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Abstract

This analysis delves into the unfolding conflict in Mali, with a particular focus on the imminent confrontation in the city of Kidal. As the Malian army, in collaboration with the 'Wagner Force' militia, advances toward Kidal, this study seeks to analyze the regional implications and the challenges posed to ongoing peace efforts. Kidal's historical significance as a locus of recurrent uprisings, coupled with its strategic location, renders it a pivotal battleground in Mali's endeavor to reassert state sovereignty over its entirety. The ongoing military offensive, orchestrated by Malian forces, the Wagner Force, and air support, engenders complex dynamics pertaining to security, politics, and the humanitarian plight of the local population. While international appeals for an immediate ceasefire and resumption of negotiations have been made, their effectiveness remains uncertain in light of persistent reports of civilian casualties. The eventual recapture of Kidal by the Malian army, though symbolically significant, introduces fresh security complexities, as Tuareg fighters forge alliances with jihadist groups. In light of these multifaceted challenges, this article underscores the pressing need for regional cooperation and diplomatic initiatives aimed at addressing the complexities of the Mali crisis and pursuing sustainable peace in the broader Sahel region.

Keywords: Mali, Kidal, Wagner Force, Sahel region; Jihadist Groups

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Background

Against the backdrop of growing tensions in Mali, the Malian army and the 'Wagner Force' militia are advancing and are now about 15 kilometers from Kidal with the aim of capturing the city and destroying the Tuareg separatist forces.¹ About 68,000 people live in the Kidal desert area (about 30,000 in the city), a central site on the way to Algeria. As the historical epicenter of an uprising, the residents of Kidal face an acute humanitarian crisis, as they have limited access to water, electricity, and medical care. Testimonies gathered from residents demonstrate the depth of daily struggles and the impact of the conflict on their lives. In addition to normal demographic trends, the population of Kidal has grown significantly in recent months due to an influx of several thousand internally displaced persons, who fled specifically from the Islamic State's massacres in the Ménaka region or the advance of the Malian army and the Wagner force - accused of abusing and deliberately harming civilians - in the Kidal region.

¹ See the link: <https://www.voanews.com/a/fighting-rages-in-mali-between-army-and-rebels-in-kidal/7351594.html>

Kidal has a unique place in the geography and consciousness of the Sahel region. From the early twentieth century, the city was developed as a former French military garrison buried in the dust of the desert, serving as a vital intermediary point between Mali and Algeria. Its strategic location, over 1,500 kilometers and a 24-hour journey from the capital of Bamako, and hundreds of kilometers from the major cities of Gao and Timbuktu in the north, has contributed to its historical significance.

The city and the surrounding area have been the hotbed of successive independent uprisings since Mali gained independence from France in 1960. The head of the current military junta, Colonel Assimi Goita, previously served in Kidal.

Kidal has been under the control of the Azawad Movements - (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad - MNLA) an alliance of mainly Tuareg tribal groups seeking autonomy or independence - since 2012. This rebel stronghold has been a stubborn obstacle in the Malian government's attempt to secure its control over all parts of the country. The Kidal region was among the initial territories to be seized by separatist rebels from the Tuareg tribes, consisting of factions advocating for varying degrees of autonomy, including those supporting full independence, alongside adherents of Salafist ideology aspiring to establish an Islamic caliphate and implement Sharia legal principles within the area.² Their success was quick and impressive and only direct French military intervention as part of Operation Serval prevented their occupation of the capital city.³

Malian military forces are now marching, supported by roughly 1,000 fighters from the 'Wagner Force' and air assistance, to seize the symbolic city of Kidal.

It should be emphasized that since they seized power in a military coup in 2020, the military junta in Mali has set as top priority for the re-establishment of state sovereignty over all parts of the country. Because of this as well as the local's separatist aspirations, the Kidal districts may become a significant battleground.⁴

The advance of Mali's regular forces, along with 'Force Wagner' raises critical questions about security, politics and the humanitarian situation in this region.⁵

Airforces also participate in the onslaught, which, according to the leaders of the Tuareg

2 Many Tuareg rebels served as mercenaries in Libya under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi. After his fall, they returned home, with military experience, military training and radical ideas that they tried to implement in their country.

3 Operation Serval was an international military operation led by France and Mali in northern Mali, from January 11, 2013, to July 2014. The purpose of the operation was to liberate the northern region of the country from rebels from the Tuareg tribes who took control of it and announced a breakaway from the central government and the establishment of a state called Azawad. The operation began following Resolution 2085 of the UN Security Council, which was approved on December 20, 2012.

