

By Ole Martin Gaasholt

Who needs to reconcile with whom?

The Conflict's Complexity in Northern Mali Calls for Tailored Solutions

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While negotiations are taking place in Algiers, some observers insist on the need for reconciliation between Northern Mali and the rest of the country and particularly between Tuareg and other Malians.

But the Tuareg are a minority in Northern Mali and most of them did not support the rebels. So who needs to be reconciled with whom? And what economic solutions will counteract conflict?

This Policy Note argues that not only exclusion underlies the conflict, but also a lack of economic opportunities.



The important Tuareg component in most rebellions in Mali does not mean that all Tuareg participate or even support the rebellions.

All the rebellions in Northern Mali have been initiated by Tuareg, typically from the Kidal region, where the first geographically circumscribed rebellion broke out a few years after independence in 1960. Tuareg from elsewhere in Northern Mali have participated in later conflicts in varying degree.

Tuareg component in rebellions

In the 1990s, Malian Arabs put their mark on what has continued to be known as a Tuareg rebellion, this time affecting all of Northern Mali. By contrast, a third rebellion from 2006 until 2009 occurred almost exclusively in the Kidal region.

The latest conflict, beginning in 2012, was greatly influenced by the people who had taken part in the previous rebellion, along with additional people from Kidal. Tuareg from other regions of Northern Mali joined in as the conflict unfolded. This time, however, the predominantly Tuareg rebels claimed to be fighting on behalf of all

the peoples of Northern Mali, which they called Azawad, and not just of the Tuareg.

There has thus been a sequence of rebellions in Mali in which the Tuareg component has been important. In addition, there have been complex connections between the various conflicts, with unresolved grievances from previous episodes feeding into subsequent rebellions. The Tuareg component, however, does not imply participation or even support by all Tuareg.

The conflict has remained specific to Mali, and, within Mali, to Tuareg originating in Kidal region. Other Malian Tuareg were not necessarily initially concerned, and nor generally were Tuareg inhabitants of other countries. Furthermore, the way in which other Malian peoples were affected varied from one rebellion to the next.

Malian Arabs were important participants in the extensive conflict of the 1990s that permanently reshaped the relationship between Northern Mali and the rest of the country.

The Songhay opposed Tuareg and Arab rebels in the 1990s, whereas many of them joined Islamists controlling Northern Mali in 2012. Very few Songhay, or even Arabs, joined the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA), despite the claim that Azawad was a multiethnic territory. Diverging interests were thus reflected in the existence of several rebel and Islamist organisations.

The composite character of the population of Northern Mali found expression in complex oppositions between people of different ethnic groups or parts of ethnic groups both during the conflict and in the complicated post-conflict negotiations.

Northern Mali's peoples

The major ethnic groups of Northern Mali are the Songhay, Fulani, Arabs and Tuareg. The Songhay are the most numerous, while the Fulani are far more numerous in central Mali. In the south of the country, the Bambara are numerically and politically dominant, and their influence has increased with the

expansion of the apparatus of the Malian state since independence.

The Arabs are few in number but have a distinct presence as traders. Both Tuaregs and Arabs are primarily nomadic pastoralists. Arabs were better represented in the Malian national institutions than the Tuareg until the rebellion of the 1990s. Both Tuareg and Arabs increased their presence in the Malian state machinery and armed forces as part of the peace settlement following that conflict.

Arabs and Tuareg may still be less numerous than the Songhay, depending on how one defines people of slave descent. Although such people exist across Mali and may at times outnumber descendants of their former masters, among many Tuareg and Arab groups they are not just more numerous, but also somewhat distinct from other people.

Differences between Tuareg groups and between different parts of Northern Mali have been as important as those between entire ethnic groups. This has not precluded perceptions of differential treatment on ethnic grounds and demands for redress.

Growing sense of marginalisation

The recurring conflicts have been taken as proof by rebels and outside observers that

the Tuareg have, or Northern Mali has, been systematically excluded from participation in the Malian state. Worse, violent responses to conflict, as in Kidal during the first rebellion, have exacerbated the sense of marginalisation.

On a different, but related, note, the Malian state has been accused of not developing Northern Mali, regardless of its ethnic make-up. A challenging economic situation, characterised by droughts, state oppression, obstacles for pastoralists and, more recently, smuggling and abduction for ransom are attributed to the failure of the state to deliver economic development and security.

Instead, the Malian state has continued to govern Northern Mali and the Tuareg living there heavy-handedly. Conflicts have been ended by offering positions in the state and armed forces to Tuareg and other Northern Malians. Projects have also been offered to former rebels while infrastructural and development investments have been promised and partly implemented. Similar measures have been discussed in recent negotiations.

A frequently mentioned issue is the lack of employment opportunities for young men, who are easily drawn to criminal activities such as smuggling or into politico-military movements. None of the interventions to

counter marginalisation have been sufficient to counteract renewed conflict. Instead, the latest upheaval has produced more complex tensions among Northern Malians than ever before.

Reconciling whom?

The Tuareg of the MNLA began to oppose Malian Tuareg Islamists (Ansar Dine) during the conflict, but also the Algerian Al-Qaeda of the Maghreb (AQIM) and another Islamist group, Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), which recruited heavily inside Mali, particularly among the Songhay and Fulani.

It was MUJAO that drove the MNLA from Northern Mali. After the French intervention and the gradual but incomplete restoration of the Malian state presence in the north, an Arab group clashed with the MNLA, before splitting, whereupon one faction allied with the MNLA and other Tuareg groups in the negotiations in Algiers.

Defections from Ansar Dine created new Tuareg groups, which with the MNLA drove the Malian army from Kidal in May 2014. After a ceasefire, further negotiations were agreed upon. Before that, Tuareg and Arabs loyal to the Malian army throughout the conflict, but the rivals of powerful Tuareg rebels for regional influence, not least in Kidal, paved the way for the Malian army's re-entry into Kidal in 2013.

In October 2014, a Tuareg group siding with the government drove MNLA members from several localities in Northern Mali. Elsewhere, Songhay vigilante groups active during previous rebellions to counter the Tuareg and Arabs have been revived to oppose the latest Tuareg rebels.

With such a complex mosaic of tension and opposition, who should be reconciled with whom?

Carrying on (making a) living in Northern Mali

Given such diverse relations with and within the Malian state, reconciliation appears as a means to address the abuses committed by all sides in the conflict and to insist on an inclusive solution for all Northern Malians.

A negotiated solution with the instigators of the latest conflict, notwithstanding their possible links with now wanted Islamists, was under consideration throughout the conflict. This underscores the willingness of most

Lack of employment opportunities draws young men to criminal activities or into military movements.

PHOTO: TOM PILSTON/PANOS



As a way of negotiating peace, positions in the state and armed forces are often offered to former rebels from Northern Mali.

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Northern Mali faces a challenging economic situation. Droughts, obstacles for pastoralists and state oppression have led to increased smuggling and abductions for ransom. The state has failed to deliver economic development and security in the region.

actors to reconcile the opposing factions and achieve reunification.

However, this symbolic option though important, does not address the underlying causes of the successive conflicts. Marginalisation was not only due to political exclusion. Limited economic opportunities both heightened the sense of exclusion and reinforced the conditions that have produced conflicts.

To address the deeper causes, the economy of Northern Mali, which is over-dependent on pastoralism, trade, smuggling, and state and development support, requires long-term development. Regional investment and integration of ex-combatants are incapable of producing more self-sustaining and wide-ranging economic change.

Appropriate interventions ought to be considered by all the parties involved, including international partners, but also Malian authorities and the others involved in the present negotiations. This means recognising the political and economic factors that inform conflict, rather than the politicised ones that have been invoked to justify it.

Policy recommendations

1

Recognise the complexity of the Malian socio-political landscape and avoid preferential treatment of or focus on particularly vocal groups.

2

Promote reconciliation as an all-embracing process to include the entire population affected by conflict, rather than supposedly representative entities with grievances that are assumed to be legitimate.

3

Facilitate research into and debate about how to address the underlying causes of conflict, with emphasis on economic development, given the generally recognised marginalisation resulting from limited economic opportunities in Northern Mali.



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