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MALI : TRANSITION DEVELOPMENTS AND NEW SOCIO-POLITICAL AND SECURITY DYNAMICS IN THE NORTH

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2022 was characterised by the accelerated deterioration of the socio-political and security context in Mali. In addition to tensions with France, ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel, Niger and, most recently, Ivory Coast, the Malian transition has faced much internal turbulence in recent months.

Inflation and the rise in the price of basic necessities, the tug of war with the signatory movements of the Peace Agreement, and the tensions with MINUSMA are evidence of a strategy that does not help to normalise relations with the countries of the sub-region and with the international community.

The recent ban on NGOs receiving French funding, the muzzling of politicians and a certain instrumentalisation of the justice system are, among other things, **signs of a tense climate that is not conducive to a calmer socio-political climate.**

The latest statements by the signatory movements of the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement from Imam Dicko denouncing certain excesses of Cherif Madani Haidara or the "pro-junta" activist Ben le Cerveau, as well as the artist Rasbath, which range from classic warnings to strong criticisms and even threats, are clear signals of a poisonous socio-political climate.

Similarly, the eventful return of Imam Dicko from Saudi Arabia just after his appointment as a permanent member of the World Islamic League and the Ulema Committee does not augur well for relations with the current authorities.

This study will first analyse the rather tense socio-political context coinciding with numerous upheavals in the North in a context of **mutation of the jihadist movements and recomposition of forces.**

It will then look at the way in which **the ongoing competition between terrorist movements is stirring up new struggles for influence**, making it even more difficult for the transitional authorities to secure the territory and resolve the Wagner equation.

Finally, the complex **recomposition of forces in the North of Mali and the future of the Algiers Agreement** will be discussed, the effective implementation of which, paradoxically, does not seem to be in the interest of any of the parties involved.

¹ See the letter from the CMA to the mediation leader on 12/10/2022 and the CSP-PSD communiqué of 12/20/2022 <https://www.mandeinfos.com/2022/12/23/mali-les-mouvements-independantistes-du-nord-suspendent-leur-participation-a-la-mise-en-oeuvre-de-laccord-de-paix/>

A CONFUSED AND BOILING SOCIO-POLITICAL FRONT

The tensions surrounding the **militarisation of the national police** and civil protection, as well as the establishment of the Independent Authority for the Management of Elections (IAME) and the enlargement of the National Council of the Transition seem to be decisions taken in haste and under pressure. The same is true of the return of Choguel Kokalla Maiga to the primacy, the conclave between political groups and parties in discretion denouncing the transitional authorities and the return of religious figures to the political scene are indicators of another crisis in the making.

On 4 November, several thousand people gathered at the Independence Monument in Bamako and in regional capitals to denounce the blasphemous remarks of an individual against Islam. This show of force is a very telling political message, even a warning to the transitional authorities.

A video and astonishing image of a meeting of religious organisations in Segou flooded social networks a few weeks ago. **This meeting was first of all aimed at saying no to secularism and calling for the establishment of an "Islamic Republic" in Mali.** In addition, a video recorded on 15 December 2022 has been circulating on social networks for several days, in which the Muslim preacher, a highly respected and listened-to figure in Mali, deploras the bad situation in the country and invites religious figures to "tell the truth" to the leaders of the transition².

In the Timbuktu region on 26 October 2022, a letter from the Cadi Houkou Houka containing the "conditions" laid down by the leader of the IMSG/JNIM to

bring school education into line with the principles of "sharia" was handed over to the governor of the region with an unprecedented impact on social networks. These conditions include: the integration of the teaching of the Arabic language and the Koran into the curriculum, the end of co-education in schools by separating girls and boys, and the compulsory wearing of the veil, among others.

