The “Tuareg question” in Mali today

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Preamble: at least four intertwined issues...

One of the complexities of the “Northern Mali problem”, or more generally of the “Mali problem” as it is posed by the events of these past few years, is that it is in fact made up of a number of issues that are interrelated and partially overlap: the “Tuareg question”, the “governance question”, the “drugs question” and the “question of Jihadism”.

1. It is the “Tuareg question”, in other words, the question of “Tuareg separatism” that we shall analyse here, because it is the subject of countless misapprehensions and strong polemics. We therefore only mention the other three questions below as a reminder. They are well-known and not subject to controversy.

2. The “governance question” is obviously central for understanding all the current ups and downs. The increase in corruption at all levels, the resignation or lethargy of the political class which was incapable of proposing an alterna-

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1 This paper was written in December 2012. Since then, a few things have changed (for instance the disappearance of Jihadist Tuareg groups, the scission of MNLA and the emergence of the “Haut conseil de l’Azawad”, or some statements of French officials about the fact that the Malian administration and army should enter Kidal). But the analysis is not affected.

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tive to the system of the incumbent President Amadou Toumani Touré, known locally as “ATT” (and to the crisis that followed), ATT’s disastrous second term of office (tolerating or even facilitating outright racketeering and abandoning the North politically and militarily), the disintegration of the Malian army (recruitments based on a widespread system of favours and privileges, more than 80 generals appointed by ATT indulging in every possible kind of trafficking, etc.) are the most manifest signs of this.

3. The “question of (hard) drugs”, a consequence, among other things, of the above phenomena, has been added to various forms of existing smuggling (cigarettes, illegal immigrants and weapons) and, around the income it generates all along the transit circuit, has “federated” part of the traditional and modern “elites” of the North (Arab and Tuareg tribal chiefs, high-ranking army officers, barons of the regime, leaders of the Tuareg separatist movement), to whom have been added the Jihadists (finding here not just a new source of income in addition to trading in hostages but also a base for local alliances).

4. As for the “Jihadist question”, the responsibility of the ATT regime is already known, as are the disastrous consequences of the war against Gaddafi; but we may also evoke the wave of Wahhabism which has been unfurling in West Africa for more than twenty years, thanks to the financing of the Saudis and Qatars, to the detriment of “brotherhood” and Sufi forms of Islam that previously prevailed and are characterised by their tolerance. This creates a theological and ideological climate that is hostile to modernity, oriented towards the medieval past, ritualism, intolerance, the regression of women’s rights, etc., which provides a fertile terrain for Salafism in general and fanatical and violent Salafism in particular².

² Obviously, we must not confuse Wahhabism, usually peaceful, and Jihadism. But the first often paves the way for the second. As for the word jihad, it is taken here in the exclusive and restrictive meaning of “holy war” given to it by the extremist and terrorist groups, and not in the wider sense that it has for most Moslems of inner spiritual struggle.
The “Tuareg question”: recap of chronological events

A detour into history is necessary to gain a better understanding of the current situation.

Before colonisation

Tuareg hegemony over the area that is now Northern Mali (and Northern Niger), and the multiple sedentary groups already living there was at the time incontrovertible. It was established gradually in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. But this was a very particular kind of hegemony. It was neither centralised nor uniform, and was devoid of a common political ambition, of the state or imperial type. No administration, even indirect, of the regions and population subject to this hegemony was implemented. It was fundamentally a predatory economy, based on raids, or the collection of tributes, conducted by uncoordinated Tuareg groups.

Above these groups there were multiple “tribes”, clans or Tuareg fractions, constituting the basic political and military units, “confederations”, large entities placed under the authority of an “amenokal”. There were more than ten sharing the Sahel-Saharan region. Not only did they have no all-encompassing structure binding them, but each of them constituted an unstable entity, made of weak feudal bonds and multiple rivalries³.

In other words, Tuareg societies were characterised well before colonisation by a large degree of horizontal fragmentation, which became amplified under colonisation, with their loss of military hegemony, modern population movements and the creation of new borders and new administrative units. While the Tuareg groups of Timbuktu, Kidal, Ménaka, Tchintabaraten and Iferouane, in Mali and in Niger, shared a common language and a common general culture, they did not share the same traditions, historical references or relations with the population groups among whom they lived, and each one had strong cultural differences.

