The Geopolitics of Armed Conflicts in northern Mali: Perceptions and Power Dynamics

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Six years after the signing of the Algiers Accords (2015) between the Malian government and (separatist Tuaregs and militias) armed groups as a mitigating mechanism to curtail the escalation of violence in the northern part of the country, its implementation has yet to be effective (Pellerin). While the civil society rejected the peace deal, insecurity and instability expanded from the north to the center (Bonny). In this regard, this Policy Brief determines why the Algiers peace agreement is still inoperative. What can possibly explain the expansion of the conflict in the center of the country despite the existence of the United Nations (UN) through MINUSMA and other international peace keeping forces?

1-Conflict Background

Mali is a multi-ethnic, multicultural state where tolerance, mutual acceptance and cousinhood of pleasantry” or “pleasant kinship” i.e., “a set of friendly, preferential bonds established by the ancestor, in a renewed, personal approach that works on the basis of humor and polite derision,” have prevailed for a longtime between the different groups (Niane,2005:10). A landlocked country with little resource, Mali always struggled launching a large-scale nation-wide development impetus which, in the vast desertic areas of the north—a region historically marked by criminal activities—translated into recurrent rebellions from the Tuareg minority; thus, making of an inclusive phenomenon (lack of development and infrastructures) an exclusive ethnic (Tuareg) problem.

Since its independence in 1960, Mali has been facing successive Tuareg rebellions (1962, 1991, 2006, 2012), leading to the signature of various peace treaties namely the 1991 Tamanrasset Agreements, the 1992 National Pact, 1996 Peace Flames Ceremony, the 2006 Algiers Agreements and the 2009 Shebha Agreements in Libya. The current crisis resulted from another Tuareg insurrection, in 2012, and was sanctioned by the 2015 Algiers Agreement. This chronic instability coupled with a crippled economy plagued by droughts, famine, rampant embezzlement resulting from the emergence of a corrupted bourgeoisie along with the International Monetary Funds’ (IMF) 1980-1990s Structural Adjustment Program (SAPs), earned the nation the tag “failed state.” (Bourgeot, 2021: 46-47).

2-The Geopolitics of the Malian Crisis

Although domestic flaws (weak economy, bad governance, corruption), to a large degree, account for most of the country’s current security issues, one cannot deny the impact external factors had on the widespread insecurity in Mali and in the Sahel. Realists conceptualize the international stage as a realm where individual states cooperate or compete for the sole achievement of their strategic goals. In that sense, the international community/scene is anarchic. By implication, it is ruled by interest not sheer logic or rationality which jeopardizes world peace. (Donelly, 2000:9) One can then, without doubt, speak of the existence of an incoherence in the management of world affairs despite the existence of predefined criteria established into legislative bodies framed into international law that set the framework for international military interventions. For instance, in
2002, the United States, despite a French Veto in the UN Security Council, dragged the world into a war in Iraq. Ultimately, destroying Iraq’s military capacities led to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and opened the whole region to a terrorist take over. (Gerges, 2016:98-165).

In the same vein, the current crisis in the Sahel, in general and in Mali, was generated by a 2011 UN-authorized, French-initiated and NATO-led international military intervention in Libya against Muhammar Gaddafi under the Responsibility to Protect (RP2) doctrine. Like in Iraq, dismantling Libya’s military arsenal and capacities made the nation a “failed state.” (Campbell, 2013:18-22). As a result, Libyan authorities lost control over their territory which became a hub to jihadism and criminal activities exposing the whole region, the Sahel, to a terrorist hold. The fall of Libya led to the return of well-armed Tuareg soldiers, who used to operate within Gaddafi’s Foreign Legion, in the Northern part of Mali. They formed a separatist group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and with the help of their terrorist allies al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), AN SAR Dine, in 2012, conquered northern Mali and plunged the whole Sahel into an unparalleled insecurity which the region still suffers from. It is safe to mention that prior to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) military intervention in Libya, Mali, notwithstanding its history of ethnic tensions, weak economy and bad governance had never lost its territorial integrity nor it had ever faced a terrorist threat within its borders. The same observation could be made of most Mali’s neighboring countries (Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, Mauritania) which currently suffer from the terrorist threat.

The outcome of the international intervention in Libya was easily predictable because of the history of the region. In the 1900s, the Algerian Civil War helped pave the way for the rise of Salafism and terrorism (United States Department of State, 2014:57-58). This growing feeling of Islamophobia was perceptible as well from the international mismanagement of the Palestine-Israeli conflict. The American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan had made radicalism trendy worldwide as it became borderless and translated in the growth and exportation of terrorist organizations—motivated by an ideological and civilizational (religious) discourse against the West—worldwide. Jihadism became global and would take advantage of conflict zones, weak states, for recruitment and expansion on behalf of international terrorism (Bourgeot, 2020: 47-48); thus, becoming a threat to not only concerned states’ sovereignty over their territory but also their political stability and democracy. (Amnesty International, 2012: 5).

From what we have covered so far, it is safe to posit that Jihadism, in Sahara or anywhere else, “is not primarily an essential standard religious movement.” It is rather “the agglomeration of the insurgent centers built on social, political or economic divides” (Pellerin, 2019: 9) which speaks volumes to the consequence of the Invasion of Libya on economically and politically unstable states like those in the Sahel. The predictability of the Libyan Invasion’s outcome gives credit to Realists’ theory on international law posing that powerful countries use to pursue solely their own interest which would justify why they intervened in Libya despite the potential outcomes of such a military adventure for the world. According to Leaman (2004: 234-248), terrorism is, without no doubt, the consequence of the West’s constant need to secure and monopolize world’s resources. Therefore, the current crisis in the Sahel results from Western countries’ need to secure natural resources (Massenat, 2021:12). Libya holds the largest oil reserve in Africa with 48.3 billion barrels, and a natural gas reserve estimated at 5,300 billion cubic meters 20, and its proximity with European consumer markets makes it an important economic and strategic point for competing actors in the region (Massenat, 2021 :12). Mali, like Libya and other Sahelian states such as Niger, Algeria, Sudan or Tchad has a considerable amount of natural resources. Taoudeni basin is believed to possess considerable quantities of gas, uranium, an inexhaustible water table, quartz, carbonates, lithium, and liquid petroleum, similar to the ones existing in the petroleum-rich provinces in Algeria, Niger, Sudan, and Libya. Unlike these countries, Mali remained the ‘last extraction frontier,’ largely unexplored. According to Maiga (2015), Gaddafi, during his visits in Mali argued
that, “The North of Mali is very rich in mineral resources. If you don’t take care, one day the West will come and install themselves permanently in order to exploit your resources”.

3-Internal Tensions and Suspicions

In Mali, progressively, an anti-French politics sentiment, built on the popular awareness that France and NATO’s war on Libya accounts for the war they endure, is gaining massive support in the public opinion. This new state of mind led to huge protests either calling for a revision or a repeal of the Algiers Accords as it is believed to be a French initiated strategy aimed to partition Mali for selfish reasons (Simonis, 2017). Many actors, from the political and civil society spheres, are depicting a collusion between the French military apparel and terrorist groups. Such feelings take their source in overt French political and military support to rebel and terrorist groups. In 2012, for instance, when the Tuareg rebellion, in a joint assault with terrorist groups, beheaded Malian soldiers during the fall of Kona, Alain Juppé, the French foreign minister, called the Tuareg rebellion “friends” who should be given French support (Simonis, 2017). In addition, according to the Malian Prime Minister Dr. Choguel Kokala Maiga, the French military prevented the Malian army to take hold in Kidal after they had successfully regained control of former terrorist-led regions (Timbuktu and Gao). Two years afterwards, jihadism, which was residual by then, vigorously spread from Kidal (North) to the center of the country as demonstrated in the below map.

Dr. Maiga went as far as to claim that French officers trained terrorist organizations in Kidal (Sessou, 2021). More, Dr. Maiga claimed that France compelled Mali into signing a peace treaty with groups such as Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l’Azawad (MNLA)—which allied with terrorist groups against the Malian Army—and Haut Conseil pour L’Unité de l’Azawad.
(HCUA) whose leaders officially served in the terrorist group Ansar Dine (one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the North). It is important to recall that the sole reasoning behind the French intervention, officially, was to help Malian authorities save the nation’s territorial integrity. Therefore, suspicions arose when the French military cooperated with those who were threatening the very territorial integrity they officially came to preserve.

The insurgency in Northern Mali is also ethnic, class based with a shifting power dynamic. Traditionally, the Tuaregs belonged to a privileged group that ruled over the black and slave Sonrai cast. In addition, the Tuareg social pyramid was topped by the aristocratic class of the Ifogha who ruled over the Imghad class. The advent of democracy changed, somehow, this paradigm. The Tuareg society, a traditionally slave society living off the back of Sonrai, had to work to survive. At the same time, the Ifogha who traditionally ruled over the Imgad began losing this position of power. In short, the advent of democracy changed the social makeup and ended the minorities’ traditional hold on the majority which led to more conflict. This paradigm is perceptible even nowadays. The Algiers Agreement is signed between the Malian government and the armed groups. The armed groups are made of two opposing entities i.e., those supporting the government and fighting against secession—the Platform including GATIA (made of Tuareg Imgads) and Ganda IZO (former black slaves to the Tuareg)—and radical separatist groups within the Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA) made of MNLA and HCUA which are all Ifogha. The Platform, made of auto-defense militias, was created in response to Ifoga aggressive behavior toward the Songhai, the Peul and the other ethnic groups who largely overwhelmed the Ifogha. Let us not forget that the Tuareg as a whole do not make the majority in the north.

4 Inadequate International Response

The international response to the Malian crisis fails to mitigate the conflict because of its superficiality and lack of understanding of the reality on the ground i.e., the cultural, historical, ethnic and class make-up of the populations. First, the international response, as designed in the latest Algiers Accords, portrays the conflict from a minority right approach which translates to paradigms such as Southern majority oppression of Northern minorities. In short, it is a South vs. North conflict. This framework builds its reasoning on the homogenisation of Southern and Northern populations into two distinct identity blocs depicting the South as Black and the North, made of separatist groups, as Tuareg (white-skinnes). This, in itself, creates a confusion in terms of the demography of the North in which the Tuareg are a tiny minority; therefore, unrepresentative of the Northern populations. Moreover, many fractions of the Tuareg population fight MNLA alongside the Malian army. Therefore, attempts at defining this conflict solely on ethnic grounds, black skinned southerners vs white skinned northerners, is groundless. The latest Algiers Accords deprives all ethnic groups (the huge majority of the northern populations), apart from the Tuareg, of their human rights to decide for themselves what kind of world they want to live which constitutes the seeds of perpetual conflict. It is of paramount importance to recall, as well, that armed separatist groups have traditionally been associated with drug trafficking—from which they fund their wars—which will not perpetuate within a peaceful environment where the state has authority over all its territory (International Crisis Group, 2018). This might as well explain why the conflict is so recurrent to the point that the ethnic justification would only serve as a pretense to protect smuggling networks.

Second, the concept of justice, the core of any real peace program, has never been taken into consideration in these Accords. The separatist Tuareg movement allied with Jihadist groups in committing mass slaughter on military and non-Tuareg civilian groups in Timbuktu and Gao and Kidal (Touchard, 2014). Peace, in any conflict situation, is built on reconciliation which core remains justice. These Algiers Accords, much like preceding Agreements, will fail because it does not serve justice thus awarding impunity. These jeopardies the likelihood of a true reconciliation because other communities are denied their basic human rights. Moreover, the Algiers Accords
mutes the voice of this suffering majority in favor of a violent minority. It becomes of paramount importance for this Agreement to take into consideration the shifting of power dynamics we mentioned earlier. The majority of the populations living in the North had never thought of splitting from Mali. Therefore, they can’t fit into a Peace Treaty which does not reflect their aspirations.

Certain provisions of the article are biased and do not correspond to any historical reality. For instance, in Article 5 of Chapter two, titled: “Foundations for a sustainable resolution of the conflict”, it is said that “The Azawad denomination refers to a socio-cultural reality, both commemorative and symbolic, shared by the different populations of Northern Mali.” Those who are familiar with Malian history know that this denomination is just geographic but does not refer to any socio-cultural reality per se. In a similar vein, in Chapter 3, titled: “Institutional framework and territorial reorganisation”, the Article 6 stipulates that “The Parties shall put in place an institutional architecture enabling the populations of the North to manage their own affairs in a spirit of participative citizenship, based on the principle of free administration and enabling wider representation of these populations within national institutions.” To achieve this end, it is said that:

1. - a Regional Assembly shall be set up in the Region elected by direct universal suffrage, to which a large number of competences shall be transferred, as well as resources and appropriate judicial, administrative and financial powers;
2. - within this framework the Malian populations and particularly those of the Northern Regions shall manage their own affairs, based on the principle of free administration;
3. - the President of the Assembly shall be elected by direct universal suffrage. He shall also be the Chief Executive of the Regional Administration;
4. - the cercles and communes shall have debating organs (a Cercle Council and a Communal Council) elected by universal direct suffrage and managed by offices with an executive function with a President of a Cercle Council and an elected Mayor at their head;
5. - each region shall have the right to choose its own official name within the framework of the provisions relating to the judicial status and functioning of the regions.

These provisions are problematic in many regards. As a failed State, the implementation of the above provisions, will even further weaken the Malian state. Without a unitary State, any autonomy given to the north will spur other forms of territorial claims and autonomy which in the end, will lead to chaos. Mali’s regional location and role as an international terrorist ground does not provide favorable conditions to grant administrative autonomy to the Tuareg separatists because of their bonds with terrorist groups. In addition, it might motivate other ethnic groups into emulating the Tuareg rebellion. Instead of bringing sustainable peace as the agreement states, this situation is likely to lead to the partition of the country and the weakening of its institutions. Therefore, this peace agreement, if it is not revised, will also undermine Mali’s sovereignty and widen the divide between its populations, a situation that is likely to cause further conflicts and instability in an already conflict-ridden country.

Third, the United Nations approach this crisis from a Civil War perspective which leads to two main problems. First, it discards the role the international community, the United Nations, played in the advent of this crisis while taking down Gaddafi’s Libya. This event is the starting ground for every single development the Sahel witnesses now. Second, it ignores the real problem the region faces, which is the presence of terrorist groups and narcotic traders. As a matter of fact, MINUSMA, the United Nations’ Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali, only serves a peacekeeping role between the Tuareg rebels and the Malian military (Van der Lijn, 2021). It doesn’t fight terrorist groups which is why the conflict, since MINUSMA’s ground presence, expanded from the North to the center of the country (United States Department of State).

Conclusion:
This study posits that growing hostile public opinion over the role international forces played in the Malian conflict, along with an inappropriate military and social assessment of the reality on the ground, from the international community, account for the non-implementation of the Algiers Accords and an extensive spread of terrorism throughout the country. As far as the role of international actors is concerned, public opinion is increasingly perceiving the French intervention as solely motivated by the access to Malian natural resources. In this effect, many Malians approach the French intervention from realist perspective i.e., the pursuit of French interests at the expense of the Malian populations. People are suspicious of France and its impartiality because of their cooperation with Tuareg rebels along with their Jihadist allies (Leovich, 2021) which jeopardizes the Peace Accords Malians consider as the very seed of their nation’s partition as some provisions of the deal consecrate the complete military disengagement of the State from northern regions. In words, this is acknowledging the tacit separation of the country as state authority is contingent to its capacity to use force to keep order or impose it.

Second, the Peace Agreement fails to take into account the ethnic dynamics in the region as it interprets the current conflict in racial terms: Blacks (south) vs Whites (north). Parting from the understanding that Blacks, in a large degree, constitute the majority in the North as well, this deal constitutes the starting ground for future conflicts as other ethnic group might call for the same privileges given to the Tuareg which could threaten peace for good in these regions.

As to why the conflict spread from the north to the center, it becomes self-evident that the international military mission’s, MINUISMA, mandate is not appropriate for the Malian case as it doesn’t fight terrorism which remains the deadliest evil in the Sahel. This mission is detached from the reality on the ground which naturally translates to the widespread insecurity we are witnessing now.

References:


