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Mali: Beyond Counterterrorism

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Mali: Beyond Counterterrorism

Wolfram Lacher and Denis M. Tull

The international military intervention in Mali is fraught with risks. The current campaign against extremists in Mali's north could easily turn into a conflict between local communities. Attacks on civilians by the Malian army and African troops could cause the situation to escalate further. Progress in the north requires a government in the capital Bamako that has widespread support, which is currently lacking. The EU training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) will be confronted with the coup leaders of 2012 and ethnic militias in the army. By intervening, external actors are embarking on a long-term involvement in a complex conflict. To minimize these risks, stronger external focus is needed on the political process in Bamako, and the coordination of regional and international efforts must improve.

The widespread assumption that intervention in Mali is about fighting extremist groups is misleading. At the heart of the war are two closely intertwined crises. First, the conflict in the north is fundamentally between elites from rival tribal and ethnic groups, some of whom, for tactical reasons, have allied themselves with heavily armed extremists. Second, the government in Bamako has been largely paralysed ever since a military coup deposed President Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012. As a result, the government has been unable to win any allies in the north. A lack of regional security cooperation was also partly to blame for the increasing extremist presence in northern Mali, and for the situation escalating into a violent conflict in January 2012. The underlying reasons for this lack of cooperation persist – despite the joint

regional approach that was agreed in January 2013.

Complex dynamics in northern Mali

To understand the conflict in Mali, one has to look below the surface of the three Islamist extremist groups – Al-Qaida in the Muslim Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine – that control the north.

The conflict has its roots in tensions between northern elites that had been growing over recent years. Tuareg tribes of aristocratic descent saw their hitherto dominant position in Kidal region increasing eroded by the policies of the Malian leadership under President Touré (2002–2012). To exert control over the north,

Touré drew on leaders of Tuareg groups formerly vassal to the aristocrats, as well as Arab tribes from Timbuktu and Gao regions. Touré relied on militias from these groups and gave them free rein to participate in northern Mali's flourishing drug-trafficking trade. With Mali's leaders and their allies involved in criminal activities, AQIM was also able to expand its presence in the north. The vast sums of ransom money that European governments paid for the release of hostages played an important role in this development. Ransom money created shared interests between terrorists, tribal leaders and high-level Malian decision-makers. It also fuelled local rivalries, as did control of the drug trade. When Tuareg fighters returning from Libya's civil war arrived in Mali in autumn 2011, the power balance tipped in favour of Tuareg groups that had been on the losing side of Touré's divide-and-rule policies.

These groups include both the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which launched the rebellion in 2012, and the leadership of Ansar Dine. The rift between the current leaders of the two groups had already emerged during the 1990s conflict in northern Mali, as well as the 2006-09 rebellion. Ideological differences play only a secondary role today, as they did then. The ethnic militias that until the military coup had fought in the north on the government's side partly fled to southern Mali or Niger. Partly, they joined the extremists or formed a separate militia – the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA). The three extremist groups won their dominant position by entering into tactical alliances with tribal leaders, criminal networks and regional jihadists. These alliances relied on the financial power that the ransom money had brought to AQIM and the MUJAO, which formed when it broke away from AQIM in late 2011. Local factions tried to use these alliances to gain military supremacy over their rivals in the north and thus manoeuvre themselves into position for potential negotiations with the national government. The dilemma facing local

elites was that they stood to lose power if they terminated the alliances with extremists.

France's military intervention has changed the game. It has raised the political costs for the armed groups. French military advances have weakened the bargaining position of the armed groups vis-à-vis Bamako. Consequently, the tactical alliances began to disintegrate shortly after the French military intervention began on 11 January 2013. Some rebel factions are more likely to enter into negotiations. Tellingly, the MNLA approached France even before the intervention, to offer its services in fighting the extremists. As the militarily weakest group, the MNLA had no bargaining power. When the French military intervention began, many Ansar Dine fighters who had left the MNLA because of military weakness subsequently returned. This explains why, when French troops arrived in the regional capital of Kidal in late January 2013, the MNLA was able to announce that it was now controlling the town. The same reasoning was behind the split of Ifoghas Tuareg leaders from Ansar Dine to form the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA) in late January.