³ The same can be said of local Arab societies, such as the Berabiche or the Kunta.
But in addition, Tuareg societies have inherited from the pre-colonial period a high degree of *vertical fragmentation*. They are deeply divided by caste/class, in particular between nobility (*imajerhen*), in the minority, vassals (*imrad*) and slaves (*iklan*). Relations of dominance, and in particular discrimination against the former slave group, are still strong.

**Under colonisation**

Initially, relations between the French and the Tuareg groups were often tense. The colonialists were wary of their former masters of the country (the *imajerhen*), even though some collaborated with them, but others were among the main figures of the resistance. The colonial administrators, after slavery was officially abolished (1904), promoted the sedentarisation of the former slaves to break the links they had with their former masters, and kept the masters under close surveillance.

But once colonial domination was firmly established (after the First World War and particularly in the 1930s) the Tuareg were not given any special treatment, and were integrated into the colonial political system in the same way as the rest of the population. To the north of the official limit separating agriculture (the sedentary zones) and livestock breeding (the nomad zones), the “tribal chiefs” and the “chiefs of groupings” (Fulani, Arab and Tuareg), named and appointed by the colonial administration, were the exact equivalent of the village chiefs and canton chiefs for the sedentary population. All the “ethnic groups” were subject to the same levies (taxes, forced labour, conscription), and received the same services (efforts to combat major endemic diseases, building of health centres and schools).

It is true that, initially, the Tuareg had lower school enrolment rates, not only because, as for other nomadic groups, transhumance is not conducive to formal education (in spite of the nomadic schools created by the coloniser), but also because the Tuareg nobility first of all refused to send their children

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4 Respectively called in Songhay (language widely spoken in the North of Mali by sedentary groups): Surgey, Daagey, and Belley.

5 We remember the resistances of Firhoun (Western Iwellemeden confederation, established at Ménaka), and especially the revolt of Kaocen, in the Air, in 1916. On the other hand the Ifoghas (centre of the separatist and jihadists movements) collaborated with the French from the outset.
to the schools run by Whites. But this attitude began to change after World War II, and, when countries gained their independence, there were many Tuareg in official positions.

After independence

Three characteristics of the current situation of the Tuareg groups should be recalled, because they contradict the various stereotypes frequently evoked regarding them.

1. A vast process of sedentarisation took place. Today the majority of the Tuareg have settled and are living in fixed camps, villages, or towns. The Tuareg who still practise mobile livestock breeding are most often centred on a fixed territory, or make use of herders. The image of the Tuareg as a fundamentally nomadic people is no longer true.

2. The Tuareg are mixed with other groups everywhere, and the vast majority of the villages are multicultural and multiethnic. Only the extreme northeast of Mali, (including Adrar of Ifoghas, a Jihadist and separatist bastion), beyond Kidal, is very predominantly Tuareg (but with a non-negligible Arab presence), rather like the Aïr Mountains in Niger. The image of a vast “Tuareg country” in northern Mali or northern Niger is therefore erroneous.

3. In Mali, basic education is dispensed in the native languages, and Tamasheq, the Tuareg language, is systematically taught at primary school in the same way as all the languages of the country (the situation is therefore very different from that of Amazigh, which is the subject of numerous protests from the Berbers in North Africa); similarly, there are many radio programmes in Tamasheq; furthermore, Malians of Tuareg descent are integrated into the elites, political life and the State institutions, up to the highest levels (directors, ministers, Prime Minister). The image of the Tuareg as victims of specific discrimination in the political sphere of Mali does not correspond to reality.
And so what is the reason for the successive uprisings of the Tuareg separatist movement (five since the independence of Mali)? Five different factors can be identified:

1. It is undeniable that among the nobility there has long been a certain nostalgia for the pre-colonial Tuareg hegemony. This has sometimes been fostered by French representatives, particularly among the Ifoghas, who, in the name of their long-term alliance with the colonial powers, may have believed on independence that France would recycle for their benefit the project entertained at one time of a Common Organisation of Saharan Regions (OCRS), in other words a Saharan State, that would be fundamentally Tuareg. This nostalgia and this illusion are, among other things, responsible for the first rebellion of the independence movement, that of 1963, which started in Ifoghas and Kidal.

