

I. Introduction: a chronology of the crisis in Mali

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The signing of a peace agreement in Mali in mid 2015 marked the end of a more than three-year long process to reach an agreement to address the serious political and security crisis, in the aftermath of the armed rebellion that broke out in northern Mali in January 2012.

The start of the crisis

The current crisis began on 17 January 2012 when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad, MNLA), a Tuareg-led group, started a series of attacks against government forces in northern Mali.¹ The MNLA were joined by armed religious extremist groups, including Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour le Tawhîd et du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), as well as by deserters from the Malian armed forces.² An important impetus for the 2012 rebellion was the crisis in Libya and the fall of Muammar Qadhafi's regime, with his killing on 20 October 2011. This resulted in the return of hundreds of Malian men who had served in the Libyan armed forces and large flows of arms and ammunition into Mali.³

The difficulties faced by the Malian armed forces in northern Mali, with reports of serious shortages of arms, ammunition and supplies, including food, caused public discontent and protests on the streets of Bamako against the government.⁴ Following a mutiny by low- and middle-ranking officers on 21 March at a military base in Kati, 16 kilometres from Bamako, the soldiers occupied the presidential palace in Bamako and announced a military coup on 22 March 2012.

The military junta, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, forced the democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Touré into hiding, suspended the

¹ The build-up to the rebellion began in November 2010 with the formation of the National Movement of the Azawad (Mouvement National de l'Azawad, MNA). For a detailed overview and chronology of the crisis, see Thurston, A. and Lebovich, A., *A Handbook on Mali's 2012–2013 Crisis*, Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), Working Paper no. 13-001 (ISITA: 2013), pp. 3–6.

² United Nations, Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, S/2012/894, 29 Nov. 2012.

³ Stewart, S., 'Mali besieged by fighters fleeing Libya', *Stratfor*, 2 Feb. 2012; Gwin, P., 'Former Qaddafi mercenaries fighting in Libyan war', *The Atlantic*, 31 Aug. 2011; and United Nations, Report of the assessment mission on the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel region: 7 to 23 Dec. 2011, S/2012/42, 18 Jan. 2012.

⁴ Chauzal, G. and van Damme, T., *The Roots of Mali's Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, Conflict Research Unit Report (Clingendael Institute: The Hague, Mar. 2015), p. 7.

constitution and dissolved the government. The coup contributed to the retreat of the state in the northern regions, and by late March the rebellion had taken control of the three main cities in northern Mali: Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. On 6 April the MNLA announced that it had accomplished its goals and proclaimed the northern regions—an area covering roughly two-thirds of the national territory of Mali—an independent state, referred to as 'Azawad'. On the same day as the MNLA's announcement, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the military junta reached a framework agreement that provided for the transition of power to civilian rule. It led to the formal resignation of President Touré and to the appointment of an interim president, the Speaker of the National Assembly, with the task of overseeing the return of constitutional order and democratic governance.

Infighting among the non-state actors

Soon after the MNLA declared the independent state of Azawad, a rift developed between the MNLA and the other rebel groups, Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO, due to a clash of ideological and programmatic approaches. While the MNLA wanted to establish a secular state, the goal of the religious extremist groups was to establish extreme forms of sharia. During May to June 2012 the two Tuareg-dominated groups, the MNLA and Ansar Dine, engaged in a dialogue regarding the governing institutions of, and the place of Islam in, a future state of Azawad.⁵ However, these efforts failed and were followed by a gradual shift in the balance of power from the MNLA to the extremist groups.

By 18 November 2012 Ansar Dine and the other religious extremist groups had fought and expelled the MNLA from the three major cities in the north, and divided up the occupied areas between themselves: AQIM controlled Timbuktu and the surrounding area; Ansar Dine controlled Kidal; and MUJAO controlled Gao, Menaka and other towns in the Gao region.⁶ During the remainder of 2012 the people in these cities, in particular in Timbuktu, were subjected to the imposition of an extremely fundamentalist and violent version of sharia, involving gross violations of human rights.⁷

⁵ Gaasholt, O. M., 'Northern Mali 2012: The short-lived triumph of irredentism', *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Nov. 2013), p. 84.

⁶ United Nations (note 2).

⁷ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2013: The State of the World's Human Rights* (Amnesty International: London, 2013), pp. 173–74; Human Rights Watch, 'World report 2013: Mali', [n.d.]; and Casey-Maslen, S. (ed.), *The War Report: 2012* (OUP: Oxford, 2013), pp. 122–23.

The start of the peace talks

As a result of mediation by ECOWAS, constitutional order was re-established in Mali on 25 April 2012. A transitional government was installed and a regional mediator, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso was appointed for provisional peace talks in Ouagadougou. A significant step was taken on 3–4 December 2012, when the mediators were able to organize a tripartite meeting between the MNLA, Ansar Dine and an official Malian Government delegation, at which they agreed to create a framework for inter-Malian dialogue based on national unity, territorial integrity, religious freedom and the rejection of extremism.⁸

French intervention

On 10 January 2013 the crisis heightened as Ansar Dine advanced to Konna, a town in central Mali, 700 kilometres north-east of Bamako, with the intention of moving further south.⁹ This prompted the Malian Government to call for external military intervention by the United Nations and France. On the same day, French President Francois Hollande ordered air strikes to stop the advance of the extremist forces. The French military intervention in Mali, Operation Serval, began on 11 January and over the next few days it cleared extremist forces from the area north of Konna and established bases in northern Mali. Subsequently, ECOWAS decided to accelerate the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), which had been mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 2085 on 20 December 2012—at that time only planned for full deployment by September 2013.¹⁰ However, the deployment of AFISMA was delayed due to logistical, capacity and coordination challenges. France and the United States called on the UN Security Council to establish a UN operation and the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS eventually supported this proposal, although under specific conditions.¹¹ On 25 April 2013 the Security Council mandated the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), while authorizing French troops in Operation Serval to intervene in support of MINUSMA when under imminent and serious threat (at the request of

⁸ ‘Communiqué de presse du médiateur de la CEDEAO pour le Mali à l’occasion de la première rencontre entre le gouvernement de transition, le groupe ANSAR EDDINE et le MNLA’ [Press release by the ECOWAS mediator for Mali at the occasion of the first meeting between the transitional government, Ansar Dine and the MNLA], Communications Office, Burkina Faso Presidency, 4 Dec. 2012; and ‘Mali rebels agree to respect “national unity”’, Al Jazeera, 5 Dec. 2012.

