

NOREF Report

Is a military intervention in Mali unavoidable?

Roland Marchal

Executive summary

No clear settlement of the crisis in Mali seems possible in the short term, despite a UN Security Council resolution on October 12th paving the way for a military intervention by ECOWAS countries. The crisis is fed by various dynamics that need to be reconciled for peace to prevail. Firstly, the transition in Bamako is going nowhere, and further divisions in the government and the resurgence of the coup makers undermine the fragile progress witnessed in July. Unable to agree on a solution in Bamako, most political actors have developed a militaristic approach to any solution for the north. Secondly, Islamist and jihadist movements were able to gain control of northern Mali (two-thirds of the country) in a few months and have enforced new rules inspired by their understanding of Islam.

Although protests erupted in several cities, the militants deepened their control over the region and its local and transnational economy and may have a constituency among the population. ECOWAS, supported by France, is willing to intervene militarily, but the fragmentation of the Malian army is a key weakness. Moreover, ECOWAS has not spelled out the actual aims of its intervention: mere territorial gains without addressing local and national grievances may mean the return of the status quo ante, which would be unacceptable to most people in northern Mali. As usual, the long-term political dimensions of the ECOWAS intervention are dismissed in favour of an immediate military victory that would be very fragile as a result.

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As expected,¹ the coup in Bamako on March 22nd 2012 was more a symptom of the crisis in Mali than the first step to its recovery. The crisis actually deepened and was reshaped by new dynamics, including the growing role of jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for the Unicity (Tawhid)² and Justice in West Africa (MUJWA).

In October 2012, despite some hope created by the return to the country of the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, and the appointment of a new cabinet, the conclusion of the political crisis in Bamako was still some way off. In particular, at this stage any serious attempt to regain control of northern Mali from insurgent groups seems unlikely, to say the least, despite recurrent claims made by leading military officers in the Malian media. The UN Security Council resolution passed on October 12th paves the way for a military intervention, although the prospects for such an intervention are poor because of the situation in Bamako, the lack of any definition of a realistic aim for the operation (other than a simple military victory) and the difficulty of finding African troops capable of operating in a desert environment.

From March, the crisis developed in two parallel directions with very few links between them (which should already be perceived as a genuine paradox). On the one hand, in “liberated Azawad” (i.e. northern Mali), the coexistence of the various armed groups was short lived and in a matter of weeks the main (at least in terms of number of fighters) movement, the Mouvement National de Liberation de l’Azawad (MNLA), had to share control of the main cities with other armed groups – Ansar ed-Din and the MUJWA – and was soon edged out by them, while AQIM’s presence on the ground became public knowledge. The grip of Islamist groups on the territory was illustrated

by their ability to siphon off many fighters from the MNLA, the enforcement of *hudud* (physical punishments) to prove that they were serious about the implementation of *sharia* and the destruction of the tombs of saints in Timbuktu to ensure that local religious practices would not be respected just to please the international tourism industry and UNESCO.

On the other hand, the most striking aspect of the crisis was taking place in Bamako. The leaders of the coup were soon under heavy pressure to give up power, but the regional organisation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), was unclear as to how to respond, as illustrated by the decisions made by the regional mediator, the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré. He was fully aware that Bamako public opinion was more than ambivalent about the coup makers, since it considered the main political parties to be as responsible for the defeat in the north as the overthrown president, Amadou Toumani Touré. ECOWAS did not perform very impressively, to say the least. Indeterminate decisions and the mismanagement of key aspects of the mediation reminded the Malian people that their neighbours had their own interests to preserve, even at the cost of Mali’s. Outsiders contemplated a situation in which Malian elites were focusing on Bamako political games and forgetting the rest of the country, including the north, which required a clear and strong message from the centre. Moreover, despite being officially disbanded, the military junta kept arresting (and torturing) people, appointing high-ranking officers and grabbing whatever money was available with little or no reaction from the interim government of technocrats led by Cheikh Modibo Diarra. By September the situation had slightly improved, but relations between ECOWAS and the political elites in Mali were still clouded by implicit doubts about hidden agendas.

1 Roland Marchal, “The coup in Mali: the result of a long-term crisis or spillover from the Libyan civil war?”, NOREF/NIS Foundation, May 2012 (the text was written early April), <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Regions/Africa/Publications/The-coup-in-Mali-the-result-of-a-long-term-crisis-or-spillover-from-the-Libyan-civil-war>.

2 This emphasis on the Unicity (“Oneness” may be a better translation) of God is common to all Islamic schools of thought, but Wahhabism (nowadays often called Salafism, although there are many differences between the two) adamantly refuses any kind of inter-mediation between God and the believer, since it would bring into question the radical difference between human beings and God and alter the oneness of God.

This report proposes an analysis of the three main armed actors in the north and an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of neighbouring states and international players in terms of a possible military intervention. This analysis is based on open sources and discussions with colleagues and a few Malian friends. It should be taken as food for thought, since little hard data is available and it is difficult at this stage to confirm or deny

the assumptions on which most current analyses are based.

Dealing with clichés about Mali

The crisis in Mali is both over- and under-reported. Daily news is available in Malian and the international media, but, paradoxically, little is actually known about the current situation in northern Mali. The French press publishes dispatches and articles, but very few actually come from first-hand witnesses in the north. Yet, based on these approximations and the cultural biases of the media, a narrative has been shaped and is tailoring the news we read and watch.

A few points deserve comment. They should be kept in mind as a cautious warning regarding the average media discourse on Mali. Three such points are mentioned here, but many others could have been made.

The opposition defined by the Western media between secularists and Islamists in Mali is overstated and wrong in many respects. Recurrently, journalists talk about the MNLA as a secular organisation, while the rest are declared to be Islamists. Despite the virtual collapse of the MNLA and the desertion of many of its fighters to other armed Islamist groups, the alleged different religious stances are still used to frame the political dynamics in northern Mali. Four major misjudgements can be identified. The first is that the religious stance of an organisation can be equated with the ideology claimed by its spokespersons. MNLA spokespersons are indeed secular and live in countries (Mauritania and France) where Islamism is not favoured, but this fact does not say much about the religious views of the average members of their movement. Secondly, these organisations all claim a very specific ideology, but it is possible that they do so to hide other, less-unified components of their identity, e.g. Tuaregs have deep social divisions; ethnicity among them and Arab tribes is connected to local conflicts and patterns of migration, wealth and political power; while local arrangements may sometimes be more important than holistic narratives provided to national Malian media and the international press. Thirdly, there is an implicit belief that “normal” Malian society is secular, while

the current crisis and the inclusion in the summer of the Haut Conseil Islamique (High Islamic Council) led by Mahamadou Dicko as a legitimate interlocutor prove that a certain social pact rooted in the late period of colonialism and early period of independence is actually being questioned by the current crisis, which should be seen as affecting the religious fabric in both the north *and* south of the country. Last but not least, the terms “secular” and “Islamist” that are so often opposed refer to different levels of analysis. Secularism is not a political project, whereas Islamism *is* one (although not without many ambiguities).

Too few commentators question the supposed criminalisation of the armed Islamist movements referred to by some pundits, politicians and journalists. Membership of the drug economy seems to be synonymous with the Islamist groups, just as in Afghanistan opium is with the Taliban. In Afghanistan, the Taliban impose taxes (one-tenth) on all agricultural products, and, of course, make more money from opium than from other products. They do not force farmers to grow opium poppies and do not authorise local use of the drug in any way. Moreover, most of the economic actors in the opium sector are not socially identified with the Taliban: they operate on another social and economic level, although politically they can be supportive of the Taliban. Trafficking in northern Mali basically includes migrants, counterfeit cigarettes and drugs. Commodities are also often smuggled. As is frequently the case, since the aim is to criminalise the Islamist groups, the media forget to mention that AQIM benefits from the protection of these activities and is not carrying them out, either directly or in a marginal way. Only hostage taking is its (very profitable) near monopoly. This does not turn the militants into nice people (let us be clear: they are not), but should remind us that one should include other players in any analysis of the criminal networks such as Nigerians (why are counterfeit cigarettes produced in such huge quantities?), Moroccans (Morocco is an excellent example of a narco state, although saying this is politically incorrect), Libya (the recent fighting in Sabha reflects attempts to control migrants’ access to the Mediterranean Sea), local actors, businessmen, state officials and army officers in the past (cf. the so-called “Cocaine Neighbourhood” made up of large new

villas in Bamako).³ Latin American drug cartels are attempting to build networks in West (cf. Guinea Bissau as an example) and Central Africa (the participation of airports in Chad and the Central African Republic has been proved over the last year). There are good enough reasons to fight the armed Islamist or jihadi groups without needing to create fake rationales. The real discussion should be much more serious and strategic. The rate of urbanisation in this part of Africa is rising dramatically: how will employment be created for the youth who are entering the workforce? Are trafficking and war the only jobs available to them? Why has the international community failed to pressure national governments to increase development in this region? Would a military intervention merely change the profiteers (state officials and local businessmen taking over from AQIM and other jihadi groups) or be used as an opportunity to radically challenge the region's criminal political economy?