2. The very brutal repression of the 1963 rebellion by the Malian army, coming mainly from the south, left painful traces in the collective memory, in particular in the region of Kidal, and fuelled deep resentment within many families in this zone who were affected by the massacres.

3. The great famine of 1973 led to the migration of many Tuareg to camps or neighbouring countries (Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya) and the constitution of a category of young unemployed people who were idle and cut off from their environment, who were recruited for the future rebellions. This famine cause profound disorganisation of the Tuareg societies. In other words, contrary to another common belief, rebellion is not a “natural” (or “cultural”) product of traditional Tuareg society but on the contrary a product of its fragmentation!

4. Gaddafi played an important role: he called upon the young Malian and Nigerien Tuareg in camps and settlements to join him, and enlisted a great number of them in his “Islamic legion” (which was to fight in the Lebanon). He developed in them a culture of armed violence, promising to give Libyan

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6 There has often been talk about preferential, long-standing relations between certain French intelligence services and the Tuareg separatist leaders, which is highly plausible, but, of course, there is no proof of this.
nationality to any Tuareg who wanted it, and he also contributed to fostering the illusion of a Saharan State (a mixture of OCRS and Gaddafistan!)

5. Lastly, we cannot ignore certain forms of domination, neglect or scorn that the north was sometimes subjected to by the Malian State, and certain officials in the south. Three forms can be distinguished:

- Economic neglect, especially in the fact that the north is landlocked and drastically inaccessible (few roads, tracks in very poor condition, etc.). This penalises all the population groups in the North, and not the just the Tuareg. While some towns in the North do have some infrastructure (Kidal has roughly the same facilities as an equivalent town in the South), the vast rural areas are generally devoid of basic services. The North is much less dynamic economically than Bamako or the cotton areas, and has fewer schools and health centres than the highly populated areas. Furthermore, a lot of funding was poured into the North (admittedly often misappropriated by the elites in the North and by those close to power), following the 1973 famine, but also within the framework of agreements to return to peace after each uprising.

- For Bambara, Soninké or Sénoufo civil servants, being sent to work in the North is seen as punishment or exile, and they often behave there with disdain or arrogance towards the autochthones (Tuareg and non-Tuareg), imposing the Bambara language in daily interactions, and scarcely trying to integrate into the local environment.

- Lastly, there is a strong tendency, in public discourse and the media in Mali, to build the symbols of Malian identity on the Malinké/Bambara history and language only ("geste du Mali medieval", the Kouroukanfouga charter, etc.). This is also perceived as a denial of the specific histories and traditions of the North of Mali, which are totally different ("geste du Songhay", the arrival of the Moroccans, the caravan trade, Tifinar writing, etc.). Here again, all the population groups in the North, and not just the Tuareg, are concerned by this symbolic domination by the South.
The cycle of Tuareg uprisings

It is indeed a cycle, and the joint attack of the separatist movement and the Jihadists in January 2012 is only the latest stage in a process that commenced in 1963, and which included the uprising of 1990, and the recurrences in 2006 and 2009.

All these uprisings have their source around Kidal, within the grand Ifoghas confederation (in particular the Kel Antessar, Idnan and Chamanamasse tribes), even though they were occasionally able to mobilise certain Tuareg elements of other groups, as well as Kunta Arabs, the allies of the Ifoghas. It is within the nobility of the Ifoghas and of the vast family of the amènokal that the ethnic entrepreneurs emerged, who have tried for more than 40 years to organise the demands of the independence movement, build a cultural and ideological identity for it, and above all give it military expression.

No ethnic movements anywhere are “spontaneous” or “natural”. All are social constructions. The fact of putting forward collective ethnic references (among the diverse identities of each), giving preference to an ethnic interpretation of politics (among the other possible decipherings), and crystallising discontent, frustration, dependencies or discrimination in the form of ethnic demands (among other possible structurations) necessarily requires the involvement of some preferential or eminent actors, more or less charismatic leaders, in other words, ethnic entrepreneurs, who reorganise the past and the present in the form of an ethnic “great narrative” giving a direction to the future (restoration or revolution). All the political entrepreneurs anywhere (founders of splinter groups, parties, movements, dynasties, or regimes) produce such “major narratives” (or “corpus”), which are more or less successful. But only the ethnic entrepreneurs, which are a special set of political entrepreneurs, give these narratives a basis that is inextricably racial and cultural. It is of little importance whether or not the narratives are true, the main thing is that, thanks to them, the ethnic entrepreneurs find followers who believe them, thus a minimum of collective mobilisation emerges.

