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Northern Mali: A Conflict with No Victors

Fighting has resumed between the Wagner Group-supported Malian army and a coalition of armed groups that signed the 2015 peace agreement, jeopardising the accord. Crisis Group experts Ibrahim Maïga and Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim explain what caused these clashes and what each side could lose.

What explains the intensified fighting in northern Mali?

On 2 October, a column of around 100 Malian army vehicles, accompanied by mercenaries from the Wagner Group, left the town of Gao for the Kidal region, the stronghold of the Permanent Strategic Framework (Cadre stratégique permanent, or CSP). The latter brings together separatist factions from the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and some of the armed groups from the originally pro-government Plateforme coalition. All these groups signed the 2015 Algiers Accord, ending the 2012-2014 conflict between the government and the armed groups of the CMA. Clashes between the army and CSP slowed the convoy's progress, particularly as it approached Anéfis, a town in the south of the Kidal region. The army took Anéfis on 7 October. This resumption of fighting poses a significant threat to the peace agreement.

The human toll over the last two months is already high. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has recorded around 400 casualties, nearly half of them civilians, since August, as a result of the renewed hostilities in northern Mali. The CSP has accused the army

and its Wagner allies of committing atrocities against civilians, notably in Ersane, a village halfway between Gao and the town of Kidal, where seventeen people were allegedly killed execution-style and their corpses rigged with explosives. The Malian authorities have denied these accusations, asserting that the army acts with full respect for human rights.

The withdrawal of MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, requested by the Malian authorities in late June, set these events in motion. In July, MINUSMA began handing over its twelve military bases to the Malian state, in accordance with UN mandates. The transfer quickly led to disagreements between the government and the CSP. Some of the MINUSMA bases, notably those at Ber in the Timbuktu region and Aguelhok, Tessalit and Kidal, all in the Kidal region, lie in areas claimed by groups that signed the 2015 peace agreement, which say the accord grants them control there – even if small army units may be located there. These groups would not allow the army to take over the bases without prior negotiations.

On 11 August, the army and Wagner mercenaries clashed with CSP fighters as they vied for control of the Ber base, from which MINUSMA had not completed its withdrawal. The army took possession of the camp two days later, after the last MINUSMA personnel left.

In September, the CSP launched a series of deadly attacks on army outposts in northern and central Mali, notably in Léré in the Timbuktu region, Dioura in the Mopti region, and Bamba and Bourem, both in the Gao region. In response, the army and its Wagner partners carried out airstrikes on insurgent positions, also deploying additional troops and combat aircraft in several locations in the north.

The fresh fighting, the first since 2015 involving the peace agreement's signatories, coincides with a significant upsurge in jihadist violence in northern Mali. The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (commonly known by its Arabic acronym, JNIM), a coalition of several groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, has intensified its attacks on state forces in the Gao and Timbuktu regions. In mid-August, JNIM imposed a blockade around Timbuktu, cutting off its supply of food and other essential goods. The Malian authorities are convinced that JNIM and the CSP rebels are coordinating operations, labelling the CSP attacks as "terrorist" in several statements. The CSP, however, has denied carrying out joint operations with the al-Qaeda affiliates, maintaining that its agenda differs from JNIM's.

For the Malian authorities, taking control of the UN bases is part of a broader ambition. Since assuming power in May 2021, in the country's second coup d'état in less than a year, the authorities in Bamako have made it a priority to reassert their sovereignty over all of Mali. This stance is at the heart of the popular support the transitional authorities enjoy. In October, they described the reconquest of areas held by the armed groups as an "**irreversible process**".

For its part, the CSP sees the army's deployment as a direct threat to its influence in areas that it controls. With the state largely absent since 2012, the CSP member groups have grown accustomed to administering this territory; they have been collecting taxes, providing certain services to the population and managing exploitation of natural resources, notably artisanal gold mining. From their perspective, what the army is doing constitutes a serious violation of the security arrangements they concluded with Bamako in 2014 and 2015, before the main peace accord.

Is this resurgence of conflict following MINUSMA's withdrawal surprising?