Islam is also reified, and therefore the differences between Sufi and Salafi Islam are often overstated or taken out of context. Western media keep being too ideological in their analysis of the politics of Islamist movements. Timbuktu is the city of the Sufi tombs, but is also known to be very conservative about female behaviour in public; thus the distance between the lay population and the Islamists may not be as significant as is often thought.⁴ The destruction of the tombs in Timbuktu provoked uproar in the international media, but few journalists asked what kind of Islam was practised in Timbuktu before the city was taken over by the insurgents. To a large extent, media reaction was framed in terms of a colonial (and later touristy) mythology that Timbuktu was a "sacred city".⁵ Yet one can imagine that the population has other concerns than these (very estimable) tombs: health

services have not been available for weeks, food prices have gone up and daily life is controlled by the insurgents. The destruction of the tombs was directly connected to their ideology and a recent (badly timed) UNESCO decision to put the tombs on the list of endangered monuments. Comparisons were made with the Bamyán Buddhas destroyed early 2001 by the Taliban. More sophisticated journalists have reminded us that Wahhabi supporters had destroyed all traces of pre-Islamic religions in the Najd region where Wahhabism developed. This point raised many valid questions that were not explored, since ideology is taken as the paramount and self-sufficient explanation. In the case of the Taliban, the destruction of the Buddhas came at a difficult time for the organisation when discussions to ease the sanctions and push Osama bin Laden out of Afghanistan were taking place. In particular, the Buddhas were not destroyed for years, despite the fact that the Taliban controlled the area.⁶ Therefore, by analogy, in Mali the destruction of the tombs may have been part of a struggle for power within Ansar ed-Din, a reaction to the UNESCO decision and/or a way of proving to the population at large that the insurgents were taking their religious agenda very seriously. The press did not investigate this aspect.

A last illusion should be questioned. We all discuss the Tuaregs as if they were a tribe characterised by an organic primordial solidarity. They are not; or to put it more clearly, they are a loose confederation of loose units. The conflicts in Mali and Niger from independence onwards have had an impact on the way Tuaregs perceive their communalities and shared values, but one should also understand that these communities often have few linkages (e.g. Kidal and Gao) and do not share the same history of coexisting with others. Beyond the political differences and ambitions of their leaders, or even the social differences (noble/plebeian, migrant (*ishumar*)/autochthone, youth/traditional elders), there is a danger of not taking into account their own internal differences. Historians such as Pierre Boileau⁷ and Charles Grémont,⁸ to give only two examples,

3 Drug trafficking is a relatively recent business. It started in 2003, but developed quickly after 2006. Many different people benefit from the transportation business, besides the militias securing the transit routes through the desert.

4 Ferdaus Bouhlel Hardy, "Les médersas du Mali: réforme, insertion et transnationalisation du savoir islamique", *Politique étrangère*, no. 4, 2010. The author describes how Koranic schools and Islamic associations organised a huge gathering in Timbuktu in September 2010 against secular education, Western tourism and the state's lack of support for Islamic education. The increasing marginalisation of these *madrasas* may have contributed to the process of radicalisation when Ansar ed-Din and MUJWA took over the city in June.

5 As a French scholar on Islam in Africa stated, "had this event taken place in Niger or Chad, no one would have heard about it".

6 Cf. the testimony of the UNESCO special envoy to the Taliban, Pierre Lafrance, "Comment les bouddhas de Bamyán n'ont pas été sauvés", *Critique internationale*, no. 12, July 2001.

7 Pierre Boileau, *Les Touaregs Kel Adagh: dépendances et révoltes: du Soudan français au Mali contemporain*, Paris, Karthala, 1999.

8 Charles Grémont, *Les Touaregs Iwellemmedan (1647-1896): un*

and anthropologists such as Georg Klute⁹ and André Bourgeot¹⁰ (among others) have regularly made this point in their analyses, yet reification and oversimplification always seem easier – at the risk of building illusions and witnessing them collapse.

The unresolved crisis in Bamako

ECOWAS's proposed intervention in the Malian crisis was seen internationally as a way of finding an alternative to the military government organised under the Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de la Démocratie (CNRDRE). In August the coup leader, Captain Amadou Sanogo, was nominated chair of the Comité Militaire de Suivi de la Réforme des Forces de Défense et de Sécurité. This committee is tasked with managing both the reform of the military apparatus and the military operations in the north, even in the event of an international operation. Blaise Compaoré, the president of Burkina Faso, was appointed ECOWAS mediator and his minister of foreign affairs, Djibril Bassolé, well known for his role in the Darfur mediation, became his main spokesperson.

In early April 2012 an agreement was reached to relieve Amadou Toumani Touré of the presidency and appoint the speaker of parliament, Dioncounda Traoré, as interim president. Without going into important details, a series of weaknesses in this agreement brought new problems. Only a few of them are reviewed here, but they give a sense of the intensity of the crisis.

Traoré accepted the post of interim president, but did not want to stay in office for only 40 days, which was the legal duration of his term in office as defined by the Constitution. The reason was simple: had elections been held he would have been the likely winner and would have had a full presidential mandate. Consequently, his enthusiasm was limited and his energy focused

on the extension of his interim mandate from 40 days to one year, which was eventually accepted on May 20th 2012. On May 21st demonstrators entered the Presidential Palace and attacked the president. Seriously injured, he left Bamako for medical care in France and only returned on July 27th. Many observers thought that he would reassert his leadership of the transition, take steps to deal with the coup supporters and offer a strategy to deal with the crisis. The new cabinet appointed a month later was most disappointing in this regard, since most ministers retained their positions. The new structures that were supposed to curb the influence of the military and the prime minister, such as the Haut Conseil de la Transition, were not fully implemented and this unwillingness to deal with the issues, added to Captain Sanogo's new position, left the impression that nothing had actually changed. Currently everyone is betting on the October 19th meeting in Bamako that is supposed to gather international and regional players as well as all key Malian political actors to clarify the many ambiguities of the current situation.

While ECOWAS was willing to edge out the coup makers in the first months after the coup, the mediator was much more ambiguous and did everything to allow the CNRDRE to retain some of its powers. For weeks there were internal disagreements among ECOWAS member states and even at the African Union level. The head of the junta, Captain Sanogo, made the most of an incident on April 30th that opposed his forces to troops known to be close to Touré.¹¹ By defining this incident as an attempted coup, he avoided explaining why under his command the army had been unable to reassert itself in the north despite repeated promises. He also tried to contest the extension of Dioncounda Traoré's term in office, but was eventually blocked. Yet in his new position he can play an influential role – all the more so because he has appointed his supporters to posts at various levels of the military and security apparatus. One of his main arguments to retain the support of a section of the Bamako population is the decision by several ECOWAS members to block military equipment intended for Mali in their ports. Sanogo argues that ECOWAS wants

ensemble politique de la Boucle du Niger, Paris, Karthala, 2010.

9 See an excellent analysis of the 1990 revolt by Georg Klute, "Hostilités et alliances: archéologie de la dissidence chez les Touaregs au Mali", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, vol. 35, no. 137, 1995.

10 André Bourgeot, *Les sociétés touarègues: nomadisme, identité, résistance*, Paris, Karthala, 1995.

11 Amnesty International, *Mali: il faut enquêter sur les disparitions, les homicides et les tortures des opposants à la junte*, Paris, July 16th 2012.

to make Mali weaker so as to benefit from the international military intervention. The counter-argument is that there is concern that these weapons will be sold to whoever is ready to buy them or used against the transitional institutions. Sanogo's ability to survive the summer pressures says much about the depth of the current crisis and the divisions in the Malian political and state arenas. It also raises questions as to whether the restoration of a fully democratic order should not take place prior to any international involvement, since there is a clear risk that Sanogo could emerge from the reconquest of the north with more legitimacy than he actually deserves.

But the main Achilles' heel was the prime minister, Cheikh Modibo Diarra. At first people saw him as neutral and a successful scientist and technocrat. The truth was rather different. He had set up his own political party in March 2011 and bitterly criticised the political elites in Bamako for failing to achieve anything. His character – some say his arrogance is based on his previous positions at NASA and Microsoft Africa – made him a very difficult prime minister to deal with. Observers often referred to him as someone with an obtuse mind who basically made several important mistakes and upset the main political parties and a large section of the international community, with the exception of his good friend Blaise Compaoré (although toward the end of July the latter seemed less warm towards Diarra). His Government of National Unity (GNU) was expected to deprive the CNRDRE of all its powers, but failed to do so, with the prime minister showing no determination to marginalise the coup makers. This accusation may be overstated, since he mostly showed contempt for the major political parties, which quickly realised that he had no intention of returning them to power in any form. His choice of ministers was also debatable. Blaise Compaoré managed to get one his henchmen, Sadio Lamine Sow, appointed as minister of foreign affairs, which did not please the Malian political parties, which were already concerned about the mediation.¹² Secondly, while the coup was linked to the situation in the north, the cabinet included only one young Tuareg technocrat with no or little

network in northern Mali and appointed to a very humble position as minister of sports. The new cabinet announced in late August was a profound disappointment, since 18 ministers retained their position and most of the others were appointed as advisers to the prime minister; in other words, the will to cope with the crisis in the north was overshadowed once more by petty interests and personal rivalries in Bamako.

