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Mali's Tragic But Persistent Status Quo

Alex Thurston

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Abbreviations

- AQIM – Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb, an Algerian-led affiliate of al-Qa’ida, formerly known as the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (French acronym GSPC), founded in 1998
- CJA – Congrès pour la justice dans l’Azawad (Congress for Justice in Azawad), a Timbuktu-based militia with MNLA defectors as prominent leaders
- CMA – Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements), an umbrella body for ex-rebels and former jihadists formed in 2014; a signatory body to the 2015 Algiers Accord
- CME – Coordination des mouvements de l’entente (Coordination of Movements of Understanding), an umbrella group created in 2017 for dissident militias that have left the CMA and the Plateforme
- GATIA – Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et allies (Self-Defense Group for Imghad Tuareg and Allies), a pro-government militia formed in 2014 and a leading member of the Plateforme, an umbrella body for pro-government/anti-secession militias and a signatory to the 2015 Algiers Accord
- HCUA – Haut conseil pour l’unité de l’Azawad (High Council for the Unity of Azawad), a Tuareg political-military faction formed in 2013 and led by ex-Ansar al-Din members; a key pillar of the CMA
- ISGS – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, an indirect offshoot of AQIM created in 2015
- JNIM – Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Society for Supporting Islam and Muslims), a Mali-centric jihadist alliance formed in 2017 as part of AQIM’s hierarchy
- MINUSMA - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, a peacekeeping force deployed in Mali since 2013
- MNLA - Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), a separatist movement formed in 2011; initially the key actor in the northern Malian rebellion of 2012, the MNLA is now part of the CMA

- MOC - Mécanisme opérationnel de coordination (Operational Coordination Mechanism), a security structure in northern Malian cities created by the Algiers Accord
- MSA – Mouvement pour le salut de l’Azawad (Movement for the Salvation of Azawad), an MNLA splinter group and pro-government militia formed in 2016
- MUJWA – Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (also known by the French acronym MUJAO), an AQIM offshoot that was eventually and circuitously reintegrated into JNIM

Glossary

Key Actors

Bamako-Based Politicians

Cissé, Soumaïla – runner-up in the 2002, 2013, and 2018 presidential elections

Diallo, Ali Nouhoum – former National Assembly president and “doyen” of Peul civil society in Bamako

Keïta, Ibrahim Boubacar – president of Mali since 2013

Maïga, Soumeylou Boubèye – prime minister of Mali since 2017, former defense minister

Touré, Amadou Toumani – leader of the 1991 military coup and president of Mali, 2002-2012

Ifoghas Tuareg Politicians

Ag Achérif, Bilal – prominent MNLA leader

Ag Attaher, Intalla – long-time *aménokal* (paramount hereditary ruler) of the Kel Adagh

Ag Bibi, Ahmada – former Ansar al-Din senior official, currently CMA and parliamentary deputy for Abeïbara

Ag Ghali, Iyad – current JNIM commander, past leader of 1990 and 2006 rebellions

Ag Intalla, Alghabass – former Ansar al-Din senior official, currently CMA

Ag Intalla, Mohammad – current *aménokal* and parliamentary deputy for Tin-Essako

Other Northern Politicians and Militia Commanders

Ag Acharatoumane, Moussa – former MNLA activist and current MSA leader, a Daoussak

Ag Gamou, El Hajj – current GATIA leader, an Imghad Tuareg

Prominent Non-Tuareg Jihadists

Abu al-Hammam, Yahya – Algerian national and AQIM commander, deputy to ag Ghali within JNIM

Abu Zayd, ‘Abd al-Hamid – Algerian national and AQIM commander killed by French forces in 2013

Kouffa, Amadou – Mopti-based JNIM senior leader

Executive Summary

The West African nation of Mali has been in crisis since 2012. That year, a northern separatist rebellion led by members of the Tuareg ethnic group, set in motion a chain of events that reverberates to the present. The country's challenges now include a fractious landscape of ethnically-tinged militias, a jihadist insurgency in the north, and widespread, multi-layered insecurity (including jihadism, banditry, and inter-communal violence) in the central regions of Mopti and Segou. These trends draw on larger histories of rebellion and conflict in Mali, especially since the 1990s.

This report addresses the following question: why, amid Mali's crisis, does the political status quo persist, both in Bamako and in the country's conflict zones? To answer this question, the paper examines two core factors – the politics that enable and drive violence, and the flaws that hamper existing frameworks for peace and stability.

The report makes two, interrelated arguments. First, armed conflict in Mali benefits certain politicians and does not typically threaten many other politicians' survival or interests. The central state would almost certainly prefer to end the conflict, but its limited means prevent it from doing so. Thus the central authorities seek ways to manage and shape the endemic violence that they cannot eliminate. The management of violence in both northern and central Mali revolves around controlling regional capitals (or making deals with the de facto administrative authorities there) and accepting that state authority progressively diminishes as one leaves the regional capitals and moves into the surrounding areas.

Mali's political violence is palatable to the figures at the top of the political hierarchies in two of the country's political poles – the capital Bamako and the far northern city of Kidal, the bastion of the north's recurring rebellions. These political classes have been relatively stable since a key transitional political phase in 1990-1992, although they have had to coopt some challengers and strategically (if reluctantly) cede some ground to others. Although frequently at odds with one another politically, and periodically in direct violent conflict, these

groups – meaning the technocratic, Western-oriented politicians in Bamako and the hereditary Tuareg elites of the Kel Adagh tribal confederacy in Kidal – have need of one another at times to ensure their mutual political endurance. These dynamics help explain why some of the very same former rebels and ex-jihadists who challenged the central government in 2012 helped re-elect President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2018 (IBK).¹ Within the north, the politics underlying the violence also helps to explain why assassinations of leading commanders and politicians are relatively rare² – violence often serves more to demarcate zones of influence than as an existential, winner-take-all competition.

The parties to the conflict in the north, both the armed groups themselves and the central state as the backer of local proxies, seem to understand that no armed faction is strong enough to vanquish its foes. As a consequence, various northern actors, and especially the hereditary elite of the Kel Adagh Tuareg, seem to prefer to preserve their positions as mediators of political violence and as intermediaries between states (national and foreign) and populations, rather than allow other outcomes to gain traction. Put differently, a political arena built around violent factionalization is actually less of a zero-sum struggle than peacetime politics where elected representation would be the primary vehicle for influence. Endemic violence restrains citizen-driven accountability, in that a true post-conflict environment might empower ordinary citizens to demand sweeping change in Bamako, Kidal, and other power centers.

In central Mali, escalating mass violence does not benefit any long-established elites – but neither does it genuinely threaten, for now, the national state. In the central region of Mopti, jihadism has a kind of grassroots character that makes it far more socially revolutionary than the jihadism in the north. Reacting to jihadism in Mopti, the government has inflicted brutality and ethnic profiling on the Peul, an

¹ For an analysis of IBK's victory in the north, see Baba Ahmed, "Présidentielle au Mali: comment IBK a conquis les voix du Nord," *Jeune Afrique*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/619504/politique/presidentielle-au-mali-comment-ibk-a-conquis-les-voix-du-nord/>.

² Possible assassinations in the north include the car accident that killed the rebel leader Ibrahim ag Bahanga in August 2011 and the car accident that killed AQIM commander Nabil Makhlouif/Alqama in September 2012. Confirmed assassinations include the car bombing that killed longtime Tuareg politician Cheikh ag Aoussa in October 2016.

ethnic group now increasingly and unfairly identified with jihadism.³ The government also supports ethnic militias from non-Peul communities, who have taken up arms in response to jihadist violence and in response to growing inter-communal tensions. These approaches have only fueled the conflict, and there are essentially no local power brokers, as in the north, on whom the government can rely to rationalize the conflict. By default, the trendline in Mopti – toward jihadist shadow governance and increasingly “ethnicized” violence – has progressively deepened. The national state has acquiesced to surrendering much of rural Mopti to jihadists, ethnic militias, and bandits. Bamako-based authorities lack a coherent political strategy for Mopti.

The report’s second main argument is that the formal, externally-backed mechanisms intended to stabilize Mali and resolve its conflicts are implicated in perpetuating violence. The peace process envisioned by the 2015 Algiers Accord has been rocky and problematic. Alongside implementation problems, the design of the Accord unwittingly encourages ambitious politicians and violent entrepreneurs to create new militias as a means of seeking representation in the structures established through the Accord. Nevertheless, foreign powers appear comfortable with both the Bamako-based political class and the Tuareg hereditary elite in Kidal, occasionally contemplating sanctions against members of the latter but showing no appetite to displace either group. Moreover, as two experts put it, “In some ways, Bamako’s elites are more connected to the realities of cities outside Mali than to what is happening in the centre or north of the country.”⁴

Simultaneously, the foreign military presence in Mali exacerbates the conflict – not just because foreign soldiers attract jihadist violence, but also because the foreign presence intersects with an atmosphere of political suspicion and recrimination. This recrimination goes beyond the foreign military presence, but attitudes toward the two main objects of conspiracy theories – France and Algeria – are shaped and

³ For one activist’s perspective on these dynamics, see Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, “En Afrique, le fantasme d’une « communauté peule » radicalisée,” *The Conversation*, 4 September 2018, <https://theconversation.com/en-afrique-le-fantasme-dune-communaute-peule-radicalisee-102276>.

⁴ Andrew Lebovich and Gregory Mann, “Sahel or High Water: Mali’s Political Fatalism,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 August 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_sahel_or_high_water_mali_political_fatalism.

reshaped by the persistence of violence in Mali. At least in Bamako, and likely elsewhere in the country, many actors charge that France has intervened in Mali in order to advance its economic and political interests rather than to safeguard Malians, and many of the same actors charge that Algeria protects and abets Malian jihadists in order to serve its own interests, which essentially run counter to those of France. In other words, some Malians view the conflict as one that cannot be resolved by Malians or by foreign soldiers; rather, such voices say, a game of regional politics is underway and the central actors in the conflict lie about their roles in it. Regardless of whether such conspiracy theories contain truth, the “social fact” of these theories makes the conflict more difficult to resolve and inculcates mistrust between politicians as well as between politicians and publics.

These patterns shape a violent, tragic, and seemingly intractable status quo. In this stalemate, the central government cannot or will not project meaningful political authority in conflict zones, militia commanders cannot eliminate rivals or achieve military and political hegemony outside of their bases, jihadists can spoil peace efforts but not re-assert overt political authority, and foreign forces act as hunter and hunted without contributing meaningfully to political progress. In this climate, it is perhaps surprising that ordinary Malians have not amassed the numbers necessary to overthrow the leading politicians in Bamako, Kidal, and elsewhere – whether through street protests, armed uprisings, or populist mass movements. Flashes of grassroots pressure have appeared over the years, but there has been no mass anti-systemic movement in Mali save the jihadist uprising in Mopti, and the desperation that seems to fuel grassroots recruitment to that movement provides a clue as to why populations elsewhere have not turned completely against local elites: to do so would invite further destabilization and even upend the precarious livelihoods that many Malians still have. Indeed, Mopti’s uprising offers insight into what the worst-case scenarios for Mali might look like – a “Far West,” as two journalists put it.⁵

⁵ Olivier Dubois and Boubacar Sangaré, “Au centre du Mali, c’est le Far west...” *Journal du Mali*, 5 January 2017, <https://www.journaldumali.com/2017/01/05/centre-mali-cest-far-west/>.