Although the current clashes were triggered by MINUSMA's withdrawal, tensions between the transitional authorities and the armed movements have been simmering for months. Following the May 2021 coup, several individuals opposed to the Algiers Accord, in particular Choguel

Maïga, who is now prime minister, rose to power, raising serious concerns among the signatory armed groups. Meanwhile, the new authorities in Bamako were apprehensive about the creation that same month of the CSP, which brought together two coalitions, the CMA and Plateforme, that formerly were rivals. Since then, Bamako has feared that this united front could weaken its position in the peace process and jeopardise its aspirations to regain full control of all of Mali.

The peace process, which has been difficult from the very beginning, has gradually reached a deadlock. In December 2022, the CSP armed groups stopped participating in the 2015 agreement's monitoring mechanisms, denouncing the government for lack of commitment and calling for an urgent meeting to be held outside Mali, a proposal that the authorities have thus far rejected.

Furthermore, as tensions were rising, the international stabilisation mechanism, which, among other things, helped prevent direct confrontations between the former adversaries, fell apart as first the French Operation Barkhane and then MINUSMA withdrew. MINUSMA had deployed in 2013 to help the government stabilise the north and Barkhane in 2014 (succeeding France's Operation Serval, launched the previous year) to fight JNIM and other Islamist militants. This development paved the way for renewed direct clashes. There is no longer a buffer separating, on one side, the Malian authorities, eager to avenge the army's 2012 and 2014 defeats at the CMA's hands and, on the other, the signatory movements accustomed to managing their territory without Bamako and determined to maintain their control. This confrontation threatens to plunge northern Mali back into widespread violence, with an uncertain outcome for all parties involved. It will, however, certainly have serious consequences for the local population, for the future of northern Mali and, by extension, for the stability of the Sahel as a whole.

What are the risks to the country's stability and to the population?

The current fighting is not just a series of minor skirmishes; it has the potential to escalate into a protracted, costly conflict for all parties involved. Neither the transitional authorities nor the armed rebel groups seem likely to prevail in the short term.

The Malian authorities have limited prospects for success. Even if it scores a victory in the coming months, for instance by retaking Kidal, the CSP stronghold, the army could suffer significant casualties, along with the civilian population. Furthermore, such a victory would by no means guarantee the army's long-term control of northern Mali. The garrisons in the north would likely come under regular insurgent attack. The insurgents have recently demonstrated an ability to strike isolated army outposts before vanishing. Conversely, another defeat for the army in Kidal would have disastrous consequences. It would erode the authorities' credibility among the population and compromise their goal of restoring state authority throughout the national territory.

As for the rebel groups, they are emboldened by their successes attacking the army's secondary bases at Léré and Bamba. But these clashes could hinder their ambitions for autonomy. There are some among the CSP who hope that another army defeat on the outskirts of Kidal would help them realise their dream of an independent state of Azawad. Yet, even in the event of such a military victory, the separatist groups would find it difficult to govern. A significant proportion of northerners do not share their separatist vision and would be likely to reject their claim to authority. The CSP groups thus might lose the fragile gains they have made in the peace process to date. Should they be defeated, on the other hand, they would be set back in achieving their goal of greater autonomy in managing local affairs, particularly regarding the authority of local governing bodies.

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In the long run, the Malian authorities and the CSP both risk losing ground to the jihadists. Prolonged fighting between the two sides will weaken them both, to the jihadists' benefit. A decade after their defeat at the hands of a coalition consisting of Malian, French and African troops, jihadist groups are once again in a position of strength in the north, excepting major towns from which they maintain a distance. The groups are now split between the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and JNIM, forming two rival coalitions. These jihadist groups are exploiting the departure of the Barkhane force and MINUSMA in the Gao and Ménaka regions to consolidate and extend their areas of influence.

Beyond the risk that the sides will engage in an uncertain military confrontation that could benefit jihadist groups, the most pressing concern is the potential suffering of the people of northern Mali. Several aid organisations have sounded the alarm about the humanitarian catastrophe that will loom if fighting continues. Members of the Tuareg and Arab communities living in northern towns, whom the army and Wagner often perceive as CSP supporters, have begun fleeing to rural areas or neighbouring countries, primarily Mauritania and Niger. They fear that the army and, possibly, other communal militias might carry out acts of reprisal, like those perpetrated during the rebellions of the 1990s and 2010s. The Malian government should be aware of the dangers to the already strained social fabric and to prospects of national reconciliation. The CSP groups, who claim to defend northerners' interests, cannot allow the situation to deteriorate to the point where these communities are exposed to a prolonged war.

