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Northern Mali: A long and complicated conflict



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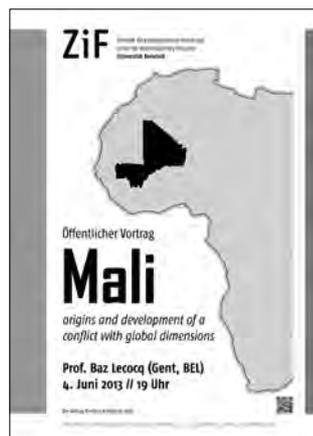
In January 2012, Tuareg separatists launched attacks on Malian Army garrisons in the Sahara. Mali had experienced such rebellions before. What nobody foresaw was that this renewed conflict would lead to a *coup d'état* by junior officers, the near total collapse of the army, the seizure of the north of the country by Tuareg rebels and the effective occupation of the north of the country by an alliance of Jihadi-Salafi movements who imposed their form of shari'a law. The offensive the MNLA launched against Malian Army Garrisons in Northern Mali was made in a vague alliance with a number of movements who were fighting a local version of the global Jihad. This doubtful coalition complicated a local conflict with long historical roots between Tuareg nationalist separatist fighters and the Malian government. The presence of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Mali and in neighbouring countries, as well as the increasing trans-Saharan smuggle of various drugs and the transport of prospective migrants on their way to Europe, finally led to international intervention in the country in January this year. Below I will give a short historical outline of the conflict and some tentative analysis of the current situation and its possible outcome, which, I am afraid, is uncertain and unlikely to be positive in the immediate future.

Historically, the Tuareg inhabit the Central Saharan mountain ranges—the Ajjer, Hoggar, Air and Adagh n Ifoghas, the adjacent Sahel-Saharan plains on the southern edge of the desert, and the interior bend of the Niger River. They are Muslims without exception, but Islam is not central to the identity of all. Prior to the second half of the 20th century, many lived a pastoral nomadic existence, engaging in animal husbandry and caravan trade. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s led to a change in Tuareg economy and lifestyle, away from pastoralism to agriculture or to an urban wage earning existence in adjacent countries. There are three particularities to the Tuareg desire for an independent state. The first is that their homeland has been carved up between five different postcolonial states. Secondly, while secessionism is strong enough among the Tuareg of Mali and Niger to have

The text is partly based on two articles by the author:

BAZ LECOCQ et al. (2013): One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali, *Review of African Political Economy*, (DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2013.799063)

BAZ LECOCQ and GEORG KLUTE (Forthcoming): Tuareg Separatism in Mali and Niger, in: WOLFGANG ZELLER and JORDI THOMAS (eds.), *Secessionism in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan



resulted in armed rebellions in these countries, irredentist claims to unite all Tuareg into one territorial state have never been formally made, let alone been supported. Thirdly, the ideal of national independence has never been raised in official negotiations with the states the Tuareg fought to gain independence from, until the most recent creation of the MNLA independence movement in Mali. Colonial conquest and later the establishment of the colonies left the Tuareg divided between the postcolonial states of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The borders between and within these countries were gradually enforced by the states. Borders presented both opportunities, for example for tax evasion and smuggling, and obstacles to mobility. Eventually, the Tuareg internalised the borders as the prevailing logic of political and administrative organization or a framework of collective identity. The logic of territorial demarcation and political freedom or subjection played an important role in the shaping of Tuareg ideas on national independence. Tuareg political leaders first expressed these ideas in debates surrounding the decolonisation of French West-Africa in the 1950s. As mineral wealth, most importantly oil, was discovered in the hitherto worthless Sahara in this period, conflicts broke out over attempts to redraw the Saharan borders. In 1957, the French Assembly voted for the creation of the *Organisation Commune des Régions Sahariennes* (OCRS). This was a barely concealed French attempt to restructure the colonial territories in such a way that Saharan resources would remain under French control after the immanent independence of the West-African States. After independence government–Tuareg relations in Mali quickly deteriorated after an already bad start. The Malian government took a socialist course and set out on an active policy to modernize society by undoing parts of the colonial heritage. The regime’s lack of understanding of local work ethics, gender relations, social dynamics, and power structures led to a wavering modernization policy that sought to ‘civilize’ the Tuareg through sedentarisation projects. These policies were much resented among a population seeing itself as superior to the new Malian rulers, and which had previously already sought national independence outside Mali. The tensions between the regime and the Tuareg came to a head in May 1963, when a group of Tuareg started a revolt against the state. The Tuareg fighters were small in number, two hundred at maximum, and ill prepared. Nevertheless the army remained unable to suppress the rebellion and therefore resorted to brutal reprisal tactics against the civilian population. In August 1964, the rebellion was over. Although the rebellion was ill prepared and ill-conceived it expressed Tuareg nationalist aspirations. The rebellion would have a lasting and crucial legacy in Tuareg history and their vision on the state and independence. Narratives of the bloody repression of the 1963 rebellion would become a central part of Tuareg nationalist discourse from the 1970s onwards, which gave birth the second rebellion.

Those Tuareg who had fled from repression in Mali during the first rebellion, especially the leaders of that rebellion, formed the nucleus of a new informal nationalist organisation in exile in Algeria and Libya, where many Tuareg went to work as migrant labourers after the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s had destroyed their traditional pastoral economy. In the second half of the 1970s, this loose network transformed into a structured organisation with the aim to struggle for the erection of a Tuareg state. In 1979 the Libyan regime offered support to the Tuareg organisation. The background for Libya’s engagement was GADDAFI’s policy to extend Libyan influence southwards into sub-Saharan Africa. Libyan support led to the foundation of a formal resistance organisation, the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arab Central Sahara (FPLACS). In December 1980, about one thousand Tuareg members of the new movement entered Libyan military training camps, some in order to prepare a new upheaval back home, most, however, because this was a good job opportunity. Largely due to his support for the Tuareg movement, Algeria and Niger broke all relations with GADDAFI’s regime in 1981. Thus, in late 1981 the training camps were closed and the FPLACS was dissolved. Those FPLACS members who had received training were invited to join the regular Libyan army, or a volunteer force in support of the Palestinians in Lebanon, which about

200 fighters did. These men gained fighting experience in the Bekaa valley until Israel ousted the PLO from Lebanon in 1982, after which they returned to the Sahara. From 1986 onwards, GADDAFI also deployed Tuareg soldiers, trained in newly opened training camps, in his conflict with Chad. The campaigns in Lebanon and Chad had reinforced and deepened Tuareg political solidarity and understanding. Their experiences with the Palestinians in particular served as example for their own political project. In 1987, a group of Malian Tuareg veterans from the Lebanon and Chad campaigns living in Libya founded a new clandestine organisation which set as its task to prepare the armed fight for secession from Mali and the erection of a new state Azawad. This is a topographical name for the region north of Timbuktu, now to be adopted as the designation of the projected State. This organisation had no formal Libyan support. Tuareg veterans of Libyan campaigns from Niger looked reluctantly upon their Malian colleague's project. Instead they aimed at using non-violent political means to improve integration of the Tuareg into Nigerian society.

Tuareg in Northern Mali rose again against the Malian state in 1990. This second Tuareg rebellion was a low intensity conflict. Logistical preparations for this uprising had started in the late 1980s with the organisation of arms depots. At the end of June 1990 a group of barely armed rebels attacked the town of Menaka in Northern Mali, freed the arrested, captured weaponry from the Malian Armed Forces, and confiscated some four wheel drive vehicles. The rebels organised themselves as the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA), the ancestor movement to the current MNLA. About two hundred experienced guerrillas deployed high speed motorised guerrilla tactics, based on so-called technicals (open four wheel drive vehicles, mounted with heavy machine guns and a combat group of about a dozen men), fully adapted to desert warfare. The Malian Armed Forces were forced to deploy two thirds of their total strength in defence: around four thousand men. Civilians were the main victims of army retaliation, which led civilians to take the rebels' side with many young men joining the MPLA. The rebellion speeded the fall of the then reigning dictator MOUSSA TRAORÉ, who had been in place since 1968. The military pressure of the rebels combined with demands for democracy in the Malian capital Bamako ultimately led to his demise. In April 1992, the new democratic government of Mali signed a peace wit the MPLA rebels called 'The National Pact'. It stipulated the integration of former rebels in the Malian Armed Forces, and special economic programmes for the North. The latter never took place, while the integration of former rebels in the Malian Armed Forces proved problematic. Subsequently, many former rebels 'deserted', joined existing movements refractory to the National Pact or created new movements with ill-defined goals. Thus, although the National Pact formally ended the rebellion, fighting was not over. In 1993 and 1994, Tuareg rebel movements kept fighting, but especially among themselves in ever more splintered movements based on Tuareg tribal alliances. In reaction to the uncontrolled raids of Tuareg against settlements along the Niger River, merchants and military of the Songhay population mobilized a militia in 1994 called Ganda Koy, which means Masters of the Land in the Songhay language. Ganda Koy carried out pogroms against Tuareg and Arab inhabitants of the major cities in northern Mali. These pogroms resulted in the mass flight of around one hundred thousand Tuareg and Arabs to the neighbouring countries. By this time the civilian population of Northern Mali had become so war weary that traditional leaders initiated reconciliatory meetings between all ethnic groups of North Mali, finally leading to a final peace in 1996.