But, in the case of the Tuareg independence movement, as in other cases in Africa or in the world, the ethnic entrepreneurs have become ethnic-military entrepreneurs. In other words, not only have they wished to erect ethnicity as an anchor of political life (as in Guinea), but more importantly they have
given precedence to the recourse to violence as its natural expression (as in Casamance or eastern DRC).

As is often the case for uprisings based on ethnicity, the ethnic-military entrepreneurs have above all been driven by their own interests, or those of their circle of adepts, jumping from one alliance to another, using their capacity to cause nuisance for their personal promotion, and settling into the chains of corruption and misappropriation that the “post-rebellion cash” has aroused.

From 1990, the cycle of uprisings has operated like a machine for producing advantages in favour of the ethnic-military entrepreneurs and their clients: after the first uprising, the peace agreements enabled the recycling (with spectacular promotions) of the rebels (or the inner circle of the rebel leaders, even if they had never fought) in the uniformed state services, and the paying of large sums of money officially intended for social reinsertion, humanitarian aid and development, part of which was appropriated by the leaders of the rebellion, but also by the elders in the North and the barons of civil society and the military of the ATT regime. After a time, certain leaders who were not content with their lot or that of their affiliates decided to take up arms again, upping the ante and triggering a new cycle of post-rebellion payoff in their favour.

In addition, the “national pact” signed in 1992 endorsed the withdrawal of the armed forces from the North of the country, who were left in the hands of the rebels and other militia groups. For the Songhay militia groups had also reappeared (under the name of ganda koy, which can be translated as “the masters of the country”) to defend the interests of another major “ethnic group” in the North of Mali. Thus the success of the ethnic (or ethnic-military) entrepreneurs always incites the appearance of other ethnic (or ethnic-military) entrepreneurs to take charge of the interests of other rival ethnic groups, following a well-known process of chain reaction. More recently, the ganda-ize movement (“the children of the country”) appeared in this way, with its militia, this time including a majority of young Fulani. An Arab movement also emerged.

The considerable post rebellion payoff was integrated into the other, equally considerable, cash flows generated by smuggling, drugs and the hostage trade, to build paradoxically in the North of Mali pockets of great wealth. Certainly, this wealth scarcely concerned the vast majority of the population, farmers, herders, small retailers, local civil servants, who, at best, only received a few crumbs. It was concentrated in the hands of what could be called a strange
“predatory alliance”, which includes various Tuareg or Arab tribal leaders, the leaders of militia groups, fronts and separatist groups, some generals in Bamako and the high-ranking officers assigned to the North, and, of course, the Jihadist leaders. The proceeds were allocated to conventional prestige expenses (in Gao, everyone knows the district called the “drug villas”), but also to buy weapons, or 4×4 pick-ups (when they were not simply stolen).

It was this “predatory alliance” that was the de facto manager of business and security in the North of Mali abandoned by Bamako, its police and its army. It was against this backdrop that the preparations were made for the 2012 uprising, facilitated by the arrival of Gaddafi’s Tuareg troops the French had curiously allowed to leave Libya with considerable stocks of modern weapons. But this new separatist uprising quickly took on a radical new dimension, due to its alliance with the Jihadists, and particularly due to their very rapid seizing of power. After the combined attack by separatists (MNLA) and Jihadists (AQMI, Ansa Eddine, Mujao), the former were completely marginalised.

It should also be stressed that the boundaries between these various organisations are somewhat porous. In particular, on the side of the Ifoghas Tuareg (among which were numerous members of the Idlan tribe, many of whom had joined Gaddafi’s army), the coming and going between the two almost exclusively Tuareg groups, the MNLA (separatist) and Ansar Eddine (Jihadists), were incessant: the MNLA troops largely switched to the side of Ansar Eddine at the beginning of the conquest of Northern Mali by the Jihadists; then after French intervention and the winning back of the towns, the movement was reversed, giving back troops to an MNLA which had none left. More generally, all over the North of Mali, numerous young people joined this or that ...

