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Volume 5, Number 5, December 20, 2020

Paris, Algiers Concerned over Mali's Transitional Regime

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Can Mali's new government regain territorial control and restore personal security? For the past four months, Mali has been governed by a transition government that was set up after a military coup d'état in the summer of 2020. The international community initially condemned the coup, but it has since been forced to accept this reality, and has been encouraging Mali's military and the transition government to advance the implementation of the 2015 Algiers peace accords.¹ Yet actions taken so far by the military and the new regime do not bode well for the future of the country, and are showing signs of weakness vis-à-vis a multitude of armed groups, including several jihadi militant organizations.

Understanding the current instability in Mali requires looking back eight years. It has been a turbulent period, politically, economically and in terms of security. The 2012 rebellion of separatist Tuaregs opened Mali's doors to a collection of Islamist jihadi groups, such as Ansar al-Din and al-Qa'ida in the Maghreb (AQIM). Compounded by the 2011 civil war in Libya and the free flow of weapons across the borders, these groups took over large territories in the north by April 2012.

¹ *United Nations Peacemaker*, "[Accord Pour la Paix et la Réconciliation au Mali - Issu du Processus d'Alger](#)," 2015.

Mali's internal division was exacerbated by the absence of government from half of the national territory, clashing ideologies, weapons proliferation from across its borders, tribal battles over farmland and water resources, in addition to a demographic explosion.² These factors exposed social and ethnic cleavages that had propagated until then mainly under the surface. And while the 2013-2014 UN-backed French emergency Operation Serval pushed most of the jihadi groups out of Malian cities, armed militants are still largely present in rural parts of the country.³

In April 2013, UN Security Council resolution 2011 established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA),⁴ which is currently the largest UN peace keeping force in the world. Despite success of the French Barkhane force in Operation Serval,⁵ and the presence of UN peacekeeping forces, violent attacks and reprisals increased. Several jihadi armed groups in the north reorganized and remained active there. Other jihadi groups moved away and spread into neighboring Burkina Faso and parts of Niger, igniting new local conflicts. More local groups and militias sprang up in central Mali, which has since become the epicenter of instability in the country. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), in 2019 alone 284,000 Malians were displaced.⁶ These people fled violence and insecurity. This paper will analyze efforts made by the new transition regime to rehabilitate the country and offer stability and security to the long-suffering residents of Mali.

The Official French Take on Mali's Transitional Government

The 2015 peace accords should have calmed internal tensions, but that did not happen. At the time, the accords were signed by Mali's government, an alliance of pro-government militias and allied Tuareg groups. But over the years, these groups changed and splintered, with the new groups demanding to be included in various government programs designed to pay militants to disarm. Local interim authorities, established by the peace accords to restore basic services to residents in the north, lack finances, training and support. In parallel, the coordination mechanism for the disarmament and integration process, has suffered setbacks and delays.

² *World Population Review*, "[Mali](#)," 2020.

³ *Defense*, "[Opération Serval, Ministère des Armées](#)," 2013.

⁴ *MINUSMA UN missions*, "[About MINUSMA](#)," n.d.

⁵ *Defense*, "[French Ministry of Defense, Operation Serval 2013-14](#)," 2013-14.

⁶ *Internal Displacement Monitoring Center*, "[Mali -country information](#)," 2019.

The failure of the implementation of the accords, growing personal insecurity in central Mali, state corruption and an economic crisis led to the August 18, 2020 coup d'état against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. As mentioned above, the international community condemned the coup, with the West African regional organization, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) suspending Mali from all its institutions and decreeing sanctions until a civil transition is put in place.⁷ On September 25, the army nominated Bah Ndaw, a retired general, as the country's transitional president, and a transitional government was sworn in a few days later. International actors are nevertheless concerned that the transitional regime is heading in the wrong direction.

Addressing the UN security Council on October 8,⁸ Mali's representative to the United Nations, Issa Konfrourou, listed delays in implementing the 2015 Algiers Accord on Peace and Reconciliation and cited the worsening security conditions in the center of Mali as factors that led to the coup. The debate reflected international awareness that Kaita will not be reinstated, no matter what pressure is applied on the Malian army. On October 15, the UN Security Council adopted a presidential statement,⁹ welcoming the new transitional arrangements and outlining expectations for the way forward, including elections within 18 months, full implementation of the 2015 peace agreement, and expedited action to protect civilians and reduce intercommunal violence in central Mali.

While the appointment of a civil transition government constituted a positive sign, its composition seemed less promising. Out of the 25 cabinet portfolios, at least four central posts (defense, security, territorial administration and national reconciliation) went to army colonels. The M5-RFP (Rally for Patriotic Forces) opposition movement is only partially represented.

A second worrying sign was the October 8 prisoner-exchange deal with the Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam w-al-Muslimeen (JNIM) organization. In the deal, 206 jihadi prisoners were released in exchange for four hostages, including the French-Swiss citizen Sophie Pétronin, who was kidnapped in 2016. According to several reports, JNIM also received ten million euros for the release, though no official sources confirmed the transaction. French Prime Minister Jean Castex declared on October

⁷ ECOWAS Commission, "[Statement by ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on Mali](#)," August 20, 2020.

⁸ UN News, "[Transitional President in Mali appoints new Prime Minister, top UN official tells Security Council](#)," October 8, 2020.

⁹ UN Security Council Report, "[Overview of Security Council Presidential Statements](#)," October 15, 2020.

12 that his government did not pay any ransom for the liberation of Pétronin, though technically he did not say a ransom was not paid.

Clearly, the army had come under great pressure to achieve the liberation of one of the four hostages - Malian opposition figure Soumaila Cissé. His kidnapping in March 2020 in the north of the country generated great public anger and came to symbolize the weakness of the government in Bamako, Mali's capital, vis-à-vis jihadi groups. Mali's government under Keita began negotiating an exchange with the group that held Cissé and the three European hostages, but failed to conclude a deal. The military regime took up these negotiations from that point, supposedly succeeding where Keita's government failed.

Mali celebrated the liberation of the hostages, but several questions have been raised over the operation. Several lists of the 206 people supposedly released in the deal circulated in social media prior to October 8, but no official list was published. Hence, it is unclear whether all the released were indeed rebel militants. It seems that among them were several militants responsible for some of the most lethal terror attacks in Mali, Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso.¹⁰ On the face of it, the deal should be considered a victory for JNIM and its Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghali, as the regime yielded to their demands.

Auditioned by the French Senate Foreign Affairs and Defense Commission on October 13, minister of armed forces, Florence Parly, noted that the negotiations that led to the liberation of Petronin, Cissé and the other two hostages were started by Mali, and that French authorities were informed of the imminent release just four days ahead of it. "The decision to liberate jihadists was taken solely by Malian authorities, who estimated this was necessary in order to obtain the release of Somaila Cissé," she said.¹¹ Her statement implied that if consulted in advance, Paris would have objected the deal which significantly empowered the jihadi captors.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian arrived at Bamako on October 25, to meet with the new president and new government. It was the first French official visit to Mali since the August 18 coup d'état, and its objectives were clear: highlighting the commitment of Paris to closely

¹⁰ *Le Monde*, "[Au Mali, la libération de 200 islamistes constitue un succès pour les djihadistes](#)," October 14, 2020.

¹¹ *Public Senat*, "[Djihadistes relâchés: 'Une décision qui appartient aux seules autorités maliennes,' selon Florence Parly](#)," October 13, 2020.

accompany the transition process and making sure the transitional government lives up to its promises of free and open elections. Moreover, with an increasing number of voices calling for dialogue with certain jihadi groups, and on the backdrop of the prisoner-exchange deal, the French minister came to caution his Malian interlocutors against any hasty moves. France believes that certain jihadi groups who are willing to negotiate with the regime have not abandoned their ideology and objectives, such as the imposition of *shari'a* on the state.

The level of French concerns was highlighted again on November 2, with the visit to Bamako of Parly. The minister reaffirmed French support to Malian forces in their campaign against terrorism, stating that “the return of the military forces to the whole [Malian] territory is a prerequisite for the return of the administration; it is important that all the army forces reaffirm their holding of the territories in regions under threat.”¹² Parly also revealed that French Barkhane forces had just neutralized over 50 jihadi fighters in central Mali. The military operation and the announcement made in Bamako were clearly meant as a message (perhaps even a warning) to Mali’s transition government that there was a need for a tough hand against militant Islamic groups, and against negotiating with groups that have not adopted a constructive political agenda.

Algeria’s Concerns

The insistence of Paris that Bamako had taken by itself and against French policy the decision to liberate 206 jihadi prisoners did not convince Algiers. With 14,000 kilometers of shared border, Algeria sees Mali’s territories as its geostrategic backyard. Concerned over risks of instability along its borders, Algeria intends on playing an active role in the regional scene, both in Libya and in the Sahel. The 2015 Mali peace accords, signed under its auspices, offer Algeria (so it believes) the credibility to play such a key role vis-à-vis Bamako.

Shortly after the August 18 coup, and even before Paris, Algiers dispatched its chief diplomat to Mali, Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum. Three weeks after the prisoner-exchange deal the Algerian Defense Ministry published an unusually harsh statement, revealing that security forces had arrested on Algerian soil Mustapha Derrar, who had been released earlier in the Mali exchange deal. The statement continued, saying that under the prisoner-exchange agreement “more than 200

¹² Daouda Bakary Kone, “[France-Mali: Florence Parly à Bamako](#),” *Financial Afrik*, November 3, 2020.

terrorists were released, and a substantial ransom was paid to terrorist groups [in exchange for] the release of three European hostages,” it denounced “unacceptable practices, contrary to UN resolutions criminalizing the payment of ransoms to terrorist groups and hampering efforts to fight terrorism and its sources of financing.”¹³

On November 16, Algerian security forces arrested in the south of the country, near its border with Mali, a second terrorist - El Hocine Ould Amar Ould Maghnia. He also was part of the group of militants liberated in the exchange deal. Senior members of the Algerian security system continue to blame France for paying a ransom, arguing that terrorism in the Sahel region was created by such payments. Without the European money, militant groups could not have survived in this harsh environment, they say.

Algeria would like to see a reduction in French involvement in Mali and assume the sole responsibility of guaranteeing the 2015 peace accords. Nevertheless, despite political differences, Paris and Algiers agree on two points: that the accords should serve as the basis for a restructuring process, and that only a strong Mali government (both politically and militarily) could impose the implementation of the accords. Both Paris and Algiers estimate that for the moment, this is not the case. The Mali transition regime has repeatedly committed to the Algiers Accords. The head of the government Moctar Ouane said on November 16 that the implementation of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in Mali, which emerged from the Algiers Process, is one of the key priorities of the Malian transition authorities.

The Current Situation

The international community considers the establishment of a transitional regime a positive sign towards stabilizing the political system in Mali. But recent developments regarding the composition of the transitional institutions give reason for concern. On December 5, the National Transition Council (CNT) – serving as a temporary parliament – became operational. Malian civil society and its political class have criticized the composition of this body and have threatened to

¹³ *République Algérienne - Ministère de la Défense*, “[Lutte antiterroriste - Arrestation d'un terroriste à Tlemcen](#),” October 29, 2020.

boycott it after the army secured 22 seats out of 121 for itself.¹⁴ This development cast doubts on the commitment of the army to advance free elections. The international community is adamant that without an electoral process, the country cannot stand up against the proliferation of extremist forces.

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¹⁴ Marième Soumaré, "[Mali: Calls to boycott National Transitional Council grow louder](#)," *The Africa Report*, November 17, 2020.