

# CRISIS IN MALI

## A peacebuilding approach

By Katrine Høyer

While there are several narratives about Mali, the one currently dominating the agenda concerns the capture of Mali's north by radicals and the perceived ungovernability of that region as a result of the lack of governance, and state complicity with criminal groups which in turn was exploited by well-armed, equipped and trained international terrorist groups.

The counter-terrorism campaign championed by France and its allies is in reaction to the various groups occupying the area, ranging from the jihadist al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) to salafist Ansar Dine. The campaign targets these groups as a security threat not only to the local countries and populations, but also to security in Europe. In other words, the crisis in Mali is currently being defined by far too many commentators in terms of security for Western citizens, and realpolitik is dominating the agenda.

However, counter-terrorism by external powers is not obviously consistent with peacebuilding – and, for Mali to recover from the current crisis, solutions must be rooted in peacebuilding, taking into account the historic, political, socio-economic reality of the country. This angle is currently missing from many international narratives about intervening in Mali. In this paper we will discuss what a peacebuilding approach to the conflict in Mali could look like.

### THE SITUATION IN MALI

Mali must be understood in the context of the wider changes in North Africa and the Sahel, including recent events triggered by the Arab Spring, which created a new geopolitical map in the region. But, while the conflict in Libya and subsequent return of Tuareg fighters to Mali (and neighbouring countries) played a trigger role, events in Mali have their roots in history.

Since Mali's independence in 1960, there have been four Tuareg rebellions which can all be characterised as being in part in reaction to a perception of their having been colonised, first by the French and since by the African Malian government. The Tuareg were to some extent favoured by the French, who regarded them as noble and "whiter" than their black African peers. This laid the foundation for a deep-rooted mistrust between the Tuareg population and the state, which still persists today. This is

combined with a feeling of their being left by the state to fend for themselves, including in the wake of very serious ecological crises like the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, where the loss of livestock was not compensated by the government and people had to find their own solutions.

This experience emphasises the very real underlying challenge of integrating semi-nomadic people living in remote conditions into the modern nation-state, especially when they are subject to livelihood challenges whose traditional solutions put them at odds with the norms and systems more appropriate to the mainly sedentary lifestyles of most other Malians. It is also part of the historic context that the Malian army has never defeated the Tuareg rebels militarily and turned to the oppression of the civilian population instead (most famously in the rebellion of 1963–64). With the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s and the corruption exerted

in relation to food aid intended for the north, the shaping of a nationalist movement occurred.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) laid claim to an independent Azawad state in April 2012. Tellingly, the actual size of the Tuareg population in Mali is a issue. It is complicated





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by whether their former slaves and descendants should be included, and by the fact that the Tuareg have tended to avoid inclusion in censuses – a posture which both reinforces and symbolises their alienation from and ambivalence towards the Malian state. Official estimates point to the Tuareg constituting 2-3 percent of the population in the north (where about 10 percent of Mali's population lives). However, other estimates are much higher, ranging between 10-30 percent. The various figures, of course, differ according to the motivations of the actors using them. Nonetheless, the Tuareg do not constitute the largest group in the north and are in majority only in Kidal and not in the two other northern capitals, Gao and Timbuktu.

The MNLA's claim to an independent Azawad (and approximately 60 percent of the Malian territory) therefore does not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of

is a huge mistake and as such may contribute to further conflict in itself.

The current crisis in Mali goes much deeper than the Tuareg rebellion and the security challenges posed by AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar Dine, etc. Mali has suffered a long-lasting crisis of governance and has historically not succeeded in creating a national post-colonial identity, inclusive of all populations.

A key dynamic that is not currently part of the dominant narrative about Mali is that, in the past, the Malian state has been divorced from its people more generally – not just the Tuareg. This is partly because most Malians, especially in rural areas, have local governance traditions that operate relatively independently of the state, just as they have done since colonial times, as well as very effective civil society networks, which provide mutual support in a context

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the people in the north, notably the Songhai and Fulani, nor in fact all of the Tuareg. A key insight to draw from this is that the situation in northern Mali transcends the Tuareg claim. Therefore, reducing the north-south dynamic to purely a question of Tuareg independence or autonomy

where the state struggles to provide basic services. These networks are often dominated by one or other ethnic or caste group, while other groups are, or perceive themselves to be, marginalised, geographically, economically and socially. The uneven provision of government services

further reinforces perceptions of unfairness and exclusion. As a result of all these factors and others, there are fractures: between the state and its people; between north and south; between state authorities and traditional authorities; and between different communities.

The democratic transition does not currently seem to address these issues. Since its nomination, the current government has struggled to act independently from the (ex) military junta, which seems determined to hold on to its grip rather than ceding the democratic space. The continued influence of the military junta in Bamako and a very ambitious roadmap for transition back to democracy, with elections scheduled for July 2013, mean that the root causes of the current crisis are unlikely to be sufficiently tackled by the ruling elite, nor by the international community which, for the most part, would consider early elections a signpost of success.

#### **UNGOVERNED SPACE IN MALI?**

At the same time, corruption and inequitable development in Mali, and possibly also direct sponsorship and protection from local political and military authorities, have fuelled the existence of an underground transnational economy – one of trafficking illegal drugs, arms and people. The financial interests at stake are great – and constitute an immense challenge for peacebuilding in a region where alternative sources of income are scarce.

While a more equitable development is necessary in Mali, it should be kept in mind that Mali is about five times the size of the UK with a population of 12-14 million people and the state budget of a mid-size British city. Natural resources are poorly managed and climate change may well exacerbate the frequency and severity of cyclical droughts. In that light, the junta's desire for continued political influence can probably be partly explained by the desire to maintain the status quo – and thus the continued development of the illegal economy.

According to the dominant narrative, the presence of the various illegal actors means that northern Mali is an “ungoverned space”. This notion needs to be unpacked if the situation is to be understood and addressed. While the state’s presence in the north of Mali has been limited, a range of alternative structures have, in fact, flourished. These are provided by figures based on their historic, ethnic, cultural and religious identities, by organised criminal networks and by jihadist organisations. These have, in different measure, complemented the functions of the state, and to a large extent were tolerated by the state in doing so.

This complex web of informal networks and patronage systems – some of them with links to neighbouring countries, not least Libya and Algeria, as well as to Bamako, Europe and even Central America – has, in some respects, acted as a system of governance, i.e. it has provided a degree of security, order, systems and opportunity. Rather than ungoverned, northern Mali could therefore be referred to as being “alternatively governed”.

It is likely that, when the lid constituted by the French troops is lifted, the illicit trade (and governance) will continue, as there is

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no reason to think that the presence of the Malian or external armies will be able to prevent it – or avoid the temptation to participate. In this sense, Mali raises central questions about how you achieve peace in a context where the actors include so-called drug dealers, criminal groups and terrorists. Targeting these governance structures using a purely counter-terrorism approach risks having negative effects unless the benefits and the services that have been provided, such as security, employment and even to some extent normative frameworks, are integrated into or replaced with a peacebuilding strategy and approach.

#### WHAT IS PEACE?

Peace is when people are able to resolve their differences without violence and can work together to improve the quality of their lives. Peacebuilding helps people achieve this by ensuring they can live in safety, have fair and effective laws, participate in shaping political decisions, make a decent living and secure their wellbeing.

Moreover, the outside interests in Mali are plentiful – drug smuggling networks operating in parallel or together with the various jihadist groups constitute only one component. Mali’s neighbouring states are also important stakeholders, not least Algeria, which has long tolerated AQIM operating at its borders, providing an external enemy that justifies the continued military rule of that country.

The role of the international community also deserves consideration. First of all, the governance deficits in Mali were overlooked over time by the international community and corruption and inequitable economic development were not sufficiently challenged. This is partly because Mali ostensibly provided an African example of somewhat successful democratisation and at the same time showed good aid absorption – factors which made Mali a so-called “donor-darling”. In addition, security

and plans. Past interventions in Mali have failed precisely because they did not sufficiently integrate nationwide consultations, misrepresented the social fabric in the north, downplayed the socio-economic differences and underestimated the problematic governance systems in the north and in Bamako. A peacebuilding approach to Mali would entail:

- thorough analysis and understanding of, as well as dialogue involving, all relevant stakeholders on these issues
- determining how to support progress towards a more integrated, inclusive, peaceful and well-governed Mali, while realising that this will take time and that there are tensions between this goal and that of homeland security
- recognising that these are, fundamentally, Malian questions, which cannot be solved by outsiders; but given that outsiders including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), France, the West and potentially the UN are already involved and will continue to be so, outside interveners need to find a way to resolve these tensions and contribute to Mali’s peace

Furthermore, incentives are critical. While previous Tuareg peace agreements were sufficient to stop the fighting, they proved unsustainable when it came to establishing real peace. Part of the reason for this may be that the Tuareg-Bamako deals in the past have excluded younger Tuareg, women, other ethnic groups in the north and those not part of the Bamako elite. In this regard, Mali presents us with the central question of when a political settlement is actually inclusive enough.

The bargain needed to build a sustainable peace will need to be a more dynamic and evolving elite

interests pushed by the international community to a large extent distorted and drove the Malian government’s approaches in the north following 9/11. Arguably, the homeland security imperatives of the West, rather than real peacebuilding challenges in northern Mali, set the priorities for outside interventions.

#### A PEACEBUILDING APPROACH

Taking the situation and the challenges outlined above into account, it is essential that outsiders intervening in Mali and more widely in the region integrate the use of a peacebuilding lens into their analysis

bargain that incentivises leaders towards longer-term peace, by drawing them into better governance of the “ungoverned spaces”, and which continues to evolve. Because historically such elite bargains have tended to become the new status quo and to feed and foster patronage networks that *undermine* democratisation, there is probably a role for outsiders (especially those with regional legitimacy rather than those from the West) in playing a long-term facilitative role to try to ensure that a new bargain in Mali evolves in a more democratic way.

- the relationship between the state and all Malian people
- how to retain a dynamic civil society while strengthening the state
- the relationship between the government and the north
- the concept of “alternative governance”
- the interests and grievances of all groups in the north (not just the Tuareg)
- the nature of Islam in Mali
- the inter-relationships between ethnic groups that have been damaged by behaviours during recent conflicts

Some kind of national dialogue process seems to be needed, to discuss and debate the nature of the Malian nation and the Malian state, and to explore what citizenship means in practical terms. This should not be limited to discussing the Tuareg rebellion(s) and the relationship

Such a dialogue should be led by Malians, but can be supported internationally (e.g. by ECOWAS or the UN) and would involve a broad cross-section of influential people from all across Mali (i.e. not confirming the north-south divide). It would be designed to enable an honest and frank

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between the Tuareg and the rest of Mali. The dialogue could be used to identify and debate a whole range of critical issues that need to be addressed for Mali to evolve as a peaceful and democratic country. From a peacebuilding perspective, these could include:

conversation about how to strengthen the country’s ability to develop peacefully and inclusively. It would contribute to a new shared vision for peaceful and democratic development.

Prescribing the precise form and participation in this dialogue is

beyond the purpose of this paper, but it might involve a series of facilitated meetings – more formal and less formal – taking place in different parts of the country over a period of perhaps two years. Such a national dialogue could build on Mali’s long tradition for negotiations and its very dynamic civil society. In other words, the fact that Mali has a strong society but a weak state needs to be positively explored and engaged with. The governance structures in place in the north – informal as they may be – need to be taken into account, and their transformation or evolution should surely be at the core of a peacebuilding strategy in Mali.

Future outside intervention in Mali will have to deal with crucial dilemmas that in the past were not successfully addressed, including how to best support good governance and inclusive development. It will be important to maintain a role for external actors that does not fuel or unintentionally enable illicit networks. Experience from previous peacekeeping missions will point to the difficulty in this.

Any intervention strategy therefore needs to be built on, and continuously monitored with reference to, a thorough analysis of the involvement of some members of the political elite in the illicit economy, which in turn continues to allow groups such as AQIM to consolidate and enrich themselves.

A useful contribution to this would be an objective review of Western involvement in Mali over the past two decades since the end of the Moussa Traoré dictatorship, exploring the degree to which it fostered or undermined democratic progress and peace in the north, perhaps using recent OECD Development Assistance Committee statebuilding and peacebuilding norms as a reference. This would help identify practices to maintain or avoid in the next phase.

A peacebuilding approach will also entail taking into account the regional dimension. Importantly, Mali has brought to the forefront the regional



Refugees collecting water. Niger, July 2012 © Sean Smith



consequences of the changed geopolitical space in the wake of the Arab Spring. Since the civil war in Liberia (1999-2003) “regionalism” has been the buzz-word used in response to the security challenges in West Africa. Partly due to the inability of the UN to engage in every crisis on the continent, more trust was put in ECOWAS. However, ECOWAS was not able to respond to the crisis in Mali, despite their planning, as an ECOWAS military intervention was opposed by the UN Security Council (the UN did not believe ECOWAS would be able

reform (SSR), counter-insurgency, civilian protection, development and humanitarian issues in order to maximise the speed of impact. But this kind of approach is not likely to be adequate in Mali unless it addresses the nature of the crisis of that country and its historical connotations.

The crisis in Mali is deep-rooted and should be treated as such. This is not done by quick democratic fixes but through a long-term, patient approach. Adopting a peacebuilding approach to Mali may provide some

in the foreseeable future or be able to be addressed through transitional stabilisation efforts.

Moreover, past stabilisation efforts undertaken in Mali, notably SSR, have admittedly not been successful. This demonstrates the need to radically revise SSR and, in fact, counter-terrorism, shifting away from a purely military focus.

In recognition of the regional trajectory and implications of the crisis in Mali, a peacebuilding approach in the country needs to be linked to wider Sahelian peacebuilding approaches. At this point, the main Sahelian approach is framed mainly in terms of counter-terrorism and security and military cooperation. But it could be much more than that and, for instance, could build on a regional approach to peacebuilding that takes into account the historic, cultural, (real) economic and ethnic linkages between the various countries. The role of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in eastern Africa in facilitating cooperation on socio-economic and peacebuilding issues might be considered in this regard.

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to meet the challenge of Mali’s vast territory). The future of the regional security architecture will need consideration.

At the same time careful consideration must be given to the applicability in Mali of the stabilisation approach promoted by many Western donors over the past years, which seeks to integrate peacebuilding, statebuilding, security sector

of the answers. This would comprise recognition and analysis of how the “ungoverned space” is in fact governed. Any intervention will have to be based on what is the reality of Mali i.e. a strong society but a weak state with a range of informal governance structures that need to be understood and engaged with. The failure of formal government in Mali lies at the heart of the current crisis – something that is not likely to change

## MOVING FORWARD

Peacebuilding efforts in Mali should be Malian-led, should build on the Malian tradition for negotiations, and should look beyond quick elections and the completion of a democratic roadmap.

A peacebuilding approach would also comprise folding the need for homeland security into a broader framework. While it is, of course, very difficult to square the Western nations’ need for homeland security with the needs of human security in Mali and the wider Sahel, this is something the West simply must do. There is a need for a long-term peacebuilding strategy that goes beyond troops, immediate stabilisation needs, SSR, counter-terrorism and quick-fix development projects. Purely focusing on the counter-terrorism aspect will only serve to benefit groups like AQIM and MUJAO in terms of recruitment, as the Malian population is likely to suffer from such a campaign and it also feeds the “crusader” narrative (as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan).

However, as counter-terrorism, stabilisation and SSR are likely to form part of the overall toolbox used in Mali for some time to come, it is necessary to consider ways to make them more conflict-sensitive. This means making them more reflective of the context in which they are being implemented, and the interaction between the intervention and the context, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts.

As part of a peacebuilding approach, it will also be necessary to identify incentives to bring criminal groups and other “alternative governors” into a peacebuilding process. Outside interveners will need to explore further if there is a “peace dividend” that is going to be persuasive for these actors and what such a peace might look like. This is not an easy task but, as events in Mali have demonstrated, it is a necessary one.

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