The core challenge for Mali involves simultaneously brokering intra-elite bargains that reduce violence, all while allowing ordinary people greater influence in politics...

Finding a way out of Mali's multi-faceted crises will not be easy. The answer to Mali's problems cannot be found in clichés such as "peace accord implementation" or "better governance." In much of the center and in parts of the north, mistrust of state agents runs so deep that the state cannot simply "return." Repeated elections are not providing genuine vehicles for frustrated and wary populations who have already displayed a long-running apathy regarding voting as a strategy for change. The core challenge for Mali involves simultaneously brokering intra-elite bargains that reduce violence, all while allowing ordinary people greater influence in politics; in other words, as in many other civil wars, the elites are fundamental to making peace but elites' interests are simultaneously an obstacle to peace. To break this stalemate, the report recommends taking steps toward a de-militarization of the conflict alongside an effort to broker political arrangements that reduce conflict and tension while expanding opportunities for meaningful citizen participation and progress toward greater political accountability.

Introduction

Mali is a poor, conflict-torn country. In the 2016 Human Development Index, Mali ranked 175th out of 188 countries.⁶ Approximately two-thirds of the landlocked country is desert or semi-desert. Mali's chief exports – gold and cotton – provide livelihoods to only a portion of the population; some three-quarters of Malians live on subsistence agriculture.⁷ Furthermore, as Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert have argued, Mali “never quite met the prerequisites for functional statehood.”⁸ A lack of resources has made the state into a vessel for donor funds and a political actor whose strategies for domination are often based on negotiation, proxy fights, or crude coercion, rather than hegemonic authority or widespread legitimacy.

Since 2012, northern Mali has been enveloped in armed conflict. Initially a separatist rebellion, the conflict has become a complex set of interlinked sub-conflicts. The starting point of the 2012 rebellion echoed and exacerbated political-military conflicts dating back to rebellions in 1963-1964, 1990-1996, and 2006, as well as to anti-colonial uprisings before the country's independence in 1960.⁹ But the presence of overt jihadism in 2012 changed the conflict's internal dynamics and affected outside actors' perceptions of the violence. In January 2013, at a moment when jihadists had displaced separatists and carved out a proto-state in northern Mali, the French government led a military intervention that stopped jihadists' territorial expansion and ousted them from northern Malian cities. Since that time, however, the continued French military presence, as well as added layers of foreign security forces, have neither quelled the tenacious jihadist insurgency nor ended the multi-sided civil war. In the north, patterns of violence and political realignment have become so complex that this report cannot treat them all: focusing on Kidal and

⁶ United Nations Development Program, *2016 Human Development Report*, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>.

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization, “Integrated Production and Pest Management Programme in Africa: Mali,” 2018, <http://www.fao.org/agriculture/ippm/projects/mali/en/>.

⁸ Catriona Craven-Matthews and Pierre Englebert, “A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The Empirical and the Fictional in Malian State Reconstruction,” *African Security* 11:1 (January 2018): 1-31, quotation at 2.

⁹ This history is discussed in more detail below. Two major works on past Tuareg-led rebellions in Mali are Pierre Boilley, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh. Dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 1999); and Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonization, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Mali* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Ménaka, the report largely passes over the conflicts in Timbuktu and Gao.¹⁰

In addition, since 2013 a related violent conflict has grown in the central Malian region of Mopti, with spillover into neighboring Segou. Mopti's violence includes jihadists, whose makeup and strategies differ fundamentally from the jihadists in the north, even though the militants in Mopti are formally subordinate to northern jihadist leaders. Mopti's violence also includes ethnic militias, bandits, and Malian security forces. As new parties and ethnic groups are drawn into the violence in the country's central regions, new crises threaten to spread further south.¹¹ Periodic terrorist attacks have also hit the capital, Bamako, involving participants from both the north and the center.

Yet long-familiar political actors, both in the capital Bamako and in the northern city of Kidal, have clung to power, even as their popularity erodes. On 12 August 2018, Malians re-elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) to a second term – despite that fact that his first term saw violence go from bad to worse. Keïta's landslide victory in the second round of the contest, where he took more than 67% of the vote, belied the weakness of the mandate he had won. Turnout was just 34% of registered voters in the second round, meaning that fewer than two million people, out of a population of around eighteen million, voted for the president.¹² In comparison with his own performance in 2013, the president actually lost significant support: in the second

¹⁰ For a recent study of political realignments among northern armed groups, see Nicolas Desgrais, Yvan Guichaoua, and Andrew Lebovich, "Unity is the Exception: Alliance Formation and De-Formation Among Armed Actors in Northern Mali," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (2018): 654-679.

¹¹ Central Mali's conflicts are also discussed more below. Three indispensable reports on the topic are Boukary Sangaré, "Le Centre du Mali: Épicentre du djihadisme?" GRIP, 20 May 2016, <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/39606/ASC-075287668-3758-01.pdf?sequence=1>; Adam Thiam, "Centre du Mali: Enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée," HD, March 2017, <https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Centre-du-Mali-Enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-n%C3%A9glig%C3%A9e.pdf>; and Aurélien Tobie, "Central Mali: violence, local perspectives and diverging narratives," SIPRI, December 2017, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/sipriinsight_1713_mali_3_eng.pdf.

¹² Malian Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, "2ème tour de l'élection présidentielle: résultats provisoires complets," 16 August 2018, <http://www.matcl.gov.ml/sites/default/files/public/resultats%20election%20pr%C3%A9sident%20rep%202eme%20tour%20si gn%C3%A9.pdf>.

round of the 2018 elections, he received 562,767 fewer votes (25% of his total) than in the second round of the 2013 contest.¹³

In many Malians' eyes the entire process, and especially the run-off election, had offered no real prospect of change: as in 2013, IBK's foremost opponent was former Finance Minister and long-time opposition figure Soumaïla Cissé. Many other candidates were also familiar faces from the past two decades of multiparty politics. One candidate, declining to endorse either IBK or Cissé in the second round, lamented that the whole process had become merely "a game of musical chairs."¹⁴ A similar observation applies to the north, where many of the dominant politicians and armed group commanders are figures familiar from the past three decades of rebellion, from elite families, or both.

Why, in the face of widespread conflict and suffering, does Mali's status quo persist? What explains the political acquiescence of a beleaguered population and the tenacity of long-lasting politicians who are either unable or unwilling to bring peace?

¹³ Grant Godfrey, "Analysis of the Mali Presidential Election Process and Outcome," Presidential Power, 3 September 2018, <http://presidential-power.com/?cat=125>.

¹⁴ Cheick Modibo Diarra, "Communiqué de Fin de Campagne," 10 August 2018, <https://cheickmodibodiarra.net/communique-de-fin-de-campagne>.

Part One: The Politics That Enable and Drive Violence

A Stagnant Political Class in Bamako

In 1991, a military coup ended twenty-three years of military rule and initiated a process of formal democratization in Mali. The ensuing liberalization transformed both political life and civil society, as a multitude of voices crowded in to speak for Mali.¹⁵ On the one hand, liberalization seemed to bring a period of stability for the country. Elections occurred regularly. There was an orderly transition from the government of Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992-2002) to that of Amadou Toumani Touré (or “ATT,” 2002-2012). On the other hand, the real spoils of democracy accrued to a relatively small elite class. Over Touré’s two terms, he coopted most opposition politicians, “and a political elite who seemed to have no concern for the daily struggles of ordinary people gained influence and power. A culture of corruption and impunity was spreading rapidly among the political class.”¹⁶ Public confidence in democracy fell through the 2000s; Malians overwhelmingly support elections in the abstract as a means of choosing rulers, but they are highly skeptical about whether their own democracy actually works.¹⁷

The typical profile of a senior politician today is someone who was educated at elite Malian schools or overseas, often in France; then had a technocratic career in the Malian government, the development sector, or the banking industry during the 1970s and 1980s; then took senior positions in political campaigns and/or cabinets in the 1990s; and then continued to serve periodically in government or the National Assembly until the present. This background has meant that many

¹⁵ For one insightful account of how this process affected religious life in Mali, see Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), Chapter Eight.

¹⁶ Susanna D. Wing, “Mali: Politics of a Crisis,” *African Affairs* 112:448 (July 2013): 476-485, quotation at 480.

¹⁷ Massa Coulibaly and Michael Bratton, “Crisis in Mali: Ambivalent Popular Attitudes on the Way Forward,” *Stability* 2:2 (2013), <https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.bn/>.

senior politicians were insulated personally and professionally from the ravages of structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and 1990s – a time when, under pressure from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other donors, “the government had to restructure the public enterprises, which entailed job cuts, and it had to abandon the automatic hiring of degree-holders.”¹⁸ The former technocrats who found paths into politics – such as President Keïta, who worked for the European Development Fund in the 1980s, and his perennial rival Soumaïla Cissé, who worked for the Malian Company for Textiles Development (CMDT during the same period – constituted a rising elite at the very moment that many Malians were experiencing the shocks of public sector cuts. These technocratic backgrounds helped launch some politicians’ careers, most notably Cissé, whose power at the CMDT facilitated his rise within the Alliance pour la démocratie au Mali, a major political party.¹⁹

Both the current administration and the preceding administration were rocked by major corruption scandals

Resigning amid scandal or controversy is a barrier neither to repeated appointments to senior government posts, nor to running for high office or otherwise taking up senior roles in political parties. For example, both former Prime Minister Moussa Mara and current Prime Minister (and then-Defense Minister) Soumeylou Maïga resigned after Mara conducted a disastrous visit to Kidal city—controlled by northern armed groups since 2012—in May 2014, provoking a battle in the city in which dozens of people were killed. This event became the most notorious decision of Mara’s approximately nine-month tenure in office. Yet Maïga was back in high office little more than three years later, and Mara was discussed as a potential candidate in the lead-up to the 2018 elections. The repeated second acts for Malian politicians do not make Mali unusual, but they are striking in light of the country’s

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Azam and Christian Morrison with Sophie Chauvin and Sandrine Rospabé, *Conflict and Growth in Africa, Volume 1: The Sahel* (Paris: OECD, 1999), 50.

¹⁹ Alexis Roy, “Peasant Struggles in Mali: From Defending Cotton Producers’ Interests to Becoming Part of the Malian Power Structures,” *Review of African Political Economy* 37:125 (September 2010): 299-314, quotation at 310.

widespread problems and the oft-voiced sentiment of popular fatigue with the entire political class.

Both the current administration and the preceding administration were rocked by major corruption scandals. IBK's administration was dogged by controversy over a massive procurement scandal that centered on the purchase of a presidential aircraft in March 2014 and an army supply contract that critics said was grossly inflated;²⁰ the scandal prompted the International Monetary Fund to hold back some \$11.7 million in aid for much of the rest of 2014.²¹ Similarly, ATT's administration was tarnished by accusations that public health funding had been embezzled by the minister of health and some fourteen accomplices.²²

The political class is also heavily Bamako-based, and at times has embodied a kind of Mandinka-Bambara ethno-cultural hegemony that excludes outsiders.²³ Not all politicians come from the south – current Prime Minister Maïga is from Gao, and ATT is from Mopti. But many leading politicians are southerners, and by the time Malians from other regions reach senior positions, they have often spent years in the capital. True outsiders have limited opportunities to enter the senior levels of government, parliament has rarely been an effective counterweight to the presidency, and decision-making remains largely centralized in Bamako. The need to rise through the ranks of the military or the political class, as well as the fluidity and relative unimportance of party membership, makes the Bamako elite a single broad network rather than rival camps offering the Malian people genuine choices about the future of the country. These patterns are not necessarily unique to Mali, but the disconnect between Mali's

²⁰ Overcharging on the aircraft and various military expenditures may have cost up to 40 billion CFA. See "Mali: l'audit sur l'avion présidentiel fait toujours polémique," RFI, 14 October 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20141014-ibk-mali-affaire-avion-presidentiel-societe-civile-reclame-comptes>.