Current trends suggest that the armed groups in the north are splintering into their respective ethnic and tribal components. Ansar Dine's Berabiche Arabs in January formed their own brigade, Ansar al-Sharia, which has close ties to AQIM. The MUJAO's Lamhar Arabs and Songhai could also form their own militias, which would leave behind a hard core of regional jihadists. To evade French military strikes, the extremists will fragment into small groups, some of which will move into neighbouring countries, while others will remain in northern Mali to adopt guerrilla tactics. The latter trend was already apparent in early February 2013. Armed groups in the north would no longer pose a direct military threat to Bamako – but conflict in northern Mali was far from over.

The big risk in this scenario is that conflict dynamics in the north would develop

into a war between groups based on different ethnic and tribal groups, similar to what happened in the 1990s. In late January 2013, the Malian army's Imghad Tuareg militias who had earlier fled to Niger, led by Major Colonel Hadj Gamou, joined the Franco-Malian offensive. The involvement of ethnic militias in Malian military offensives is likely to escalate the conflicts between ethnic groups and tribes in the north. Some armed groups will probably distance themselves from the jihadists to avoid coming under attack from the French army. But it is also possible that some tribal groups, like the Berabiche and Lamhar Arabs, could see the war as a fight against their communities, and ally themselves even more closely with the extremists. In any case, the supposed counter-terrorism mission that external actors are engaged in is likely to reveal itself as an intervention in a conflict internal to northern Mali. The conflict in the north is neither primarily due to on regional jihadism, nor to a "Tuareg problem". Instead, rivalries oppose the elites of different Tuareg groups, as well as Tuareg and other communities in the north. To resolve this conflict will be a far more difficult and protracted task than fighting a hard core of extremists. Even if regional jihadists partially move into neighbouring countries, the conflict in northern Mali would be likely to continue.

Until France intervened, there were few incentives for the armed groups to try and negotiate a solution. They were under no military pressure whatsoever and their position was too strong for them to start making compromises that would be acceptable to other communities in the north. The difficulty of balancing the diverging interests of northern Mali's communities and political factions will be a major obstacle to negotiating a solution. One possible approach would be a gradual process whereby individual groups are encouraged to switch their allegiances to the government through a combination of military pressure and incentives. Some leaders of

armed groups might be persuaded by credible offers of positions in the national administration or the military – although such an approach would constitute a hard sell in the country's south. Once the armed groups have been weakened to the point that an inclusive political process can begin, negotiations could begin that would lead to further-reaching concessions. One of these could be truly decentralising the country – decentralisation was agreed in the 1990s but never actually implemented. But for such a process to succeed, there has to be an effective government in Bamako – and that has not been the case since the coup last year.

The political crisis in Bamako

Since the putsch, little progress has been made in efforts to return to a constitutional order and to form a functional government. Mali's interim president Dioncounda Traoré, the coup leaders under Captain Amadou Sanogo, and former prime minister Cheick Modibo Diarra consistently blocked each other. Diarra's forced resignation in December 2012 showed that the coup leaders were continuing to exercise their veto power. They gradually consolidated their position within the army and security apparatus. Units loyal to ex-president Touré were dissolved and leading officers imprisoned. Allies of the coup leaders continue to dominate the government and act as a counterweight to the interim president.