⁹ ‘Mali Islamists “enter” Konna after clashes with army’, BBC News, 10 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰ ECOWAS, ‘Communiqué of the ECOWAS Chairman on Mali’, 11 Jan. 2013; and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085, S/RES/2085 (2012), 20 Dec. 2012.

¹¹ Van der Lijn, J. and Avezov, X., ‘Peace operations in Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2014*, pp. 115–16.

the UN Secretary-General).¹² On 1 July 2013 authority was transferred from AFISMA to MINUSMA, which also incorporated troops from AFISMA. France started a phased withdrawal of its own forces from May 2013 and by 1 July 2014 Operation Serval was concluded.¹³ Subsequently, France instigated a larger regional counterterrorism presence across the Sahel—Operation Barkhane—and French forces remained authorized to intervene in support of MINUSMA.¹⁴

Humanitarian consequences

The violent conflict had devastating consequences for the population, both as a result of the fighting itself and as a result of gross human rights abuses, in particular by the extremist groups. The UN reported numerous serious human rights violations, including 276 cases of rape (of which 68 involved children), as well as an unknown number of summary executions and forced disappearances without specific statistics.¹⁵ Human Rights Watch reported 26 extrajudicial executions, 11 forced disappearances, and 50 cases of torture or ill treatment by Malian armed forces, and numerous although unspecified cases of human rights abuses by non-state armed groups, including arbitrary detention and assault.¹⁶

By the end of 2012, human rights and humanitarian organizations had reported several hundred cases of gender-based violence and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had reported 10 victims of punitive amputations by non-state armed groups, attributed to the application of sharia.¹⁷ A November 2013 report from the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) found that a reasonable basis existed to believe that the following war crimes had been committed in Mali since January 2012: murder; mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without due process; intentionally directing attacks against protected objects; and pillaging and rape.¹⁸

The conflict resulted in large-scale refugee flows. In the period between the start of the rebellion in January 2012 and the military intervention in

¹² United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100, S/RES/2100 (2013), 25 Apr. 2013. See also the MINUSMA website, <<http://minusma.unmissions.org/en/about-minusma>>; and the UN website on MINUSMA, <<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/background.shtml>>.

¹³ Van der Lijn and Avezov (note 11), p. 116.

¹⁴ Van der Lijn, J. and Smit, T., 'Global and regional trends in peace operations', *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, p. 164.

¹⁵ United Nations, Security Council, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali', S/2013/189, 26 Mar. 2013; United Nations, Security Council, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali', S/2014/1, 2 Jan. 2014; and Casey-Maslen (note 7).

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, 'World report 2014: Mali', [n.d.].

¹⁷ Casey-Maslen (note 7), pp. 117, 123.

¹⁸ Casey-Maslen, S., *The War Report: 2013* (OUP: Oxford, Nov. 2014), p. 155.

January 2013, a total of 376 828 people were displaced, including 228 920 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 147 908 persons displaced into neighbouring countries, mainly Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger.¹⁹ This represented almost a quarter of the overall population of the northern regions, estimated at 1.3 million people.²⁰ In late 2013 there were 254 800 IDPs, with 42 300 IDPs having returned home.²¹

Elections and the start of the Algiers peace process

Early elections were required under the preliminary peace agreement of 18 June 2013 and international pressure for them to take place was also strong. Presidential elections took place on 28 July and 11 August 2013 and resulted in the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Parliamentary elections followed on 24 November and 15 December 2013 and were won by the Rally for Mali (Rassemblement pour le Mali, RPB), a party created by Keita in 2001. The RPB won 115 of the 147 parliamentary seats of the National Assembly, although with a voter turnout of only 39 per cent.

With a democratically elected president and government in place, the scene was set for the formal peace negotiations to begin. On 24 July 2014, after a dialogue between the parties in Algiers (16–24 July 2014), the declaration of a cessation of hostilities was signed and the consensual roadmap was adopted. According to this roadmap, mediation between the parties would be led by the Algerian Government and held in Algiers, and this process started on 1 September 2014. Aside from Algeria, the mediation team consisted of: the AU, ECOWAS, the European Union (EU), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the UN and the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger.²² The outcome of this process is described in section III.

From the outset of the peace process it was clear that there were a number of challenges to building peace in Mali. The signing of the peace agreement on two different dates, 15 May and 20 June 2015, testified to this. Within the coalition of the rebel groups, the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA), the two main groups—the MNLA and the High Council for Unity of Azawad (Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad, HCUA)—were not ready to sign on the first date. Furthermore, while external interventions forced the violent extremist groups into hiding, they remain a major challenge to the peace process in Mali.

¹⁹ International Organization for Migration, 'The Mali migration crisis at a glance', Mar. 2013.

²⁰ International Organization for Migration (note 19).

²¹ UNHCR, 'Global report 2013: Mali', p. 2.

²² United Nations, Secretary-General, 'Chair's summary of high-level meeting on Malian political process', Press release, SG/2211, 27 Sep. 2014.