

West Africa Report

Armed groups in Mali: Beyond the labels

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Summary

The number of armed groups in Mali has increased steadily since the 2012 crisis, although a large swathe of the northern part of the country still remains beyond the control of the national authorities. The armed groups were established either just ahead of or in reaction to peace talks, and their demands often seem to be based on community or individual interests. This report offers an explanation for the delays in the peace process, particularly before the June 2015 Agreement was reached, and the difficulties encountered in implementing that agreement.

Since the 2012 crisis in Mali¹ the number of armed groups has proliferated throughout the country. Some of these groups continue to operate in cities in the north of the country, remaining beyond the reach of the national authorities.

A chronological interpretation of the crisis reveals that their creation, partly motivated by the need for representativity, occurred, in most cases, either in anticipation of or in reaction to the cycle of negotiations. This multiplication of armed players makes reaching a peace agreement even more complex for the mediators, who find themselves facing armed movements with conflicting demands.

The terrorist threat, restricted to the north for a long time, has gradually spread through the rest of the country with the emergence of Katiba Ansar Dine Macina in the region of Mopti, in the centre,² and attacks in the region of Sikasso, in the south,³ for which Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid (Ansar Dine of the South) has claimed responsibility. There were also attacks in the centre of the country's capital, Bamako, with bombings at La Terrasse, a bar-restaurant in March⁴ and the Radisson Hotel in November.⁵

This report is based on interviews conducted between November 2015 and April 2016 in Bamako, Mopti and Gao in Mali, as well as in Nouakchott, Mauritania. The first section looks at the creation of the different armed groups involved in the peace process and

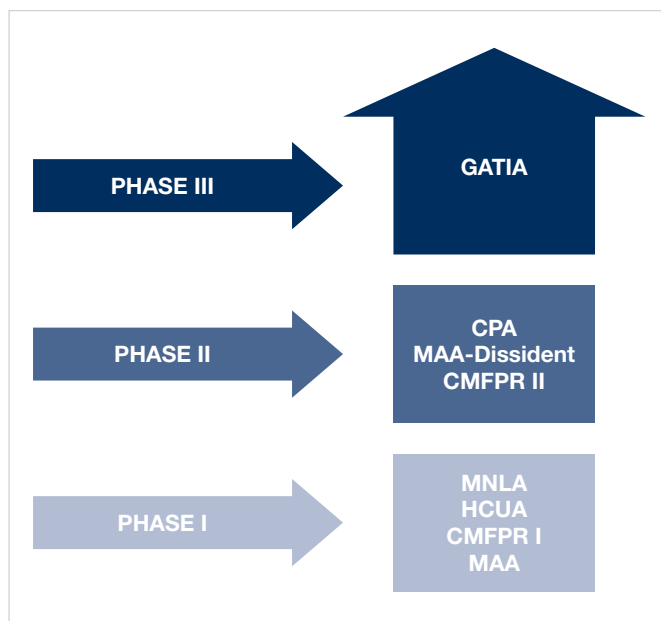
attempts to understand the logic behind their existence and the alliances among the movements.

The second part covers the groups considered terrorists, whose actions have had a significant impact on national stability. The third and final section analyses the agreement signed in June 2015, which, although it did not tackle the structural origins of the crisis, nevertheless offered some avenues for national actors to explore in order to embark on positive change in the country's advance towards a peaceful horizon.

Armed groups in the north of Mali: between alliances and rivalries

More knowledge of the specifics of these groups is required for an understanding of the delays observed prior to the signing of the agreement and its implementation. This section retraces the trajectories of various armed groups categorised as politico-military actors, in an attempt to better understand the logic behind their creation and the alliances that have formed or continue to be formed. Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2012 the number of armed groups associated with the peace process has risen from two (MNLA and HCUA) to eight (MNLA, HCUA, MAA1, CMFPR I, MAA2, CPA, CMFPR II, GATIA).

This increase took place in three phases that tally with the calendar of the peace negotiations. The first went from the beginning of the rebellion in January 2012 to the signing of an agreement in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on June 2013. The second started after the signing of the agreement and ended with the commencement of the Algiers negotiations in June 2014. The third covered the Algiers negotiations from the start to their conclusion with the signing of the agreement of 20 June 2015.