France's military intervention and the international community's increasing involvement in Mali are also changing the balance of power in Bamako. The fact that the extremist offensive towards Mali's heartland was only stopped by the French intervention exposed the coup leaders' incompetence. President Traoré, who had been widely unpopular as a representative of the Touré-era political establishment, gained support after he appealed to Paris for help. French influence became visible in late January 2013, when several officers

from 'bérêts rouges' elite units were released from jail. Such influence, however, can equally trigger a revival of tensions within the army, as clashes between 'bérêts rouges' and army units loyal to the coup leaders illustrated in February 2013. France is likely to use its presence in Bamako to prevent further interference by the coup leaders in the political process. But even if this strategy is successful, it will not be enough to end the crisis in Bamako.

For external actors, the key of the transition process lies in elections. France and the EU have rightly sought to encourage the adoption of a roadmap to this effect, on which the EU has conditioned its resumption of development aid. In late January, Prime Minister Django Cissoko presented a roadmap that would lead the country to elections at the end of July. In another sign that France's presence in Mali is curbing the influence of the coup leaders, the roadmap stipulates that unlawful imprisonment and torture by the coup leaders will be prosecuted. However, contrary to the interim authorities' previous approach to resolve the crisis, the plan does not refer to a national dialogue. Moreover, instead of being agreed on the basis of an all-inclusive consultative process, the roadmap was passed by the national assembly – whose session had expired, and which is seen as dominated by the political establishment of the Touré era. France and the EU are likely to have backed Cissoko's approach, to avoid an open transition process that could further weaken the interim authorities.

Nevertheless, it seems doubtful that Mali will actually be able to hold free and fair elections in the north anytime soon – especially outside the cities of Timbuktu and Gao. Another problem is that 150,000 Malians have fled to neighbouring countries and allowing them to vote will be difficult. If these issues are ignored, northern communities will feel excluded from the political process. Conversely, if the government delays elections until it becomes possible to hold them in the north are accept-

able, the government's own crisis of legitimacy will soon return to the fore.

Finally, simply returning to the pre-coup political order would mean failing to acknowledge the severity of the crisis in Bamako. The coup exposed Mali's democracy as nothing more than a façade. Those who staged it initially gained public support because they had removed from power a political class that was considered to be corrupt to its very core. Putting this political establishment back in power is unlikely to be seen as a return to a legitimate political order.

External actors therefore currently have to work with a government and a military that are both internally divided, have little scope to take political or military action, and lack broad societal backing. A weak government, however, will be unable to make the concessions needed to persuade northern groups to switch sides. A divided army lacking clear chains of command will struggle to keep its soldiers under control and prevent transgressions in the north. Pacifying northern Mali depends directly on making progress in the political process in Bamako.

The dynamics of military intervention

With the extremists' advance that compelled France to send in its troops, the international community's original plans became obsolete, as they had been outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2085 of 20 December 2012. The idea was to deploy the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), which was to be operational by autumn 2013 and was intended to help the Malian army win back the north. The European Training Mission Mali (EUTM Mali) was to prepare Mali's soldiers to lead the operation.

With the French intervention, a number of key factors have changed for AFISMA and the international community. The mission, whose troops have already started to arrive in Mali, must now intervene in the conflict

immediately. Instead of the 3,300 soldiers set out under the original plan, AFISMA may count as many as 6,000 soldiers, who will come from at least eight West African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo. Chad has also joined the mission, the only country in the group that is not a member of ECOWAS. It is supplying by far the biggest contingent, having agreed to send in 2,000 soldiers.

The chain of events has pushed into the background the (political, logistical and financial) reservations that Mali's neighbours have expressed about military intervention. Politically speaking, AFISMA was seen as a problem because it would be coming to the aid of a government functioning outside the limits of a constitutional order. It had long been unclear whether or not the coup leaders would even agree to the intervention, seeing as ECOWAS was seeking to remove them from power. Furthermore, there was and still is confusion about what political strategy should accompany the military action and what the ultimate goal of that action should be. Logistical challenges have also slowed AFISMA's progress. ECOWAS still does not have an operational standby force – and that will not change until 2015.