4 The Tuareg tribe previously launched an insurgency in 2012, inflicting humiliating defeats on the Malian army before agreeing to a ceasefire in 2014 and a peace accord in 2015. The 2012 uprising coincided with an insurgency by radical Islamist groups that never stopped fighting in Mali, a fight that plunged Mali into a political, security and humanitarian crisis that spread to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger.

5 See the link: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/11/13/dans-le-nord-du-mali-la-bataille-de-kidal-est-engagee-entre-l-armee-et-la-rebellion-touareg_6199883_3212.html

rebels from the CSP-PSD (Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité, et le développement), who control the city, resulted in the injury and death of innocent civilians.

These developments in the fighting follow the withdrawal of the UN forces MINUSMA (The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali)⁶ from their camp in Kidal on November 8, a retreat that exacerbated the escalation of violence in the region.⁷ The withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping force MINUSMA at the behest of the ruling military junta in Mali⁸ sparked a race between the armed actors in the north - the army, the separatists, the jihadists - to control the territory and the camps left behind by the peacekeeping force. In the race for control, Kidal was seen as the 'ultimate prize'.⁹

The combat zone is disconnected and has no journalistic presence; there is uncertainty about what is happening. The only certainty in the current uncertainty is that the residents of Kidal continue to live in fear of aerial bombings. Since the night of November 3-4, the attacks on the city have been by Bayraktar TB2 drones made in Turkey, purchased by the Malian government.

The European Union called for an immediate ceasefire and the resumption of negotiations between the Malian government and the armed groups. The US also criticized the harm to the innocent and accelerated finding a political solution to the crisis.

On November 14, 2023, the Malian army announced that it had regained control of the city of Kidal after a raid that began on the 11th of the month, a raid that left many rebels dead.¹⁰ Against the armed forces of Mali (FAMA- Malian Armed Forces) and their auxiliary forces 'Wagner Force', stands the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace,

6 The MINUSMA force has 13,000 soldiers stationed mainly near cities in northern Mali, in an area where jihadist militias operate - among others in Gao and Timbuktu. They conduct tours of IDP camps, which are often attacked, and assist the Malian army, among other things, in medical evacuation if necessary.

7 Russian Wagner Force soldiers have been stationed in Anéfis, 110 km to the southwest, for several weeks, and in Tessalit, 200 km to the north, since October 21, 2023, after the peacekeeping force, MINUSMA, left the city under pressure from the military junta. As of November 10, approximately 6,500 uniformed personnel (out of 12,944 on the mission) and 196 civilians (out of 737) have already left Mali. See the link: <https://www.afrik.com/mali-arrivee-a-gao-du-dernier-convoi-de-casques-bleus-de-la-minusma>

8 The relationship between the government in Mali and the MINUSMA people was unstable from the beginning, even before the recent military coups. The UN force rejected the demand to act more against the jihadist organizations and emphasized that this is not part of its main mission. The UN officials asked the government in Mali for more freedom of action to protect citizens and investigate cases of human rights violations both by the terrorist organizations and of the state's army and recently also of the members of the Wagner Force, a very limited freedom of action.

9 Reuters, "The UN force is failing in its mission in Mali. The junta wants to eliminate him and rely on Russian mercenaries," Haaretz (June 21, 2023). <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/africa/2023-06-21/ty-article-magazine/premium/00000188-d7de-df52-a79d-dfff75b0000>

10 Charly Hessoun, « Reprise de Kidal : Ibrahim Traoré exprime son admiration pour Assimi Goïta, » la nouvelle tribune (15.11.2023). See the link: <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2023/11/reprise-de-kidal-ibrahim-traore-exprime-son-admiration-pour-assimi-goita/>; https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/un-monde-d-avance/mali-les-forces-armees-maliennes-viennent-de-reprendre-kidal-le-bastion-de-la-rebellion-touareg_6156252.html

Security and Development (PSC-PSD) which brings together most of the Tuareg armed groups that control this vast desert area.

The reported occupation of the city has not been confirmed by independent observers.¹¹ Concurrently, the capture of the city by the army would carry symbolic significance, considering the protracted absence of official Malian authorities and the military presence within its confines. During this period, control over the city and its environs had been firmly vested in the Tuareg rebels. But according to several sources, Malian army soldiers suffered quite significant losses, until they managed to capture the airport of Kidal. Therefore, the Tuareg warriors retreated. Officially, this is a 'tactical' retreat to avoid urban warfare that would have involved harming civilians. Despite the occupation of the city, a new and completely unprecedented security situation was created. And the 'tactical' retreat of the Tuareg fighters heralds a coordinated response with jihadist groups. The ruler of Mali, Colonel Guetta, knows this better than anyone. Incidentally, this is what led him to announce the conquest of Kidal without victory, thereby implying that the war was far from a victory.

