Into the Abyss in Mali

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Largely away from the public eye, the Malian government and its Tuareg population have been locked in a cycle of conflict for decades. In the aftermath of the global war on terror these rebellions and unmet agreements set the stage for a new kind of conflict.

Enter the Islamists. Pressing their advantage over both Tuareg groups and the collapsed government in Bamako, several groups connected to al-Qaeda took control of parts of northern Mali in 2012. In just a few months, the international community watched a localized conflict become a global threat. The events in Mali clearly illustrate how unresolved local grievances can metastasize into global headaches and eventually nightmares, putting civilians at risk and halting development.

Atomization… and the seeds of strife

Geographically isolated from Bamako, the Tuaregs in the north have received little consideration from the government. Part of the Berber ethnic group, the Tuareg population is spread across several countries in North and West Africa. There are an estimated 1.8 to 2.3 million Tuaregs across the region, with the largest concentration living in Mali and Niger.[1] Mali's three northern regions—Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal—contain only 10 percent of the population while accounting for two-thirds of the country's land mass.[2]

Prior to independence, French colonists played into the Tuaregs' notion of separateness through a "divide and rule" strategy. Mali and Niger were among France's least important and least commercially viable colonies, and as a result little investment was made there, especially for long-term projects or growth. At independence in 1960, Mali was one of the poorest countries in Africa.

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The Tuaregs were severely tested by drought and famine in the 1970s and 1980s. Fueling their animosity, the Malian government used the drought to collect international aid which, once collected, was not shared with the Tuareg population; instead it was siphoned off into private pockets in Bamako.[3] The increased pressure on the Tuareg community contributed to a general weakening of the group's hierarchical and traditional life. The droughts caused large numbers of Tuaregs to seek refuge in neighboring countries, "especially Libya, where thousands of them became members of President Muammar al-Qadhafi's Islamic Legion."[4] These refugees would return home in the late 1980s, following Qadhafi's dismantlement of the paramilitary force.

In its takeover, the MNLA was aided by a number of other regional groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), *Ansar Dine*, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). But while these groups supported the MNLA against the government in Bamako, they had their own objectives.

In the past half-century, the Tuaregs have staged several rebellions seeking greater autonomy from the south. A number of factors have contributed to the repeated Tuareg uprisings. Chiefly, political exclusion from decision-making in Bamako and a lack of government interest and investment in the north have been cited as a factor.[5] Additionally, some have cited the region's harsh climate, rugged terrain, and ensuing resource scarcity as underlying issues.[6] Since the early 1990s, a series of peace agreements have been brokered between the Malian government and Tuareg groups. However, many of the concessions made in the agreements went unmet, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence that continues to plague the region.[7]

After the fall of the regime of Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, large numbers of trained and armed Tuareg soldiers, previously in his employ, returned to northern Mali in support of the burgeoning rebellion. It is not clear exactly how many soldiers came, but reports put the number between two and four thousand.[8] In October 2011, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg rebel group, was formed aiming to create an independent state in northern Mali.[9] The term "Azawad" comes from the Berber word "Azawagh," which refers to the river basin extending across northeastern Mali, western Niger, and southern Algeria. Since its inception, the MNLA has been a secular group singularly striving for independence from Bamako.

The Tuareg uprising

From the start, the MNLA was more organized and prepared than previous Tuareg groups. On October 2011, a number of Tuareg leaders and fighters came together at the Zakak base to discuss strategies and goals. Underscoring the meeting was the need for the group to move beyond the divisions and infighting that paralyzed their previous rebellions.[10] At the meeting, a ruling council, military leadership, and other administrative bodies were formed, thus making up the MNLA, with Bilal Ag Cherif chosen as the group's leader. The group has since appeared to strive to represent all of the people who live in the region. The MNLA notes on its website that it comprises a variety of fighters and tribes from across northern Mali's rebel groups of the past, fighters from Libya, members of the Tuareg, Songhai, Peul, and Moor groups, as well as defected soldiers and officers from the Malian army.[11] The MNLA also included a new generation of Tuaregs

with Internet and social media expertise to help the group get its message across.

The MNLA kicked off its rebellion in mid-January 2012, attacking a military base and barracks in Menaka, in the Gao region of Mali.[12] The following day, January 17, the group attacked Aguelhoc and Tessalit in the Kidal region.[13] Fighting continued between government forces and the MNLA across the north in the months that followed in a revolt that seemed more organized and prepared than those of the past.

Then, in March, a coup conducted by Malian army Captain Amadou Sanogo and his Green Berets contributed to a perfect storm of events. Frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of support from their government to fight the renewed Tuareg rebellion, Sanogo and his men deposed democratically-elected President Amadou Toumani Toure. Upon taking power, the Green Berets established the National Council for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE). The group suspended Mali's constitution and dissolved its institutions, promising to restore civilian rule. Within days, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the UN, and much of the international community condemned the coup, and in some cases ceased their operations in Mali. ECOWAS suspended Mali from its membership and imposed sanctions against CNRDRE on March 29.

While Sanogo's coup was successful from a purely operational standpoint, it did not increase the Malian government's support of its troops stationed in the north. In fact, the disintegration of the government weakened an already-trembling army. Taking advantage of the political upheaval in Bamako, the MNLA pressed its advantage. On April 2nd, the MNLA seized major cities in the north including Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu. Days later, the group announced a ceasefire, claiming that they had enough land to form their own state of Azawad.[14] The country was thus effectively split in two, with Bamako in control in the south and the rebels holding the north.

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Flies in the ointment

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Formerly known as the Group Salafiste Pour la Predication et Combat (GSPC), AQIM has its roots in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. In 2004, the group rebranded itself as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, changing its focus from the near enemy (Algeria) to the far enemy (the West, particularly the United States and Israel), and increasingly began to target foreigners in its North African operations. In Mali, the group took advantage of the country's sparsely-populated northern regions where the government's reach is limited. In the Sahara, AQIM is a hybrid: part criminal network, part smuggling outfit and part Islamist insurgency.

AQIM-related *Ansar Dine* (Defenders of the Faith) was formed in October 2011 and expanded its reach and power in northern Mali throughout 2012. It is a product of a schism among the Tuareg leadership, formed as a result of its founder, Iyad Ag Ghaly, being passed over for the post of leader of the MNLA. Ag Ghaly subsequently founded *Ansar Dine* with the aim of creating an Islamic state in northern Mali. As of January

2013, the group was estimated to have around 1,500 fighters.[15]

The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) is a West Africa-based, militant Islamist organization allied with *Ansar Dine* and possessing ties to AQIM.[16] The group's first public statement was on December 12, 2011, when it released a video of three European aid workers it had abducted in Western Algeria on October 23, 2011. Shortly after its inception, MUJWA reportedly made an agreement with both *Ansar Dine* and AQIM to pursue a common goal of spreading their beliefs across the region.[17] The group appears to target West Africa more than its compatriots. It is largely black African Muslim, rather than of Arab descent, and identifies itself as "an alliance between native Arab, Tuareg and Black African tribes and various *muhajirin* ("immigrants," i.e., foreign *jihadists*) from North and West Africa."[18] The group appears to fund itself through kidnapping activities.

The 2012 coup in Bamako and the Tuareg rebellion gave these groups an opening to gain a significant foothold in the Mali's north. As its affiliate groups swept across northern Mali with the MNLA, members of AQIM reportedly accompanied the fighters. In April 2012, there were reports that AQIM fighters Abou Zeid, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and Yahya Abou Al-Hammam were in Timbuktu meeting with *Ansar Dine* leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, who was holding the city at the time with AQIM support.[19]

No room for compromise

The results were not long in coming. On May 26, 2012, the MNLA and *Ansar Dine* agreed to merge to form an Islamist state.[20] In the agreement, the pair outlined their intent to impose a non-rigorous form of *sharia* law in the new state.[21] This harmony did not last long, however; in less than a week, the two groups clashed over the degree to which *sharia* would be enforced.

One month later, Ansar Dine pushed the MNLA out of Timbuktu and Kidal. *Ansar Dine* also helped its ally, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, push the MNLA out of Gao. Shortly thereafter, Ansar Dine announced that it had control of all three cities.

As *Ansar Dine* took control of northern Mali, the group increasingly began to push a radical interpretation of Islam on residents. On July 10, 2012, *Ansar Dine* destroyed two tombs at Timbuktu's ancient Djingareyber mud mosque, a major tourist attraction, angering the city's residents and drawing international condemnation.[22] The Islamist group banned alcohol, smoking, Friday visits to cemeteries, watching soccer, and required women to wear veils in public.[23] It whipped and beat those who did not adhere to its strict interpretation of *sharia* law.[24] The group was also blamed for orchestrating the deadly stoning of a couple it believed had had children out of wedlock, although Ag Ghaly denied the accusation.[25]

Meanwhile, in Gao, MUJWA similarly imposed a draconian interpretation of *sharia* law on Malians. Harsh punishments have proliferated against those believed guilty of an assortment of crimes, real and imagined—whether they be theft or merely media coverage of protests critical of MUJWA. The group has also trained its sights on Malian culture; as of the end of 2012, 16 mausoleums listed as World Heritage Sites had been destroyed.[26]

Nor were these elements alone. As Islamist groups took over northern Mali, numerous reports indicated that foreign fighters were flowing into the region to participate in the new order. The exact numbers of foreign militants in Mali

is hard to determine, but reports have noted the presence of Pakistani *jihadists* in Timbuktu and foreign fighters from Algeria and Western Sahara in Gao.[27] Militants from Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan have also been identified.[28]

But while the Islamists were successful at taking power and physically keeping control of the north, they proved unable to provide residents with basic services and support. The events in the north spurred many northerners to flee the region. Nearly 450,000 have been displaced by the fighting to date. This, in turn, created a human capital vacuum as skilled workers fled the violence. Reports indicate that in cities like Kidal, basic services like water, electricity, and telephone run intermittently, in some places even down to one night a week.[29]

Pushing back

By the fall of 2012, the international community was solidifying its response to the events transpiring in Mali. The increasing presence and power of Islamists raised Mali's position on the international stage. In December 2012, the UN Security Council approved plans for an African-led intervention force. However, the UN resolution noted that before troops could be deployed, Mali must takes steps toward stabilizing its government, continue peace talks and ensure that its military is properly trained and equipped.

The rebels, meanwhile, continued to dig themselves into the north. Islamic fighters reportedly stole millions of dollars' worth of construction equipment from companies that had been working in the region. They dug tunnels, constructed roads and electrical networks, allowing them to traverse the rugged terrain more easily. Locals in the north reported in December that Islamist fighters were modifying vehicles to hold weaponry, fortifying roads, and digging trenches.[30]

Taking the lead in the international response, French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian announced in October that France was planning to launch a military intervention in the coming weeks.[31] As part of their preparations, the European nation was already sending surveillance drones to the area.

Racing to protect themselves, Ansar Dine signed an agreement in December 2012 in Algiers with the MNLA to "reject terrorism and work together towards securing the areas they control."[32] The two groups also condemned the UN's approval of an African-led mission into northern Mali. However, the agreement was short-lived, when *Ansar Dine* suspended the cease-fire in early January claiming that the government was preparing for war. Aggressively, *Ansar Dine* seized control of the strategic town of Konna on January 10, just 435 miles from Bamako along the narrow waist of Mali that separates its north and south.[33] The moves prompted the French to respond with their own forces.

On January 11, the UN Security Council called on member states to assist Mali's defense and security forces.[34] The same day, French Prime Minister François Hollande announced that France had begun deploying troops to Mali to aid its army's efforts against the Islamists using a combination of air and ground strikes.[35] With French support, the Malian army regained control of Konna that same day.

Shortly after the French began their foray into Mali, the country's interim president, Dioncounda Traore, spoke to Malian soldiers, stating firmly, "Mali is at war… because Malian women and men are not inclined to renounce liberty, democracy, their territorial integrity, or the republican and secular form of the country."[36] His statement illustrated the government's aim to regain control of all of Mali. It also highlighted that the conflict was occurring on several levels simultaneously. On one level were

the Islamist groups forcing their ideals and way of life on Malian civilians; on another, groups of Malians were seeking to break away from the nation entirely.

French and Malian troops continued retaking northern cities and towns in the following weeks. Pushing the Islamists from Mali's northern cities did not entirely quell the violence, prompting them instead to begin a guerrilla war. Upon retaking Gao, the French-led forces found themselves conducting counterinsurgency measures, similar to those needed in Afghanistan and Iraq as the Islamists mounted a counter attack in February.

Reacting to the French intervention, *Ansar Dine* stated that the move would have "consequences for French citizens in the Muslim world."[37] In early February, *jihadists* staged suicide bombings and a military offensive in Gao. Prior to the French incursion, *jihadist* groups had enough time to embed themselves in the communities and the wider geography of the region. Following the suicide attacks, French and African forces mounted an extensive operation to clear out Gao, conducting house-to-house searches. There have been subsequent suicide attacks launched by Islamist fighters trying to hang on in the region.

The counterinsurgency in Gao was preceded by the January attack on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria. AQIM offshoot leader Mokhtar Belmoktar and his group conducted the deadly attack. In a video, Belmoktar claimed that the attack was conducted to punish the West for its intervention in Mali.[38] Belmokhtar had previously been active in northern Mali.

In the following months, French and African forces continued mop-up operations uncovering the depth and breadth of *jihadist* activities and capabilities. In March, French forces seized a large arms cache in northern Mali including heavy weapons, suicide belts and equipment to manufacture improvised explosive devices. One search uncovered a bomb-making factory that the Islamists had abandoned.

Furthering the idea that the Islamists were not wanted in northern communities, reports indicate that residents of Gao have provided information and assistance to French and Malian troops on the *jihadists* and their weapons caches.[39] Pushed out of power by both *Ansar Dine* and MUJWA, the MNLA cooperated with the French, even though they are still battling the Malian government. Regional analysts have noted that northern Malians did not want to live in an Islamic state.[40]

In mid-March, France announced that it would be putting forth a resolution at the UN for a peacekeeping force to be deployed to Mali to replace French and African soldiers. The announcement came as France indicated that it would begin withdrawing its troops in April.

As the French and Malian forces pushed both Tuareg rebels and the Islamists, the MNLA began to splinter. Influential Tuareg tribal chief Intalla Ag Attaher withdrew his support for the MNLA in May 2013, leaving the organization to lead the High Council of Azawad.[41] The new organization was launched to negotiate peace with the government in Bamako, in contrast with the MNLA, which was still demanding independence.

As the MNLA splintered, the work and care its leaders had taken to coalesce before beginning the insurgency fell by the wayside. By working with the Islamists, it had undercut its legitimacy among the population. However, it is worth noting that the MNLA cooperated with French forces to drive away Islamist forces.[42]

As French forces, with the assistance of Malian forces, retook cities and villages across the north, plans began to form for Mali's next steps. The international community began calling for dem-

ocratic elections to replace Mali's interim government that had been formed after the coup. The United Nations Security Council reiterated the call for democratic elections in Resolution 2085, which came out in December 2012. Within days of the coup, several states and organizations halted aid to Mali. Much of that aid could only be restored after an elected government was in place.

At the end of June, the UN Security Council agreed that the African-led support mission in Mali would be folded into a UN peacekeeping force. MINUSMA, the UN force, was stood up on July 1st with the aim of supporting the implementation of the peace agreement and securing elections.

A rocky road to stability

Beyond physically ridding the region of Islamist fighters, Mali needed a legitimate government. Even in the best circumstances, orchestrating an election in an underdeveloped country with poor infrastructure is a feat. Throw in the thousands of refugees, groups of violent Islamist fighters, and a localized rebellion, pushing forward with elections could have presented Mali with a greater liability.

About two weeks ahead of the July elections, campaigning began. The contest pitted 28 candidates representing varying groups from across Mali. Given the divisions, it was expected that scheduled runoff elections would take place. Among the candidates were several seasoned Malian politicians.

Held on July 28 and August 11, the first and second rounds of Mali's presidential elections went smoothly and received a surprisingly high voter participation rate. Former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, known as IBK, won the presidency after his rival Soumaila Cissé conceded the election on August 13th. Running under the banner "for the honor of Mali," IBK played to Malian voters who were humiliated by the need to invite France to keep their country in one piece.[43]

Yet elections are just one hurdle toward long-term stability. The Malian government will only survive and prosper if it can come to a pragmatic solution to its ongoing issues with its Tuareg population and exercise continued vigilance against violent Islamists.

Challenges abound. The MNLA has splintered as the group fell into an old and familiar pattern of internal infighting in the aftermath of the Islamist takeover. The MNLA may have doomed itself by trying to work with *Ansar Dine* and MUJWA to fight the government in Bamako, thereby losing credibility in the eyes of many Malians. With a new government in Bamako, the group's perceived ties with the Islamists may hinder it and its cause at the negotiating table. However, the cyclical nature of the violence in the north may yet work in the MNLA's favor.

Pursuant to earlier negotiations, once in office IBK and his administration have 60 days to engage in talks with the Tuaregs. While the government can take advantage of the perception that the MNLA's actions paved the way for the Islamist takeover, it is not the wisest course of action for the long term. The Malian government and the Tuaregs need to come to a real and pragmatic solution. There need to be measurable steps that both sides can take to build confidence in each other and increase the odds that peace will break out for the long term.

In addition to building a country that is more inclusive to Tuaregs and protected from violent Islamists, there needs to be greater economic and social development in the north. Without positive change and growth, it is likely that another Tuareg rebellion will occur. And next time, the Islamists will likely be more prepared.

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