The paramount duty of the GNU was to restore a system of working co-operation between the political parties and the government in order to prepare new elections and send a clear message to the population in the north that Bamako cared about them, was aware of the very difficult humanitarian situation in the region (more than 250,000 internally displaced people and refugees from Libya), and would do everything to address both politically and militarily the situation there. GNU achievements thus far do not reflect this agenda. The new cabinet has failed to act. The proposal to organise a national conference on September 22nd collapsed because the prime minister and the main political parties were no longer on speaking terms.

One of the paradoxes of the situation is that with all energies focused on Bamako politics and no effort being made to deal with the situation in the north, Malian elites have developed a sense of nationalistic paranoia that is not helpful in discussions on a political process involving the international community. Whatever France and the U.S. do is subject to multiple and contradictory overinterpretations of hidden agendas and plots. Sanogo is playing this card with great skill: at one stage he endorsed the project of a regional intervention, but only a few days later he reiterated his view that the Malian army should lead any military action in the north and that ECOWAS troops were not welcome in Bamako.

This quick glance at political developments over the last six months illustrates that no solution has been found to the crisis in Bamako. The coup makers have retained their influence within the state apparatus and among the populace, while relations between the president and prime minister are poor, to say the least. All hopes are currently focused on the October 19th meeting, since the most contentious issues will be discussed in

¹² This feeling was very bitter: President Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire – Compaoré's best friend in the region – appointed the former UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire spokesperson to a ministerial position in the Malian cabinet: Hamidou Touré is thus minister of the communication and therefore the cabinet's official spokesperson.

front of regional and international partners. Many believe that the announcement of an ECOWAS military intervention will change the mood of the population and the army and bring about a consensus that is necessary to re-establish the unity of Mali. I do not share this optimism.

The collapse of the MNLA

While the MNLA caused the conflict besetting Mali, events after March 2012 made clear that this organisation may not last forever. To explain the weakening of the movement – to talk about collapse would be an exaggeration – one should take various dynamics into account, some rooted in political developments in northern Mali, others in the political economy of the conflict.

The civilian component of the MNLA can be traced back to two groups formed after November 2009: the Réseau de Plaidoyer pour la Paix, la Sécurité et de Développement des Régions Nord (Réseau)¹³ and the Mouvement National de l'Azawad (MNA). The first group was made up of traditional leaders, civil servants, sheikhs, customs officers and NGO leaders. Its main goal was to reconcile local communities after the bitter divisions created by the 1990 war¹⁴ and to pressure the state to develop the north. To a large extent, what the Réseau did was to reaffirm the traditional leadership in the north and try to make it more accountable to the community. As such, this network deepened a paradoxical effect of democratisation in Mali: the co-optation of traditional leaders and their representatives into the democratic political arena. It was relatively successful in its attempts to encourage the local administration to respond to social grievances, including the implementation of the 2006 agreement for demobilised fighters. Nevertheless, this political work, positive as it was, did not succeed in repairing relations between Tuareg tribes that opposed each other in 1990 and 2006 (although they were not exactly the same ones that were involved in the two conflicts). In particular, it was not able to develop good

relations with certain Arab groups that would later side with the MUJWA.

The MNA was a quite different organisation and was created nearly a year after the Réseau on October 31st and November 1st 2010 in Timbuktu, and not in Kidal, as was the Réseau. The MNA introduced the issue of Azawad (thus going beyond mere Tuareg issues) and was highly critical of traditional leaders and the elder generation. It exemplified a clash of generations, despite the appointment to leading positions of figures involved in the previous war such as Ibrahim ag Bahanga, who was subsequently killed in a car accident in July 2011.¹⁵ The so-called “Arab Spring” was also a source of inspiration for the MNA and it was considering a referendum on self-determination (the South Sudan case had not gone unnoticed). The problem was that this radicalism was limited to a minority section of the northern Mali youth, while key members of the leadership were socially connected with noble Tuareg lineages. Moreover, the MNA was opposed to certain things that the Réseau was trying to achieve by working through established institutions.

But the real start of the MNLA was marked not by the growing success of those expressing political grievances, but the Libyan crisis. From February 2011 onward many returnees entered Mali from Libya. The first of these were those involved in the Islamic Legion, which fought in Chad but was not part of the Libyan army. Soon after came the Tuaregs and Arabs who had been Libyan soldiers and officers. Among them were nearly 2,600 fighters who had fought in the 2006 war. When the MNLA was set up at Zakak in northern Mali in October 2011, nearly 2,000 of its combatants had been in Libya. The others were soldiers and officers of the Malian army who had defected to join their brothers-in-arms.

If the Libyan crisis was an *atouitas* (“godsend” in Tamasheq, the Tuareg language), the political conditions were far from mature. Not only had the Réseau and MNA failed to co-ordinate their programmes and articulated convergent discourses despite their common aim of getting resources to the north, but little is known about

¹³ This is a direct reference to the Programme Special pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord, which framed the response of the Malian state and the international donors in terms of the problems in the north and with AQIM.

¹⁴ See Klute, “Hostilités et alliances”, for details on the Tuareg divisions in this period.

¹⁵ He was a commander in the 1990 war and in 2006 opposed the Algiers Agreement.

the mood of the returnees who made up the rank and file of the MNLA. Although data is sparse, we know that some returnees joined Ansar ed-Din from the start, which also makes the recruitment of their former comrades in Libya more likely in April and May 2012. We do not have any understanding of returnees' religious views, but they are more likely to be in line with the current religious dynamics in Libya, not Mali.

From what we currently know, another important factor was not taken into account by the MNLA insurgency. When the returnees appeared from Libya, they arrived in the Kidal area with heavy weapons and plenty of ammunition, fuel, and some food. They were able to wage a short campaign, but were not sufficiently well organised to secure resources to keep their fighting force intact. Soon fighters could not get food, and incidents with the civilian population in "liberated areas" occurred. Despite a lack of hard data, one can also assume that other incidents were motivated by greed or the desire to settle scores with populations that were involved in the earlier wars in northern Mali.

The chain of command seems to have been very relaxed at many points in the unfolding of the crisis. This can also be linked to the MNLA leadership: most of them come from the Kidal region and sometimes had little authority over the people they were guiding in the war; there has also been growing competition between returnees and "home-grown" soldiers, which is not uncommon, but is hardly acknowledged by the MNLA leadership.

The MNLA leaders expected funds from outside, either from Libya or Mauritania, Algeria and France. This money never reached them. Among the rumours circulating among Malians, two are worth considering. One is that Algeria actually finds the current (October 2012) situation more suitable than the victory of a "secular" movement that would have raised difficult questions regarding the status of Algerian Tuaregs. Supporting the MNLA was thus no longer a priority. The same kind of thinking might tentatively be attributed to Mauritania: the unfolding of the crisis in Mali meant that Mauritania was suddenly much safer. The second rumour is that Paris had bet on the MNLA and would have considered its goals with relative sympathy had it been willing to fight

AQIM. As elaborated on later in this report, there is no doubt that a section of the French security apparatus shared this view and it is not impossible that money changed hands. The election of a socialist president, François Hollande, who was opposed to this kind of clandestine operation may have stopped the exercise and contributed unintentionally to the near collapse of the MNLA.

The MNLA leadership also understood too late that the demand for secession was not timely, since it was too radical in the region for obvious political reasons, but also because economic interests are growing because of new oil and gas discoveries. After months of contradictory statements, in early October 2012 the MNLA decided that it should demand regional self-determination. This new stance is more acceptable and makes the MNLA a possible ally in an international intervention that primarily targets jihadi groups. France would like to promote the MNLA as the main channel for political dialogue (and therefore play down its military role), but this perception is not shared by all international players. Algeria prefers to engage Ansar ed-Din, which is described as the strategic actor in the current crisis by the Algerian minister for African affairs, Abdelkader Messahel. Moreover, the overall conditions for dialogue (a clear rejection of terrorism) may be simpler to state than to monitor.

Moreover, Tuareg politics is subtler than is often thought by outsiders. It is doubtful that Tuaregs supporting the MNLA will witness foreigners fighting their kinsmen without any reaction, even though some have scores to settle. The MNLA troops may melt away even further and/or provide a new channel for those who want to take over the protection economy in the region, with or without any Islamic agenda. Also, little is said about the bitter relations the MNLA foot soldiers have with the Malian army, which, in theory at least, will lead the intervention in the north. The current French/Malian expectations regarding a future MNLA role as a bridge is largely rooted in the concern that without local allies, the international forces may face humiliating setbacks sooner rather than later.

The emergence of Islamist movements

The spring of 2012 in northern Mali saw the growing influence of two new Islamist groups: Ansar ed-Din and the MUJWA, which basically ran the show by taking over cities from the MNLA, coercing the population, destroying Sufi symbols and enforcing *hudud* as a way to prove their Islamic credentials against allegations that they were motivated only by drug money.

What follows is tentative in many ways and tries to make sense of the political dynamics of the current period. It is more an attempt to build a consistent narrative with scattered facts than a scholarly exercise fully based on hard evidence.

As described in the previous section, the MNLA was created out of a frustration with the traditional chiefs and political elite who seemed to have little genuine interest in the youth and its predicament in northern Mali. It was naive to believe that leaders such as Iyad ag Ghali¹⁶ would accept being kept on the margins after the leading role he played in the 1990 war and as Amadou Toumani Touré's special envoy for negotiating the release of hostages kidnapped by AQIM.

When the MNLA understood that Iyad would not stand idly by, it did not stop him when he gathered a few dozen Salafi fighters to form Ansar ed-Din. There could be two explanations for this: either the MNLA leadership misunderstood the danger or it could not risk of splitting the MNLA, which recruits heavily in Kel Adagh (the Tuareg federation to which Iyad belongs), by opposing Iyad. This decision was justified by the belief that Iyad would organise and therefore control the few dozen Salafi militants in the Kidal area, which was a gross misreading of the situation – but the MNLA has rarely demonstrated any political realism.

A majority of the initial Ansar ed-Din members belong to Iyad's Tuareg federation; the Ifoghas; and an Arab tribe, the Kunta, whose communities are scattered across Mauritania and northern Mali. With the help of and, on occasions, reinforcements provided by some AQIM commanders,¹⁷ Ansar

ed-Din was able to appear as a military actor despite its relatively small number of fighters. A French scholar on Mali, Pierre Boileau, provided tentative figures for the insurgency in May: the MNLA had about 3,000 fighters, Ansar ed-Din nearly 400 and AQIM 600.

Iyad ag Ghali is paradigmatic of the current behaviour of his movement. He belongs to one of the noblest lineages of Kel Affala in the Kidal region and has been able to build a network of local chiefs who are indebted to him. As stated above, at the beginning his followers were Tuareg from the Ifoghas, but when tribal affiliations did not work in his favour, he mobilised his religious credentials as a born-again Salafi. His name and background often made the population more obedient. As a witness said referring to the takeover of Gao by Iyad's group (and the MUJWA): "They [Ansar ed-Din] only ask us to practise religion more rigorously, nothing else." The last card Iyad used – with caution – was money. When at one point MNLA fighters were unable to buy food, he simply recruited some of them by paying them a salary.

Iyad also played the "Islamic law and order" card very skilfully, since the MNLA had no funding and its fighters were undisciplined and ready to loot from civilians, especially non-Tuareg communities. In Gao and Timbuktu Ansar ed-Din and the MUJWA set up a hotline and their militias reacted on the spot to address the population's concerns. Soon they appeared to be stricter but more predictable than the MNLA combatants.

Ansar ed-Din claims that it is not interested in the secession of Azawad, only in the full implantation of Islamic law there. The claim is interesting because it refers to the growth of a Salafi movement in the region that started in the 1990s at a minimum and grew stronger thanks to money disbursed by AQIM. Ansar ed-Din could have followed the Haut Conseil Islamique chaired by Mahamadou Dicko in Bamako and retained only a civilian expression. It did not do so for various reasons. Part of the support Iyad got is from people who want his group to lead the entire process, either for tribal or political reasons. By accepting this responsibility he would also get more control over the religious agenda of his tribe,

mand of AQIM's Amir Abdelhamid Abu Zeid).

¹⁶ For his personal background, see Marchal, "The coup in Mali", 2012.

¹⁷ Notably, Talib Abdelkrim al-Targui (who operates under the com-

which is divided on whom religiously to follow.¹⁸ Iyad also keeps silent on the subject of AQIM's presence alongside his own fighters and one may expect this ambiguity to last for some time, even if negotiations start with Bamako.

The MUJWA came to the attention of the world in October 2011 when it kidnapped three aid workers from a Sahrawi refugee camp near Tindouf in Algeria. It also carried out a sophisticated suicide attack on a security post in Tamanrasset¹⁹ in March 2012. In April it took seven Algerians working at the Algerian consulate in Gao hostage and in the following months freed three and killed one.²⁰

The stronghold of the group is currently Gao, from where the leader of the MUJWA's military branch comes. Although its founding leader is from Mauritania, most of its members seem to belong to the Tilemsi Arab tribe mostly settled in and around Gao. The origin of the group is still unclear and competing versions are available. The most likely is that Tilemsi businessmen from Gao were involved in smuggling networks and were dealing with their kinsmen in AQIM. At one point they thought that it would be better to fund their own organisation to avoid being overtaxed by the other armed groups that were emerging, notably the MNLA and the Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso.²¹ The Gao battle against the MNLA in late June 2012 gives some veracity to this version, because the MUJWA was smart enough to develop connections with the Songhai to isolate and defeat the MNLA. A video released by the MUJWA proves its effort to compromise with Songhai nationalism against the Tuareg nationalists. The video also illustrates the increasingly sophistication of the MUJWA's propaganda.²²

Of course, this version – even if it could be confirmed – does not tell the whole story, since the MUJWA started operating before the Malian crisis. This scenario also does not say much about the organisation's links with AQIM and Ansar ed-Din. Relations with the latter do not raise many problems (at least in the short term), since the two groups recruit from different sources: Ansar ed-Din recruits mostly among Ifoghas and Kunta Arabs, while the MUJWA is made up of a majority of Tilemsi Arabs. Time will tell whether this coexistence is rooted in interests larger than merely counterbalancing the number of MNLA fighters.

Relations with AQIM are different. AQIM experienced difficulties in transforming itself into a regional (i.e. Maghrebi) organisation. These difficulties were acknowledged at a time when there was a debate among al-Qaeda affiliates and associates about the name of the organisation and whether the reference to al-Qaeda deterred further expansion of jihadi ideology. We know today that Osama bin Laden was the first to launch this discussion. In Somalia, the debate also broke out at a meeting of key commanders in August 2011 and continued until mid-2012, when al-Shabaab decided to reshape its internal structures by defining new regional commands with greater autonomy and commanders who were more clearly associated with the populations of the various regions. In Yemen, this discussion raises the question of the relations between al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Ansar al-Shari'a. Nasir al-Wuhayshi heads both AQAP and Ansar al-Shari'a and Ansar al-Shari'a commanders take a *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) to him.²³

For the author, the MUJWA is not a group that split from AQIM (in general, splits are murderous in Algerian history), but was born from AQIM. It is fairly possible that the first actions were undertaken to give prestige to the young movement and build its credibility. From an AQIM perspective this process merely corresponds to the implementation of the al-Qaeda principle advocating the centralisation of decision-making

18 A son of the supreme leader (*amenokal*) of the Ifoghas, Intalla ag At-taher, belongs to the MNLA. Another is a member of Ansar ed-Din. It was weeks before traditional leaders in the north were prepared to make a statement against the coercive enforcement of Islamic law in the north.

19 This city is home to the Comité d'État-major Opérationnel Conjoint (COMEC), the structure for regional counter-terrorist co-operation among Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. The added value of this institution promoted by Algiers has yet to be seen.

20 Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, *Al-Qaeda and Its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara*, Doha, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 1st 2012.

21 The Ganda Koy was a mostly Songhai self-defence militia group that committed atrocities against the Tuareg in the 1990s. The Ganda Iso is a more recent group that tried to resuscitate the same idea after 2006.

22 The Moor Next Door (blog), "More on MUJWA: the battle at Gao and even more questions", <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2012/07/01/more-on-mujwa-the-battle-at-gao-and-even-more-questions/>.

23 See the excellent programme on PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/al-qaeda-in-yemen/understanding-yemens-al-qaeda-threat/>.

and the decentralisation of execution. Or to put it another way, it is the al-Qaeda response to the Arab Awakening model tested in Iraq and promoted everywhere by the U.S. military (cf. Ahle Sunnah wal Jaama'ah in Somalia).

