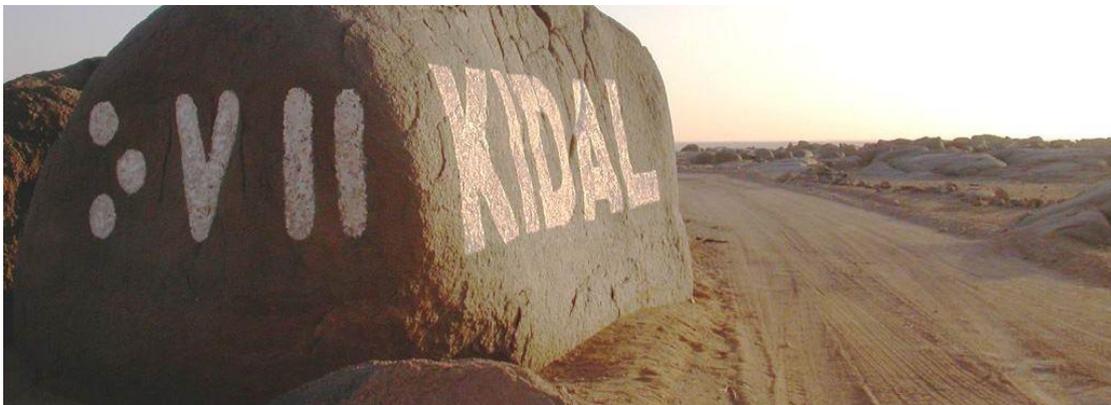


MALI | THE DANGER OF STAGNATION



More than two years after the launch of the Serval operation, the situation remains very fragile in Mali. While the negotiations in Algiers between the Malian authorities and northern armed groups have so far been unsuccessful, the appointment of Modibo Keita as prime minister in early January 2015, replacing Moussa Mara, has been hailed by the French and Malian press.

Modibo Keita has in fact dismissed ministers implicated in scandals. Moreover, he is very familiar with the northern situation for having been, up until his appointment as Prime Minister, the High Representative of the Malian Head of State in the negotiations in Algiers. However, the roots of the crisis that swept the country in 2012 run deep. It will take time to heal the scars left by history and reverse the practices at the origin of the collapse. But in the short term, the priority is to strengthen security.

| A precarious security situation

According to the latest UN report on the situation in Mali, released last December (1), the security situation in the country is "precarious". During 2014, jihadist groups have in fact multiplied skirmishes by operating in small groups. Between October and December, their actions resulted in the death of six peacekeepers in actions including suicide attacks, mine laying or IEDs and ambushes with – not unlike Boko Haram tactics – motorcycles. As noted by the head of the UN peace-keeping operations last September "terrorists and jihadists [...] have taken the bull by the horns" (2). This time we no longer dealing with *rezzous* (small incursions) but a professionalisation of guerrilla actions against the Malian, French and international forces, and the people who support them.

In response, the MINUSMA acquired sanitary equipment and mine-protected vehicles, while thousands of its members were trained in the fight against improvised explosive devices, in combat first aid and the identification of weapons encountered in the field. Similarly, the international force deployed aerial means in Kidal to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance focused on the movements of armed groups, while Sweden sent 250 intelligence specialists to Timbuktu, adding to the Dutch contingent already deployed in Gao. The first days of January, however, did not show any change. The French base of Tessalit was subjected to thirty rockets and mortar shells attacks between 30 December and 1st January. On 4 January, a patrol vehicle of peacekeepers from Niger was blown up by a remote-controlled explosive device, while four trucks owned by a MINUSMA subcontractor were burned, less than 200 km north of Gao (3). The next day, whereas the violence was generally located in the three regions of northern Mali, the centre of the country was hit. A position of the Malian army was attacked in Nampala, near the Mauritanian border in response, according to a statement from AQIM, to the provision of information by Malians making possible the neutralisation on 11 December, by French soldiers, of Abderhamane Ould Amar al-Ahmed al-Tilemsi, founding member of MUJAO and senior officer of Al-Mourabitoune.

The capabilities of the international force remain in fact constrained by the available manpower – 74% of the authorised numbers were deployed in Mali at the end of 2014, 8,543 soldiers and 1,019 police officers – and the lack of self-sustainment and equipment within the contingents from the African International Support Mission in Mali (MISMA). Of the seven infantry battalions and reserve units of the force in the field, only two actually fully meet the needs initially defined with a shortfall in the other five units ranging from 50 to 80% (4). But beyond the capability shortcomings of MINUSMA, that fragility refers to two aspects. First, the rout of the Malian army in Kidal in May 2014, marked the failure of a strategy to train and redeploy the Malian security forces in the three northern regions. Then and most importantly, with a thousand men in the country, the French contingent finds itself limited to maintaining pressure on the armed groups in order to contain and weaken them, intervening occasionally while helping the MINUSMA and the Malian forces in their actions.

| Deep-rooted

The argument of the inability of the under-manned and ill-equipped armed forces to provide effective security cannot however be sufficient. A second reason stems from the presence of jihadists. The former MUJAO fighters enjoy local support with an efficient network of informants in the Gao region (5). In addition to their connections with a drug trafficking source of income, they did "not only cut hands and destroy" during 2012 (6). Their message was strengthened by the distribution of millions of CFA francs on the occasion of Ramadan. The Islamists provided fuel and food at cost prices, equipped health centres, paid agents (7). And Gao is not an exception. In Timbuktu, "several jihadist groups were able to maintain positions [...] especially thanks to the support of some Fulani accomplices who live on these lands," as recently stated by a Tuareg to a journalist from *Mondafrique* (8).