²¹ "IMF Approves Aid Restart for Mali After Spending Row," Reuters, 2 December 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ozabs-mali-imf-idAFKCN0JG0CV20141202>.

²² Mamadou Fofana, "Affaire du détournement de 3 milliards FCFA au Fonds mondial de la santé: Non-lieu pour Dr Lasseni Konaté, Oumar Ibrahima Touré inculpé mais libre, Ousmane Diarra toujours en prison," *L'Indépendant*, 24 July 2012, <https://maliactu.net/affaire-du-detournement-de-3-milliards-fcfa-au-fonds-mondial-de-la-sante-non-lieu-pour-dr-lasseni-konate-oumar-ibrahima-toure-inculpe-mais-libre-ousmane-diarra-toujours-en-prison/>. See also Bruce Whitehouse, "What Went Wrong in Mali?" *London Review of Books*, 30 August 2012, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n16/bruce-whitehouse/what-went-wrong-in-mali>.

²³ Interview with Malian scholar and development consultant Nouhoum Salif, Bamako, 20 January 2018.

image as a leading West African democracy and the realities of elite-dominated politics has become more evident in recent years. Even the country's foremost populist voice, radio host and youth activist Mohamed Youssouf Bathily ("Ras Bath"), has an elite pedigree (he is the son of a cabinet minister) and a seeming ceiling to his political influence (his temporary alliance with Soumaïla Cissé obviously did not sway the election in the latter's favor).

National politics then becomes, in large part, a matter of negotiations between the Bamako-based elite and various regional power-brokers. On one level, authorities in Bamako attempt to manage the regions through fiat, especially amid the current crises: the president has appointed military governors for multiple regions in central and northern Mali. But simply asserting national executive authority, as then-Prime Minister Moussa Mara attempted to do in the above-mentioned May 2014 visit to Kidal, can provoke backlash. Given these limitations, one interviewee argued, the central government has psychologically accepted a division of the country into secure and insecure zones.²⁴ At times, alignments of interests permit deals between Bamako-based authorities and politicians in the conflict zones: one example is the arrangements, negotiated by Prime Minister Maïga that saw the northern rebel bloc the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) guarantee security for the July-August 2018 presidential elections. Yet the historical northern elite itself embattled and divided, even as it innovates ways to maintain some power, especially in Kidal.

Attrition and Ambition in the North

In the north, local politics has, in many ways, been stalemated since the 1990s. The far northern region of Kidal has been the driving force behind repeated rebellions by members of the minority pastoralist Tuareg community: 1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012. These rebellions responded to Kidal's complaints about the central government, but the rebellions and their aftermath also reflect Kidal's own local political struggles. These struggles have two primary dimensions: intra-elite competition, and the competition between an embattled elite and a

²⁴ Interview with Malian analyst Boukary Sangaré, Bamako, 20 January 2018.

rising but still limited counter-elite. The competition plays out both on physical battlefields and in electoral politics. No party is strong enough to completely dominate these competitions, however, and so the result is a stalemate, or even a kind of war of attrition.

The Kidal elite are the Ifoghas, the most “noble” clans among the Kel Adagh, the dominant Tuareg confederation in the region.²⁵ Although the Ifoghas sometimes present a more or less united front against other actors, they are internally divided along clan and political lines. During the twentieth century, the leading political office of the Ifoghas, and of the Kel Adagh as a whole – the *aménokal* – became heavily dependent on good relations with central authorities. Under French colonial rule (roughly 1903-1960) and then under the postcolonial Malian state, the *aménokal* gained power and status, rising from something like first among equals to paramount tribal ruler. Yet the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and 1980s brought tremendous disruptions to Tuareg society, as did the postcolonial rebellions themselves. The 1963 rebellion – which saw the *aménokal* remain a loyalist and his own brother become a rebel leader – foreshadowed developments in the 1990s and after. During the 1990s and 2006 rebellions, Ifoghas leaders emerged who implicitly challenged the authority of the *aménokal*, Intalla ag Attaher (1927-2014), and his sons. These rivalries partly turned on clan lines, opposing the *aménokal*'s clan (Kel Afella) to others (especially the Iriyaken and Ifergoumessen).²⁶ Yet the *aménokal*'s family has repeatedly sought to build bridges to challengers from among the Ifoghas.

Competition developed between the Intalla family and the leader of the 1990 and 2006 rebellions, Iyad ag Ghali.²⁷ An Iriyaken, ag Ghali rose to prominence as the foremost political and military leader among the *ishumar*, the generation of Malian Tuareg who fled drought and poverty in the 1970s and 1980s to seek new livelihoods in Algeria, Libya, and beyond. By the early 1980s, ag Ghali was a major figure among aspiring Tuareg rebels based in Libya, and he was a natural choice for leader when rebellion broke out in northern Mali in 1990. As

²⁵ Much of what follows draws on the two above-mentioned histories: Boilley's *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh* and Lecocq's *Disputed Desert*.

²⁶ Interview with Malian NGO official Assinamar ag Ousmane, Bamako, 23 January 2018.

²⁷ Interview with Malian journalist who requested anonymity, Bamako, 9 March 2018.

ag Ghali took center stage among the Kel Adagh due to his military leadership and his (resulting) privileged position in negotiations with the state, the Intalla family sought new ways to reinforce and reimagine its own political status. Beginning in the 1990s, ag Attaher's three sons entered electoral politics (a theater ag Ghali never sought out), winning positions as mayor of Kidal and as members of parliament. Relations between the Intalla family and ag Ghali have become complex and sometimes self-contradictory. At times, ag Ghali has seemed to challenge the family's authority and even aspired to become *aménokal*, aware of how ag Attaher and his father benefited from their privileged position as intermediaries between the Kel Adagh and the state, ag Ghali used rebellion to position himself as the state's new foremost interlocutor in the north. Ag Ghali has, according to some Malian experts, viewed ag Attaher's sons as his social juniors and has sought to subordinate them to his influence.²⁸ Whether to ensure their survival and/or out of overlapping visions of how the north should be governed, ag Attaher's sons have sometimes accepted to work with or even under ag Ghali.

Another axis of intra-Ifoghas competition concerns generational changers and differences in outlook. Even by the mid-1990s, as the rebellion wound down, ag Ghali faced dissent from among the Ifoghas. Initially, ag Ghali's most prominent rival among the Ifoghas rebels was Ibrahim ag Bahanga, who viewed the negotiations with the state as a betrayal of the Tuareg cause, rejected the low rank offered to him by the Malian army in 1996, and periodically took up arms against the state. During the 2006 uprising, a multi-sided intra-Ifoghas rivalry played out, as ag Ghali and various Ifergoumessen leaders (including ag Bahanga) rebelled against the state while the *aménokal*'s family and the Kel Afella clan remained loyalists.²⁹ Then, after ag Ghali and other leaders accepted a new peace agreement with the Bamako-based authorities, ag Bahanga pursued the rebellion,³⁰ remaining at large until his death in a car accident (or, possibly, an assassination) in 2011.

²⁸ Interview with Malian scholar Brema Ely Dicko, Bamako, 22 January 2018.

²⁹ Interview with Malian journalist, Bamako, 9 March 2018.

³⁰ Cherif Ouazani, "Ibrahim ag Bahanga," *Jeune Afrique*, 27 January 2009, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/205568/politique/ibrahim-ag-bahanga/>.

A second rival to ag Ghali has been the young Ifoghas politician Bilal ag Achérif (b. 1977³¹). Just as ag Ghali represented a rising and more cosmopolitan generation when activist *ishumar* returned to Mali from North Africa around 1990, ag Achérif embodies a different strand of Ifoghas and indeed Tuareg politics. He has become another case study in how the Ifoghas can gradually incorporate challengers and how Ifoghas solidarities can come to trump other political alignments. In 2011, ag Achérif positioned himself as the political face of a multi-ethnic irredentist north. He became the political leader of the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (French acronym MNLA). The MNLA grouped together revolutionary Tuareg separatists and became a Tuareg-led but multi-caste and even (aspirationally, at least) multi-ethnic organization. Key MNLA positions went to non-Ifoghas, including Mohamed ag Najem (from the traditionally less prestigious Imghad caste), who became the MNLA's military leader, and Moussa ag Acharatoumane (from the Daoussak, a Tuareg-adjacent ethnic group), who became a prominent MNLA intellectual and spokesman.

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As the MNLA was forming, generational and ideological differences came to the fore at a meeting in Zakak, Mali in November 2011. There, according to multiple accounts, ag Ghali spent several days attempting to convince the MNLA to make him their leader, and/or to avoid an armed rebellion and instead negotiate with the Malian state. But the group's nascent leadership was ambivalent, and many of the younger fighters openly opposed ag Ghali, viewing him as a lackluster "Azawadi" (i.e., northern Malian) patriot, or even as a traitor, due to his past negotiations with the Malian state.³² In other words, the very

³¹ Martin Vogl, "Mali's Shaky Rebel Alliance and a Looming War," The Africa Report, 5 July 2012, <https://swap.stanford.edu/20120706230941/http://www.theafricareport.com/index.php/news-analysis/mali-s-shaky-rebel-alliance-and-a-looming-war-501814848.html>.

³² Interview with former Ansar al-Din member and current CMA official Mohamed ag Aharib, Bamako, 24 January 2018. Ag Aharib was present with ag Ghali at Zakak.

forces that had positioned ag Ghali as the most influential Tuareg politician of his generation simultaneously exposed him to devastating criticisms from rivals and youth, delivering an “affront” that ag Ghali could not accept.³³ Young separatists may have already been concerned, at that date, about ag Ghali’s jihadist affiliations and religious vision. In any case, these trends helped shape ag Ghali’s approach to the 2012 rebellion and its aftermath, as discussed below.

Amid intra-lfoghas rivalries, the lfoghas have faced a challenge from the Imghad. Imghad is sometimes translated as “vassals” or “tributaries” – indeed, the sense of a cross-clan “Imghad” identity is somewhat new, given that in the past each noble clan had its own tributaries or Imghad. As noted above, during the 1970s and after, drought and other disruptions challenged and even overturned some of these hierarchies. lfoghas sometimes found themselves in desperate poverty in the Kel Adagh Tuareg diaspora that stretched from Bamako to Tripoli and beyond. During this period, the Imghad also began to develop a stronger sense of a unitary Imghad identity that cut across clan divisions.