Another fact supports this version (but not strongly enough to make it 100% certain): Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a leading AQIM commander, is moving into all the major cities under the control of Ansar ed-Din and the MUJWA with a small contingent of troops. This would correspond to the need to co-ordinate activities, solve local problems and develop a common strategy by ensuring that all commanders are on the same page. This is very similar to what we are witnessing in Somalia and Yemen.

These elements of analysis, if true, raise uneasy questions about Ansar ed-Din and its ability to enter negotiations with Bamako. In his statements to the media Iyad ag Ghali has been careful never to associate himself with AQIM, but has also never criticised it. This balance may become much more difficult to maintain with time. While the three Islamist organisations discussed above have access to funds, it is unclear how their relative political and military unity will evolve over time. While Western condemnations may have little influence on their behaviour, the way in which heavy weapons and ammunitions are shared, the way in which the spoils of war are distributed, and the emergence of local figures and egos may challenge the apparent consensus we are witnessing today.

Opposition to those groups is not weak in northern Mali, but is desperate to find support in Bamako. Demonstrations have already taken place and were repressed. Differences among the various Islamic groups will also emerge in terms of the way in which they coerce their opponents in the north.

There is no doubt that secularism, as it has been built by Malian history, is going to evolve into something different, whichever way the conflict ends. To a large extent the crisis up north has raised a number of pending religious issues for the Malian polity. The growing influence of Mahamadou Dicko and his Haut Conseil Islamique reflects more than tactical gains and

opportunist stances. Whether the insurgents are defeated militarily or enter a genuine negotiation, the Salafi trend is going to be more influential than ever in Mali and will also assert its influence in the political debate, more so than the Family Code that the government attempted to introduce (with considerable opposition). This outcome, while likely for Mali, opens a new set of questions for neighbouring countries, especially Burkina Faso, where Blaise Compaoré is facing a dramatic decline of popular and military support.

The regional equation

This section will provide an overview of the stances of Mali's neighbours, i.e. Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. On occasion the description is sketchy, since information is not readily available. The main issue is, of course, the military intervention that ECOWAS has been promoting.

Mauritania has been facing AQIM attacks for years and has been reacting to them with force. The main problem faced by the country in the current setting is that it has limited military capabilities that are already overstretched and therefore will not be able to participate in any permanent military intervention beyond its borders. From time to time its military has pursued AQIM fighters, but did so with French (or U.S.?) special forces support. Mauritania receives significant U.S. and French back-up in its fight against AQIM.

This support is affected by the nature of the regime and its poor governance. The human rights situation in Mauritania is rather appalling and Western governments may find it difficult to support security services with such a poor human rights record. Yet for the time being, AQIM is seen as a major threat by European and U.S. public opinion.

Niger is in a quite different situation. The current regime is credited with legitimate elections and has a genuine interest in stabilising its own north, where Tuaregs have the strongest constituency. Different from Mali, the Niger ruling elites are careful to assess regional dynamics and not become their victims. The Nigerien army was able to disarm the Niger Tuaregs who came back from

Libya, although it did not act forcefully against the Malian contingents that reached northern Mali with heavy weapons and ammunitions.²⁴ Niger also hosts a large community of Nigerians who have deep family connections with north-eastern Nigeria, where Boko Haram enjoys considerable popular support.

Apart from an increased flow of refugees, the risks to Niger's stability of a military intervention in northern Mali are serious. There is little chance that Nigerien Tuaregs and Arabs would witness a military intervention without showing solidarity with their kinsmen in Mali. The involvement of Nigeriens in the insurgency is also likely. As with Mauritania, whatever is said publicly, it is doubtful whether Niger's military could provide a significant contingent to any military operation in northern Mali. The need to secure its own territory would be too important.

On October 1st 2012 Niger launched its Strategy for Development and Security, a \$2.5 billion, five-year initiative targeting six of the country's eight regions. As its name indicates, this strategy prioritises both security and development. The security aspect includes border controls, the maintenance of public order and the rule of law, and the elimination of "threats", which presumably means AQIM, kidnappers and drug traffickers. The development aspect will focus on improving infrastructure and strengthening social services, particularly in terms of health, education, water, sanitation and transportation. Increasing employment, especially for the youth, is another priority for the programme. The central government, in other words, aims to demonstrate to the population its capacity to rule, to make life better for ordinary people, and to remove the incentives young northerners have for participating in drug smuggling and kidnapping. However, while the programme's goals are clear, details of its funding structure remain somewhat vague.

President Mahamadou Issoufo made his views very clear when he met his French counterpart in Paris in early summer. He believes that a military intervention is needed and that the Malian army should be part of it. This stance is based, firstly, on a concern that time will allow the Islamist

armed groups to put down roots and have a cross-border impact. It is also an illustration of the strong reservations Niger has with regard to Blaise Compaoré and his focus on mediation and political dialogue.

AQIM is essentially an Algerian organisation and reflects the decision of the international community not to question the nature of the civil war in Algeria (more than 150,000 people killed and more than 300,000 refugees are conservative figures) and its problematic end. In the same way, for geopolitical reasons (for the U.S., mostly energy and counter-terrorism; for France, Algeria's ugly civil war) and because of competition with China, no Western governments are willing to question the role of the military and the Département de la Recherche et de la Sécurité (DRS, the powerful security service) in decision-making. As an Algerian sociologist, Lahouari Abdi, stated, "Algeria is the only country in the world where power is concealed and clandestine".²⁵

Due to the rise in energy prices, Algeria is in a much better economic situation than in the 1990s, when it had to call humiliateingly on the IMF for support. Reserves are above \$200 billion, while external debt is less than \$5 billion. Economic growth is on average above 5%. This partially explains why the Arab Spring had little chance of spreading to Algeria. People were fearful of a return of the massive coercion they had to cope with in the 1990s and also had had many of their economic grievances addressed by the government. This situation also explains another major pattern of how power works in Algeria. The overarching priority of the ruling elites is domestic politics, particularly the mutation and maintenance of the huge system of privileges and patronages that define Algerian politics.²⁶

This also sheds light on why Algiers has been mostly silent on the Malian crisis, except when its diplomats were kidnapped in Gao. As in Mali, one can suspect that high-ranking military officers are involved in the various forms of trafficking and are ready to tactically compromise with AQIM if

²⁵ See his interview in *el-Watan*, July 5th 2012, http://www.elwatan.com/dossiers/50eme-anniversaire-independance-algerie/l-algerie-est-le-seul-pays-au-monde-ou-le-pouvoir-est-cache-clandestin-05-07-2012-177333_260.php.

²⁶ See the viewpoint of a former French diplomat at <http://blog.lefigaro.fr/malbrunot/2012/05/impressions-dalgerie.html>.

²⁴ The explanation for the army's passivity was actually that the Malians returnees were better armed than it was.

benefits are shared in the right way. Moreover, sectors of the DRS have connections with (and some analysts would add control over) some AQIM units, which means that the eradication of this particular jihadi movement is not on the agenda.

Algeria wants to be considered the regional hegemon, although it does not do much in the current situation to react to regional challenges. Increasingly, observers believe that it fails to react because of the many levels of competition within Algerian state structures (among the presidency, the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, and various military and security cliques). As a consequence, COMEC has been on hold for months now, despite the crisis (one could say because of the crisis) and Algiers has merely reaffirmed its hostility to a foreign intervention on its borders.²⁷

When the UN Security Council started discussing a military intervention, Algeria again stressed that political dialogue with Iyad ag Ghali was the best way to address the current crisis. Many observers recall the recurring rumours that the Ansar ed-Din leader had in the past entertained a warm relation with sectors of the DRS and that dialogue in such a context gives a strategic leverage to Algeria, which few Malian politicians are ready to accept. Internationally, the situation is made even more complicated by the fact that U.S. AFRICOM considers Algiers to be its strategic partner, even at the risk of being manipulated. Washington's current reluctance to endorse a military intervention has some good points, but also illustrates the strength of this connection.

Chad's indirect involvement in the discussion is interesting, since this country is not a member of ECOWAS. Chad's current interests in the region are only connected to Niger via the proposed construction of a pipeline that would allow Nigerien oil to be transported to Kibri in Cameroon. Of course, the Malian crisis is also linked to Libya, and Chad's ruler was highly critical of the international military intervention in that country, although after May 2011 he adopted a lower profile.

President Idriss Déby of Chad is currently paying more attention to the crisis in Fezzan, ever since Chadian Tubus went to Kouffra and Sabha to reinforce their Libyan kinsmen and protect their share of the trading and smuggling routes that connect Fezzan to Niger and Mali. The humanitarian consequences of the Libyan crisis are also as serious in Chad as they are in Niger.

Tubus are also distantly related to Tuaregs, but the commonalities are not impressive. Yet because Chad had been involved in various U.S. counter-terrorist programmes, Déby may be interested in gaining some political capital and even funds at a time when he is restructuring his own army. He could also play the expertise card, since large parts of his army (Zaghawa, Tubu, Qorane and Arab) have genuine experience of desert warfare.