Even though substantial troop numbers are being deployed to Mali, it is important not to expect too much of AFISMA. The mission has begun six months earlier than planned and has only limited capabilities. The troops are being sent in unprepared and without sufficient training. AFISMA is logistically and financially dependent on the international community. Getting the troops into Mali is by far the easiest problem to solve. Much bigger question marks hang over their ability to get around, communicate and work together.

The mission involves many relatively small contingents, which will impede its cohesion and effectiveness. Only a fraction of the troops will actually be available for combat missions. On top of that, the armies involved are not known for their abilities to

conduct counterinsurgency operations anywhere, let alone in desert regions. The Nigerian army, which is sending the second-largest contingent to Mali (1,200), has been unsuccessful in fighting Boko Haram extremists on its own territory. Boko Haram's ranks have swelled due to the Nigerian army's ruthless approach. Although Chad's army has experience of desert combat, it has also called on France a number of times (most recently in 2008) to help it overcome rebel uprisings. Besides, Chad's main reason for getting involved in AFISMA is that the authoritarian regime of President Idriss Déby is looking to earn political credit with France. Déby has had to rely on French troops a number of times to ensure his political survival. Mauritania and Algeria, probably the two most important countries for Mali in the region, have refused to participate in the African mission. They fear that if they get involved, the conflict will spill over into their territories. The attitude in Mauritania, whose elites have close ties to Mali's Arabs and Tuaregs, is also shaped by the view that the conflict is about "black" soldiers from Mali and West Africa attacking "white" groups in northern Mali. Major diplomatic efforts are needed to promote political, security and intelligence cooperation between Mauritania and Algeria on the one hand and Mali, France and AFISMA on the other.

AFISMA will not be able to fulfil the task originally set out in Resolution 2085. Most support for the Malian army in seizing back control of the north is likely to come from France. Indeed, the tripartite alliance between the French army, the Malian army and AFISMA will primarily have to rely on France's capabilities. Paris will have to bear the bulk of the military load for the foreseeable future. Even in the most optimistic scenario, it will still be several months before France can slowly start handing responsibility over to the Malian army and AFISMA troops. Until then, those forces will mainly be tasked with holding recovered territory. But even that will be far from straightforward, given the vast distances,

the enemy's mobility and the limited capabilities of Malian and AFISMA soldiers. For the foreseeable future, their control is likely to remain limited to a small number of towns, while most of northern Mali will present a vacuum where armed groups can move around with ease. It is all the more important for third states and international organisations to provide robust financial and logistical support to AFISMA.

Military intervention and the political process

The apparent success of France's military intervention thus far can only be sustained in the long term on the basis of negotiated political solutions to the conflicts in northern Mali. Paradoxically, France's intervention may prove "too successful" – in the sense that the government in Bamako, propped up by French and African military support, could refuse to enter into meaningful negotiations. Now that extremist groups have been weakened, France and AFISMA should aim to shift the focus back to the actual problem – the conflicts between Mali's elites. Of course, by intervening, France has now become a key political actor within Mali, too. Paris will be tempted to use its military clout to influence the situation, while all the political camps in Mali – be it the rebels or the competing factions in Bamako – will attempt to manipulate external actors to their own advantage. The French army, which is still being celebrated in Mali, could thus soon find itself accused of neo-colonialism from rivalling Malian politicians.

Ideally, France and AFISMA should merely establish the preconditions that allow the parties to Mali's conflicts to start negotiations. The military offensive and the rebels' weakened position should, above all, serve to steer the focus away from extremism and terrorism to the core issues behind the conflict. A long-term solution first requires the advent of a legitimate, effective government in Bamako. Northern armed

groups that, following their military defeats, will be more amenable to compromise, need a negotiating partner in Bamako in order for talks to begin.