While Tuareg nationalism has been a force in Saharan politics for decades, the rise of political Islam with a Salafist orientation is much more recent. The acceptance of Islamist tenets by a minority within the larger Tuareg political landscape must be understood in the context of the broader 'globalization' of Tuareg society over the last two decades or more. Major factors of political-religious transformation include the arrival in the late 1990s of the South Asian Islamist movement Tablighi Jama'at—which strongly condemns recourse to jihad in a Muslim society in the absence of certain



Impression of Timbuktou (February 2010)



A group of young Tuareg soldiers of the Malian army and their friends (Anderamboukane, February 2010)

necessary legal conditions—the emergence of AQMI’s ancestor, the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in 2003, and the launching of the US Pan-Sahel Initiative, a counter-terrorism program focused on military training in the wider region. Over the last decade or more, long-standing practices of international smuggling and migration have become more intense, complex, and profitable, while the technological infrastructure has been transformed. The subsequent socio-political changes have reshaped the Tuareg perception of their political situation according to the new global position of their homeland. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) was created in 2009 out of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. In December 2011, a new Salafi Jihadi organization was created out of AQMI: the Movement for Divine Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Another even more locally rooted Jihadi-Salafi movement, Ansar Dine, had developed under the leadership of IYAD AG AGHALI, a key figure in the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s. The Tuareg organised in Ansar Dine were of the conviction that only their Salafi ideology can unify the various Tuareg clans, the different ethnic groups in the region, and even the whole of Mali. These political convictions propose an alternative to both the Malian nation-state, riddled with corruption and nepotism, and the political ideal of Tuareg independence, which so far has been unable to overcome the divisive clan structures within Tuareg society. Nevertheless, many Ansar Dine members fought not so much for shari’a but due to their personal or tribal loyalty. Rather than remaining one coherent, visible, and operative fighting unit controlling a particular zone, AQMI cooperated with Ansar Dine and MUJAO, leaving these organisations to be the public flag bearers of Jihad.

After the fall of GADDAFI in summer 2011, an estimated three thousand Tuareg of Malian origins left Libya for Mali. Some had made careers in the Libyan army, others had fought either for GADDAFI as mercenaries or for the Revolutionary Transitional Council. Former Libyan soldiers merged with the former fighters of previous Tuareg rebellions in Mali and with a group of young Tuareg who had founded a new political movement in October 2010, the National Movement of Azawad, as well as with a number of experienced Tuareg politicians. Thus the MNLA National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad was born in October 2011. In the first months of 2012, divisions between the MNLA and the jihadist coalition of Ansar Dine and its allies had been temporarily subordinated to their shared desire to push the Malian army out of the North. Once that task was accomplished, rebels and *mujahideen* quickly fell to fighting one another. Within a few short months after the collapse of the Malian Armed Forces in April, the MNLA lost control of virtually the entire territory of Mali’s three northern regions to a militarily superior alliance of Ansar Dine, AQMI, and MUJAO. Ansar Dine’s military victories led to the defection of a core of experienced MNLA fighters from the Kidal Region to Ansar Dine. MUJAO fighters chased the MNLA from its strongholds at the edge of the city of Gao in June 2012. The MNLA and the *mujahideen* systematically dismantled the state bureaucracy and destroyed the archives of the civil administration in what seems to have been a premeditated *tabula rasa*. *Mujahideen* particularly targeted symbols of secular francophone administration. It was reported that criminals who had escaped the prisons in northern cities took advantage of the absence of security forces by engaging in looting. Songhay inhabitants of Timbuktu blamed both the MNLA and local Tuareg who lived on the outskirts of town for much of the looting in the immediate wake of the conquest of the north. Similar dynamics have been reported for other northern towns. The *mujahideen* replaced the already fragile economy of the north, and what little prospect of salaried employment existed, with a war economy. The situation of women in the north was particularly dramatic. Many were forced into seclusion or exile, having had to abandon their economic, political and other activities. In those zones under the direct control of Ansar Dine and its ally AQMI (Timbuktu and Kidal) men and women alike were flogged for violating the *mujahideen*’s rules on socializing, smoking, or listening to music. Women in particular