During the 1990s rebellion, ag Ghali initially commanded a unified rebel force that challenged the central state in the name of greater freedom and development for Kidal. Yet after negotiations opened between ag Ghali and the state, rebels fragmented along tribal and clan lines. Another divisive factor was rebels’ different visions about the direction of Tuareg society. It was here that the tensions between lfoghas and Imghad came to the fore. Ag Ghali’s Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (French acronym MPLA), and the lfoghas as a whole, felt an acute challenge from the Revolutionary Liberation Army of Azawad (French acronym ARLA). That movement demanded not just greater autonomy for the north but also a revolutionary leveling within northern society. ARLA was dominated by the Imghad, and represented a challenge not just to the Malian state but also to the lfoghas. According to one insider’s account, ARLA came to outnumber the MPLA (then known as the MPA), which prompted ag Ghali to form an alliance with the Malian army against ARLA.³⁴ Most lfoghas chose

³³ Interview with Malian Arab politician and CMA official Mohamed Ould Mahmoud, Bamako, 12 March 2018.

³⁴ Interview with a Malian specialist on the north, Bamako, 8 March 2018.

in-group solidarity and preservation of their status over ARLA's call for revolution.

Here again, ag Ghali personified a fault line in northern society through his contentious relationship with the Imghad leader El Hajj ag Gamou (b. 1964). Initially companions during the 1990s rebellion, ag Ghali and ag Gamou fell out in 1994 due to political and personal conflicts, with ag Ghali reportedly even marrying ag Gamou's ex-wife. Ag Gamou became ARLA's leader, and then rose through the ranks of the Malian army after the 1990s rebellion ended—eventually becoming a general, and in a sense reaping some of the post-conflict dividends that ag Ghali did not. The rivalry between ag Ghali and ag Gamou resurfaced in the 2006 rebellion, as ag Gamou remained loyal to the state and helped fight the rebels.³⁵ Indeed, one Ifoghas interviewee insisted that there is no general problem between the Ifoghas and the Imghad, but rather a “problem of men” between ag Ghali and ag Gamou that grew into a broader conflict between ag Gamou and the Ifoghas generally.³⁶

In any case, the Ifoghas-Imghad rivalry colored electoral politics and other maneuvering for offices in Kidal. It was not just ag Ghali who felt the challenge of rising Imghad power, but the Ifoghas as a whole, including the Intalla family. The Imghad outnumber the Ifoghas, and the declining influence of the Ifoghas has been felt in local politics since the mid-2000s. For example, Intalla ag Attaher's son Alghabass represented Kidal cercle as parliamentary deputy from 2002-2012. In an interview with the author, Alghabass ag Intalla stated frankly that he felt his own popularity slipping between the parliamentary elections of 2002, when he won decisively, and 2007, when his majority was slim. He added that had he run in 2012, he might have lost.³⁷

³⁵ The Malian state's response to the 2006 rebellion also involved working with a range of Arab and Tuareg tribal militias in the north, a decision that helped to entrench militia politics – and, by extension, drug trafficking. See Wolfram Lacher, “Organize Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, 11-12, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf.

³⁶ Interview with ag Aharib.

³⁷ Interview with Alghabass ag Intalla, Washington, 13 January 2018. Other interviewees, such as Assinamar ag Ousmane, confirmed this sense.

The 2012 rebellion, then, was shaped by these three rivalries – the rivalry between ag Ghali and the Intalla family, the rivalry between ag Ghali and the younger Tuareg revolutionaries, and the rivalry between the Ifoghas elite and the Imghad, especially ag Gamou’s forces

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³⁸ “Oumar Ould Hamaha: A Case Study of the Bridges Between Three Groups,” GCTAT, 11 January 2013, <http://www.gctat.org/fr/analysis/29-ranoc/220-oumar-ould-hamaha-a-case-study-of-the-bridges-between-three-groups.html>.

challenge to the hereditary Ifoghas elite, and/or that the two men had found ideological common ground.

When the MNLA launched its rebellion on 17 January 2012, capturing Ménaka, ag Ghali's Ansar al-Din supported them. AQIM in turn assisted Ansar al-Din. This loose coalition captured a string of important northern cities between January and March 2012, including Kidal and Tessalit. In late March, junior-ranking soldiers in the Malian military carried out a coup, overthrowing then-President Touré and causing the military command structure in the north to collapse. The MNLA then claimed control of Gao and Timbuktu, and declared independence for "Azawad" — a territory notionally encompassing the entirety of Mali's three northern provinces — on 6 April. Yet, the *modus vivendi* among the armed groups broke down during the spring of 2012. The gap in political visions between the MNLA and the jihadists became more and more apparent after the initial string of military victories. The MNLA's popularity also faltered: the group preyed on northern civilians, and once it occupied cities its claims to represent the north's Peul and Songhai populations (and not just Tuareg and Arabs) wore increasingly thin. Ansar al-Din grew stronger politically and militarily, AQIM came more into the spotlight, and MUJWA rode a wave of anti-Tuareg sentiment to seize control of Gao. These jihadist groups came to deploy somewhat different strategies in recruitment and in their relations with civilians — Ansar al-Din leveraged its leaders' longstanding ties to Kidal to build local Tuareg support there, while MUJWA pursued a more ideologically focused, militarily aggressive, and multi-ethnic coalition in Gao.³⁹ The overall result, with local variations, was jihadist political ascendance.

In May-June 2012, efforts to negotiate a shared vision of "Azawad's" future broke down. Ansar al-Din and its hardline jihadist allies turned on the MNLA, chasing the separatists mostly out of northern cities. A period of jihadist control followed, distinguished by notorious incidents where jihadists subjected civilians to corporal punishments and destroyed centuries-old mausoleums and manuscripts. The more flexible elements in Ansar al-Din, led by Alghabass ag Intalla, attempted to negotiate political understandings with the MNLA and

³⁹ Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhlel, "Chapter Four: Decentralized Non-State Armed Groups" in *The Roots of Restraint in War* (ICRC, 2018), 48.

the Malian government, working through the governments of Burkina Faso and Algeria as intermediaries. Amid these talks, ag Ghali's commitment to negotiations was difficult to assess. Ag Ghali's own allies among the Ifoghas felt that he became more and more radical over the course of 2012-2013.⁴⁰ In January 2013, negotiations broke down due to irreconcilable positions held by ag Ghali and the Malian government. The combined jihadist forces of Ansar al-Din and AQIM advanced on central Mali, and the French government launched Operation Serval in response. French-led forces overturned jihadist control in northern cities, pushing jihadists into the desert.

The intra-Tuareg rivalries that shaped the rebellion also shaped its aftermath. The French intervention dramatically shifted the balance of power among different factions. First, the intervention and the looming U.S. and U.N. designations of Ansar al-Din as a terrorist group fractured the group. The politicians around Alghabass ag Intalla soon quit the movement. Second, the MNLA received a major boost from the French, who helped them regain a lead role in administering Kidal; the MNLA positioned themselves as counterterrorism partners for the French, which allowed them to help hunt down some of their jihadist rivals.⁴¹ Third, the aforementioned Ag Intalla wing of Ansar al-Din (which rebranded itself as the High Council for the Unity of Azawad or HCUA) reached a political accommodation with the MNLA. In 2014, the HCUA, the MNLA, and another northern movement, the Arab Movement of Azawad (French acronym MAA), formed an umbrella bloc called the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA). The CMA represented something of an Ifoghas-Arab front that could face down challenges from ag Gamou and the Imghad (see below) while negotiating with the Malian government. Fourth, however, the MNLA has remained particularly prone to schisms, with various members breaking off to form their own movements.⁴² The schisms within the MNLA have pushed ag Achérif closer to his fellow Ifoghas within the CMA, and have made the HCUA the CMA's dominant military force,

⁴⁰ Interview with ag Aharib.

⁴¹ Cheikh Diouara and John Irish, "Mali Tuaregs Seize Two Fleeing Islamist Leaders," Reuters, 4 February 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-rebels/mali-tuaregs-seize-two-fleeing-islamist-leaders-idUSBRE91205Z20130204>.

⁴² One example is the Coalition of the People for Azawad (CPA), led by the Idnan Tuareg Ibrahim ag Mohamed Assaleh. See Ibrahim Maïga, "Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the Labels," Institute for Security Studies, West Africa Report Issue 17, June 2016, 5, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/WestAfricaReport17.pdf>.

entrenching the MNLA's status, since mid-2012, as more of a political than a military enterprise.⁴³

The CMA's relations with ag Ghali and the jihadist wing of Ansar al-Din have been ambivalent and opaque. Amid the CMA's negotiations with the Malian government, both during and after the 2015 Algiers Accord, journalists and other observers have speculated that ag Ghali continues to influence the CMA and particularly the HCUA, possibly maintaining contacts with figures such as Alghabass ag Intalla and the parliamentary deputy Ahmada ag Bibi.⁴⁴ Yet assassinations, particularly jihadists' killing of CMA commander Salim Ould M'Begui in Timbuktu in September 2018, could signal that relations between the CMA and the northern jihadists are now quite tense.

Meanwhile, ag Gamou has remained a key player in northern politics. In 2014, ag Gamou's ally Fahad ag Almahmoud created the Self-Defense Group for Imghad Tuareg and Allies (French acronym GATIA).⁴⁵ Some observers and detractors see GATIA as merely a new iteration of the 1990s-era ARLA movement,⁴⁶ although others note that GATIA's support base is actually narrower than that of ARLA, and that GATIA is more pro-Imghad than it is sweepingly egalitarian.⁴⁷ On 14 June 2014, GATIA and several other movements created an umbrella political bloc called the Plateforme. The Plateforme represents loyalist militias that oppose northern secessionism, and is sometimes portrayed as a proxy for Bamako. The Plateforme militias became the third major party to the 2015 Algiers Accord, along with the Malian government and the CMA. Ag Gamou, who continues to serve as a general in the Malian armed forces, is a dominant figure not just within GATIA, but also within the Plateforme as a whole. Militarily, ag Gamou has not succeeded in overturning the CMA's position in Kidal, which has led ag Gamou to fall back on his longtime support base in Ménaka, a region that has now been administratively carved out of Gao.

⁴³ Interview with ag Ousmane.

⁴⁴ Benjamin Roger, "Mali: l'ombre d'Iyad Ag Ghali plane sur les négociations d'Alger," *Jeune Afrique*, 18 February 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/225445/politique/mali-l-ombre-d-iyad-ag-ghali-plane-sur-les-n-gociations-d-alger/>.

⁴⁵ "Nord du Mali: naissance d'un groupe armé opposé à l'autodétermination," RFI, 15 August 2014, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20140815-nord-mali-naissance-groupe-arme-oppose-autodetermination-maa-gatia-mnla-gamou-almahmoud/>.

⁴⁶ Interview with ag Aharib.

⁴⁷ Interview with Malian specialist on the north.

Ag Gamou has benefited from and perhaps even fostered some splintering within the MNLA. He has allied with Moussa ag Acharatoumane, who created the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) in September 2016 – a movement that might be described, in geographic terms, as the former Ménaka wing of the MNLA. The GATIA-MSA alliance is discussed further below, but here the relevant point is that amid Ifoghas-Imghad rivalries, the CMA and ag Gamou remain major poles of political power amid a fragmented north. Government support (along with reported trafficking of drugs and other goods) may help GATIA and other Plateforme militias overcome the core challenge that all militias face – namely, paying and caring for their members.⁴⁸

Post-rebellion electoral politics in Kidal have furthered rivalries between ag Gamou's Imghad allies and the Ifoghas. In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the Intalla family and other Ifoghas elites held on to several parliamentary seats in the Kidal region: Mohamed ag Intalla (who succeeded his father as *aménokal* in December 2014) won elections as parliamentary deputy for Tin-Essako, while the HCUA's Ahmada ag Bibi won election as deputy for Abeibera. Their scores, in these tiny constituencies were both at, or near, 100%. The cercle of Kidal, however, was won by the Imghad politician Ahmoudène ag Iknass, who received over 67% of the vote in the election's first round.⁴⁹ Another sign of ag Gamou's influence in Kidal was the February 2017 appointment of his ally Sidi Mohamed ag Ichrach, an Imghad, as the region's governor.⁵⁰ Military and administrative power in Kidal, however, rests primarily with the CMA: when Prime Minister Soumeylou Maïga visited the city in March 2018 (the first Malian prime minister to do so since Mara's failed attempt in 2014), and when President Keïta went there in July 2018, it was the Intalla family and the CMA who acted as their hosts.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Interview with Boukary Sangaré.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, *Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 47.