Outlook

Discussions at the UN Security Council in early February suggest that AFISMA is likely to be placed under the umbrella of a UN mission in the near future. This move is related to considerations about the mission's broader legitimacy under a UN flag, as well as concerns about funding for the intervention. ECOWAS has estimated that AFISMA will cost just under €460 million in the first year, and it is likely that the final figure will be much higher. Robust and mobile African units will be essential in partially replacing the French army and in driving forward efforts to stabilise Mali. The African-led mission can also play a role in preventing incursions and acts of revenge by the Malian military and pro-government militias in the north of the country.

After successfully containing the extremist threat, external actors should refrain from taking a position in the internal conflicts in Mali. It would be wrong for external actors to seek and select their partners among the actors in Mali's north, or in its capital. The international community should focus its attention on what political process is best suited to establishing a legitimate and effective government in Bamako – a government able to negotiate with northern communities and insurgent groups.

Particular attention should be paid to Mali's military, which in the medium term should leave the political arena and submit to civilian control. It is still unclear what impact the French intervention will have on the balance of power in Bamako. France, AFISMA and EUTM Mali will seek to curb the coup leaders' influence. However, even if they are successful, the army leadership will attempt to capitalise on the fact that external actors depend on cooperation with

the Malian army for their intervention in the north.

How to deal with the coup leaders will also be a problem that EUTM Mali will face. Currently, the military offensive takes precedence, which will probably lead to the Malian army receiving tactical and logistical advice and support. However, EUTM Mali should not lose sight of the questionable nature of the partner it is dealing with. If the coup leaders are not prepared to give up their newly won power, this may prove a persistent obstacle to finding a political solution to the conflict, in Bamako as well as in the north. The army's behaviour in the reconquered areas of the north also raises questions. An EU mission supporting the Malian armed forces and associated ethnic militias while they perpetrate human rights violations and acts of revenge will find itself politically and legally compromised. EUTM Mali should therefore focus on reforming the army, rather than simply building up its tactical capacities. This approach carries less political risk and is necessary in the long term in any case. However, it will remain a difficult task as long as the acute conflict continues. Seeking to reform an army at war is unlikely to be successful.

Recommendations

The EU and other external actors should focus stronger attention on the political process in Bamako than they have to date. They should not press for a quicker and apparently less risky transitional process that does not allow for the broad inclusion and consultation of Malian political actors. This seemingly pragmatic solution is unlikely to be sustainable. The EU should also avoid redirecting funds from development aid to AFISMA and EUTM Mali. If the Malian government goes bankrupt, this will only serve to undermine the political process.

Furthermore, the EU and its member states should seek to better coordinate external engagement in the Malian conflict. Foreign governments and international

organisations are continuing to increase their offers of humanitarian, development, security or logistic assistance to Mali and the intervention. There is an urgent need to coordinate these efforts and, above all, to ensure that they do not get in the way of one another. This also applies to the multiple mediation initiatives of the past months, which have included those by the UN, ECOWAS, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Qatar and Switzerland. It is unlikely that these countries will leave everything up to France when negotiations begin again. Algeria, in particular, will seek to place itself yet again at the heart of the negotiations. The EU should not aim to play a leading role in mediation. Appointing its own Sahel special representative could certainly facilitate coordination within the EU. However, an EU Sahel envoy would be of limited value at international level, and France is set to determine the EU's policy on Mali whatever happens. The EU and its members should use their influence to reduce the number of divergent voices within the international community to a sensible, productive level. It would therefore make sense for the African Union/ECOWAS as a regional representative and the UN as a representative of the international community to lead a two pronged diplomatic effort, bringing together and coordinating all political efforts.

Mali is now entering a long period of instability. In the medium term, two steps will be key: free and fair elections organised by an independent electoral commission; and the creation of a legitimately elected government that can enter into negotiations with the actors in northern Mali. Other than simply re-hatting AFISMA under the UN umbrella, a UN mission could fulfil two roles: firstly as an observer mission, monitoring political developments and, in particular, the human rights' situation in northern Mali. Secondly, in terms of its political dimension, preparing, supporting and observing the elections and negotiations.

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