There is a further motivation that should be mentioned. In February 2008 armed opposition groups nearly overthrew him. The very day he launched his counter-attack in the capital city, the main opposition figure, Ibni Mahamat Saleh, was arrested by some of Déby's bodyguards and disappeared. Ibni was a prominent African member of the Socialist International and many socialists in France demanded an investigation of his murder (generally, Déby's bodyguards were supervised by the French secret services). The former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was too close to Déby to do more than make window-dressing statements. But many expect (or fear) that the new French president, François Hollande, may prove his difference by not giving up on this request, whatever the implications for Chadian-French relations.

By potentially proposing to be part of the military intervention in northern Mali (and insisting on very clear and well-thought-out conditions), Déby knows that he is helping France to act decisively with a good chance against AQIM, the MUJWA and Ansar ed-Din. Reward is an ugly term in diplomacy, but not in Chadian military ethics.

²⁷ Alexis Arieff, "Algeria and the crisis in Mali", *Actuelles de l'IFRI*, July 19th 2012, http://www.ifri.org/?page=detail-contribution&id=7253&id_provenance=98.

Strengths and weaknesses of the two main international actors

France and the U.S. are both actors in and witnesses of the current crises, because direct intervention is excluded due to Algerian opposition, touchy Malian nationalism, and the risk of unifying the armed groups against a poorly thought out foreign military intervention. Neither is surprised by the current course of events since for years both have made their concerns clear to the heads of state of the region. This apparent perceptiveness is not without its paradoxical weaknesses.

The U.S., especially after 2001, entertained a number of projects to train the armies in the region against terror and build amicable relations that would benefit the U.S. private sector in the mining and energy sectors. What is happening today accounts for a self-fulfilling prophecy to the extent that a number of researchers, not all from the region, have framed a narrative in which the U.S. needs a terrorist threat to increase its influence and has co-operated with the Algerian security services, notably the DRS, to achieve this result.²⁸

A concern that one can share with the supporters of this view is that AFRICOM's main interlocutor on the current crisis is Algeria, while most in the region and many in Europe feel that Algiers has always behaved ambiguously with regard to AQIM and the various Tuareg crises and is involved on all sides. Indeed, many analysts are close to believing that several AQIM and Ansar ed-Din units have working relations with the Algerian DRS²⁹ and that it would be risky to rely on a regime that sees procrastination as its best course of action in the region. Furthermore, Algeria perceives this region as its backyard, which does not help to build consensus and co-operation with Mali and Niger.³⁰

28 Jeremy Keenan, *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa*, London, Pluto Press, 2009. For a more mainstream analysis, see Yathia Zoubir, "The United States and Maghreb-Sahel security", *International Affairs*, vol 85, no. 5, 2009.

29 To be clear, some sectors of it. If power in Algeria is split among many rival constituencies, one should assume that the DRS is also not defending a unified position related to the Sahara and AQIM issues. This is one of the many weaknesses of Keenan's analysis.

30 For years the Malian government proclaimed that AQIM was an Al-

gerian problem and that it was up to Algiers to solve it. In June, when the discussions on a military intervention in Mali took place, the Nigerian minister of foreign affairs, Mohamed Bazoum (himself a Tuareg), in an interview with the French radio station RFI, merely said that "Algeria should wake up", which is not exactly a mild expression.

While in the early 1990s the U.S. administrations kept their distance from Algiers and avoided talking about terrorism in Algeria as an international issue, relations improved after the Algerian presidential elections of November 1995, although full normalisation only happened in 1999. Commercial interests and the energy sector were key in this improvement, which persists today. What was criticised in the 1990s became a model after 2001 in terms of counter-terrorist policy. Various programmes (the Pan-Sahel Initiative, the Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Initiative/Partnership) were established to train the national armies of the region (including those of Morocco and Chad) and to develop potential facilities for U.S. forces in case of specific counter-terrorist operations.

The CIA had a base in Mali, but eventually had to move to Burkina Faso, with a base in Mauritania being used for a longer time.³¹ One may expect the usual mix of drones and special forces watching northern Mali and the neighbouring regions, but it seems likely at this stage that Washington prefers France to take the lead under an agreed division of labour, since neither Paris nor Washington wants to spend a fortune to fund a counter-productive mission that would make AQIM more than a residual terrorist organisation.

U.S. interests in the region may reside more in Mauritania, West Sahara, Libya and Nigeria than in Mali itself. This is why U.S. publications so frequently refer to the linkages between AQIM and Boko Haram, even at the risk of overstating them.³² Hausa communities are present in northern Mali, as are Somali migrants, and it is likely that some of their young members were recruited by the jihadi groups there. Moreover, the connection is deeper, since the groups make detonators in the same way. Yet one should again be cautious and first confirm the facts before building a new totalising threat that fits in so well with particular agendas.

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31 Craig Whitlock, "US expands secret intelligence operations in Africa", *The Washington Post*, June 14th 2011.

32 J. Peter Pham, "Boko Haram's evolving threat", Africa Brief no. 20, April 2012, http://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/AfricaBriefFinal_20.pdf.

Over the summer of 2012 the U.S. administration had to make up its mind on a military intervention project that became increasingly possible after the UN Security Council resolutions in July and October. To be fair, the U.S. administration raised a number of important points regarding the language proposed by France at the Security Council. The very idea of a military intervention deserves clarification, including on the kind of support expected from international actors. Another point of difference is that France keeps talking of foreign aggression in northern Mali, while the U.S. believes that the problem cannot be framed in this way. However, tactical issues may be more important than strategic ones in understanding the current lack of enthusiasm of the Obama administration for military intervention.

Firstly, the current government in Mali legally proceeds from a coup and its relations with the U.S. are clearly hampered by this reality. This point is overstated by the State Department, because the other arguments will not be as consensual in the current U.S. electoral period. Secondly, in his electoral campaign, Obama has tried to present the killing of Osama bin Laden as a turning point in the fight against terrorism. Yet the situation in Mali, Somalia and Yemen (not to mention Iraq and Afghanistan) has proved how illusory this stance is. Getting into a public debate on the intervention would therefore weaken this stance and diminish the counter-terrorism credentials of the current U.S. administration. Thirdly, while hard evidence is still thin, it seems likely that AQIM played a marginal role in the killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens. As the polemics on whether the State Department did everything to secure its Benghazi compound are making the headlines in the U.S. media, it is inappropriate to get into a new debate on intervening in Mali while suddenly so little seemed to have been done over the last few years to prevent AQIM expansion in the Sahel.

This last point raises the important question of why the U.S. and France co-operated militarily for years with Mali without receiving any warning from their military advisers about the deterioration of the Malian army and the increasing corruption that had so dramatically undermined its efficiency. As happens so often, the military and diplomats involved in these programmes were right until

things went wrong, but no proper assessment of the mistakes made has been carried out in either Paris or Washington.

France is in a difficult position because national elections took place in the spring of 2012 and the winners, François Hollande and the Socialist Party, do not share the same vision as the former president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Moreover, Paris enjoys the advantages and suffers from the disadvantages linked to its former colonial power status in the region. Connections between the regimes in the region and French political elites were also affected by the change of president in France.

Sarkozy was a president with many faces. Confronted with AQIM's surge in the Sahel, he reacted by declaring war on the jihadi movement on July 26th 2010, which was the best way to provide this small group with increased credibility among the radicalised youth of the region. He was also fond of special forces and used them on various occasions, not always successfully.³³ Despite this warlike stance, his government tried to design a more comprehensive (and, some would add, sensitive) policy to tackle the growing insecurity in the Sahel. The Programme Spécial pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord mentioned earlier was indeed guided by the need to reintroduce a state presence in the region, where history was marked by a military and predatory presence. Building – or rebuilding – the legitimacy of the state before starting military operations against traffickers was certainly a good idea, but needed a strong commitment by the respective capital cities that clearly was missing in the case of Mali. When the coup happened in Bamako, local observers were eager to see France as the brain behind it. Although this was untrue, France might have been aware that some Malian politicians and high-ranking officers were considering a coup and did not warn the government.

³³ On July 22nd 2010 with Mauritanian forces, French special forces intervened unsuccessfully in northern Mali to free the hostage Michel Germaneau (78 years old), who was killed the following day by AQIM. On January 7th 2011 French special forces tried to intercept the hostage takers of two young French people abducted in Niamey. All were killed. Other operations (and successful ones) are likely, but are not mentioned in the press.

Another problem remained unresolved for months. In the French state apparatus there are divisions (which were also reflected at the political level before and after the May elections) about the analysis of the MNLA and possible military actions. The Tuaregs and the MNLA seemed to be the best option to both a number of leading academics and the intelligence services, while the military supported targeted military interventions, arguing that the Islamist groups should be treated as cancerous cells that could expand with time and opportunity. Only in August did the French government make up its mind and announce that a military intervention would be necessary if talks failed, a stance later reframed as military intervention became the most likely process to bring about an end to the crisis.