⁵⁰ "Mali: Sidi Mohamed Ag Ichrach Has Arrived in Kidal to Prepare the Return of the Administration," Sahelien, 23 August 2017, <http://sahelien.com/en/mali-sidi-mohamed-ag-ichrach-has-arrived-in-kidal-to-prepare-the-return-of-the-administration/>.

⁵¹ See "Mali: une visite haute en symbole du Premier ministre à Kidal," RFI, 23 March 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180323-mali-visite-haute-symbole-premier-ministre-kidal-boubeye-maiga>; and "Visite d'IBK dans le nord: pour la CMA, la mise en

Kidal, then, finds itself in a relative stalemate. Ag Ghali's jihadist forces have continued to wage a formidable insurgency since 2013— formalizing Ansar al-Din's relationship with AQIM and a faction of MUJWA through the creation of a jihadist alliance, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (JNIM, the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims) in 2017—but those forces are not strong enough (or, perhaps, foolish enough) to retake territorial control in the north in the face of sustained French military operations. Meanwhile, the CMA retains pronounced de facto administrative control in Kidal and neighboring areas, where the Malian military has yet to redeploy, but its ambitions are constrained by the Plateforme, by the numerous and other highly fragmented rebel groups and militias in the north, and by the willingness of the northern jihadists to sabotage any meaningful steps toward an enduring peace. As far as GATIA and the Plateforme are concerned, the CMA stands as a key obstacle to influence in Kidal, while jihadist groups complicate their position. On the one hand, Plateforme-associated militias have positioned themselves as counterterrorism partners for the Malian and French governments in Menaka. On the other hand, GATIA and other Plateforme-associated militias are now prominent targets for jihadists. Meanwhile, parts of the Plateforme network may maintain contact with former MUJWA elements, given that some Gao-based elites have floated between MUJWA and other militias, both loyalist and anti-government.⁵² In sum, no force is strong enough to defeat the others and the boundaries between camps are fluid.

There are also questions about who these armed groups really represent. Estimating Kidal's population is difficult, but the 2009 census put it at nearly 70,000 people. Since 2012, moreover, the conflict in the north has displaced thousands of people. The armed groups each have at most a few thousand fighters. The civilian population, caught between violence, elite machinations, and displacement, is not necessarily given a voice through armed

oeuvre de l'accord de paix traîne," RFI, 21 July 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180721-visie-ibk-le-nord-cma-mise-oeuvre-accord-paix-traîne>.

⁵² For more on these dynamics, see Andrew Lebovich, "Reconstructing Local Orders in Mali: Historical Perspectives and Future Challenges," Brookings Institution, July 2017, p. 18, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/lebovich_mali.pdf.

movements that represent individual politicians' ambitions. Ideological goals such as independence, autonomy, or jihadism do not necessarily represent ordinary people's preferences. Indeed, the seeming lack of widespread popular support for such agendas contributes to the prolongation of military stalemate, where no force is strong enough to prevent others from acting as spoilers, and no force is united enough

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Does this fragmentation position jihadists as the dominant power in the region in years to come? Various observers describe Ag Ghali as "incontournable" – indispensable – to politics in Kidal and throughout the north. Ag Ghali's strategy envisions a process whereby jihadist forces will drive out foreign forces and attract popular support, becoming a pillar of resistance to the government⁵³ – and perhaps, exercising a kind of shadow authority in the absence of central state authority. The years since 2013 have demonstrated that few northern elites remain willing to sign on overtly to the jihadist project, perhaps partly because of the French presence and the political costs associated with external sanctions on jihadists, but these years have also proven the tenacity of jihadism in the region. Ag Ghali remains the ultimate spoiler, casting a wide shadow over the fragmented political and military landscape in Kidal and beyond. That shadow increasingly extends to Mopti as well.

⁵³ " 'Al-Masra' Tuhawir al-Shaykh Aba al-Fadl Iyad Aghali," *Al-Masra* (April 2017), p. 4, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/al-masracc84-newspaper-45.pdf>.

Revolutionary Jihadism and Inter-Ethnic Violence in Central Regions

The political scene in the north features violent contests between forces that are still essentially controlled by long-familiar faces and a few younger entrants to the political-military arena. The situation in the center is very different. Although the organizational outlines of jihadist forces and bandit outfits in the center are much fuzzier than they are in the north, the center features widespread violence “from below,” directed at village-level and district-level authorities. The crisis in the center has become a “cocktail” of violence, as one Malian researcher puts it – a widespread feeling of insecurity has touched all ethnic groups and distorted the regional economy.⁵⁴

The 2012 rebellion touched off a scramble for pre-emptive self-defense measures among segments of ethnic Peul communities in northern Mopti region and in Gao. Echoing and extending trends at work since the 1990 rebellion, the Tuareg-dominated uprising in the north elicited fears among Peul and Songhai communities that they would become victims of Tuareg raids and predations⁵⁵ - a credible fear given MNLA and Ansar al-Din abuses against civilians.⁵⁶ These fears led some Peul youth to join the MNLA – a development that might seem counterintuitive, given Peul concerns about the MNLA itself, but that is explained by Peul youth’s desire to learn fighting techniques and gain weapons by participating in the rebellion. Other Peul youth gravitated toward loyalist militias such as Ganda Koy, and Ganda Iso, which had substantial Songhai and Peul recruitment.⁵⁷ Still other Peul youth rallied to MUJWA in Gao, not necessarily due to sympathies with jihadism but rather (or simultaneously) due to desires for protection. Still other Peul, particularly the future jihadist leader Amadou Kouffa, drew close to Ansar al-Din. Meanwhile, Mopti itself was directly affected by the rebellion. Northern factions sought to dominate towns

⁵⁴ Interview with Brema Ely Dicko, Bamako, 22 January 2018.

⁵⁵ Interview with a local politician from the Mopti region, Aba Cissé, Bamako, 24 January 2018; interview with Malian journalist Boubacar Cissé, Bamako, 25 January 2018.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Mali: War Crimes By Northern Rebels,” 30 April 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/30/mali-war-crimes-northern-rebels>.

⁵⁷ On these militias, see Marc-André Boisvert, “Failing at Violence: The Longer-lasting Impact of Pro-government Militias in Northern Mali since 2012,” *African Security* 8:4 (2015): 272-298.

in northern Mopti by mid-2012. In January 2013, jihadists (led by ag Ghali and AQIM, with the participation of Kouffa) advanced on Konna and Sévaré, the twin city of Mopti *ville*.

For Mopti, the aftermath of the 2012 rebellion included reprisals by state security forces and proxy militias as they sought to reassert control. State abuses accelerated a wider collapse of local authority, as the region's intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts exploded. On one level, these conflicts revolved around resource pressures surrounding land and water. The region's key economic sectors – farming, herding, and fishing – rely on these resources, as does human survival itself in an arid environment. Resources are increasingly strained by population growth, as well as by the expansion of mechanized, irrigation-based agriculture, which extends the growing season and thereby exacerbates farmer-herder conflict. There is, additionally, a growing tendency by major farmers and fishermen to invest in livestock, and thereby crowd into sectors that were not historically theirs.⁵⁸

Since the colonial period, and with increasing frequency since the 1990s, communities have fought over these resources. The legacy of colonial legislation, which transformed and undermined customary Peul notions of pasture management by allowing elite families to consolidate control over pastures, continues to spark conflict.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, when violence broke out between villages, most famously between Soosoobé and Sasalbé in 1993, the perpetrators went largely unpunished. Moreover, many Mopti residents have developed a growing resentment at “rackets” – arrangements of collusion where local authorities manage land and water in ways that exclude or extort the poor.⁶⁰ For example, Peul herders have decried the hereditary pasture managers and village chiefs who charge elevated fees to access grazing areas, the state officials who back up the power of village-level authorities, and the judges who decide legal suits based on under-the-table payments (or whose judgments go unenforced).⁶¹ There has been a growing sense, in Mopti and beyond, that herders

⁵⁸ Interview with Brema Ely Dicko.

⁵⁹ Interview with Peul historian Boubacar Cissé, Bamako, 25 January 2018.

⁶⁰ Thiam, “Centre du Mali,” 24.

⁶¹ Interview with former Ambassador to Iran and current Peul civil society leader Amadou Mody Diall, Bamako, 9 March 2018.

can and should govern themselves without the supervision, or predation, of hereditary local authorities.⁶²

Peul veterans of the 2012 conflict constituted part of the base for post-rebellion militias, both jihadist and non-jihadist, back in Mopti.⁶³ As communities arm themselves, inter-ethnic violence has also grown, with cross-victimization between communities furthering a cycle of conflict. The violence has also spread south, arousing concerns that not just Mopti and northern Ségou, but even parts of southern Mali, could become engulfed in inter-ethnic violence involving Peul, Bambara, and other groups. Pre-existing hunters' associations within the Dogon and Bambara ethnic groups have furnished the core of new "self-defense" militias. The Peul, because they are widely geographically dispersed and because some of them are nomads, come into contact and conflict with multiple ethnic groups.⁶⁴ Peul also accuse the state of disproportionately targeting their community due to an assumption that Peul support Islamist insurgent groups. Meanwhile, the state stands accused of backing ethnic militias, particularly among the Dogon, in Mopti, and in this way exacerbating the violence.

Amid these overlapping conflicts, Mopti's jihadists have played a central role. Unlike in Kidal, Mopti's jihadists – initially misnamed in the media as the "Macina Liberation Front," but more accurately rendered as the "Macina Battalion" or just "Amadou Kouffa's forces" – have not attracted Mopti's politicians to their banner.⁶⁵ Even Kouffa himself, according to the little that is known about his biography, is a former Qur'an school student, itinerant bard, and anti-establishment preacher, rather than a leading politician like Iyad ag Ghali. Here it is worth noting that Peul society is, to simplify matters considerably, hierarchical, gerontocratic, and caste-based, with legacies of Peul enslavement of adjacent ethnic groups that incorporated some individuals into Peul society while giving them low status.⁶⁶ Overlaying these patterns are hereditary systems for the transfer of authority, both

⁶² Interview with Boukary Sangaré.

⁶³ Interview with Boubacar Cissé.

⁶⁴ Interview with Boukary Sangaré.

⁶⁵ On the issue of the name "Macina Liberation Front," see Thiam, "Centre du Mali," 28. This issue also came up in author's interview with Brema Ely Dicko; and with Boubacar Cissé.

⁶⁶ See Naffet Keïta, ed., *L'Esclavage au Mali* (Paris: Harmattan, 2012).

for village heads and for religious leaders, as well as more recent systems where central state authority props up the control that hereditary village authorities have over formerly communal pastures. Kouffa's movement partly represents an effort to overturn these hierarchies.