The recapture of Kidal by the Malian army under his leadership is a major event in the recent history of Mali and the Sahel region. There is not only a local military victory here, but also progress towards unity, stability and development advocated by Mali's leaders. History will remember that what the French army (Barkhane), the European Takuba force and the UN MINUSMA force could not do in ten years, repel the attack and expansion of the jihadist armed groups, Mali did in two years.

The Regional Consequences of the Crisis in Mali

The crisis in Mali is part of a wider context of instability in the Sahel region. The rise of the threat of radical Islamic terrorism and the security challenges in the neighboring countries are crucial aspects that must be considered in any military or diplomatic activity in the region. Improved regional cooperation can be the key to effectively dealing with interrelated challenges. But the departure of the French forces that were operating in the Sahel, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger as part of the Barkhane and Takuba force, leaves a significant void that is not certain that it is within the power of the countries of the region to fill, together with Russian aid in the form of the 'Wagner force'.

Above all, for the opposition in Mali, this attack on Kidal has and will have consequences for the national unity that the military junta strives to maintain. Omar Mariko, head of the opposition party Sadi (Solidarité africaine pour la démocratie et l'indépendance) quoted by RFI, was heard saying: "Because the ceasefire is absolutely necessary (...) it is a war that takes us away from the strategic political goals of unity nationally, the stability of the state and democracy. The carnage that will follow, whether on the military forces or mainly on civilians, only distances us from a complete solution to the war situation

¹¹ See the link: <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-s-army-says-kidal-recaptured-from-rebels/7354689.html>

and the insecurity that Mali is currently experiencing. The ceasefire is a must.”¹²

The peace agreement signed in Algiers in 2015 between the parties now appears to be deeply obscured, and the prospects for a peaceful resolution to the war are steadily receding. Moreover, the avenues for peacefully resolving the conflict continue to drift farther out of reach with each passing day.¹³ Kidal (as well as other settlement points in the Kidal area) which was under the control of the rebel groups when the peace agreement was signed in 2015, and the return of the army to Kidal was supposed to be carried out in these settlements in accordance with the methods established in the agreement: the establishment of a renewed national army that incorporates fighters from the armed groups that signed it, the establishment of decentralized territorial authorities - All these did not happen and therefore the increasing violence and the internal war. In other words, the authorities of the transitional government of Mali have made the entry of the army into Kidal a matter of national sovereignty, while the rebels, members of the Tuareg tribes, condemn the violation of the peace agreement and take up arms.

One of the questions that arises now concerns the role that the main jihadist movement in the region may play. The Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM - Group to Support Islam and Muslims) is headed by Iyad Ag Ghali, a former Tuareg rebel leader who became the head of al-Qaida's figure in the region, who always maintained contact with the people of CSP-PSD and is known for the violent and difficult struggle against the spread of the influence of ISIS organizations in the Sahel. According to verified sources, their last secret meeting in the Kidal area was last October. The two sides then agreed on a “non-aggression pact”, according to the rebel leader.¹⁴

Joining Ag Ghali with armed Islamists would be a risky bet for him. While the rebels will offer him additional manpower and resources in his current struggle, the alliance will give credibility to the media of the military junta in Mali, which calls its enemies “terrorist groups,” a term that the Malian authorities have used for several months to designate, indiscriminately, the armed groups that signed the peace agreement from 2015 belonging to the CMA, such as the jihadist groups of JNIM (Group in Support of Islam and Muslims), linked to al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. ‘Erasing’ this distinction between armed groups with political demands recognized in the peace agreement, and jihadist groups not involved in this agreement, is another way for the transitional authorities in Mali to legitimize the ongoing attack, and a kind of internal contradiction, since the transitional authorities of Mali promise that they are committed to the 2015

12 See the link: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231114-mali-le-carnage-%C3%A0-kidal-nous-%C3%A9loigne-de-l-unit%C3%A9-et-de-la-stabilit%C3%A9-selon-oumar-mariko>

13 The Algiers Agreement, Accord d'Alger (2015) officially called the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, is an agreement aimed at ending the Mali War, signed on May 15 and June 20, 2015, in Bamako - after negotiations in Algiers - between the Republic of Mali and the CMA (Coordination of Azawad Movements) coordination mechanism.

14 See the link: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/05/war-resumes-in-northern-mali-between-the-army-and-former-independence-rebels_6149881_124.html