.
[68] Council of the European Union, *EU training mission in Mali established* (5428/13), 17 January 2013,
http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/134748.pdf.

a sound constitutional and democratic order in Mali through the implementation of a credible and consensual road map (free, transparent and fair elections in 2013, negotiations with armed groups rejecting terrorism); re-establishing the state's authority throughout the country and redeploying the army in a context of peace and reconciliation while respecting the rule of law and human rights; and defeating organized crime and terrorism.[69] The military training mission, EUTM Mali, will train and advise the Malian Armed Forces (MAF), operating under the control of legitimate civilian authorities, in order to enable them to engage in combat operations to restore Malian territorial integrity. Specifically, the mission will advise on issues pertaining to command and control, logistical chain and human resources as well as on international humanitarian law, the protection of civilians and human rights. EUTM Mali will not be involved in combat operations.[70]

The EU also bolstered its financial and economic support for Mali. The EU's overall humanitarian support for Mali stood at €115 million since the eruption of the crisis in 2012, including an allocation of €20 million in January 2013 and an additional €22 million announced to assist victims of the conflict in northern Mali. A total of €100 million in ECHO humanitarian funding were provided since the beginning of the crisis, along with €15 million in emergency food assistance from the European Development Fund.[71]

Conclusions

The situation in Mali remains extremely fragile: the French-led military intervention pushed back Jihadist forces in their desert strongholds, but this represents only a phase of a longer conflict. The challenges at hand remain daunting. Mali has a vast territory, scarce resources to control it and is deeply divided along ethnic lines. Although the specific threat of a Jihadist takeover of Mali has been quelled (for now), Mali's situation is unlikely to improve significantly over the next few years. The ethnic divide, although not set in stone, will likely be strained further. Moreover, Mali will remain a major playground for regional terrorist and criminal organizations.

The EU, given the nature of the crisis, will have only limited capacity to influence events in the country. The deployment of the CSDP training mission is likely to help the Malian army to become more functional and effective but some of its aims sound too ambitious. Moreover, the Strategy on the Sahel and the French intervention in Mali revealed that terrorism still represents the most important prism through which European actors read the situation on the ground. Although the EU has tried to provide a comprehensive response to the ongoing crisis in the Sahel, its policies were immediately weakened by the eruption of the crisis in Mali. However, the vast and complex Malian territory makes the establishment of full *Weberian* control of the country highly unlikely. The EU is thus set to cope with the challenges stemming from

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[69] Council of the European Union, *Fact Sheet: EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali)*, updated 13 January 2013, http://consilium.europa.eu/eeas/security-defence/eu-operations/eutm-mali/factsheets.
[70] *Ibid.*
[71] European Commission, *Mali: EU allocates an extra €22 million in humanitarian aid to victims of conflict* (IP/13/126), 19 February 2013, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-126_en.htm.

this situation of structural weakness in the years ahead and the goals listed in the CSDP documents remain somehow too ambitious given the situation on the ground. Rather than aspiring to build a fully functioning state in Mali (which Mali has never been), what the EU can do is to support actively the reinforcement of the Malian national security forces, bringing the military back under civilian control, providing funds and aid to easing economic pressure and using these tools as a way to increase pressure on the Malian authorities to create a more inclusive political environment in order to quell ethnic and confessional grievances. This support will not lead to the establishment of a fully sovereign and effective Malian state but they should be aimed at limiting the potential of instability structurally inbuilt into Mali. This means that the EU should not neglect the problems of this region as it has partially done over the past few years and should work to guarantee at least the national unity of the Malian state. Although dysfunctional and largely ineffective, a united Mali remains the best option for the EU insofar as partition would likely trigger wider geopolitical dynamics of fragmentation in the region and in the wider African continent, making the achievement of EU political, security and economic aims as distant as ever.

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