The same Cadi with established links to terrorist groups was recently decorated by the transitional authorities for "services rendered in favour of peace" on 11 November 2022 on the occasion of Traditional Legitimacy Day. However, this action, which was considered excessive by Malian public opinion, provoked the indignation of 37 human rights organisations and associations of victims of violence in a joint declaration dated 16 November 2022 against the distinction of Houkou Houka Ag Alhousseiny. For these organisations, which have broken the silence despite the heavy climate of suspicion, the decoration of this personality by the Transitional authorities is a way of undermining efforts to combat impunity and constitutes a "denial of the rights of the victims of the crisis"³. At the same time, **in this context fraught with risk and uncertainty**, several countries, including Ivory Coast and the United Kingdom, have announced the withdrawal of their troops from Mali in the framework of MINUSMA. This will not be without major consequences for the operational capacity of the mission, whose future is becoming increasingly uncertain. In the north of the country, certain upheavals are a sign of a **politico-security future that is far from reassuring for Mali and the outcome of the transition in general.**

² https://fr.news.yahoo.com/mali-chef-haut-conseil-islamique-131322172.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAB5yVIUPTAJL8FmjFDaOhtBaG-eRxxmrCmsop8O5RnhYaGS1P6-wlmE1wDD6T2Hkh1DG1qKDvHlouRJ8CwPBnoCrVY27L9Pw0Z1id0rM6YDNEcAZoj20yTr303_dDWHj2czU3ZWXzidhmMan5Aie8OmcyrIkERUlpw_MwFv6W

³ <http://apanews.net/mobile/uneInterieure.php?id=4967002>

TURMOIL IN THE NORTH, BETWEEN JIHADIST MUTATIONS AND THE RECOMPOSITION OF FORCES

In Mali, violence has intensified since March 2022, with more than 5,000 incidents recorded between January and December, in addition to the number of people killed during the same period, which is close to 2,000.

This dynamic is explained by the **offensive of the Islamic State in the Sahel (ISGS, which became ISS in March 2022) in the Ménaka and Gao regions** since the withdrawal of the Barkhane force from Mali and the intensification of JNIM operations in the center and south of the country.

JIHADIST COMPETITION OR NEW STRUGGLES FOR INFLUENCE?

The firepower of the ISS (Islamic State in the Sahel), before which the ITSGA, the MSA-D and the MAF retreated after heavy losses in Aderanboukane, and then in Talataye despite the involvement of the JNIM, was dramatic for the populations who were hoping for an improvement in security that is slow to materialise.

The consequences were enormous, with hundreds of civilians killed, property destroyed or looted and thousands displaced, worsening the humanitarian situation mainly in the towns of Ménaka, Kidal and Gao. **In these increasingly insecure areas, IDP camps are regularly attacked on the outskirts of towns by "unidentified" armed men.** According to some analysts, the latest clashes between the two radical groups (ISS and JNIM) are turning in favour of the JNIM in both the Ménaka and Gourma regions, according to several local sources. The ground is ablaze and a serious humanitarian crisis is looming with the banning of most NGOs operating in the field.

Similarly, the JNIM is maintaining strong pressure in the north (Timbuktu and Taoudeni), center (Mopti and Segou), south (Sikasso, Koutiala, Koulikoro) and west (Kayes).

The attack on the Tessit military camp in Mali on 7 August 2022 by ISS and the video that the movement published in allegiance to the new caliph Abu al-Hussein al-Qurachi on 1 December 2022, show the coordination capacity and firepower of this group.

This capacity is being reinforced today with all **the arsenal of warfare recovered from the garrisons attacked and the reinforcements arriving from Nigeria, Niger and Burkina.**

The ISS and the JNIM operate in Burkina and Niger in the tri-border area, but at the same time they are strengthening their positions in Mali, where they are determinedly fighting for control of the criminal economy, which has a bright future in these areas outside state control.

ENTRE IMBROGLIO AU NORD ET L'ÉQUATION WAGNER

In the weeks and months to come, **more violent clashes are expected with the involvement of several actors in Mali.**

In Kidal, the CAM, after much hesitation and following strong pressure from the population, has finally decided to deploy a major operation called "TARTIT" (Union in Tamachek) in the region of Ménaka and Gao to protect the populations affected by the ISS.

This operation is led by troops from all the CAM movements and from all the regions of the North.

For his part, **General Alhadji Gamou launched an appeal via an audio widely circulated on WhatsApp**, a few weeks ago, to mobilise the maximum number of volunteers from his community to face the ISS. On the PRA side, the gap is widening between the government and the movements.

Things are getting worse since the suspension of the last Monitoring Committee of the Algiers Agreement² due to the absence of the Minister of Reconciliation.

The CAM sent a letter on 10 December 2022 to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria, leader of the international mediation, in which it demanded a meeting on "neutral ground" to evaluate the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, accusing the government of "lack of political will" to implement the agreement.