were subject to strict rules of modesty and veiling. In the most drastic of a series of *huddud* punishments, a couple of pastoralist parents who were not legally married were stoned to death for adultery. In many cities women, sometimes joined by young men, protested against the rules of the *mujahideen*, who repressed these demonstrations with beatings, whippings or by firing in the air.

Throughout 2012, the political conjuncture in Bamako, as well as complex regional relations, stymied an intervention that might otherwise have appeared inevitable. West African regional relations also complicated efforts to address the current conflict in northern Mali. Immediately after the March coup, ECOWAS and the Burkinabe President BLAISE COMPAORÉ took the lead on regional attempts at mediation and plans for intervention in the conflict. However, Algeria and Mauritania opposed ECOWAS plans for military intervention and disapproved COMPAORÉ's mediation efforts in the conflict. The absence of effective military and security cooperation among the states of the region was one of the major factors that allowed the situation in northern Mali to deteriorate in 2010 and 2011. The most significant obstacle, however, was the inaction of the Malian leadership vis-à-vis AQMI and criminal networks. European governments, too, contributed further to regional tensions by not only paying millions of Euros in ransom money, but also pressuring the Malian and Mauritanian governments into releasing convicted AQMI members in exchange for the liberation of hostages. In sum, despite cries of alarm from Malians themselves, as well as from their neighbours with the most at stake, foreign powers left the Malian crisis to stagnate for over nine months until it became well and truly an international emergency. This must be recognized for what it is: a failure of diplomacy for which many international actors bear responsibility, including notably ECOWAS, the AU, the EU, and the UN.

Beginning October, the UN Security Council approved a resolution—proposed by the French government—to support an ECOWAS-force of 3,300 men to help the Malian army in the re-conquest. The resolution, however, asked for a detailed, plausible and financially feasible plan within 45 days after approval of the resolution. Only few days before the 45 days period expired, UN Sahel envoy ROMANO PRODI said that the UN considered a military intervention but “a last resort”, and that it would not take place before September 2013. However, following a surprise attack led by Ansar Dine against positions of the Malian army in central Mali mid-January 2013 and the prompt reaction of the French armed forces, the conflict in Northern Mali has become international. In January 2013, the French Army, with the support of the Chadian Army and a number of armies from ECOWAS countries, intervened militarily on the explicit request of Malian Interim President TRAORÉ, but wholly outside the UN Mandate. Operation Serval managed to end the occupation of Northern Mali by the Salafi Jihadi forces of Ansar Dine, AQMI, and MUJAO within a few weeks, with operations to clear the last remnants of resistance in the following months. However, the French-led coalition did not fight against the Tuareg nationalists of the MNLA. To the contrary, under French and Chadian wings, the MNLA managed to make a political and military come back. Essentially: the primary interest of the International Coalition was to end the threat of the spread of Jihad in the region, but they had little interest in the ‘internal’ political struggles of Malian society. Furthermore, the French needed local allies who could operate as providers of intelligence and as scouts in a region none of the international combatants knew. The Malian Army was still in total disarray at the moment of French intervention. Despite careful messages to the international press and the international organisations that the French-led coalition fought ‘together’ with the Malian Army, nobody believed that the Malian Army could contribute very much, including the Malian Army itself. Thus, the MNLA provided excellent allies to fight the *mujahideen*, in exchange for their renewed hold of power in the MNLA's main stronghold, the region of Kidal.

