



Mali: Antagonists or Terrorists around the Table?

Captain Lars Scraeyen¹

25 January 2013

The Complexity of Power Contenders

The complexity of the crisis occurring in Mali since last year, or even since last century, needs no further convincing. A study of its degree of complexity, however, is relevant. Since Belgium actively participates in the support to the Malian authorities, we should take a closer look at the different opponents to the Malian transitional government. The increasing influence of global jihadist ideology on different non-state actors in Mali and its neighbouring countries brought about a sweeping change in the amount and type of power contenders since its independence in the 1960's. Notwithstanding the questionable allegiances to a supposed global jihadist terrorist group, it is an important spoiler in a peace-building process for Mali.

We will focus on the different power contenders and the impact on the determination of reaching a desired political end state through negotiations for Mali and the closely linked regional security. We will try to differentiate between antagonists and terrorists in the Malian crisis and their participation in peace settlements. On the other hand, we will highlight the distinction between the restoration of the Malian territorial integrity and the fight against global jihadist terrorism, AQIM in particular. Finally, we will argue for the contributions to different security sector reform (SSR) programmes but more importantly, in the name of conflict resolution, stress the importance of a coordinated demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) and of prevention and the security-development-governance nexus in the Sahel.

Power Contenders originating from Mali's Independence

Mali's independence was part of a decolonisation wave for many West African states in the 1960s. Despite a few initiatives towards a single nation-state for the semi-nomadic Tuareg, this community saw itself dispersed

¹ Research fellow at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). The views expressed in this paper are only those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of the Belgian Ministry of Defence or the Royal Higher Institute for Defence.

throughout Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Libya and Mali under the rule of settled Africans. The treatment of this culturally differentiated minority was dealt with in different ways by the concerned governments in the region². In Mali, the Tuareg community could hardly identify with an artificially constructed Malian culture and the community rather believed to have swapped European colonisation for African colonisation. Besides this grievance, the Tuareg community felt itself excluded and even deprived of a number of rights by the new Malian government. A rebellion between 1962 and 1964 drove the Tuareg community and the Malian government further apart. This rebellion was violently suppressed, leading to a number of Tuareg leaving Mali during the years to follow. Some of them would find refuge in Algeria and Libya, where eventually they were hired by Gadhafi's regime. This last group, as it turned out, would play an important role in Mali's current crisis with an unprecedented proliferation of modern weaponry originating from Libya. Since the rebellion in the 1960s Mali has seen other Tuareg uprisings for greater autonomy and self-determination in the 1990s and in 2005. These rebellions and the different peace negotiations led each time to more Tuareg autonomy in northern Mali which region is often referred to as Azawad. While these talks also concerned Niger, where Tuareg revolts had also destabilised the government, a different impulse was noted afterwards in both countries. In Niger efforts were directed in order to integrate Tuareg rebels in the government in contrast to Mali³. Members of the Tuareg community have actually honoured several functions and posts within the Mali government throughout the last decades⁴. This was the result of peace negotiations following the different Tuareg-led rebellions. The leaders were often offered key functions in the Malian army, or other departments, and cash in order to appease the situation. A number of Tuareg fighters have even been integrated in the Malian armed forces, in the same way as with fighters returning from Libya in late 2011. While the Tuareg community is clearly identified as a power contender in Mali, it is necessary to take a closer look at the community itself, for recent developments in the wider region have led to a marked distinction within this Tuareg ethnic group in Mali.

Whereas a number of Tuareg fighters from Libya have joined the Malian Army, others have joined the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The latter does not represent the aspirations of the entire Malian Tuareg community, as a part of them is merely interested in a participative place within Mali. However, the MNLA, as its name indicates, has been a nationalist movement since its foundation in 2010. Its goal is to create and govern an independent and secular Azawad nation. This separatist nationalist movement lies at the basis of the recent Malian crisis. It was the strife between the Malian government and MNLA that served as a breeding ground for a military coup, for Salafist movements in Mali and for the exploitation of a weakened state by criminal and terrorist organisations. The MNLA is possibly the most legitimate, distinguishable power contender for the Malian (transitional) government with a view to a more autonomous northern Mali. However, the UN Security Council Resolution 2085 (UNSCR 2085) clearly stated that the Malian authorities should put in place a framework for negotiations with all parties who have renounced terrorism and unconditionally recognised the unity and territorial integrity of the Malian state. As we will see later on, support to the Malian authorities in creating and executing this framework for negotiations is an important step towards a peaceful restoration of the constitutional order in Mali.