Thus, although Kouffa's forces have been formally subordinated to ag Ghali's since 2017, Kouffa's forces have a far different social base than that of Ansar al-Din. Kouffa's messaging is adapted to ordinary people's needs and attempts to gain their confidence; social media and platforms such as WhatsApp have changed the nature of the conflict, allowing Kouffa's recorded messages to circulate widely. Kouffa has even reportedly sent people to support his cause at community meetings in Mopti.⁶⁷ Kouffa has few partners even among the region's Qur'an school teachers, many of whom have resisted and denounced him⁶⁸ – but he has plenty of recruits among youth, as well as significant support from women who are willing to act as informants, wives, and suppliers.⁶⁹

In this sense, although Kouffa frames his project as one focused on shari'a rather than as an internal Peul affair, jihadism in Mopti resembles a social revolution from below rather than a part of intra-elite competition, as in Kidal. Kouffa's forces have been at the forefront of the effort to make Mopti ungovernable for both local and national authorities, particularly in the administrative districts of Tenenkou, Youwarou, Djenné, and Mopti district itself. This process has spread village by village, with Kouffa activating wide-ranging social networks acquired through his lifetime of traveling through Mopti. His forces assassinate and intimidate village heads and state officials. Mayors and village heads who do not flee are sometimes compelled to negotiate settlements with jihadists or otherwise keep low profiles.⁷⁰ Sometimes, jihadists encamp near villages, brokering truces with villagers and enforcing new regulations.⁷¹ Once Kouffa's forces have sway in a

⁶⁷ Interview with Boukary Sangaré.

⁶⁸ Interview with Qur'an teacher from the Mopti Region, who requested anonymity, Bamako, 24 January 2018; interview with Boubacar Cissé.

⁶⁹ Interview with civil society activist from Timbuktu, who requested anonymity, Bamako, 22 January 2018.

⁷⁰ Interview with Aba Cissé.

⁷¹ For example, Dogon civil society leader Yoby Guindo described to the author how this process had unfolded in his village of Gondo-Ogouro. The jihadists encamped near the village; following a battle with Dogon villagers, the jihadists began to dictate

village, they reconfigure the management of pastures, collect *zakat* (mandatory alms for Muslims), close schools and sometimes hospitals, ban celebrations of major holidays and lavish marriages, and punish those who cooperate with state authorities. These measures attract some support even from non-jihadists, activating legacies of Peul resistance to colonial and post-colonial government schools. The overall result is a situation where the state more or less controls Mopti city, has partial control over district centers, and has lost significant control over villages.⁷²

Throughout the crisis, state and military responses have often

All these disruptions to lives and livelihoods weaken civilian trust in authorities and seem to drive more recruits to jihadist units, bandits, and ethnic militias. In an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty, "You no longer know who is who."

worsened matters, as soldiers and authorities engage in ethnic profiling of Peul youth and commit exactions, mass executions, and counterproductive interventions such as repeatedly banning motorbikes in parts of the Mopti region.⁷³ Soldiers also create new "rackets," forcing Peul villagers to pay them to avoid being arrested on charges of terrorism. Meanwhile, soldiers work with ethnic militias (particularly the Dogon) to identify suspected jihadists and jihadist

certain terms to both the Peul and the Dogon quarters, including the closure of the village's school. Interview, Bamako, 8 March 2018.

⁷² Interview with Boubacar Sangaré. Sangaré gave the example of this process playing out in the village of Dogo, Youwarou *cercle*, where the village head Issa Dicko was assassinated in April 2015. See also Youssouf Keita, "Assassinat du chef de village de Dogo (Youwarou) : « Les tueurs sont des djihadistes libérés par Bamako », " *Le Républicain*, 27 April 2015, http://malijet.com/actualite_dans_les_regions_du_mali/128179-assassinat_du_chef_de_village_les_tueurs.html. This section also draws on the author's interview with Amadou Mody Diall, Bamako, 9 March 2018. On patterns of rural jihadism in West Africa more broadly, see Jean-Hervé Jezequel and Vincent Foucher, "Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural," International Crisis Group, 11 January 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>.

⁷³ "Mali: le gouverneur de Mopti interdit la circulation en moto dans la region," RFI, 26 March 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170326-mali-gouverneur-mopti-interdit-circulation-moto-region-securite>; "Mali : Interdiction des motos et Pick-up dans plusieurs localités du centre et du nord du pays," Studio Tamani, 3 February 2018, <https://www.studiotamani.org/index.php/politique/14434-mali-interdiction-des-motos-et-pick-up-dans-plusieurs-localites-du-centre-et-du-nord-du-pays>.

collaborators in Peul villages. Soldiers thereby exacerbate ethnic hatreds and feed a climate of mutual recrimination between ethnic groups. All these disruptions to lives and livelihoods weaken civilian trust in authorities and seem to drive more recruits to jihadist units, bandits, and ethnic militias. In an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty, “You no longer know who is who.”⁷⁴

In terms of authorities’ control over conflict zones, the 2018 elections highlighted the difference between the situation in Kidal and that in Mopti. In the far north, the administration made arrangements with the CMA that facilitated successful and relatively peaceful elections. In Mopti, by contrast no deals were possible. The election days of 29 July and 12 August were characterized by mass intimidation and disruption of the voting, such that over 700 polling places in Mopti (again, especially in Tenenkou and Mopti) were unable to function during the first round of voting.⁷⁵

Kouffa’s attitude towards Peul identity is complex, and his attitude towards Mali as a nation-state is ambivalent. In one infamous audio recording from August 2017, Kouffa declared, “We are and we will remain Peul...we are Malians and will remain such.”⁷⁶ On one level, it appears that Kouffa is not trying to recreate a theocratic state in “Macina,” nor endeavoring to secede from Mali, but is rather attempting to enforce his version of Islamic law at the local level.⁷⁷ But at the same time, researchers note a growing disenchantment, on the part of the Peul, the Tuareg, and other ethnic groups, with the Mandinka-Bambara version of Malian unity. Kouffa’s movement can be seen as one expression of centrifugal cultural forces in Mali.⁷⁸ Kouffa sometimes plays on the notion of Peul victimization by the state and by the Dogon and the Bambara, arguing that because the Peul are the majority in Mopti, they should rule there.⁷⁹ Malian analysts, however, are quick to add that Kouffa has a multi-ethnic appeal, and

⁷⁴ Interview with Boubacar Sangaré.

⁷⁵ Malian Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, “Liste des centres et bureaux ou les électeurs n’ont pas pu voter,” August 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BzzcldcMI3mYqz9VEhznNWBjCXONprp/view>.

⁷⁶ Quotation from an unpublished translation from Ffulfulde to French by Oumar Sow. I am grateful to Mr. Sow for sharing this translation with me.

⁷⁷ Interview with Amadou Mody Diall.

⁷⁸ Interview with Nouhoum Salif.

⁷⁹ Interview with civil society activist from Timbuktu.

his forces cannot be seen as a one-dimensional expression of “Peul radicalization.”⁸⁰ National Peul elites in Bamako and beyond are increasingly alarmed by the equation of the Peul with jihadism,⁸¹ and objections to ethnic profiling are now a theme in national politics. Finally, many Malians, including prominent Peul and northern politicians, argue that if a definitive peace can be reached with ag Ghali and the jihadists in the north, then the jihadist problem in the center will die down.⁸² Even Kouffa, in his above-mentioned August 2017 recording, stated, “If you want a dialogue, go talk with Iyad ag Ghali...he is our guide.”⁸³ Efforts by the national Peul elite to talk to Kouffa in 2017 succeeded to the extent that they were able to contact him,⁸⁴ but failed to generate any tangible movement toward peace.

The situation in Mopti highlights wider dangers for Mali if citizens’ confidence in authorities and elites completely breaks down. Decades of hierarchical management through local authorities has effectively marginalized swaths of ordinary people, who have lost faith that elections, courts, and security forces can resolve their problems or provide justice. Mali desperately needs mechanisms of genuine accountability and change that proceed through paths other than violence. The country’s formal peace process, however, has not so far provided such mechanisms.

⁸⁰ Interview with Boubacar Sangaré; interview with Brema Ely Dicko; interview with Amadou Mody Diallo.

⁸¹ Interview with former National Assembly President and current Peul civil society leader Ali Nouhoum Diallo, Bamako, 22 January 2018. See also Ba-Konaré, “En Afrique, le fantasme d’une « communauté peule » radicalisée.”

⁸² Interview with Ali Nouhoum Diallo; interview with former Malian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Timbuktu native Mahmoud Zouber, Bamako, 23 January 2018.

⁸³ Quotation from an unpublished translation from Fulfulde to French by Oumar Sow.

⁸⁴ In summer 2017, Ali Nouhoum Diallo was able to speak – via intermediaries – with Kouffa. Interview with Diallo; interview with Peul politician Oumar Sow, Bamako, 8 March 2018.

Part Two: Flaws in Existing Peace and Stability Frameworks

A Paradoxical Peace Process

In 2015, Algeria's government brokered a peace agreement involving the Malian government, former northern rebels, and pro-government northern militias. As discussed above, the formerly secessionist rebels and ex-jihadists were and are represented by an umbrella body called the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA), while the pro-unity militias are called the Plateforme. The accord has been widely criticized, both by experts and by Malians, as largely reproducing failed frameworks from past accords such as the 1991 Tamanrasset Accords, the 1992 National Pact, and the 2006 Algiers Accord, all of which promised decentralization and development for the north. As one report put it, "Perhaps the most striking feature of past agreements is their redundancy," not just in terms of their content but also in the cycle of "bad faith and poor implementation" that inhibit a definitive settlement."⁸⁵ These past accords have been criticized for primarily benefiting their signatories in the north and in Bamako, rather than benefiting ordinary people in the north or the south.⁸⁶

Portions of the Algiers Accord have been implemented, although sometimes only after significant delays. A monitoring committee and a technical commission on security were established in 2015. An independent observer (the Carter Center) was designed in 2017. A "Conference of National Understanding" was held in March-April

⁸⁵ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "A Process in Search of Peace: Lessons from the Inter-Malian Agreement," International Peace Institute, June 2017, 6, <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/IPI-Rpt-Inter-Malian-AgreementFinalRev.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Interview with Salif.

2017, and a “Charter for Peace, Unity and National Reconciliation” was drafted and signed by the government afterwards, although its legitimacy was challenged by the CMA and the political opposition. In 2017, the legislature approved a new Territorial Communities Code as well as a new Law on the Free Administration of Territorial Communities, measures that are meant to accelerate decentralization and elevate popular electoral representation in the north. Elections, however, at the regional, district, and municipal level, have been repeatedly delayed. Finally, in terms of the re-securitization of the north, two key provisions – (1) the establishment of Operational Coordination Mechanisms (French acronym MOCs) for conducting joint patrols in northern region, and (2) the installation of interim political authorities in northern regions – have met significant resistance from both jihadists and non-signatory armed groups.