The French preference for the MNLA over Malian Army even led to an informal French interdiction to the Malian Army to enter the Kidal region, which caused much political and diplomatic



A Tuareg couple dressed in traditional festive garments, ready for the Tamadasht Festival in Anderamboukane (February 2010)

tension between the countries despite the relief among Malians that France had come to their aid. As the current Malian government is still a result of the *coup d'état* of March last year, and holds hardly any legitimacy, the international community quickly pressed for elections in Mali, leading to the installation of a legitimate government, which can then start formal negotiations with Tuareg rebels on peace, and with the international donor community on the organisation of the reconstruction of Mali's infrastructure, administrative institutions and defence against the international smugglers and *mujahideen*, who form the major concern of the International Community. However, the Malian government protested that elections could only be held in a united Mali, under full government control, including the MNLA occupied Kidal Region. Finally, in late May this year, France 'allowed' Malian troops of Tuareg origins to enter the Kidal Region, where they engaged the MNLA and a number of well known smuggler organisations. In the ensuing negotiations in June this year, the MNLA finally formally agreed not to block elections in Kidal, but the movement remains under arms until after the elections, when formal peace negotiations with the new government can be organised. These elections have been scheduled for 28 July, which is not the best moment when it comes to expected voter turnout as July is in the middle of the rainy season, when the largely rural population is working their fields, and when roads turn into rivers of mud, impeding the elections organisations. This in turn undermines the democratic legitimacy of the new government and the peace deal it might be able to conclude with the MNLA rebels. Still the question needs to be answered whether this will put an end of any secessionist project of Malian Tuareg in the foreseeable future.

Der aktuelle Konflikt in Mali und der westlichen Sahara, der 2012 die internationalen Medien erreichte, beruht auf politischen und sozio-ökonomischen Problemen, die aus der französischen Kolonialzeit stammen und weder während der Unabhängigkeitsphase noch in den darauffolgenden, wechselnden Regimen in Bamako gelöst wurde. Der Artikel zeichnet die politischen und ethnischen Konfliktlinien, die Mali quasi teilten, seit den 1950er Jahren nach und verbindet die Unabhängigkeitsbewegungen der Tuareg in den 60er, 70er und 90er Jahren mit den regionalen Entwicklungen.

Die Unabhängigkeitskriege in Chad und Libanon wurden nicht nur durch Libyen gesponsert, sondern auch von Tuareg-Kämpfern mitgekämpft. Mit dieser Erfahrung, aber auch den Kontakten und Waffen, konnten unterschiedliche Tuareg-Gruppen nach dem Zerfall des Gaddafi-Regimes 2011 in den Norden Malis zurückkehren und schnell viel Land erobern. Unter sie mischten sich auch Salafi-Jihadi-Gruppen unterschiedlicher Ausrichtung, die zum Teil nationale, zum Teil religiöse Ziele verfolgten. Die Armee, von internen Machtkämpfen geplagt, zog sich hilflos zurück. Der Angriff auf den Norden des Landes destabilisierte die malische Regierung, ein Coup d'État folgte, und nur unter regionalem Druck wurde eine zivile Übergangsregierung eingesetzt, die Neuwahlen vorbereiten soll.

Die Operation Serval brachte 2012 französische Truppen ins Land, die in Kollaboration mit anderen internationalen Truppen die Städte im Norden Malis besetzten und die Mujaheddin in die Wüste zurückdrängten. Dabei kollaborierte gerade die französische Armee mit der nationalen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung der Tuareg.

Eine regionale Friedenstruppe mit UN-Sanktion soll Mali weiter stabilisieren und vor einer Eroberung durch Al Qaida oder andere islamistische Gruppen schützen. Jedoch zeigt gerade die neueste Episode des Unabhängigkeitskampfes in Mali, dass die Konflikte in dieser Region auch durch den Einzug des ›Krieg gegen den Terror‹ nicht eindimensionaler werden.