Besides, these relationships are prior to the offensive in 2012. In the second half of the 1990s Mokhtar Belmokhtar visited Timbuktu region several times in order, according to the Mauritanian journalist Lemine Ould M. Salem, to "extend "the holy war" in southern Algeria and beyond, across the Sahara" (9). Having escaped an ambush by the Algerian army in December 2002, Mokhtar Belmokhtar settled in the region of Lerneb north of Timbuktu, where he married a Bérabiche from the chieftaincy of Oulad Idriss, and now provides populations with money, wells or boreholes from his group. Not without causing concern. "The most dangerous factor for the future", noted in 2009 a former Malian aid worker living in Timbuktu, "is that they exercise a growing fascination in young people for Arab and berabiche from Timbuktu or chamanama from Gao ethnicities" (10).

If the activism of the jihadist armed groups constitutes a concern, they are far from being the only actors of violence escaping the authorities. In July, the Tuareg elements of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA) and Arabs from the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) clashed repeatedly. The following month, members of the MAA exchanged fire (11), while the vigilante group of the Tuareg imghad and allies (GATIA), considered as pro-government, opposed the MNLA. But as the authors of the International Crisis Group recalled last November, the creation of new movements "illustrates the risk of fragmentation of the armed groups despite the efforts from the Algerian diplomacy to unify them" and "may announce a resurgence in violence between groups that are fighting to justify their existence" as well as defending political, social and economic demands (12). Besides, when formalising the group's inception in August 2014, GATIA officials claim to have formally asked the Malian and international authorities to participate in the talks in Algiers, to defend the voice of the Imrads and oppose Northern autonomy after the withdrawal of the Malian armed forces and the reduction of the French presence (13).

| A country still in trouble

Mali's descent into hell in 2012 revealed a sick country. The northern affair has not been dealt with. The ambitious National Pact, signed in April 1992, stalled owing to lack of financial resources, delays in the institutional changes, the reactions of dissatisfaction with the arrangements obtained by the Tuareg, as well as the lack of effectiveness of the funding intended for development in the field, which primarily contributed to the enrichment of a few.

Above all, the State as policy-maker has become a shadow of itself. While it was subjected to an injunction of lenders in the 1980s, the state was weakened by a decentralisation process perceived as a substitute to central government but lacking the vision to guide the administration, and the coming into office of President Amadou Toumani Touré was the *coup de grâce*. Certainly, the proliferation of construction sites shows a country on the move. But the consensus policy has contributed to "anesthetise alternating forces and the capacity of offer from the parties" (14). More worrying, "the now widespread corruption and the nomination to high office of mediocre managers have discredited the regime in the eyes of many Malians," while a sense of community was developing (15).

But since the French and African military intervention, the fractures opened have continued to fester. The matters relating to the purchase of a presidential plane for 17 billion CFA francs (€26 million) and the signing of a military equipment contract for the Department of Defence, through a businessman close to the presidential clan, weakened President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, whose campaign was conducted under the slogan "Mali first". The presence of his family in the power structure has also been controversial: his son Karim as President of the Defence Committee in Congress, Karim's stepfather as President of Congress, a brother-in-law as Minister of Aid, or a nephew as Minister of Industry and Investment Promotion (16). As for corruption, it continues to be omnipresent (17).

Relations between North and South are still marked by resentment. The Kidal clashes cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon, although their consequences are important, but mainly an indicator of the operational limits of an army still in reconstruction and of continuing tensions. The MNLA and other rebel movements are considered by many southern Malians as "terrorists". More generally, the dominant feeling is that the unrest in the North only serves to bring money from lenders, while the South also needs development aid in a context of deterioration of the school system and a high population growth. Conversely, in the North, the impression is that of being neglected when individual and collective representations are not dominated in Kidal by the memory of the military crackdown after the 1963 revolt (18), or in other areas of the north by the violence of the 1990s, sometimes heightened by the behaviour of Malian soldiers at the beginning of 2013 (19).

| A path strewn with obstacles

The Algiers negotiations and their outcome are one of the first challenges for Mali and the international community. A failed or botched agreement would be "the worst scenario", as already stated in April 2013 by Senators Chevènement and Gérard Larcher, sealing political stalemate and making reconciliation all the more difficult. However, an agreement would not mark the end of tensions, but rather the hope of a way out. The signing of a text will in fact feed discontent, principally among opponents to any political discussion between former rebels and government, among those who feel hurt and excluded or, even, for some signatories, requiring a readiness to implement the measures envisaged by force.