How can this dangerous spiral be averted?

Given the lack of stabilisation mechanisms and the deadlocked peace process, prospects for de-escalation in northern Mali are very slim. It is still possible, however, to avoid a lengthy conflict from which no one but the jihadists is likely to emerge victorious.

The immediate priorities for the Malian authorities and the CSP are first, to agree to a truce and secondly, to start talks as soon as possible to achieve a lasting ceasefire, focusing on arrangements for the handover of MINUSMA camps. **Given the tensions among the parties involved, they should** identify a trusted mediator who can serve as a guarantor and ensure compliance with the ceasefire. A visit by the Mauritanian foreign minister to Bamako on 9 October suggests that discussions to appoint such a mediator are under way. Meanwhile, the army column has been standing still in Anéfis since 7 October.

In these circumstances, it may be possible to extend MINUSMA's mandate by several months to support negotiations. Despite tensions between the Malian authorities and MINUSMA, the mission can still play a role in this respect. To this end, Guinea and Chad, two countries that have amicable relations with Mali and contributed troops to MINUSMA, could keep their soldiers in camps in Kidal, Tessalit and Aguelhok to delay the handover of the bases by a few weeks and allow the parties to negotiate an agreement. They have all the more reason to do so as their withdrawal has been delayed by the resumption of hostilities.

If briefly extending MINUSMA's term is not possible, the African Union (AU) could give a mandate of several months to the Guinean and Chadian contingents to buy more time for the handover of the camps. This solution may be more acceptable to the belligerents and, if

appropriate, international partners should support it. In this case, the AU and the UN could jointly appoint a special envoy to assist in mediation efforts.

The belligerents will need to reach compromises regarding the transfer of the former MINUSMA camps.

Subsequently, the belligerents will need to reach compromises regarding the transfer of the former MINUSMA camps. This point could be addressed as part of the ceasefire negotiations. UN directives and the mission's statutes are clear that the camps should be handed over to the Malian state. The authorities in Bamako, however, should also respect the various security arrangements complementing the Algiers Accord. Until the most recent clashes, these arrangements were preventing violence between the parties and delineating zones where each actor is present on the ground. Within this framework, the government could use mixed units comprising both Malian soldiers and members of the signatory armed groups, rather than regular army troops alone. This mechanism is outlined in the Algiers Accord, which none of the belligerents has yet withdrawn from.

Even if these bases are in areas under the control or influence of the signatory armed groups, such as in Tessalit, Aguelhok and Kidal, these groups should acknowledge the Malian state's right to occupy them, particularly with reformed mixed units. Doing so would be a major concession that would facilitate the safe withdrawal of MINUSMA personnel and send a strong signal in favour of a negotiated solution.

Undoubtedly, the rising tensions and the stalled peace process have jeopardised the mechanism for these mixed units. Several mixed battalions have been deployed in the north since 2020. On 10 October, the CSP took over the camp housing these units in Kidal, undermining the mechanism and, in effect, disbanding the units. Though flawed, these mixed units had helped address the lack of trust among the various parties, and, through dialogue, allowed the army to gradually enter the town of Kidal. As the parties have already demonstrated the ability to find common ground on this issue, it should not be an insurmountable challenge to reach an agreement to revive these mixed units or create new ones.

A ceasefire and an agreement on the handover of MINUSMA camps to the Malian army, based on the CSP's acknowledgement of the state's right to take control of the camps using mixed units, would form the basis for a larger discussion on relaunching the peace process. The transitional president, Assimi Goïta, who, unlike other top figures, has expressed support for the Algiers Accord, should seize the opportunity to engage in direct talks with the CSP in the interest of the Malian people. He may be popular now for his ability to wage war, but long-term stability will hinge on his capacity to reach compromises to restore peace.

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