Phase 1: From the start of the 2012 rebellion to the Ouagadougou agreement

Although only two armed groups – the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad*, MNLA) and the Higher Council for the Unity of Azawad (*Haut conseil pour l’unité de l’Azawad*, HCUA) – signed the Ouagadougou Agreement,⁶ subsequently, two additional movements, which had not participated in the negotiations, became an integral part of the peace process, declaring they would abide by the agreement. The two movements were the Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR) and the Arab Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement arabe de l’Azawad*, MAA).

The MNLA was established in October 2010, following the merger of the National Azawad Movement (*Mouvement national de l’Azawad*, MNA), and the Tuareg Movement in Northern Mali (*Mouvement Touareg du Nord Mali*, MTNM). The MNLA grew from strength to strength as armed fighters returned from Libya after Mouammar Kadhafi was overthrown in 2011.⁷

The MNLA, standard-bearer for the independence of regions in the north, which they designate ‘Azawad’,⁸ spearheaded the rebellion of January 2012. Although it was largely composed by the Touareg, especially the Ichnanes tribe,⁹ the group never openly claimed allegiance to any ethnic group or tribe and preferred to portray an image of a secular organisation representing all the communities of the regions of the north.

Having succeeded in putting the Malian army to flight thanks to the support of Ansar Dine, Al Qaïda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for the Unity of the Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l’unicité du jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest*, MUJAO), in March 2012, the MNLA declared the independence of ‘Azawad’ on 6 April. However, the declaration was rejected by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN).

If certain MNLA members were aiming for independence, for others the declaration was more of a strategy oriented towards autonomy¹⁰ – buoyed up by the military victory, they believed that the formulation of extremist claims would enable them, at the very least, to negotiate the autonomy of the northern regions.

The disparate objectives of the movements within the coalition resulted in cracks appearing. After the coalition took control of Northern Mali and the MNLA forged an alliance with Ansar Dine, the other Touareg-dominated group, led by Iyad Ag Ghali, who made no secret of his determination to introduce sharia law. As soon as the alliance was sealed on 26 May 2012 it was denounced both by the international community and by certain

MNLA officials who believed that the MNLA's independence-leaning, secular agenda was incompatible with the Islamist option¹¹ proffered by Ansar Dine. On the other hand, some jihadists did not welcome Iyad Ag Ghali's move and put pressure on him to abandon this project.¹²

In June 2012 the MNLA was defeated by MUJAO after violent combat in the town of Gao, where it had set up headquarters, and it gradually lost ground to the jihadi groups that would occupy the zone for nearly ten months.

Only when the Franco-African intervention of January 2013¹³ conquered the jihadi groups after the first attack in the locality of Konna at the center of the country, was the MNLA able to make a comeback. This was to have both military and political repercussions – the military intervention would trigger a shift on the ground with the emergence of new movements, especially given the prospect of the Ouagadougou negotiations in June 2013.¹⁴

The Franco-African military intervention triggered the emergence of new movements, especially given the prospect of the Ouagadougou negotiations

Those responsible for the Franco-African intervention, aware of the limits of a purely military victory, drew a distinction between the terrorist groups (military targets) and the groups with which they needed to initiate discussions (politico-military groups), although the lines of demarcation between the two groups were blurred. Ansar Dine, whose supporters crossed over to the HCUA, is a case in point.

The formation of HCUA resulted from a merger in May 2013 of two dissident movements – the Higher Council for Azawad (*Haut Conseil pour l'Azawad*, HCA) and the Islamic Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad*, MIA).

The former was led, at the time, by Mohamed Ag Intallah, the current Amenokkal¹⁵ of Kidal and a member of the National Assembly under the colours of the presidential party (*Rassemblement pour le Mali* – RPM), who was an MNLA turncoat, and the latter had emerged from Iyad Ag Galy's Ansar Dine.

The establishment of MIA may be regarded as opportunistic, as it was only created subsequent to the launch of Operation Serval¹⁶ in January 2013. Serval had a definite impact on group dynamics. It triggered the spin-off of a part of Ansar Dine, recently labelled a terrorist movement, although previously considered, within the framework of the discussions led by Burkina Faso on behalf of ECOWAS, a movement with a rightful place at the negotiation table.

The establishment of the HCUA was dictated by military and political exigencies. As far as its leader, Alghabass Al Intallah, was concerned, the aim was to avoid being marginalised twice over: his own marginalisation and then that of his community, the Tuareg Ifoghas tribe. This concern might have caused him to dig in his heels about continuing the fight alongside Iyad. The troops on the ground, with France in the lead, also saw in the HCUA an interlocutor in the Kidal region with whom dialogue was possible, whilst, at the same time, trying to weaken Ansar Dine.

This relationship resulted in HCUA being suspected of colluding with Ansar Dine, which was listed by the UN Security Council as a terrorist group. Arguably, the tribal

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and family links¹⁷ that bound several members of Ansar Dine and HCUA contributed to keeping bridges open between them and fuelling distrust over HCUA.¹⁸

Although the objective of HCUA, which was created in May 2013, was inscribed within a project for autonomy, with independence as a long term goal, the role and place of the Ifoghas tribe in Mali's northern region, which is undergoing a process of reconfiguration, remained one of its major reasons for combat.¹⁹ Indeed, in the north, where traditional chiefs and feudal leaders had resisted the winds of democracy sweeping across the country in the 1990s, the various crises and their resolution seemed to offer an opportunity for (re)negotiation of public space and, therefore, for access to economic resources.

In the face of the MNLA and the HCUA, whose main demand continued to be independence, the emergence of the CMFPR and the MAA, which advocated national unity, marked a turning point in the negotiation process. Perceived as barring the way to the irredentists, their creation and, especially, their participation in the negotiations, were encouraged by the transitional government to counter the influence of the MNLA and HCUA.²⁰

The tribal and family links that bound several members of Ansar Dine and HCUA contributed to keeping bridges open between them

The Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts I (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR I), established on 21 July 2012, is a conglomeration of self-defence movements made up of Songhai and Peuls in the Gao and Mopti regions. It is a new player in terms of its name, but relatively old in terms of its membership

In addition to the Liberation Forces of the North of Mali (*Forces de libération du Nord du Mali*, FLN), which was created in 2012, the group was made up of Ganda Koy, a movement dating back to the 1990s, and Ganda Izo, formed in 2008. The main objective of this grouping, which formed as a result of the 2012 crisis, was to reconquer territories, which had fallen into the hands first of armed rebel groups and then of jihadist groups.

The installation of a unified political framework responded, first and foremost, to the need to ensure the representation of all the groups who realised that only armed movements had been invited to the negotiation table.²¹ This perception was partly the result of the feeling of some groups that they had been somewhat excluded during the negotiations that had followed the various rebellions since 1990.

The Movement of Arab Azawad (*Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad*, MAA), for example, had been established in April 2012 under the name of the National Liberation Front of Azawad. Its declared primary objective was to defend the interests of the Arab community of the north and, most especially, in Tombouctou.

In 2013 the group was joined by Arabs from Tilemsi, in the Gao region, following the departure of the MUJAO, to whom they had massively rallied when the town was under siege in 2012.

Apart from the continuing thread of ethnicity that explains its expansion in the Gao

IN 2013

CMFPR WAS MADE OF:

GANDA KOY
GANDA IZO
FLN

region, the movement also served to recycle individuals whose links with the MUJAO on the one hand, and their alleged involvement in drug trafficking on the other, jeopardised the likelihood of their inclusion in the political process, which pushed some of its members to dissent.²²

The creation of the CMFPR and the MAA also stems from the lack of representativity of the MNLA and the HCUA. The former groups, going beyond the fight for the unity of Mali, were motivated, on the one hand, by the determination not to be kept on the sidelines of the negotiation processes and, on the other, wanting to protect community interests.²³

Phase II: The time of dissidence

The second phase, from June 2013 to June 2014, saw the emergence of three dissident movements. After June 2013, all the armed groups apart from the HCUA experienced dissidence.

The Coalition for the Azawad People (*Coalition pour le peuple de l'Azawad*, CPA) is led by Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh, a former head of external relations for MNLA. Its establishment on 19 March 2014 came about as the result of a quarrel over leadership within the MNLA, against the background of differences over whether Algeria or Morocco²⁴ should be selected as mediator.

It should be stressed that Bilal Ag Chérif, secretary-general of the MNLA, had twice been granted an audience with the King of Morocco.²⁵ Its preference for Algeria's selection as mediator and repeated calls for a rapid start to the negotiations exposed Assaleh to suspicions of collaboration with the Malian government and expedited his exclusion from the MNLA. The CPA, which claimed a presence in the three regions of the north, with military bases in Tombouctou and Gao,²⁶ was weakened before the June 2015 agreement was reached.

Under pressure from the international community, some members of the CPA, led by Mohamed Ousmane Ag Mohamedoun, one of the movement's founders, signed the peace agreement on the CPA's behalf, despite opposition, during the first signing ceremony, which took place on 15 May 2015. Ag Mohamedoun's decision to sign the agreement against the wishes of Assaleh, the other founding leader of the group, would lead to a break-up within the group, slowing down the implementing of the agreement.

The Assaleh wing, considering Ag Mohamedoun's move as a betrayal, later excluded Ag Mohamedoun from the CPA and refused to allow him a seat on the Agreement Follow-up Committee (*Comité de suivi de l'accord*, CSA), the main body established under the June 2015 Agreement.

Ag Mohamedoun and his supporters, who had previously been

courted, particularly by the mediators, who were delighted to have succeeded in getting all the disparate armed groups to sign, were gradually marginalised from the process.

This situation, which would create deadlock over the setting up of the CSA and stall its implementation, would only be resolved through the intervention of the African Union High Representative for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL). The AU succeeded in reuniting the movement and thus resolved the thorny issue of representativity that had poisoned debate within the CSA.

The Arab Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad*, MAA-dissident), whose breakaway was led by Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidatti, consisted mainly of Berrabiches Arabs from the region of Tombouctou, many of them former soldiers from the Malian army who had deserted in 2012. Their proximity to the Ifoghas of the Kidal region, who were the majority group within the HCUA, would make it easier for them to rally to the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (CMA) when it was constituted in June 2014.²⁷

The creation of the CMFPR and the MAA stems from the lack of representativity of the MNLA and the HCUA

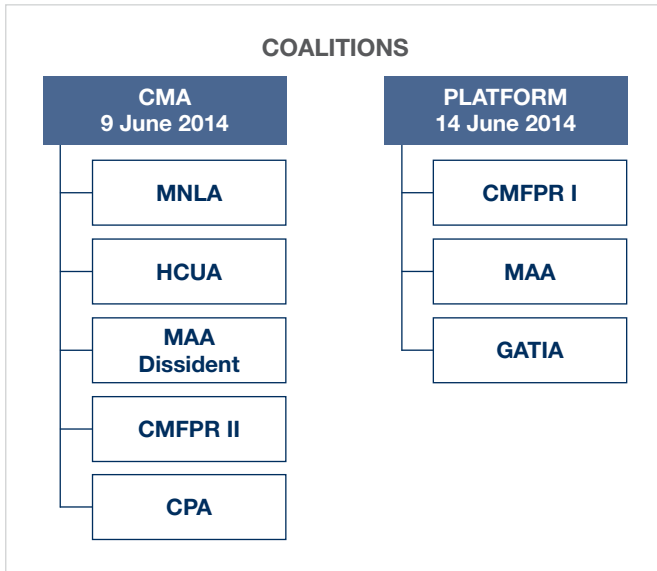
The Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements II (*Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance*, CMFPR II) is led by Ibrahim Abba Kantao, head of the Ganda Izo movement. Although the group initially presented a unified front, time, differences in opinion and, most importantly, leadership quarrels would introduce cracks and lead to the creation of the CMFPR II in January 2014.

The CMFPR II coalition would initially be excluded from the negotiations which started in Algiers in February 2014 and would only join the CMA in August of that year. Its association with movements with which it did not seem to share the same vision of autonomy was mainly motivated by a wish to rejoin the discussions. The execrable relations with CMFPR I and especially with its leader, Maître Harouna Toureh, may also explain the formation of this alliance.

Phase III: The era of major manoeuvres

The consultations that took place in Algiers between February and June 2014 were intended to bring together the various politico-military movements of the north under one unified front. However, despite the stated intentions behind the Algerian mediation, which were to create a unified front, it came up against ideological differences and inter- and intra-community rivalries. To prevent being bogged down, in June 2014, five

months after the request made by the Malian President to his Algerian counterpart to lead the negotiations, it became necessary to decide on the formation of two coalitions.



The CMA was formed on 9 June and the Platform on 14 June. The CMA was originally composed of the MNLA, the HCUA and the dissident MAA. It would be joined by the CMFPR II in August 2014 and the CPA in September 2015.

The Platform originally consisted of the CMFPR I, the MAA and the CPA, before the latter joined the CMA. This phase of the negotiations was also marked by the creation of new movements that would rally behind the Platform: the Imghad and Allied Touareg Self Defence movement (Groupe d'autodéfense des touareg Imghads et alliés, GATIA).

GATIA, which was established on 14 August 2014, emerged following the Malian army's withdrawal from Kidal, on 21 May, after its defeat in combat during the visit of the then Malian prime minister, Moussa Mara. GATIA, therefore, presented itself as a self-defence movement whose membership is drawn mainly from the Tuareg Imghad community, a tribe considered in the social hierarchy to be vassals.

Many of GATIA's members already had battle experience, having served either in the Malian or in the Libyan army. Although both GATIA and the Malian state deny that the movement is a militia in the service of the government, doubts were expressed about the links between General El Hadj Ag Gamou, a high-level officer in the Malian army, and the leaders of the movement he is suspected of having created.

A former soldier in the Libyan army and a rebel in the 1990s, notably fighting alongside Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Dine, he had since become an important personality in the Malian army. It was he, for example, who led the army into

combat against MUJAO in February 2013. Press coverage in March 2015 about the discovery amongst GATIA's ranks of fighters who had been trained by the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) providing support to the Malian army buttressed this hypothesis.²⁸

It is difficult to reduce GATIA to merely a pro-government militia, given the fact that the movement was propelled by its own internal political and economic logic. From its inception, the group stated its determination to participate in the negotiations and the peace processes.

Although GATIA was not one of the signatories to the agreement leading up to the discussions in Algiers, the group rapidly established itself as an essential player in the north of Mali. In alliance with the Platform, sharing its objective of national unity, and receiving financial backing especially from the MAA-Platform,²⁹ the GATIA severely defeated the CMA in October 2014, notably pushing it out of Tessit and In Tillit.³⁰

The terrorist threat in Mali: an equation with unknown variables

In addition to the difficulties associated with rivalries among the signatory groups, the June 2015 Agreement is taking place in the context of presence of groups categorised as terrorists and excluded from the peace process. The theatre of operations of these groups – Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar Dine, Hamadoun Kouffa's Katiba Macina and the Ansar Dine Sud of Souleymane Keïta, who was arrested in March 2016 by the Malian Secret Service – as well as the nature and targets of their attacks made them key players in the national stabilisation process.

Although some sources suggest the presence of foreigners amongst their ranks, particularly Mauritians and Burkinabé,³¹ the groups seem, in the main, to be local phenomena. Other active Jihadi groups in Mali such as AQIM, MUJAO and Al Mourabitoune will not be discussed in this section because of the transnational nature of their activities.

Ansar Dine

It is alleged that Ansar Dine came into existence towards the end of 2011 as a result of the MNLA's refusal to appoint Iyad Ag Ghali³² as its head. Ghali, the emblematic figure of the rebellion in the 1990s, established 'Jum'a Ansar al-din al-salafiya', translated as the defenders of the faith. It is difficult to estimate the numbers of his followers, largely members of the Ifoghas tribe, who broke away from the MIA and, later, from the HCUA.

Ideologically, from the very start the group called for the application of sharia law throughout the entire country, a position directly opposed to the declared secular affinities of the other predominantly Tuareg group, the MNLA.

Ansar Dine, partisan of the Salafist tradition of jihad, has aligned itself with the other jihadist groups active in the region. The group became known in January 2012 when its name was cited in relation to the massacre of Malian soldiers at Aguelhock.³³ On 26 May 2012 it joined the MNLA to form the Transitional Council of the Islamic State of Azawad before a brutal separation on 30 May of the same year and a more solid alliance with AQIM and the MUJAO.

Beyond the ideological dimension, the family ties between Iyad and Abdoul Karim Al Targui, former leader of Katiba Al Ansar,³⁴ made it easy for the movement to align itself with AQIM. The alliance would lead Ansar Dine to participate in the Konna attack, which triggered the launch of Operation Serval in January 2013 and resulted in the group being classified as terrorist.

Although some regard Iyad Ag Ghali as the figurehead of terrorism in Mali, others continue to advocate his inclusion in the peace process

As a result, Ansar Dine did not sign the preliminary agreement, under the auspices of ECOWAS, in 2013, just as Iyad Ag Ghali categorically rejected the Algiers Agreement³⁵ but remained involved in political and geostrategic events in the north.

Although some regard him as the figurehead of terrorism in Mali, others continue to advocate his inclusion in the peace process. A public statement issued on 13 March 2016 by Amenokal of Kidal, brother of the leader of the HCUA, calling on the authorities to initiate dialogue with the Malian jihadists,³⁶ attests to Iyad Ag Ghali's influence within the Ifoghas community and in the Kidal region.

Katiba Ansar Dine Macina

Appearing on the scene at the beginning of 2015, primarily in the centre of the country, Katiba Ansar Dine Macina³⁷ recruited fighters mainly from within the Peul community.³⁸

The group is believed to be partially composed of former members of MUJAO and former disciples of Hamadoun Kouffa. They were allegedly led by Kouffa,³⁹ a radical preacher in the Mopti region, in alliance with Iyad Ag Ghali, whom he had met when the two were militants in Dawa. On 19 May 2016, in a video uploaded to Youtube,⁴⁰ the group officially cemented its relationship with Ansar Dine and confirmed the assumptions about the latter's metastasis.

Katiba Ansar Dine Macina has repeatedly attacked members of the Malian armed forces, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)⁴¹ troops and civilians suspected of collaborating with the army or the MINUSMA. In addition, the group has claimed responsibility for participating in the attack on a hotel in Sévaré, in the Mopti region, in August 2015 and the one in Bamako in November 2015, killing 35 people.⁴² Although there is considerable evidence of the involvement of another terrorist group, Al Mourabitoune, which also claimed responsibility for the attacks, the possibility of Katiba Ansar Dine Macina involvement cannot be excluded.

The Katiba Ansar Dine Macina is often compared to another group active in the region, referred to in the media as the Macina Liberation Front⁴³ (*Front de libération du Macina*, FLM). Although both groups operate in the same area, the centre of Mali, it seems

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AGREEMENT

15 May 2015
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20 June 2015
CMA

they do not pursue the same objectives.⁴⁴ The FLM, led by Hamadoun Founè,⁴⁵ seems to have a political agenda. It is alleged that most of its members are Fulani herders in revolt against the theft of their livestock and the abuses of administrative authorities and certain traditional leaders.⁴⁶

A mapping of the attacks reinforces speculation that two distinct groups are operating in the same geographical area

The creation of the FLM might also provide an opportunity for some actors to capture part of the peace dividend in a context in which the central region suffers the consequences of the crisis in the north without receiving any special attention from the Malian authorities and their partners.⁴⁷ In addition, a mapping of the attacks reinforces speculation that two distinct groups are operating in the same geographical area, with interests that sometimes converge.

Important dates

- 16 October 2011:** Creation of the MNLA
- 17 January 2012:** Start of the rebellion in Northern Mali
- 1 April 2012:** Creation of the MAA
- 26 May 2012:** Alliance between MNLA and Ansar Dine
- 21 July 2012:** Creation of CMFPR I
- 11 January 2013:** Start of French Operation Serval
- 2 May 2013:** Creation of HCUA
- 18 June 2013:** Signature of the Ouagadougou Agreement
- 21 May 2014:** Removal of Malian army from Kidal
- 9 June 2014:** Creation of CMA
- 14 June 2014:** Creation of the Platform
- 14 August 2014:** Creation of GATIA
- 15 May 2015:** Peace agreement signed by the Malian government, the Platform, CMFPR II and CPA
- 29 June 2015:** CMA signs the Peace agreement
- 16 October 2015:** CMA and the Platform sign Anefis's pacts

Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid (Ansar Dine of the South)

This is one of the most enigmatic groups in the jihadist movement. It announced its existence in June 2015 with attacks on Fakola and Misséni, two villages located in the Sikasso region, on the Ivorian border. The attacks primarily targeted the Malian military and administrative buildings.

The group is better known as Ansar Dine of the South (*Ansar Dine du Sud*), a reference to Iyad Ag Galy's Ansar Dine, with whom it nurtures close links. In addition to sharing a name, several cadres in the group, including its presumed leader, Souleymane Keita,⁴⁸ who was arrested on 5 March 2016, had been members of the Islamic police of Tombouctou, who were in control when the city was under siege, occupied by AQIM and Ansar Dine.⁴⁹

The emergence of this movement hundreds of kilometres away from its traditional areas can be explained by the determination of some groups in the north, and of Ansar Dine in particular, to expand their theatre of operations. Although the involvement of former members of the Tombouctou Islamic police gives the impression of an imported phenomenon, local dynamics in the Sikasso region, notably the hypothesis of local complicity, reveals the complex nature of the movement.⁵⁰

For now, there seems to be no solution to the potential inclusion of Ansar Dine, Katiba Ansar Dine Macina and Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid in the peace process, a state of affairs that is likely to last, unsettling the process and making the agreement – a forceps delivery⁵¹ – even more fragile. There is still considerable doubt about the potential for creating conditions for a lasting peace.

The June 2015 Agreement: a new departure?

Signed on 15 May and 20 June 2015, the agreement is the outcome of a lengthy process that began in Ouagadougou. It also represents a political compromise at a time when the impatience of international stakeholders was growing in proportion to the increase in peacekeeping forces being targeted by jihadist groups.⁵²

If the main goal of the Ouagadougou Agreement of 2013 was the organisation of presidential elections, it was also aimed at laying the groundwork for future discussions

between the Malian government and the armed groups. Despite the 60-day deadline stipulated in the text, it finally took a year to bring the various protagonists together and initiate discussions.

After eight months of negotiations, international mediators under the auspices of Algiers submitted a document signed in two phases. The Malian government and the movements on the Platform, to whom must be added the CMFPR II and one part of the CPA, signed on 15 May 2015. The rest of the CMA only appended its signature on 20 June. This push, due in part to the determination of the mediators to conclude a shaky process successfully, provoked the departure of the CMFPR II and part of the CPA from the coalition.⁵³ To a certain extent this situation would be responsible for the blockages that stalled the launch of CSA activities for several months.

Since this was not the first peace agreement signed, either since independence in 1960 or since the launch of the rebellion in 2012, civil society has been cautious about the 20 June peace agreement, as has been the case among a portion of the population and the Malian political class.

Amongst the provisions that were criticised was the installation of the interim authorities in the regions of the north during the peace agreement's transition period (lasting 18-24 months). Government drafted a Bill, which was put to the vote in the National Assembly on 31 March 2016. The text provides for the installation of authorities to fill the gap left by the state, especially in relation to basic social services in certain localities in the north. A subsidiary convention, published in the national press, contains plans to distribute the number of representatives successfully among the government, the CMA and the Platform.⁵⁴

For the opposition, which contested the law on 11 April 2016 in the Constitutional Court (the case was rejected on 5 May⁵⁵), the law is likely to create a difference in treatment between the north and the south. In addition to this problem the opposition fears it may be marginalised when the new authorities are installed.

Despite the Malian government's optimistic discourse, the path to peace is littered with obstacles. The failure of the Kidal Forum, which took place from 27 to 30 March 2016 after several postponements, is one example.

Announced with great fanfare by the government and the armed groups, the forum was supposed to signal the completion of the reconciliation process between the CMA and the Platform, which had begun in Anéfis in October 2015.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, it was boycotted by both the government and the Platform due to differences of opinion over, in the main, the presence of the Malian army in Kidal during the ceremony.

In addition, despite the government's repeatedly expressed wish to make the Algiers negotiations more inclusive, they were mainly

dominated by the host country, the lead mediator, which chaired the discussions between the Malian state and the armed groups.

The summit meetings on decentralisation (*États généraux de la décentralisation*) in October and the national conferences (*Assises nationales*) on the north in November 2013 illustrate this political will. However, these meetings did not go far enough to correct the fact that there were not enough discussions amongst Malians themselves, one of the most serious stumbling blocks to preceding peace agreements.⁵⁷

Just such one-on-one discussions between the government and the armed movements were believed to be among the reasons why the National Pact of 1992 failed – several of its provisions were out of sync with the reality on the ground and the real needs of the people.⁵⁸

The agreement was also criticised for being largely rooted in methods used in the past

The lack of inclusiveness, proof of which may be found in the mistaken reference to the principle of ownership, resulted in ignorance among the people of the contents of the agreement.⁵⁹ This situation also contributed to feelings of exclusion, which resulted in some rejecting the agreement. In fact, some actors see certain members of the FLM as frustrated and marginalised actors in the peace process,⁶⁰ and they have repeatedly called for their inclusion in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process and, more widely, in the peace process.

The agreement was also criticised for being largely rooted in methods used in the past, with critics believing it would, at best, only serve to delay the advent of the next rebellion.⁶¹

Its supporters, however, believed it to be an innovative document, providing, as it did, for the president of the Regional Council to be elected by direct universal suffrage and control *a posteriori* by the central state authorities – although monitored – of decisions taken by the local authorities. These were presented as gains in the promotion of local governance.⁶²

Although the first provision was not new, it already existed in legislation, it was nevertheless very different from provisions in preceding agreements, providing for an additional means of deepening the involvement of regions in the selection of their leaders.

Although the representative of the state retains a place in the new architecture, this approach avoids the risk of parachuting people into positions of responsibility solely because of their proximity to

the central power, to whom they more often than not feel more of a sense of allegiance than they do to the people for whom they are required to provide services.⁶³

These changes, however, are not without risk and do not suffice to guarantee better governance in the north. The fear that certain individuals implicated in the illegal economy will, thanks to the large sums of money at their disposal, succeed in getting themselves elected, or, in some cases, acquire even greater power, exposes the limitations of the measures.⁶⁴

They can only work if they are accompanied by control of illegal trafficking and improvements to the electoral system. On this last point, it is up to the Malian stakeholders to find efficient regulatory mechanisms for competitive local elections that both reduce the influence of money and permit a more rigorous selection of candidates.

The peace agreement was intended to bring an end to hostilities and to develop a framework for resolving the root causes of the crisis. However, it focused on the distribution of political power, neglecting other equally important issues.⁶⁵ Many actors recognise the need for comprehensive reforms but feel any intervention must be gradual in order to avoid frustrating the various protagonists.⁶⁶

It is difficult to reduce GATIA to merely a pro-government militia

This approach reflects the search for a compromised solution in drawing up an agreement that tentatively refers to sensitive issues without tackling them head on. It also illustrates the mindset of some members of Mali's political class and the armed movements whose involvement in the illicit economy of the north makes any serious reform difficult and destroys the chance of it being applied.

Despite the many criticisms levelled against the agreement, its implementation is the cause of real hope among the people. Paradoxically, this can be explained by, amongst other things, the fact that people are exhausted by a conflict that has lasted for four years and also by their desire to play a more active role in improving their living conditions.

The Malian authorities and the armed movements must grasp this opportunity to carry forward the implementation process. If the feeling that the weakness of the text is that it gives priority to the distribution of political power, which is not the only challenge Mali faces, it nonetheless opens up interesting possibilities for stakeholders to explore in order to improve the quality of life of the people in the north. To this end, it should be seen as one phase in the process of stabilising.

Conclusion

In Mali, the plethora of armed groups with, at times, communitarian ideals has been an obstacle throughout the peace negotiation process. It also explains some of the difficulties in implementing the June 2015 peace agreement emanating from the Algiers process. A year after it was signed, the agreement has failed to produce tangible effects. The difficulties in implementing decisive measures, further delaying an end of the crisis, add grist to the mill of peace naysayers. If Mali is to achieve long-term stability, a process in which the June 2015 Agreement is only one step, all stakeholders, including the armed groups, must transcend their own political and, on occasion, individual interests in favour of the general interests of the country.

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