In this context, efforts are needed for strengthening security. The MINUSMA is also considering redeploying units to strengthen its capacity in the three northern regions, including a squadron of medium-lift helicopters in Kidal. But changes in recent months and estimates generally used to secure a country with a high recurring risk of civil war – with a ratio of one soldier or police officer for 50 civilians would require nearly 25,000 men for the

three northern regions taking into account the figures of the 2009 census – bolster the argument for increasing international but also French troops, while the Malian security forces still have a long way to go to ensure the security of northern Mali and change their image.

In the end, the fact is that the 2012 crisis is primarily a political crisis. As recalled by Thierry Perret, for having maintained a community-based structure and having failed to "change the old social laws [...], Mali has let its territories drift away" (20). But if Malians – from both North and South – are the first concerned, the international community and lenders have a responsibility to strategically steer the use of the aid, not to reduce the state to a structure aimed only at managing resources without defining policies, to weaken it without accompanying it in the necessary reforms, or even to reduce Mali's problems to their economic and social dimensions. Several initiatives point in this direction and are especially designed to improve governance, but it is important to maintain a steady course in the short and long-term, to restore failing security, at the heart of popular expectations and a prerequisite for the functioning of citizen-friendly justice and administrative systems (21). Otherwise, the efforts employed and the millions spent, will be nothing more than a missed opportunity.

| Notes

- (1) *Report from the Secretary General of the United Nations on the situation in Mali*, United Nations, S / 2014/943, 23 December 2014, p. 4.
- (2) Quoted by Cyril Bensimon, "Les islamistes frappent de nouveau dans le nord du Mali" *Le Monde* 2 October 2014.
- (3) Philippe Champleau "Mali : les harcèlements se multiplient contre l'armée malienne et la Minusma", blog *Lignes de défense*, 5 January 2015, <http://lignesdedefense.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2015/01/05/mali-13220.html>.
- (4) *Report from the Secretary General of the United Nations on the situation in Mali*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- (5) And even beyond, to make travel possible especially between Gao and Douentza.
- (6) The MUJAO was supposed to have been responsible for fifteen amputations (Morten Bøås and Liv Elin Torheim "Mali unmasked : resistance, collusion, collaboration," *NOREF*, March 2013, p. 3).
- (7) Thierry Perret, *Mali. Une crise au Sahe* Paris, Karthala, 2014, p. 54.
- (8) Louise Dimitrakis, "IBK à Paris, les djihadistes au Nord-Mali" *Mondafrique* 12 January 2015, <http://mondafrique.com/lire/decryptages/2015/01/12/mali>.
- (9) Lemine Ould M. Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara. Sur les traces du jihadistes Mokhtar Belmokhtar*, Paris, Editions de La Martinière, 2014, p. 45. For his part, Lakhdar Benchiba chooses to insist on the success of the Algerian armed forces (Lakhdar Benchiba, "Les mutations du terrorisme algérien" *Politique étrangère*, Summer 2009, pp. 345-352).
- (10) Pierre-François Naudé, "Lutte contre le terrorisme : le calme avant la tempête ?" *Jeune Afrique* 26 May 2009.
- (11) *Report from the Secretary General of the United Nations on the situation in Mali*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- (12) International Crisis Group, "Mali : dernière chance à Alger", Briefing Afrique, No. 104, 18 November 2014, p. 13.
- (13) "Mali : le Gambia dit prendre les armes pour participer aux négociations" *RFI* 16 August 2014.
- (14) Thierry Perret, *op. cit.*, P. 29.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- (16) Thomas Hofnung, "Au Mali, le président "IBK" sur une pente sablonneuse" *Libération* 10 July 2014.
- (17) Interview, international consultant, December 2014.
- (18) Pierre Boilley, "La révolte oubliée des insurgés de Kidal" *Alternatives Internationales* No. 59, June 2013, pp. 54-55.
- (19) François Grünewald (team leader) *Étude de cas sur les zones à faible densité. Etude de cas "Mali"*, U.R.D. group, report of 17 April 2014, pp. 26-27.
- (20) Thierry Perret, *op. cit.*, P. 223.
- (21) For a very stimulating synthesis of the errors made in Afghanistan (failed outsourcing of security by the Americans, blur on the objectives of aid, lack of strategic piloting of resources and adverse consequences of approaches favouring the short term at the expense of the reconstruction of the State apparatus, necessary political reforms), see: Serge Michailof and Alexis Bonnet, *Notre maison brûle au Sud. Que peut faire l'aide au développement ?*, Paris, Fayard, 2010, Chapter 6. We could also add that instability was seen as the result of economic and social factors, whereas it was the result of political factors (at national and local level).



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