Ten days later, the CAM, the Platform and the CIM (Coordination of

Inclusiveness Movements) met within the framework of the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development (PSF-PSD) on 20 and 21 September in Djounhane, a town 45 km from Kidal, to move up a gear this time by suspending their participation in the PRA's implementation mechanisms until the meeting requested by the CAM was held on "neutral ground".

In this communiqué, the PSF-PSD undertakes to come to the aid of each of its components in the event of an attack, whoever the perpetrator may be⁴

In other words, the PSF-PSD will fight the ISS and do the same with Bamako in the event of renewed hostilities between the CAM and the MAF.

Another meeting is planned between the PSF-PSD and the traditional legitimacies to consolidate this union.

It is well known that **all these movements are each backed by a tribe, and some of their leaders even wear the double hat of tribal chief.**

In addition to all the above, another alliance is emerging between the signatory movements and the JNIM against the ISS, which could mark a major turning point in the northern regions for the year 2023.

This unexpected situation could also **revive inter-community tensions, particularly between the Tuareg and the Peulh, and increase acts of banditry and other forms of violence.**

⁴ See the communiqué from the PSF-PSD of 12/27/2022 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=489724026625166&set=a.406172724980297>

WHAT ABOUT THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM AND THE FUTURE OF WAGNER?

The official end of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel announced by French President Emmanuel Macron on 9 November 2022 already raises questions about the future of the G5 Sahel Force in Niger and Burkina Faso, which are still members. **The territorial discontinuity of the G5 Sahel following Mali's withdrawal alone risks giving more space to radical groups** in the tri-border area. The tense climate between Mali and Niger makes a common approach politically and practically impossible, let alone the necessary cooperation in the so-called "Tri-border area". **Burkina Faso is preparing itself accordingly with a massive recruitment of VDH's and a very likely rapprochement with Wagner.**

At the same time, Niger is opting to strengthen its national guard through

a nomadic component and the support of its international partners, notably France A, Italy and Germany among others. It can be agreed that in Mali, the Wagner option and the "all-military" approach have not produced the expected results. On the contrary, in addition to **the isolation of the country from its traditional partners and its immediate neighbours**, serious human rights violations, ethnical-community amalgamation and massacres of civilians make the situation much more critical than before.

With such a situation, there is every reason to believe that Mali is heading for **a situation more serious than that of 2012, which will not spare any part of the country and, worse, will quickly spread to neighbouring countries.**

CHANGES IN THE NORTH: FORCES AND THE "COMPROMISED" FUTURE OF THE PEACE AGREEMENT

The latest coup of 24 May 2021 against President Bah Ndao, which put an end to the government of Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, the withdrawal of the Barkhane, Takuba and G5 Sahel forces and the arrival of Wagner in Mali have completely changed the security map of Mali.

The government opts to rearm the MAF, collaborate with Wagner and aims **to take the lead in the Burkina-Mali-Guinea triangle** by distancing itself from its strategic partners, including the movements that signed the agreement. The regions of Menaka, Gao and Gourma

were immediately invaded by the ISGS supported by ISWAP, which **the armed groups that signed the PRA and even the JNIM could no longer resist.**

Moreover, the creation of the Wilāyah (province) of the ISS in the Sahel (ISS) on 23 March 2022 by intensifying the massacres against the Tuareg populations of Menaka and Gao and the indifference of the Bamako authorities in the face of this tragedy, pushes all the Tuareg and Arab movements, including those that were considered "pro-government" to unite.

⁵ <https://www.voaafrrique.com/a/mali-16-soldats-maliens-tu%C3%A9s-dans-deux-attaques-imput%C3%A9es-aux-jihadistes/6497351.html>

One might even think that **all the movements are in the process of exploring other initiatives to defend themselves against the growing insecurity in the North.**

Iyad Ag Ghaly's JNIM or IMSG also sees this situation as an opportunity to unite other armed groups against ISS, while it can still count on the Macina Katiba, which is involved in a double movement of internal reinforcement in Mali and expansion towards the coastal countries. However, **many of the communities in the North and the Center, already victims or threatened, see the JNIM as a potential saviour and support its proposal by participating in the war effort.**