A third problem is the relationship between Paris and West African states. Presidents Ouattara and Compaoré were Sarkozy's best friends in the region: Ouattara was a personal friend of the French president and Compaoré had entertained very close relations with the right-wing parties in France for nearly three decades. At first they both influenced French policy, which may have delayed tough decisions. The situation changed when François Hollande came to power: he disliked the socialist Laurent Gbagbo, but was not impressed by Ouattara's achievements in terms of reconciliation, the reorganisation of the security sector and the fight against corruption. Relations with Burkina Faso's president are even more problematic, since the Socialist Party was not shy about criticising the latter's involvement in the Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Ivorian crises. French support therefore shifted to Mahamadou Issoufo, the president of Niger, who is properly elected, has respected credentials and is also a member of the Socialist International.

But the main problem may go beyond those mentioned here. Hollande and his minister of foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, have very little interest in and knowledge of African politics, and have no vision of what they could or should achieve in terms of the continent. Moreover, they share the view that getting involved in Africa may be perceived by French public opinion as being part of the *Françafrique* and of getting dirty money for their electoral campaigns. Moreover, they are very touchy on the subject of military

interventions (a traditional tool in French neo-colonial policy towards the continent) and would prefer to limit themselves to diplomacy (going to the Security Council and the African Union). So, basically, there is a risk that France will busy itself with the easiest part of the work in order to avoid tough and divisive decisions. Events since August merely seem to confirm this impression created by the first months of internal French debates.

The move to support a military intervention has several explanations, some of which – possibly not the most critical – are mentioned here. Firstly, the danger of terrorist attacks on French territory is being taken more seriously than previously, and with important Algerian and Malian communities in France (especially on the outskirts of Paris), the Hollande government cannot avoid this threat, since security is an issue that politically could be either very rewarding or very costly. Secondly, while Sarkozy made decisions on the basis of simplistic analyses (e.g. Libya), but escaped their consequences, the new French president is cautious in his management of international crises (as showed in Syria) and is often criticised for appearing to be powerless and indecisive. Mali offers an opportunity to prove the contrary without taking radical risks, since the intervention is an ECOWAS plan and the French role in it will be downplayed in terms of effective military involvement. Moreover, one cannot exclude the pattern of French policy towards Africa for nearly half a century: France had to make a move because its best friends (i.e. its former colonies) said that not doing so would be very costly for continued French influence on the continent, a point that is also reflected in the speech delivered by Hollande in Kinshasa in October 2012.

The risk of this mainstream policy is that it may get it wrong on all counts. ECOWAS forces may enter northern Mali early next year if a considerable amount of money is disbursed by the European Union and the U.S. But there are genuine concerns about its military ability to achieve the kind of stabilisation that would be necessary to organise elections or entertain a new engagement with the armed groups. Strangely enough, French diplomacy does not talk much about the political crisis in Bamako and the actual state of the Malian military. Yet everyone in Paris clearly understands that Malian leadership is needed to

make the intervention fully legitimate and that only a few hundred Malian soldiers might be ready by February to participate in an ambitious military operation in the north. The bet on the MNLA becoming more realistic and preparing itself to be a bridge between the military intervention and sections of the population (i.e. Tuaregs) is just that – a bet. MNLA behaviour over the last few months does not give much confidence that this will happen.

What operational concept?

Everyone endorses the view that Bamako's involvement in the reconquest of the north is essential. As a corollary to this, the crisis in Bamako should first be resolved. This was also the recommendation that the author formulated in a previous analysis.³⁴ As is generally agreed, it is good to differ to make people think twice about what seems to be a too obvious choice. The following remarks are therefore presented as food for thought.

Firstly, is there really an option for negotiations without military intervention, as claimed by Algiers and Ouagadougou? If the analysis proposed here has value, the answer is "no". Even if this analysis is half true, it is likely that the armed groups in northern Mali will bet on the powerlessness of ECOWAS and Bamako, and in that sense negotiations may not go very far, since they would be only a way for these groups to win time to root their ideology among the populace there. If the analysis is wrong, then we should soon witness significant incidents between Ansar ed-Din and the MUJWA or between the MUJWA and AQIM. We could then validate the scenario of the MNLA and a section of Ansar ed-Din joining forces against the other groups.

Secondly, is Bamako's mess solvable in the short term? Diplomats will undoubtedly be positive, but the situation on the ground is not moving in that direction. The political class is bitterly divided and Dioncounda Traoré is not above the confusion, but very much part of it. The proposals he made in late July were not implemented in good faith and have had divisive effects even among the main political parties that were opposed to the

coup. Moreover, his relations with the army are not warm, to say the least, and he also needs to deal with many new high-ranking officers who have been promoted by the military junta. The 500 soldiers who escaped to Niger and are currently asserting their readiness to fight back in northern Mali do not make a difference, even if one takes their statements seriously. If this scenario has any validity, it raises a question: should the international community bet only on state institutions and not convince more responsible Malians to build a coalition of parties and civil society organisations as an alternative to a protracted divided state apparatus?

Thirdly, what are the consequences of AQIM, the MUJWA and Ansar ed-Din being in charge in northern Mali? Are these consequences growing more serious with time or are these groups unable to do more than merely coerce the population? Also, what is the impact of the crisis on the other parts of Mali, not only the north? While politicians and analysts are discussing the shape, scope and outcome of possible international military interventions in northern Mali, too little attention is given to the impact of the crisis on the southern population. The author has no data good enough to provide even a tentative answer to these questions. By analogy with Somalia (which is not the best point of comparison), one can say that these groups are doing more than merely coercing the population. They are also creating a new social order, and it would be naive to believe that no one is benefitting from this new setting. But this does not say much about how important time is in the building of a social constituency for violent radical Islam.

Fourthly, how strong is the internal (even only at a military level) chain of command among the armed groups in northern Mali? Articles in the press always dither between two opposite scenarios: a largely decentralised one (militias are their own commanders, although they eventually follow their leaders) or a highly centralised one (identifying the groups with their leaderships). Would the disappearance of some leaders change the military or ideological nature of these movements? Deeper knowledge is needed, although for the author the answer is negative, except for Ansar ed-Din.

³⁴ Marchal, "The coup in Mali", 2012.

Fifthly, what would be the aim of a military intervention? To return Mali to the *status quo ante*? To eradicate AQIM? To end the trafficking that provides all these groups with the resources they need to recruit followers and promote themselves ideologically? Different answers to these questions necessarily define different interventions.

The discussion on military intervention should also examine the type of operation that is needed and its envisioned shape. The main trend of thinking in Africa (at least) is to consider setting up an operation like AMISOM in Somalia. Such a force will gather together various African contingents, including a Malian one, and would benefit from U.S., French and maybe even NATO support, whether from the respective armed forces or from private contractors. The aim would be to secure the main urban centres in northern Mali, rebuild local administrative capabilities, and flood these areas with humanitarian aid in order to address the current food security fragility and strengthen the “hearts and minds” campaign. Simultaneously, a new round of negotiations would start with the MNL and contacts would be developed with Ansar ed-Din, while targeted military operations would be launched against the MUJWA and AQIM, based on intelligence provided by the Western allies (largely the U.S.).

This plan, although likely, should raise a number of important questions beyond its timing within a political strategy in which Bamako’s stance has a primordial role. In particular, taking into account the current shape of the Malian army (which is thoroughly decayed) and the simultaneous development of a strong nationalism suspicious of any foreign intervention, the role and links of the Malian contingent in the military deployment would be a serious headache for military planners. Here are a few initial remarks that would become more focused once one knows which option has been selected.

AMISOM’s success in Somalia is based on several prerequisites. The first is that the force allowed itself a significant number of casualties: above 900 in the five years of its existence. Would an international operation led by ECOWAS forces be ready to pay the same price? For AMISOM, this choice was possible because the two main troop-

contributing countries, Burundi and Uganda, were in a very specific position: they were courting the international community because their internal governance was remarkably poor and both regimes entertained an unhealthy relationship with their respective armies. Among ECOWAS countries, none is in that condition today and few observers would believe that Côte d’Ivoire would take such a risk of deep involvement, for a number of reasons.³⁵

A second factor contributing to AMISOM’s success is that it stayed in Mogadishu for nearly two years before engaging in offensive operations in the rest of Somalia. During those two years (from March 2007 to January 2009) it was able to build up its own intelligence network and cultivate good relations with the population. In the period 2009-12, when AMISOM became a combat operation, it retained its popular sympathy for two reasons. It had a clear target – al-Shabaab – and only very rarely became involved in other Somali infighting. Moreover, AMISOM entered the fight against al-Shabaab when hatred for that organisation had already developed among the population. To a large extent AMISOM also appeared to Somalis as a less interventionist military force than the Ethiopian soldiers who had earlier basically run the show in Mogadishu for two years.

In the Malian case, the situation appears less favourable. The Malian army’s performance in the north was very poor and therefore the intelligence network of an international force would have to be built up, whatever assurances Malian officers may give in Bamako. The force will likely be ambivalent towards armed groups in the north because the targets are AQIM and MUJWA, based on the assumption that the borders between these organisations, the MNL and Ansar ed-Din are not blurred, which looks very unlikely to the author.

The population’s attitude to these groups has to be assessed very cautiously, for a number of reasons. As discussed above, relations between

³⁵ Let us remember that the December 1999 coup in Côte d’Ivoire was initiated by a contingent of soldiers who had been sent to participate in a peacekeeping operation but never received their salaries. If President Ouattara were to send troops to an operation in Mali, he would have to convince key commanders (including Guillaume Soro, the current parliamentary speaker) and would likely not send his best troops out of fear of a possible coup carried out either by Gbagbo’s supporters or unhappy Forces Nouvelles.

units of these groups and the population at large may not be as bad as claimed by the Western and Bamako media: shared identities and support from local figures may be a first explanation for better relations. Many analysts foresee renewed popular support for the armed groups should an international intervention take place, based on the fact that foreigners are generally not welcome in northern Mali.

Facing an international deployment, the population will also have to make up its mind about the medium-term consequences beyond the departure of the Islamist armed groups. Security will be the first point to be raised. The Islamist groups were eager to secure urban centres because they could make a point of implementing Islamic law and thus give themselves a legitimate reason to control the population. MNLA fighters were responsible for looting or killings and were castigated for these misdeeds: the MNLA may want to settle scores after the rival movements have left the main cities. What would the international forces do then? Restoring law and order may be a prime necessity, and a difficult one for a force that will be made up of foreign soldiers, not police.

A second aspect of concern to the population will be the reshaping of the economy. AQIM and the MUJWA are making a living through the protection economy that they have established in the region over and above hostage taking. The presence of international troops and Western monitoring may endanger all profitable trafficking (migrants, counterfeit cigarettes, commodities and drugs). The international community (besides the Malian state) should therefore ensure that economic development follows foreign military intervention. Clear signals that the plan is to move in this direction should be given from the start. The main danger (or, to put it differently, the likelihood) is that the region will return to the *statu quo ante*, with state officials and their cronies making money instead of the jihadi groups. This would rejuvenate an armed Islamist opposition in a matter of months.

A third comparison can be made. AMISOM is not fighting to liberate Somalia, but to take over the main cities from al-Shabaab. To a large extent, control of rural areas is left to the Somali

army and various surrogate forces provided by neighbouring states (Ethiopia and Kenya). A year after al-Shabaab's departure from Mogadishu the results are not impressive. In the Malian case, control of the cities would only be a partial achievement if the roads connecting them are not also pacified. No ECOWAS army is able to fight in the desert, except Niger's, which does not want to be part of any international military intervention. It will be necessary to find trained African armies able to fight in these conditions, and they are few and far between. Chad is considered for this role by various players, but, as discussed above, President Déby has imposed conditions and wants a high reward for his commitment.³⁶ Moreover, his army has a thin record in terms of "winning hearts and minds", without even discussing the massive violations of human rights it committed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (1999) and the Central African Republic (2003 to the present). Mauritania's military capabilities are already overstretched in securing its national territory. Despite the various disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes in Mali and the integration of Tuareg and Arab fighters into the national army, the recent collapse of the military in the north proves that the Malian army does not have the capacity to leave towns and fight in the desert. This brings us to a final consideration.

The international community is tending to define the operation in conventional terms, more or less like an aggressive peacekeeping mission (as in Somalia or the DRC), but maybe there should be a rethink in this regard. AMISOM is only a case, not a paradigm. Other types of military operations can be envisioned according to the answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this section. An alternative option is presented below for the sake of discussion.

Counter-insurgency is not a specific type of warfare: it is more a method of transforming a society in order to undermine the insurgents. Insurgents are not expected to defeat an occupying

³⁶ By chance, the issue of Zoe's Arch and (a fine of €6.3 million is still pending, despite the amnesty given by Déby) is returning to the headlines whenever a UN Security Council resolution on Mali is discussed. (Zoe's Arch was the French NGO that claimed to be bringing children from Darfur to France for their safety, when in fact most of the children were from Chad. After its personnel were arrested, the €6.3 million fine was imposed, which the Chadian government says should still be paid, despite the amnesty for those involved.) This is a clear signal that Paris will need to be generous.

force by using direct military force, while the occupying force has less interest in the outcome of the war than the insurgents and over time its inability to defeat the insurgency will compel it to withdraw. The usual assumptions of counter-insurgency are twofold: that the population will turn against the insurgents for economic reasons and that counter-insurgent forces can protect the population. Both are very unlikely in many cases, especially in the Malian case.

Increasingly, an alternative is framed in ongoing crises (Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia) that encapsulates guerrilla and special operations warfare. In that scenario, guerrilla warfare is considered as an option for the counter-insurgent forces and can provide an alternative to a heavy military presence. This type of operation targeting AQIM/MUJWA commanders – who seem currently to be settled in different cities – could be envisioned, provided that a number of requirements are met and political resources are available. Firstly, targeting should be based on a fair assessment of the consequences for AQIM/MUJWA and a measure of the possible reprisals against the local population. Applying pressure on the armed groups will be necessary if one wants a realistic conversation to start. The danger of this option, as reflected by the U.S. policy in Yemen, is to forget the political dimension of the scenario and spend one's time identifying targets without assessing the political impacts of such a military campaign and not articulating a narrative of liberation at the same time.

Moreover, one should define a military strategy that will empower local resistance to the Islamist groups and not only envisage a military intervention that merely restores Bamako's authority without much consideration of the local situation. Such an option cannot be considered if the Malian military is ignored and the Malian government is not considered. It should be clear from previous sections of this report that northern Mali is not politically homogeneous and that the way in which a military intervention is planned has to take into account these various political specificities. If not, an ECOWAS military intervention will only be the link between a short-term crisis and a protracted war.

Conclusion: more uncertainties ahead

This overall survey of the many aspects of the Malian crisis illustrates how procrastination and wishful thinking have been key component of our weak responses to these challenges. The illusions harboured with regard to the state of Malian democracy, the nature of military co-operation and the nature of Islamic dynamics, together with a very biased understanding of the political economy of the region, give considerable room to coercive armed groups that represent primarily a danger to the population that they control.

It is therefore a difficult moment for the European Union and France, but also a good opportunity to reflect once more on the impact that our policies and interests (oil, uranium and migration control) have had on the development of these militant movements. Had the West been less ready to compromise on democratic practices and co-operation partnerships, other developments may well have taken place in the countries of the region. Properly designed alternative policies would not have provided Islamist radical groups with the growing support that they enjoy today.

The solution does not lie in further adventurism on the part of the West, after a poorly thought out military intervention in Libya and an obsessive concern with retaining market share in the developing regional energy and mining markets in competition with China. But the solution cannot be limited to diplomacy and advice provided here and there to the region. A more critical political and military approach is needed.

The current impulse by the new French president is positive because it obliges all actors to clarify their stance publicly and state what their interests are. But the French analysis – if fairly reflected by the public statements made by high-ranking officials – still suffers from a number of blind spots, especially with regard to political developments in Bamako and the implications for the whole of Mali of a military intervention. France should also not take as gospel the assurances provided by the states of the region. Crises scenarios have to be extended to plan counter-measures. If successful, such an intervention should also bring about

drastic reforms in ECOWAS member states that benefit from the situation in northern Mali.

Eventually, two different kinds of interventions may be looked at. The first one aims at regaining control of the territory and trying to address local grievances without considering the armed actors as political interlocutors. Such an option is naive, because a military intervention will not generate its own legitimacy and the Malian state is currently too factionalised, corrupt and lacking in a national vision to achieve a significant part of this objective.

The second option is to enter a dialogue with some of the armed groups occupying the north. In order to avoid procrastination and allowing the de facto partition of the country to formalise, the Malian state and its allies have to make a military move that is strong enough to make such groups

aware of the risk they run of being challenged everywhere. But relations with AQIM will not be cut overnight, especially if there is still a military agenda in Bamako and the idea prevails that engaging the northern organisations is only a first step towards dismantling them politically.

A realistic view is that none of the ECOWAS armies (including Mali) currently has the ability to enforce such a political strategy on the ground. While the military planners are mobilising after the vote on the UN Security Council resolution, what is clearly missing is a better-grounded political analysis that would envision not only the military gains to be made, but also the way to disconnect jihadi groups from local grievances and transnational trafficking. Politics and policies rather than drones and special forces are therefore the solution to the current crisis in Mali.