7 This alliance between the MNLA and the Jihadists went rather far. The MNLA claimed responsibility for the taking of Aguelhoc, where almost a hundred Malian soldiers had their throats cut by the Islamists. Once the jihadists had taken power over the whole of the North of Mali, MNLA also tried to negotiate with them, including by accepting Sharia law as a basis for a joint action.

8 We may remind you that Iyad Ag Ghali, the leader of Ansar Eddine, is a former separatist leader, a cousin of the leaders of the MNLA, and, like them, a member of the family of the amenokal of the Ifoghas. This is a remarkable example of the personalities who made up the predatory alliance of the North: he was, successively, rebel leader, advisor to ATT, friend of Blaise Compaoré, negotiator for the release of hostages, linked to top leaders in Qatar and Algeria, notoriously involved in numerous traffics, rebel again, and lastly determined jihadist...

9 Contrary to its declarations, the MNLA did not free any towns from the jihadists. It simply rushed into Ménaka and Kidal once the jihadists had left, fleeing the advance of the French troops.
armed group, not for profound ideological reasons, but to earn a wage, arms, a status, power, preferring the profitable culture of violence to the frustrated culture of idleness, or simply to settle a score. For example, many Fulani joined the MUJAO less out of enthusiasm for Salafism than from “anti-MNLA” sentiment, because of the abuses perpetrated by this movement in the Niger valley at the beginning of the uprising.

The traps of the Tuareg question

Having clarified the former and recent context in which the Tuareg uprisings took place, we can now, from this perspective, recall two incontrovertible but often forgotten truths.

1. The Tuareg are a very small minority in northern Mali. Estimations vary between 5 and 10%\(^{10}\). The other population groups in the North (not given much mention in the Western media) are the Songhoy, Arma, Arabs, Fula, Gabéro, Bozo, etc., to whom must be added the residents originally from the South but settled in the North sometimes for two or three generations.

2. The Tuareg separatists (today the MNLA) are a very small minority of the Tuareg; beyond the core of the nobility of the Ifogha (today divided among separatists and jihadists) or even the aristocracies of the other tribes of the Ifogha confederation, they concern only very rare, isolated elements of the aristocracies of the other confederations. Everywhere, the vast majority of imrad (former vassals) and Bella (former slaves), which constitute the majority of the kel tamashek population (“those who speak tamasheq”, the generic name adopted by the Tuareg themselves) is very hostile to separatist topics (you only have to go and meet them in the refugee camps in Burkina Faso or Niger to be convinced of this)\(^{11}\).

\(^{10}\) There has never been a census on an ethnic basis, firstly, and, secondly, many people from the North live some or all of the time in Bamako, which further complicates any estimations

\(^{11}\) Many imrads of the confederation of the Ifoghas did however play an active part in the 1990 uprisings, but in 1994 they had violent clashes with the Popular Movement of Azawad (comprising the aristocracy of the Ifoghas and led by Iyad Ag Ghali) and they are today very hostile to the MNLA (cf. lieutenant-colonel Gamou).
In these conditions, we can understand the exasperation of the Malians when they observe that the Western media very often make the double confusion between Northern Mali and Tuareg country, and between Tuareg and separatists, thereby relaying the staggering pretention of the MNLA that it represents the population of northern Mali, a territory for which it proclaimed independence under the name of a derisory “Republic of Azawad”\textsuperscript{12}, before being expelled everywhere in a few days by its jihadist allies. Astoundingly, such discourse has sometimes found complacent or naïve relays in Europe and in France, in various commentators, politicians, humanitarian militants, or even anthropologists, regardless of the actual facts.