The accord’s implementation has struggled amid mistrust between the government and the CMA, as well as periodic violence between the CMA and the Plateforme (particularly GATIA). The CMA accuses the government of foot-dragging and unilateralism, while the government accuses the CMA of insincerity. From the beginning of the process, the CMA has been reluctant to endorse the accord or its component steps – for example, in a sign of what was to come, the government and the Plateforme signed the accord in May 2015 in a ceremony boycotted by the CMA, which only signed the accord one month later under international pressure. The Plateforme, meanwhile, has repeatedly complained that its members – and their sometime allies among “sedentary” northern populations (i.e., non-Tuareg and non-Arab northerners) -- have been excluded from the accord’s implementation, and that the accord implicitly favors the CMA.⁸⁷

Moreover, periodic clashes between the CMA and GATIA demonstrate (and further ensure) that the accord only partly speaks to ground realities: the ability to unleash violence remains fundamental to northern politics, and clashes come to demarcate geographical zones of influence whose existence is more real, in certain ways, than the accord itself. For example, in July 2017 the CMA attacked GATIA’s

⁸⁷ This was the primary complaint voiced at a press conference held by Plateforme-aligned militias in Bamako on 23 January 2018, attended by the author.

position outside Kidal city,⁸⁸ driving GATIA back and contributing to GATIA's decision to emphasize military dominance in Ménaka rather than Kidal. Amid these core problems of mistrust and continued violence, the accord's signatories have been reluctant to abandon the framework, but all sides are visibly dissatisfied with it and sometimes outright ignore it.

The accord's structure, meanwhile, leads to two problems. First, by excluding jihadists seen as hostile to making peace, the accord reinforces their incentive to undermine its implementation. Jihadists' ability to act as spoilers was underlined by their January 2017 suicide bombing targeting a joint patrol organized through the MOC in Gao. Second, by rewarding armed groups with a seat at the table, the accord incentivizes new groups to take up arms, which in turn undermines the prospects for successful implementation.

These dynamics create dilemmas for the accord's signatories and for mediators: Amid a proliferation of armed groups, the participants in the peace process can either welcome more participants into the process (which could encourage still more groups to take up arms) or the participants can exclude the newly created armed groups, which can encourage them to act as spoilers. For example, the installation of interim authorities in Timbuktu was disrupted in March 2017 by the Congress for Justice in Azawad (CJA), a militia aligned with the Kel Ansar Tuareg in Timbuktu. As a price for allowing the interim authorities to proceed, the CJA demanded greater representation in political offices in Timbuktu.⁸⁹ In November 2017, the CJA and other northern armed groups – including breakaway groups from the CMA and the Plateforme – formed a new umbrella bloc, the Coordination of Movements of Understanding (French acronym CME), which demands inclusion in the Algiers peace process. The Algiers Accord remains valuable, but it cannot address many of the core drivers of these multi-level conflicts.

⁸⁸ "Mali: affrontements entre le Gatia et la CMA dans la région de Kidal," RFI, 27 July 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170726-mali-violation-cessez-le-feu-gatia-cma-kidal>; and "Mali: lourd bilan des combats entre le Gatia et la CMA dans le nord du pays," RFI, 27 July 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170727-mali-lourd-bilan-combats-entre-le-gatia-cma-nord-pays>.

⁸⁹ "Installation des autorités intérimaires au Mali: le blocage persiste à Tombouctou," 6 March 2017, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170306-mali-installation-autorites-interimaires-tombouctou-cja-blocage-tirs>.

A Quagmire for Foreign Forces

Amid Mali's conflicts, foreign forces have become deeply implicated in the conflict, both trying to resolve it and fueling it. The French-led military intervention that began on 11 January 2013 – Operation Serval – achieved its primary objectives with relative ease. Serval immediately reversed the jihadists' advance into the Mopti region and swiftly pushed jihadists out of the northern cities they controlled, taking Gao (27 January), Timbuktu (also 27 January), and Kidal (30 January). Pursuing jihadist bands into far northern Mali, Serval and allied Chadian forces soon killed prominent jihadist leaders such as AQIM's 'Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd (25 February 2013). Commentators hailed the mission as an example of what could be achieved by rapid military interventions against jihadists.⁹⁰

Amid the intensive phase of combat operations wound down, France sought to internationalize the military response to Mali's collapse. Through its seat on the U.N. Security Council, France pushed for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which the Council established in April 2013. With over 15,000 personnel, MINUSMA seeks to stabilize Mali, support extension of state authority, and build security in ways that allow for political progress. For its part, the European Union set up the European Union Training Mission for Mali (EUTM), which trains Malian military units and then seeks to "train the trainers" to propel a force-wide transformation. Meanwhile, in summer 2014, France replaced Serval with Operation Barkhane, a Sahel-wide counterterrorism unit based in Chad but with a large base in Gao and a presence elsewhere in Mali. Operation Barkhane achieved some counterterrorism successes in terms of destroying jihadist camps and killing jihadist leaders.

Yet Barkhane, MINUSMA, and the Malian government soon ran into a problem that has confronted anti-jihadist forces in northern Iraq, northeastern Nigeria, and elsewhere: it is much easier to break apart jihadist proto-states that seek to govern territory than it is to eliminate jihadist guerrilla units based in remote areas or disrupt clandestine

⁹⁰ See Christopher Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qaeda in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

urban networks.⁹¹ After Serval began, the jihadists and their allies struck across northwest Africa, hitting a series of high-profile targets in Algeria, Niger, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso between January 2013 and 2016. Mali's jihadists also conducted major attacks in southern Mali, notably gunmen's storming of the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako in November 2015.

In recent years, as violence has escalated in central Mali and as jihadists have reorganized in the north, jihadist attacks have come to target MINUSMA and Barkhane in particular. As Barkhane pursues development projects, it has built some goodwill in places such as Aguelhoc and Tessalit. But military operations also have wide-ranging negative effects, including harm to pastures and roads due to airstrikes. Meanwhile, outside of northern regional capitals, security remains precarious because of widespread banditry and the threat of jihadist attacks; it has become exceedingly dangerous to travel by road within the north.⁹² Aid workers are also highly vulnerable to attack.⁹³ MINUSMA now struggles to fulfill its core mandate. As one recent analysis argued, "MINUSMA faces a shrinking space for protecting civilians. Both the hostile environment in which it operates and its ambiguous position in relation to counter-terrorism have hampered or reduced the relevance of the protection tools usually at the disposal of UN missions."⁹⁴

⁹¹ On the idea of jihadist proto-states, see Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9:4 (2015), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/441/html>.

⁹² Interview with ag Ousmane.

⁹³ Kieran Guilbert, "Aid Workers Attacked Most Often in West and Central Africa," Reuters, 18 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-westafrica-aid-attacks/aid-workers-attacked-most-often-in-west-and-central-africa-idUSKCN1AY217>.

⁹⁴ Namie di Razza, "Protecting Civilians in the Context of Violent Extremism: The Dilemmas of UN Peacekeeping in Mali," International Peace Institute, October 2018, p. 1, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/1810_POC-in-the-Context-of-Violent-Extremism.pdf.

Amid a Western mantra of “African solutions to African problems” and, increasingly, “African regional solutions,” France has sought partners other than the Malian government for help in stabilizing Mali (and, France hopes, paving the way for an eventual French military reduction there). On a formal, public level, France’s newest partner is

French political commentators now increasingly compare France’s dilemmas in Mali to the dilemmas the United States faced in Afghanistan: the war seems unwinnable, yet leaders and military strategists assert that withdrawal would lead to a worse situation and the possible collapse of the central state

the Joint Force of the G-5 Sahel. The G-5 is a political body that has existed since 2014, but its joint force was created in 2017. Initially headed by a Malian commander, a string of delays and setbacks – notably the jihadist attack on the G-5 base at Sévaré, Mopti Region in June 2018 – led the bloc to replace the Malian officer with a Mauritanian commander and announced plans to move its Malian headquarters to Bamako.

France’s counterterrorism partnerships also extend beyond formal, government-to-government relations. By early 2018, French forces had begun working with two Malian government-aligned militias – the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and GATIA – in their efforts to hunt down and destroy the “Islamic State in the Greater Sahara” (ISGS). French commanders have insisted that the cooperation between Barkhane, MSA, and GATIA is predicated on those militias’ “loyalty to the Malian state, [acceptance] of working alongside the Malian Armed Forces, [and] conformity to the strict framework of the anti-terrorist fight, to the exclusion of any instrumentalization in relation to inter-communal conflicts.”⁹⁵ Yet these relationships have drawn French forces into uncomfortable terrain as

⁹⁵ “Face à Barkhane, un ennemi aux abois,” interview of Operation Barkhane’s then-Commander General Bruno Guibert by Vincent Hugué, *L’Express*, 20 April 2018, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/face-a-barkhane-un-ennemi-aux-abois_2001343.html.

both MSA and GATIA face allegations of ethnic-based violence in the Mali-Niger borderlands.⁹⁶ At the same time, a tribal leader and parliamentary deputy from Ménaka said, France sees MSA and GATIA as key to winning over the civilian population of Ménaka.⁹⁷

In this sense, foreign forces and interventions repeatedly create dynamics in Mali that implicate them in the conflict while seeming to cut off the possibility of an exit from it. French (and American) political commentators now sometimes compare France's dilemmas in Mali to the dilemmas the United States faced in Afghanistan: the war seems unwinnable, yet some commentators assert that withdrawal would lead to a worse situation and the possible collapse of the central state.⁹⁸ France's presence, meanwhile, feeds suspicions about its ultimate intentions – even as Malians also turn a skeptical eye toward Algeria and towards each other.

An Atmosphere of Accusation

One final obstacle to resolving, or even understanding, Mali's multi-faceted conflicts is the atmosphere of accusation and suspicion that reigns in the capital and elsewhere. Many Malians feel (correctly) that their country is weak and poor, and (more controversially, perhaps) that it is perennially exploited by more powerful actors. In numerous interviews for this paper – conducted primarily with Bamako-based commentators, albeit with individuals from different ethnic, regional, and social backgrounds – this researcher heard serious allegations leveled against two of Mali's most important foreign interlocutors, Algeria and France. Many interviewees asserted that Algeria has nurtured and protected the jihadist movement in northern Mali in order to maintain access to northern Mali as a market and to dilute French influence in the region; in particular, many interviewees believe that

⁹⁶ There are plausible risks in Ménaka of escalating inter-ethnic violence, driven by these counterterrorism partnerships. See Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim and Mollie Zapata, "Regions at Risks: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Mali," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 2018, p. 21, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Mali_Report_English_FINAL_April_2018.pdf.

⁹⁷ Interview with Tuareg politician and hereditary ruler Bajan ag Hamatou, Bamako, 12 March 2018.

⁹⁸ For a perspective on France's role in Mali and on French commentators' comparisons between Mali and Afghanistan, see Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, "Mali Is France's Afghanistan, But With a Difference," War on the Rocks, 1 December 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/mali-is-frances-afghanistan-but-with-a-difference/>.