Faced with this political and security impasse, the three (3) major leaders of

the movements that signed the Peace Agreement, namely Alghabass Ag ntalla, current President of the CAM, General Alhadji Gamou of the ITSGA and President of the Imghad Superior Council and Mossa Ag Acharoutamane, Secretary General of the MSA-D and Chief of the Doussahak tribe, have decided to capitalise on the achievements. On the one hand, there would be the merger project on which the CAM has been working for more than two (2) years and on the other hand the setting up of the Permanent Strategic Framework (PSF) which will become the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development (PSF-PSD) with the adhesion of the second tendency of the platform which was formerly close to the transition authorities. 778698490

UNFINISHED REDISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL CARDS IN THE NORTH

It is clear that **the accession of Hanoun Ould Ali's movement to the PSF-PSD strengthens it with the arrival of a heavyweight from the Lamhar community in Gao.** It should be recalled that Hanoun Ould Ali is the main backer of the platform. The strongman of Kidal, Alghabass Ag Intalla, President of the CAM, takes over the presidency of the PSF-PSD, and the defence is entrusted to Hanoun Ould Ali as 1st Vice-President, money being the sinews of war.

In the same vein of the distribution of responsibilities and possible political advantages, diplomacy and foreign relations will be entrusted to the young and very influential leader of the Menaka region, Mossa Ag Acharoutamane as 2nd Vice-President. **The cards are being reshuffled in the North at a time when the clouds are gathering over the**

outcome of the transition process and the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Who has a real interest in the latter?

Faced with these changes and the perceptible deterioration of the security situation, **one of the government's solutions is to play the traditional legitimacy card to the full.** However, it is common knowledge that **the traditional chiefs, who are mainly based in Bamako and on whom the government relies, have long been cut off from their bases and no longer have much influence at the local level.** Local communities are aligned behind the movements that share all the difficulties on the ground with them, and most rebel leaders are community leaders, whether on the CAM or the Platform side.

Meanwhile, **Algeria, MINUSMA and the other countries and actors involved in the mediation are, today, very concerned** about what is on the horizon. They all seem aware of the depth of the crisis and are quietly mobilising between Algiers and Bamako to save what is left

of the RPA before it is too late. However, **everything will depend on the choice that the transitional authorities in Bamako will make between implementing the PRA or abandoning it altogether.**

DOES ALGERIA WANT TO PROTECT ITSELF FROM THE EFFECTS OF THE SIMMERING CRISIS?

On Monday, 9 January 2023, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad, Ramtane Lamamra, in his capacity as Special Envoy of the President of the Algerian Republic, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, made a working visit to Mali where he was received by the President of the Transition, Assimi Goïta. The official communication reports that he conveyed a message from President Tebboune. He also met with the signatory movements of the PRA and asked them to reconsider their position and accept a high-level meeting in Bamako, knowing that President **Assimi Goïta is open to anything but a meeting outside Mali in the current context.** In spite of this high-profile visit, from which the stakeholders had high expectations, Lamamra finally returned to Algeria without reaching an agreement between **Bamako and the signatory movements, which remained firmly in their positions.**

In the end, the signatory movements **find themselves in a more comfortable position than the current political authorities,** regardless of the scenario that would prevail. In the event of a renegotiation of the implementation of the PRA, they are more united than ever and will speak with one voice, and in the worst case scenario of the resumption of hostilities, the PSF-PSD will present a common front. **Even the Tuareg General Alhadji Gamou, who was once Bamako's shield against the rebellion, has distanced himself from the new authorities** and will probably change his position.

On the other hand, the JNIM and the ISS, whose agendas escape everyone, are only waiting for this spark to complete what one important Malian political actor calls the "destruction of Mali", or at least follow in the footsteps of AQIM and MOJWA and **start the disintegration of the state in the northern regions in 2012.**

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

IAME	Independent Authority for the Management of Elections
PRA	Peace and Reconciliation Agreement
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
CAM	Coordination of Azawad Movements
CIM	Coordination of Inclusiveness Movements
NCT	National Council of the Transition
AMC	Agreement Monitoring Committee
PSF-PSD	Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development
ISGS	Islamic State in the Great Sahara
ISS	Islamic State in the Sahel
MAF	Malian Armed Forces
ITSGA	Imghad Tuareg Self-defence Group and Allies
IMSG	Islamic and Muslim Support Group
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM	Jamaât Nasr Al Islam wal Mouslimin
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MSA-D	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad-Doussahak
MOJWA	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
VDH	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland