

Northern Mali Conflict - Cycles of Rebellion

The crisis in Mali which started with the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, in the northern part of the country, still haunts the society and presents a serious destabilization factor for the entire Sahel region. The Mali crisis has been fueled by many different elements including: historical, demographic, political, social-economic and even climatic. Although there has been a significant international effort to resolve the crisis, the French military operation "Serval" did that to some extent, the core problems of the Malian society largely remain intact.

Mali is considered to be one of the poorest societies in the world, where 50% of its population is living below the international poverty line of 1.25 dollars per day. The Malian society is also very diverse: 50% of the population is Mande, 17% Peul or Fulani, 12% Voltaic, 10% Tuareg, 6% Songhai and 5% is usually classified as "other". Most of the country's population inhabits the southern part of the country while the larger northern part is scarcely populated.¹ One of the main reasons behind this sharp division of human settlements in Mali is the overall geography. The southern part is much richer with resources and has a much friendlier climate, while the northern part not only lacks in resources it's mostly covered with desert and harsh terrain. Throughout the history various nomadic tribes had roamed the northern part of Mali, including the Tuaregs.

One of the primary causes which led to the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, and later to the crisis, is the historical fissure between the southern richer part and the northern poorer part of the country. This economic contrast in Mali was present in colonial times, post-colonial times and sadly even today the situation is almost unchanged.

In the period from 1960 till 2012 there were four Tuareg rebellions in Mali. Three years after gaining its independence there was a first rebellion, signifying the political struggle of northern tribes and overall political instability in the country. Public discontent remains present still. Severe droughts in the seventies and in the eighties pushed some parts of the nation to seek refuge in Niger, and some even went to Libya (from the "Libyan exodus" a specific military unit will be formed later in that country). Peace agreements, economic reforms and various social and disarmament programs usually ended in failure, and were often accused of marginalizing the northern parts of the country thus deepening the social fissure in Mali. These social fissures were also present during the colonial times. The French preferred the southerners and usually offered them better positions in administration, education, military and other spheres of public life while neglecting the northern tribes. This later led to further disagreements between the northern and the southern part of Mali which were cleverly used by the French to easily govern the whole

¹A. Thurston, A. Lebovich, *A Handbook on Mali's 2012-2013*, Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) September 2013, p. 6-9 (<http://buffett.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/ISITA-13-001-Thurston-Lebovich.pdf>)

country - *Divide et imperia*. Sadly these historic tensions remained even after the colonial times and have often played an important part in the rebellion cycles.²

The economic dimension has also played a big role in the overall destabilization of the northern Mali and pushed its population towards rebellion. This region is lacking in some natural resources such as gold and cotton which are exploited in the southern part of Mali. Therefore the Tuareg and Arab population in the north have turned to agriculture and cattle herding. On top of not being lucrative, farming has another difficult aspect and that is the climate. Severe droughts and harsh terrain make things worse for the north Mali and this also made room for organized crime, illicit trafficking and smuggling. As the economic situation deteriorated various groups including GSPC, AQIM and MUJAO started exploiting the terrain and the vast border with Algeria. Difficult terrain was favoring these groups in smuggling light arms, trafficking drugs and creating vast criminal networks. Among other problems the unemployment among younger generations is high (and more than 50% of northern Mali population is classified as young) as well as general discontent with the government.³ Despite all these problems the government in Bamako remains idle, furthermore on couple of occasions the government sidelined certain projects which were researching the possibilities of oil and gas drilling in northern Mali. Endemic corruption that occurs in many African governments, including Mali's government, often leads to above mentioned outcomes such are underdeveloped regions and discontent among citizens.

Although historical, social and economic issues have their impact in the perpetual cycles of rebellion in Mali, there are also other (more important) factors which caused the 2012 crisis in the country. One of these factors is the collapse of the Libyan state and the fall of Gaddafi's regime. The Western powers were very persistent with their Libyan agenda. With their customary narrative of promoting democracy and removing dictators while bombing a country, France along with its allies succeeded in removing the authoritarian regime of Muammar Gaddafi. However, the regime-change wasn't successful. The Libyan state now presents a threat to the region and is a breeding ground for terrorist, criminal and various other armed groups. The Tuareg exiles integrated in the Libyan military were facing various difficulties after the collapse of the state. Many of them sought shelter in Niger while others returned to their ancestral grounds in northern Mali. Whereas the government in Niamey managed to successfully integrate the Tuaregs into the Nigerian society, the Malian government was pushing them aside and treating them as second-class citizens. We should keep in mind that the Tuaregs were part of the Libyan armed forces, well trained with a sophisticated military arsenal at their disposal. In 2011 various Tuareg tribes united and formed National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad or MNLA, and in March 2012 the MNLA fighters declared the independent state of Azawad. Of

² G. Chauzal, Thibault van Damme, *The roots of Mali's conflict Moving beyond the 2012 crisis*, CRU Report March 2015, p. 30-32 (https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/The_roots_of_Malis_conflict.pdf)

³ S. Straus, *Mali and its Sahelian Neighbors*, World Development Report 2011 July 2011 p. 3-8 (http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01306/web/pdf/wdr_2011_case_study_mali.pdf)

course they were not alone in their battle for independence. Many Jihadist, criminal and terrorist groups saw their interests in supporting the MNLA as it further destabilized the country and the region.⁴

Presence of radical groups in Sahel is a decade long issue for all regional governments. With the collapse of the Libyan state during the Arab Spring the Jihadists gained momentum in the region. The threat of radical Islamism was evident in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and of course Mali. In Mali most of these armed groups were stationed in the northern part of the country, and there are a couple of reasons behind this. As I mentioned earlier the harsh terrain of northern Mali limits the region's accessibility which allows these groups to settle and establish camps and networks. Large and porous border with Algeria makes it easy to smuggle weapons, drugs or other illicit goods. Wide discontent among citizens in northern Mali is often used by these organizations to recruit new members or spread their influence. Finally, perpetual rebellions in this part of the country make it difficult to distinguish rebellion groups from other criminal or terrorist organizations, hence the security forces trying to engage them usually end up in some sort of a quagmire.

There are four main terrorist groups in Mali which have been active during the latest conflict in 2012:⁵

- **Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)** is mostly made out of foreign fighters with a goal to spread Islamic Law and liberate Mali from the French colonial legacy. Thanks to the low standard of living and high unemployment, especially among younger generations, the group manages to recruit members from Niger, Mali, Senegal and other countries in the region. The group was active in northern Mali also in Algeria and some North African countries during the Arab Spring.
- **Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)** also operates in North Africa and Sahel region. The organization represents a splinter group of AQIM with similar goals of spreading the Islamic law across West Africa. Unlike other groups MUJAO was very active in battling the Tuareg separatists. The group is composed of domestic as well as foreign fighters.
- **Ansar al-Dine (AAD)** is a domestic Malian Islamist group composed out of Ifoghas, Tuaregs and Barabiche Arabs with the goal of spreading Sharia Law in northern Mali. The founder of the group is Iyad Ag Ghali a former leader of the Tuaregs in the nineties. The expansion of the group happened in 2011/2012 when the Tuareg exiles came back from Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi's regime.
- **Al-Murabitoon** has been formed out of MUJAO and al-Mulathamun with the same goal of spreading the Sharia Law, similar to other groups. The group implements regular

⁴ David J. Francis, *The regional impact of the armed conflict and French intervention in Mali*, NOREF April 2013, p. 4 (http://noref.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/f18726c3338e39049bd4d554d4a22c36.pdf)

⁵ N. Ray, *The Rise of Islamic Terrorism in Mali*, Indian Council for World Affairs January 2016, p. 5-7 (<http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/IB/2014/RiseofIslamicTerrorisminMaliIB06012015.pdf>)

terrorist or guerilla tactics while also being affiliated with the Al Qaeda. The group was active in Niger and Algeria while operating in northern Mali.

- **Signed in Blood Battalion** an Islamic group committed to the global Jihad. The group has strong ties to MUJAO and Ansar al-Dine.

Proliferation of extremist groups comes naturally when a country faces security threats and overall political instability. Mali's military was unprepared for the insurgency in the north. After facing several defeats they were forced to withdraw to the southern part of the country. Surprisingly enough, soldiers carried out a military coup against the President Toure in March 2012 and suspended the constitutional rule. Though Toure's government was often accused of incompetence to deal with the rebels, terrorists and criminals in the country the coup only made matters worse. The junta was unable to stabilize the political situation and the rebels along with other Islamist groups in the north had declared an Islamic State of Azawad. African Union as a regional organization was unable to control the situation, their efforts to stop the insurgency also ended in failure. Tuaregs along with Jihadists have captured a couple of strategic cities and were advancing on Bamako. This became a serious threat, not only for Mali and the neighboring countries but for the French national interests in the region as well.⁶

The counterproductive coup in Bamako which was aimed at restoring the Malian state paradoxically led the country to a deeper crisis. The French government decided to intervene conducting the operation Serval. This military operation was primarily aimed at:⁷

- Stopping the terrorist advance.
- Securing the country and many French residents in Mali.
- Recovering integrity to the Malian state.

Although these were the main military objectives of the mission Serval, there is also a political and economic background to why the French actually intervened in Mali. From a legal perspective, the French based justification of their mission on the UN resolution, although the resolution allowed deployment of only African led forces in Mali. The French were trying to avoid being accused of neo-colonialism by implementing certain measures and cooperating with the African Union and some other countries in the region. Still, the mission was carried out with the combination of aerial bombing and deployment of French ground troops.⁸ In the northern parts of Mali the rebels weren't eager to engage the French troops directly, so most of them retreated to the mountainous terrain. The mission was conducted quickly and successfully completing most of the military objectives. Though the military aspect of the mission was successful and security situation has been restored to some extent, the economic and political interests were the primary initiators of the French intervention in Mali.

⁶ David J. Francis *op.cit*, p2-3

⁷ M. Shurkin, *France's War in Mali*, RAND 2014, p. 24

⁸ I. Bergamaschi, *French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual yet Insufficient*, Stability: International Journal of Security & Development 2013, p. 7

The operation Serval can be seen as a pre-emptive strike in order to stop the conflict spill-over to the neighboring Niger where the potential implosion would devastate French economic interests. Niger has vast mines of uranium and many of them are operated by French companies, mainly Areva. Destabilization of this country would jeopardize uranium imports and potentially threaten France's energy sector. Almost 80% of France electricity comes from nuclear energy. France is also a huge exporter of this commodity (more than 3 billion dollars annually in electricity sales). French nuclear sector heavily depends on uranium mines in Niger, therefore any destabilization of that country can be seen as an imminent threat to the French economic as well as energy interests. So, it is logical to conclude that the French government decided on the pre-emptive military strike in northern Mali in order to secure its foreign economic and energy interests.⁹

There is also another dimension to the French intervention in Mali. As a socialist, President Hollande was often seen as soft and indecisive figure unlike his predecessor Sarkozy who pushed for the regime change in Libya. A decision to decisively intervene in Mali had a very positive impact on Hollande's political image in France. Of course the military intervention had also echoed in the international sphere. The French were presenting themselves as a responsible power which looks after its former colonies. Surprisingly enough Paris has managed to dodge any accusation of neocolonialism despite its obvious intentions to maintain a strong presence in Sahel and preserve its economic interest in the region.

More than four years have passed since the rebellion broke out in Mali. However, today the country is still stricken with poverty, crime and growing terrorism, especially in the northern parts. Various terrorist groups, including ISIS and Boko Haram, are positioning themselves in Mali since it is considered a suitable ground for establishing such groups or networks. Lack of security and constant civil unrests are the main factors encouraging this trend. The Malian state is weak and still divided between the north and the south. And the problems that had caused the northern tribes to rise up and start the insurgency in 2012 are still there.

The operation Serval which was aimed at quelling the rebellion and eradicating the growing Salafist problem in northern Mali has been to a large extent unsuccessful, although Paris has portrayed Serval as "mission accomplished". The present problems which Mali is facing are a testament of this failed intervention. The French approach in Mali is somewhat similar to the US approach in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both the US and the French were facing potential security threats from these countries, regional economic interests were threatened or at stake and both powers used their military interventions to gain political momentum at home. Furthermore, both players didn't engage in any serious state building process, which is essential in order to overcome the crisis and stabilize the country. Iraq, Afghanistan and Mali are in worse or same condition as before the military interventions. By focusing only on democratic elections in these countries and neglecting economic, political and historical issues, the US or France are actually

⁹ David J. Francis *op.cit*, p. 6

unable or unwilling to commit themselves and truly stabilize these states. Following this analogy we can expect a similar future in Mali: deteriorating society and unstable government providing a breeding ground for radical and terrorist organizations. Foreign terrorist groups are already gaining ground and establishing networks in the northern parts of the country. As the situation in the Middle East evolves certain radical elements will seek a new haven. Traditionally, Sahel has attracted many different characters, groups or organizations which function in the sphere of organized crime or terrorism and Mali can potentially become anew hotspot for these illegal entities.

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