The rebellion in Mali unfortunately comes in many shapes, it is not just a Tuareg secession led by the MNLA. Recently, a former Tuareg diplomat for Mali to Saudi Arabia, who had been a rebel leader during the previous rebellions, has founded a group aiming at a Malian state under Islamic rule. This group, called Ansar Dine (or Ansar ud-Din) strives for a different form of nationalism and constitutes a new form of opposition. Their goal is to settle a government ruled by Islamic law, the Sharia, in Mali. The leaders are also suspected to have ties with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Ansar Dine had reportedly shifted its goals from an independent Islamic Azawad to an Islamic Mali, possibly indicating a split within the group. While initially collaborating during May

² Natali, Denise; Bray, Zoe; Dörrie, Peter. (2012). *Peoples without borders: Kurdish, Basque and Tuareg nationalism*. World Politics Review.

³ Cheney, Catherine; Cristiani, Dario; Dörrie, Peter; Gowan, Richard. (2010). *Mali's conflict, the Sahel's Crisis*. World Politics Review.

⁴ Lecocq, B., & Belalimat, N. (2012, February 28). *The Tuareg: between armed uprising and drought*. Retrieved January 21, 2013, from African Arguments: <http://africanarguments.org/2012/02/28/the-tuareg-between-armed-uprising-and-drought-baz-lecocq-and-nadia-belalimat/>

2012 to create an independent Azawad, the MNLA and Ansar Dine did not find an agreement on the application of the Sharia and severed their ties less than a week after their collaboration. The Ansar Dine's leading rhetoric, even before this short-lived union, was that they were against a separatist ideology for Azawad but only wanted to establish Islamic rule in Mali. Regardless of this fault line between MNLA and Ansar Dine, they both continued their fight against the Malian authorities and, finally, against each other. At the time of finalising this brief assessment reporting in the media made note of the break-off by the Islamic Movement for Azawad from Ansar Dine, confirming the above stated assumptions about a split within Ansar Dine.

Transnational Jihadist Spoilers

Besides these two contenders, we find smaller transnational jihadist non-state actors active in Mali and its neighbouring countries, indirectly supporting MNLA's fight against the Malian authorities during the start of the conflict, such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) by taking up their arms against the Malian authorities themselves. As in the case with Ansar Dine, some of these transnational groups are, or have been, affiliated with and supported by AQIM. In the case of MUJWA, the group splintered from AQIM for wanting to spread Islamic extremism outside of the region targeted by the latter. The relation between MNLA and these Islamic movements turned out to be unfruitful for the former, since they have been overrun by the Islamic movements. At this time, the MNLA is losing grounds to the jihadist rebels who are better armed and supported by transnational jihadist groups. Since 20 January 2013, the MNLA spokesperson Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh has fallen back to the international community and the Economic Community of West-African States (ECOWAS) offering the support of MNLA to combat the terrorists alongside with them. He does, however, make notice of their concern that a military operation in "Azawad" may involve that the Malian security forces, supported by ECOWAS, might target the population the MNLA represents in that region.

In addition to these groups, and as clearly indicated, AQIM itself actively exploits the conflict between the MNLA, Ansar Dine and the (transitional) Malian authorities in order to benefit from the insecurity in that region, acting as a considerable spoiler in the peace-building process. The instability in northern Mali provided AQIM, for instance, with a safe hiding place for its organisation which could be easily controlled because of its military superiority in that region. Associated with AQIM, members of Boko Haram, or even before Al-Qaeda members from Pakistan, have been spotted in Mali, meaning that it has become undoubtedly a new training area for global jihadists answering to calls of AQIM to assist in their fight. UNSCR 2085 explicitly labels AQIM and MUJWA as terrorist groups whereas less clarity is granted towards the position of Ansar Dine and its affiliations with these groups throughout the last year. A simple rhetoric such as "the friend of my enemy is my enemy" is too simplistic in a complex situation as the one in Mali.

Accordingly, on top of a transitional government, an ethno-nationalist rebel movement, national and regional Islamic rebels, transnational jihadist groups and AQIM, we can add since a few weeks a growing French military contingent, aided by a coalition of willing nations, at the explicit request of the transitional government of Mali. This contingent is only paving the way for the initially assigned, but reluctant ECOWAS contingent AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission to Mali) and the military contributions to ECOWAS by the EU.

Notwithstanding the focus in different media on AFISMA military operations and the French army's Operation Serval in Mali, it is important to keep in mind that the political challenge is far greater than the military challenge. It was the coup in Bamako, and the collapse of democracy, that opened the way for Islamic extremists in the ungoverned northern part of Mali. A military positive outcome should be closely, and preferably simultaneously, coordinated with political efforts to restore full constitutional order and legitimacy while pursuing negotiations with those power contenders renouncing terrorism. This last condition for negotiations and possible reconciliation with former terrorists, which is implied when power contenders disown terrorism, is an interesting and challenging subject for further elaboration within the Malian context. This highlights the different relations the Tuareg rebel groups have had with AQIM since the uprising in northern Mali. Ultimately, as stated above, this

incentive has already proven successful in the case of the split between the Islamic Movement for Azawad and Ansar Dine.

Dealing with Antagonists and Terrorists

The strong biased perceptions of contenders as terrorists or antagonistic groups, in peace talks, are an indisputable challenge for peace-building negotiations. In the case of the Taliban, for example, the Bush administration vigorously referred to and coupled Taliban and Al-Qaeda, making these two indistinguishable for the public. The Bush administration unambiguously stated that no distinction would be made between terrorists and those harbouring them. This tradition of non-negotiation was also advocated within the academic community where the practical obstacles for negotiations through a non-hierarchical structure of the Taliban, legal restraints and over-idealism⁵ were pointed. During the Obama administration this discourse changed, as well as the synonymous treatment of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The linkage between these two groups is far less frequent as before giving leeway to a more pragmatic linkage between Al-Qaeda and its allies on one side and the Taliban on the other side⁶. Similarly to the above-mentioned announcement by the United Nations, the Obama administration stated, during the Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review in December 2010, that the USA support an Afghan political process that includes reconciliation with those Taliban who break ties with Al-Qaeda, renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution. With this discursive approach in describing contenders and their linkage with terrorists, it is important to note for Mali that the contenders playing an antagonistic role in peace negotiations such as the MNLA, the Islamic Movement for Azawad and even Ansar Dine, should be distinguished from MUJWA and AQIM as being (in)directly affiliated to Al-Qaeda. With this in mind and the elaboration of a transitional roadmap to restore constitutional order in Mali, attention should be given to, e.g., a sound DDR programme. There is an overall recognition that these programmes are successful on condition of a coordinated SSR programme and provided that these are strongly related during planning stages and their subsequent implementation. Primacy of security transformation as a precondition for durable peace settlements is strongly adhered to in the international community and it acknowledges the authority and relations of both state and non-state actors, widening at the same time the scope of security encompassing military, societal, economic and political dimensions⁷.

Dividing the conflict into two yet closely linked parts, a part surrounding Malian antagonists in peace-building and a purely terrorist part, needs a separate approach in focusing on the above described process to restore public constitutional order and another one in addressing AQIM. The UN gave their approval for an ECOWAS African-led intervention force, called AFISMA. Authorised under UNSCR 2085, AFISMA has to support the Malian government in recovering the northern part of the country that is under control of terrorist, extremist and armed groups and in reducing the threat posed by terrorist organisations, including AQIM, MUJWA and associated extremist groups. The slow rallying and preparations of AFISMA, in combination with dramatic evolutions in northern Mali, pushed the Malian government to plead for assistance, which was answered by France. France on its turn was logistically supported by willing nations, such as Belgium. This contingent paving the way for AFISMA is in the meantime assisting the Malian army in regaining the north of Mali.

However, AFISMA operations in Mali shall quite literally bump into some borders while trying to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organisations. The part of their mission in support of Mali for recovering the northern territory is clearly delimited by its borders. This issue is not as simple for terrorist organisations as they are both transnational and regional and, therefore, not limited to a territory. It is true that they thrive on the anarchy in an ungoverned region of Mali, which allowed them to create safe hiding places but we should be aware of the risk to be drawn into a transnational conflict where neighbouring countries will be forced to take in those terrorist groups chased out of Mali. Taking into account the several countries in the wider region, delimited by Mauritania

⁵ Renner, J., & Spencer, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Reconciliation after Terrorism*. New York: Routledge.