Algeria specifically protects and controls Iyad ag Ghali.⁹⁹ This accusation, which echoes older theories asserting Algerian support for AQIM's expansion into the Sahara, has been taken up in parts of the Malian and international press and has been repeated by prominent French analysts.¹⁰⁰ Other interviewees added that Algeria sponsored the creation of Ansar al-Din amid the rebellion in order to weaken the MNLA, which was pro-independence and refused Algerian mediation in the conflict.¹⁰¹ Some Tuareg politicians, of course, dispute the idea that Algeria controls ag Ghali – the prominent politician Ahmada ag Bibi asked pointedly why Algeria would cultivate a clandestine relationship with ag Ghali when such an arrangement might put Algeria's ties to the United States and France at risk, and added that ag Ghali had declined an Algerian government request for a meeting in 2012.¹⁰²

With regard to France, many interviewees expressed the view that France seeded and sustains the conflict in northern Mali;¹⁰³ many interviewees stated their belief that the administration of Nicolas Sarkozy facilitated the creation of the MNLA, or at least tolerated the movement of its heavily armed returnees from Libya to northern Mali, as part of a great game that involved French ambitions to control Libya and destabilize the Sahara in order to exploit its natural resources.¹⁰⁴ Washington's posture is also subject to suspicion; many Bamako-based commentators were upset by the CMA's visit to the United States in January 2018, which such commentators saw as an encroachment on the Malian government's sovereignty and as a signal of tacit American support for the CMA over the Plateforme.¹⁰⁵

...accusations, in other words, leave some Malians feeling that there is no "Malian solution" to Mali's conflicts,

because they suspect that outsiders would sabotage any

productive steps toward peace

⁹⁹ I am anonymizing these interviews to protect my interlocutors. Interview with a specialist on the north, Bamako, 19 January 2018; interview with a Tuareg NGO worker, Bamako, 20 January 2018.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Pourquoi l'Algérie protège le pire jihadiste du Sahel," *Le Monde*, 21 October 2018, <http://filiu.blog.lemonde.fr/2018/10/21/pourquoi-lalgerie-protège-le-pire-jihadiste-du-sahel/>.

¹⁰¹ Interview with an Arab Malian politician, Bamako, March 2018.

¹⁰² Interview with former Ansar al-Din senior official and current senior CMA official Ahmada ag Bibi, Bamako, 13 March 2018.

¹⁰³ Interview with a senior Malian Muslim leader, Bamako, March 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with a senior Malian politician, Bamako, January 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with civil society activist from Timbuktu.

For the purposes of this report, what is most important is the “social fact” that these allegations circulate widely in Bamako. Significant numbers of Malians mistrust France, the most influential Western power in Mali. Such mistrust can only undercut the political dimensions of France’s counterterrorism efforts and France’s effort to build up “regional” solutions to jihadism in northern and central Mali. Meanwhile, significant numbers of Malians mistrust Algeria, the country’s most powerful neighbor and the mediator of the 2015 peace agreement. For those who view Algeria with suspicion, the conflict in the north reflects the machinations of Algerian proxies rather than internal Malian political dynamics. These accusations, in other words, leave some Malians feeling that there is no “Malian solution” to Mali’s conflicts, because they suspect that outsiders would sabotage any productive steps toward peace.

Key events can be interpreted through the lens of these allegations and suspicions. For example, on 14 February 2018 French forces raided a jihadist encampment in the area of Tinzawaten and killed Malick ag Wanasnat, a close associate of ag Ghali.¹⁰⁶ Interviewees in Bamako wondered how it was that the French could track jihadists in remote areas, but could never find and kill ag Ghali himself. In August 2018, suspicions of Algerian collusion with jihadists were reinforced as a relatively prominent Malian jihadist – Sultan Ould Badi – turned himself in to Algerian authorities in Tamanrasset.¹⁰⁷ Visits by senior Malian government officials to neighboring and nearby countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, can also fuel popular suspicions about alleged secret agreements between Malian principals and foreigners.

Far from Bamako, armed groups in the north also accuse one another of being subservient to foreign agendas. For example, former

¹⁰⁶ Armed Forces of Mali, “Lutte antiterroriste: Malick Ag Wanasnat, un fidèle d’Iyad Ag Ghali abattu,” 15 February 2018, http://malijet.com/actualite_dans_les_regions_du_mali/rebellion_au_nord_du_mali/204631-lutte-antiterroriste-malick-ag-wanasnat%2C-un-fid%C3%A8le-d%E2%80%99iyad-ag-gha.html.

¹⁰⁷ “Algérie: reddition du chef terroriste malien Sultan Ould Badi à Tamanrasset,” RFI, 13 August 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180813-algerie-reddition-chef-terroriste-malien-sultan-ould-badi-tamanrasset?ref=tw>. See also “Algérie : Les vraies raisons de la reddition de Sultan Ould Badi,” Kibaru, 20 August 2018, <https://kibaru.ml/fr/art/vwjfm>. Ould Badi’s surrender was soon followed by reported surrenders from other jihadists. See “Nouvelle reddition d’un terroriste à Tamanrasset,” TSA, 23 August 2018, <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/nouvelle-reddition-dun-terroriste-a-tamanrasset/>; and M. Rahim, “Défense: reddition d’un terroriste à Tamanrasset,” ALG24, 6 September 2018, <https://www.alg24.net/defense-reddition-terroriste-tamanrasset/>.

parliamentary deputy Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh broke with the MNLA in 2014 and – from Algiers – announced the creation of a new armed movement. Among his complaints about MNLA leader Bilal ag Achérif was that the latter wanted “to instrumentalize the legitimate fight of the people of Azawad for the profit of other agendas, notably those of certain states, that do not correspond to our own [agendas].” Ag Mohamed Assaleh objected in particular to ag Achérif’s relationship with Morocco, which ag Mohamed Assaleh said could implicate northern Mali in “the conflict between Rabat and Algiers.”¹⁰⁸ Ag Mohamed Assaleh’s enemies in the CMA, meanwhile, accuse him of being a tool for the Malian government.¹⁰⁹ On the checkerboard of regional politics, which includes Mali’s convoluted relationships with its neighbors, the Western Sahara conflict, and each Sahelian and North African state’s own ambivalent relations with France, the conflict in northern Mali evokes multi-sided recriminations and suspicions.

The opacity of Algerian government decision-making and intentions compounds these suspicions. Algerian domestic politics have witnessed increased debate in recent years, suggesting that the image of Algeria’s rulers as a shadowy military and intelligence cabal is out of date. Nevertheless, the presumed incapacity of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the periodic dismissals of senior military and intelligence officers make it difficult to determine how, precisely, the country is being run, including in foreign policy. With regard to Mali, it is clear that Algeria has major interests in the country’s future.¹¹⁰ Yet the Algerian government regularly appears reluctant to coordinate closely with other outside parties; for example, Algeria was the only regional government that refused a request by the United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali to visit their country for research and discussions.¹¹¹ Algeria remains indispensable to resolving the conflict

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin Roger, “Mali – Ag Mohamed Assaleh : « J’annonce haut et fort ma dissidence du MNLA »,” *Jeune Afrique*, 10 March 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/165075/politique/mali-ag-mohamed-assaleh-j-annonce-haut-et-fort-ma-dissidence-du-mnla/>.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with ag Aharib.

¹¹⁰ For perspectives on Algeria’s posture toward Mali, see Alexis Arieff, “Algeria and the Crisis in Mali,” IFRI, 2012, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/actuellesariefffinal.pdf>; and Anouar Boukhars, “The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali,” *Sada*, 22 October 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=49756>.

¹¹¹ United Nations Panel of Experts on Mali, August 2018 report, p. 4, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=%20S/2018/581.

in Mali, but widespread mistrust of Algeria complicates the question of how Algeria's influence can be maximized to good effect.

Recommendations

Mali's problems are deeply entrenched and interconnected. These interconnections make resolving the country's crises supremely difficult, given that making headway on one problem can leave related problems unaddressed – or, at worst, inadvertently undermine progress in one area while achieving it in another. It has already been seen above, for example, that the Algiers Accord inadvertently incentivized the creation of new armed groups even as it sought to bring peace between the then-existing armed factions.

Nevertheless, there are paths for addressing Mali's problems in a roughly sequential order, using momentum from each step to make progress on the next phase. This paper envisions a three-phase process – reducing harm, brokering deals, and empowering citizens.

Reducing Harm

1. End Western support for militias: France and other Western powers should cease any financial or military support they provide to militias in Mali. If such support helps achieve tactical counterterrorism successes in the short term, its broader effects are destabilizing. Militias have contributed to an escalation of violence, a widespread victimization of civilians, and an overall "ethnicization" of conflict in northern and central Mali.
2. End Malian government support for militias: The Malian government, if necessary under pressure from its donors and backers internationally, should cease its support to militias in northern and central Mali. As described above, these militias

exacerbate violence and, by artificially altering the balance of power among forces on the ground, ultimately prolong the civil war.

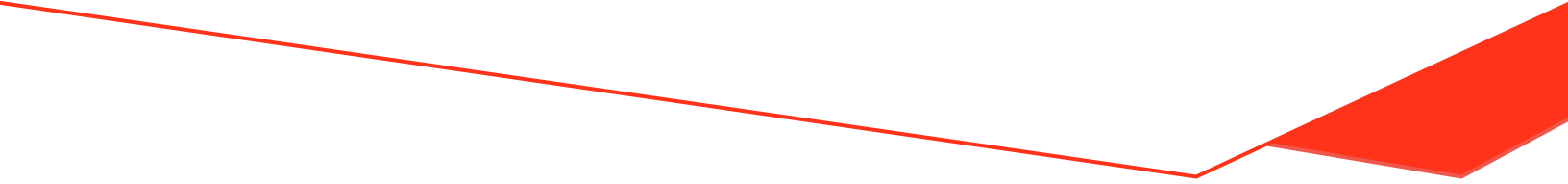
3. End military abuses and profiling of civilians: The Malian government should intensify its efforts to end military exactions against civilians, particularly in Mopti but also throughout the center and the north. These abuses fuel the conflict and undermine citizens' faith in government.

Brokering Deals

1. Give Kidal provisional autonomy while re-emphasizing government control in other areas of the north. For example, the Malian government could offer a provisional, five-year term of political autonomy to Kidal loosely based on the model of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Additionally, a five-member commission (Malian government, Algerian government, Mauritanian government, Nigerien government, and United Nations) could be created and given a mandate of (a) helping to devise appropriate political structures for Kidal, in consultation with local politicians and communities and then (b) monitoring the provisional period.
2. Launch a formal call for dialogue with JNIM: Building on the recommendations of Mali's 2017 Conference of National Understanding, the Malian government could publicly and formally offer to conduct dialogue, without preconditions, with JNIM. The Malian government should also offer a package deal of legal immunity and lifetime exile to Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa.

Empowering Citizens

1. A transition roadmap in Mopti and its environs: Mopti needs a new future that allows citizens to have a direct voice in the



management of political affairs and key resources, and to do so on an egalitarian basis. Mopti's widespread violence indicates that citizens would not accept a violent reassertion of state power there – rather, national and international authorities should attempt to shepherd a bottom-up process whereby citizens reimagine how the region will move forward. Whether through municipal elections, elections for judges, community dialogues on resource-sharing, or other mechanisms, Mopti needs a roadmap that will allow for greater equality and greater accountability.

2. Increased diplomatic pressure for enhanced popular representation at the subnational level: Western diplomacy and development should insist that the Malian government move away from military governors, unaccountable judges, and other unelected subnational figures. Throughout Mali, citizens deserve to have a greater say in who rules them at the regional and local level.

Conclusion

In Mali, largely unaccountable politicians and militia commanders have perpetrated a dangerous and counterproductive status quo characterized by multi-sided stalemates. As elites have endured amid or even benefited from these stalemates, ordinary citizens have suffered – both from violence and from the cascading economic effects of violence, displacement and crisis. To exit from its multi-sided crisis, Mali will need political settlements that pave a path out of these stalemates, but Malian citizens will also need a greater voice in the governance of Mali. Failing these outcomes, the jihadist and inter-communal violence in central Mali may offer a grim warning of trends that could spread elsewhere in the country.

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