Confusing the MNLA with the Tuareg and the Tuareg with the population of the North, which results in presenting the MNLA as the preferential contact, produces three very negative effects: (a) it constitutes a bonus to the ethnic-military entrepreneurs and to the reproduction of the cycle of uprisings and post-rebellion payoffs; (b) it jeopardizes the necessary reconciliation of all the components of Northern Mali, and the free expression of the population groups concerned; (c) and lastly it revives the division of the problem along ethnic lines (and the risks of stigmatisation of the Arabs and Tuareg, as well as stigmatisation of “black” people in “white” Tuareg areas like Kidal), which, on the contrary, must absolutely be overcome/abandoned!

The fact that the French troops endorse to this day the MNLA’s refusal to allow any representatives of the Malian State to enter Kidal (capital of one of the three regions of the North) is in this respect a very worrying sign\textsuperscript{13}.

But, on the other hand, the disastrous situation of the Malian army (further aggravated by the military putsch), which is far from having been rebuilt on a sound basis (the chain of command was destroyed, the morale and the competence of the troops are low) increases the – serious – risks of blind reprisals and therefore the continuation of the process of dividing the Tuareg question.

\textsuperscript{12} Which means “North” in tamasheq

\textsuperscript{13} This complacency can of course be interpreted as related to the concern to profit from the aid of the MNLA to find the hostages, or as a fear (probably partly founded) that a still not very reliable Malian army, disorganised and with no real chain of command, could take reprisals in this area, but these arguments are no justification for the fact that the civilian representatives of the Malian State (governor, prefects) cannot resume their functions in Kidal, with an at least symbolic presence of the Malian army! This is sometimes interpreted as France’s de facto endorsement of the establishing of an autonomous territory, managed by the separatists, which obviously compromises the future.
along ethnic lines. As often happens in such cases, the two “ethnically divided” camps (MNLA on one side, vengeful anti-Tuareg on the other) mutually fuel each other.

**Conclusions for the future**

It seems to us that two important conclusions clearly emerge from this analysis.

1. The process of reconstruction and reconciliation should involve all the components of northern Mali

Unlike previous years, it is with all the communities of the North that a dialogue must be initiated, national reconciliation undertaken and the North rebuilt. In particular, this process should include the elected representatives and civil society (left out of the negotiations in the past) and the failures of the past should be avoided by face to face negotiations with the separatist (and of course Jihadist) armed groups that are a small minority and largely denigrated\(^{14}\). A process should be undertaken to de-ethnicise the “North question”, both on the side of the Tuareg groups (by refusing the escalation of ethnic separatists) and on the side of the Malian authorities (by repressing all ethnic reprisals).

2. Priority should be given to delivering public goods and services to the population in the North

This problematic of the delivery of public goods and services corresponds first of all and above all to the aspirations of the population in the North whatever their community of origin. It also has the enormous advantage of transcending “ethnic” identities! In addition, it is a way of avoiding a conception

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\(^{14}\) This question of the MNLA not being representative (beyond the Ifoghas nobility) is evidently decisive: if we take at face value the MNLA’s claims to represent “the Tuareg”, and, beyond, the North of Mali, then we will come to the conclusion that they must be the preferential contacts. On the other hand, if they are a small group of ethnic-military entrepreneurs trying to regain entry to the game the jihadists (to whom they opened the door) had excluded them from, and which is doing everything possible to re-ethnicise the situation, then they should be required to put down their weapons to be able to take part in an inclusive dialogue.
of reconstruction as a shower of subventions and the distribution of a “post-rebellion payout”. The question is to multiply infrastructure, build (at last!) roads, schools and health centres and appoint competent staff, dig wells and boreholes, provide veterinary services for herders, provide neighbourhood security (against banditry and extortion), etc.

Certainly, the Malian State must absolutely return to the North of Mali, including Kidal, and as soon as possible. But what State are we talking about? What is required is a State that delivers (services), and not a military, repressive State\textsuperscript{15}. There is a great “demand for the State” (a demand for services from the State of Mali) within the population of the North, as testified by all the interviews, that all the local players express, which should be made use of and satisfied.

This is the best way of finally resolving the “Tuareg question”. No doubt the only one.

\textsuperscript{15} The arrival (finally!) of ECOWAS troops would allow them to delegate military security, and prevent the Malian army from directly assuming this function as long as it has not been rebuilt on a sound basis. The abuses or reprisals some elements have perpetrated against some Tuareg or Arabs can be attributed to the disintegration of the Malian army.