⁶ Without denying the existence of allegiances by hard-core Taliban with Al-Qaeda.

⁷ Dudouet, V., Griessmann, H. J., & Planta, K. (Eds.). (2012). *Post-War Security Transitions*. New York: Routledge

in the west to Somalia in the east and by Libya in the north to Nigeria in the south, which suffer difficulties in governance and development, we might just relocate these groups to weak and failed states, which are a breeding ground for extremism. The fight against AQIM has begun in Mali, but will not end in that country. Referring to history there are six distinguishable, often complimentary patterns leading to the decline of terrorism: capturing or killing the group's leader, entering a legitimate political process, achievement of the group's aims, implosion or the loss of public support, defeat by brute force and finally transition of terrorism to other forms of violence⁸. Since Mali and its supporters cannot legitimately operate outside this country at this moment, the destruction by brute force is quite unlikely since there are too many ways to escape that destiny in the short term. Further elaboration on the fight against terrorism would turn us further away from Mali, contrary to the goals set out in this brief assessment.

Assistance in a Comprehensive Roadmap to Peace in Mali

Another more inviting topic to deal with is the training of the Malian forces as stipulated in UNSCR 2085. Being part of a wider comprehensive EU Sahel strategy and in compliance with UNSCR 2085, the EU will lead a Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). The EU's strategy follows five lines of action ranging from *development, good governance and internal conflict resolution to the fight against and prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation*. The support to Mali and AFISMA clearly correlates with the EU strategy and UNSCR 2085. This mission is intended to help improve the military capacity of the Malian armed forces in order to allow, under civilian authority, the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. Belgium plans and prepares actively to take part in this mission with a team of instructors and both medical and logistical support. It was a part of this planned medical and logistical aid that had been provided to France in support of Operation Serval and AFISMA. Clearly identified as an SSR programme in support of Mali and ECOWAS, the EU and other partners could take a step further with the assistance in the development of a DDR programme. This DDR programme, as a component of a comprehensive road map for Mali and the framework for negotiations, should lead to the integration of different legitimate antagonists.

Alongside this local approach, regional programmes on the prevention of extremism and radicalisation in a larger nexus of security and development should continue to be conducted by the EU and the United States of America in support of ECOWAS and, ideally, closely coordinated. Special attention should be given to those countries subject to a spillover of the events in Mali. Reinforcements to capacity building programmes in the Sahel, such as EUCAP Sahel Niger⁹, or to other nations in the region should be considered on bilateral and multilateral grounds. Additionally, it should be considered to allow private investors to contribute in the economy's development as a part of a wider development programme and road map to peace. Due to unpredicted and unattended events, these efforts may be interrupted, but should therefore not be abandoned. It shows the prime concern of the international community for the population's human security rather than using human security as lever. The costs and risks related to the deployment of international security forces in a conflict area are much higher than those of a peaceful contribution to security and development programmes. The Belgian Ministry of Defence already plays an important role in SSR in Central Africa based on bilateral agreements and historical ties. The Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation has several bilateral development cooperation programmes with no less than 18 partners, including Mali. However, the military coup in March 2012 led to the immediate suspension of most forms of this cooperation.

⁸ Cronin, A. K. (2009). *How terrorism ends*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹ EUCAP Sahel Niger: European Union (Civilian) Capacity Building Mission in Niger.

Conclusion

We have revived a discussion concerning the power contenders, antagonists and terrorists involved with the crisis in Mali and their participation to negotiations. This discussion should serve the international community, in particular ECOWAS, the EU and individual nations to build on the current SSR efforts to collaborate in the set-up and reinforcement of a DDR programme and, consequently, consider the different national antagonists to contribute to the development and execution of a road map for the restoration of a public constitutional order in Mali. Besides reviving the issue of negotiations with former terrorists through DDR initiatives, we also try to urge governments and nations as a wider element to combine their efforts in addressing the security-development-governance nexus.

Belgium, for its part, could also consider further developing its contributions to the provision of a secure environment, assistance in development and good governance by coupling its efforts in a common security-development-governance approach with shared ambitions on a bilateral or multilateral ground. Belgium should reconsider a new national road map for development cooperation in Mali and in the wider region. This is an intra-governmental endeavour, as it involves several departments which should speak with a single voice, being part of an integrated bilateral or multilateral common security-development-governance approach and harmonising its actions with multilateral efforts and avoiding their duplication within this nexus.