

Northern Mali: The Things We Assume

Written by Baz Lecocq

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/04/05/northern-mali-the-things-we-assume/>

BAZ LECOCQ, APR 5 2012

Events have developed quickly these last days and weeks in Mali, as fast as an all terrain vehicle can drive in the sand, basically. And although electronic media can go faster than four wheel drives, they can only go as fast as the rumours they feed on. Elsewhere, I have argued that in following events in the Sahara, everything is shrouded in a haze of dust. Nothing is known with certainty, all depends on rumour and a form of hearsay known as 'the Tuareg telegraph' that can only be interpreted with deep inside knowledge of the Saharan world.[1] I shall be honest, I can no longer rightly claim to have that deep inside knowledge, it is too long ago since I was last in the Azawad.[2] But the same goes for the vast majority of journalists and Sahara watchers now active, which leads me to plead here for extreme prudence in the analysis of the current situation in Northern Mali, a prudence that is often ignored in favour of tempting speculations. Here I would like to address a few of these pieces of speculative analysis with the single goal of asking for more prudence because precipitous judgements can have grave consequences for the future denouement of the conflict.

Current 'Knowledge' and the Sources of Information

To begin with one obvious example: the recent statements in the press that the MNLA[3] and its allies 'control' the Azawad are large exaggerations. What we know is that the Malian Armed Forces have retreated from The North and that various Tuareg movements are present in the main cities. This however, does not mean that they control these cities or the bush surrounding them. As the relations between the two main known groups – MNLA and Ansar ud-Din[4] – are not clear either, we cannot even begin to speculate who controls which city and to what extent. The cities of Gao and Timbuktu and the riverain villages will be especially difficult to control as they are largely inhabited by Songhay populations who, for the most part, do not want to be part of an Azawadi State, and who have organised and supported vigilante movements against the Tuareg in the past, as well as quite recently. As for the Azawad hinterland, as far as I am concerned, effective control would mean effective relations with and assistance to humanitarian organisations in order to prevent the upcoming famine. This is not the case.

But there are more tricky possible misinterpretations of finer nuance. For our information we are essentially depending on two sources. We have the official written communiqués of the MNLA, published on their website, and the official communiqués of the CNRDRE[5], the Malian military junta, filmed and transcribed by Malian and international media. The Malian, Azawadian, and international press repeat the official communiqués, with only the Azawadian press adding further inside information, albeit with a highly political colour. These all depend for further information on the very scarce contact they can have with inhabitants of the Azawad, which forms the second source: sparse eye witness accounts. The eye witness accounts journalists gather are complemented by the contacts researchers and NGO workers have with inhabitants of the north, which are sometimes shared with the press. These two sources are both unreliable or incomplete for different reasons.

To start with the latter, the untrustworthiness lies in the incompleteness of the statements and the eye witnessing. First of all, telecommunication is only possible within the bigger cities and villages in northern Mali, but some of the mobile phone antennae have been destroyed in the fights. So far no one has tried to contact people who have freshly arrived in refugee camps and who could tell more about the situation in the bush. If they would, they would probably tell of disaster, but it would relate to drought and hunger, not to politics, about which they don't care. In Mali, politics is a city game. This goes for the north as well as the south. Down south, the rural citizens of Mali expect only one

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thing of their government: to improve their economic situation, or at least to not worsen it.[6] In the Azawad the rural population expects nothing good from the government at all and they only hope for it to leave them alone. To most Tuareg pastoralists, 'Azawad independence' means 'no more state interference in our lives'. As for the cities at present: anyone who is not a fighter or a seasoned war journalist (so far absent, but there are so many conflicts to cover) tries to stay alive by avoiding going outside during the fighting and even just after the fight. People will stay indoors and go out only for the most necessary short errands. Hence, all we receive are snatches of the fights in the main cities, mostly of what people *hear* outside: shooting, shouting, or silence. Stronger still, when I called a friend in Kidal to ask him about the situation when the MNLA and Ansar ud-Din attacked, he answered that he did not know and received his news from RFI, French International Radio. Thus, news brought feeds into news given in a particular loop. It eventually results in a clear picture but this is a slow process where rumour and misinformation are not always weeded out carefully, and where we risk questions asked quickly becoming answers given, producing facts without basis.

The official press releases from both sides should be mistrusted because they are mainly agit prop, framed to justify actions or to generate a particular effect from outside. The junta and the Tuareg rebels vie for outside support, be it in the form of actions taken in their support, or against the adversary.

The Presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

The latter is of especial importance, and both play the same trump card. Both sides calculate that the belief in the West, especially in the US, that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)[7] is involved in the conflict, can lead to international intervention. Therefore, the MNLA denies the presence of AQIM or even Ansar ud-Din in the field, or, for the latter, at least denies it has any importance or support from their side. The Malian armed forces who until recently fought in The North stressed the presence of both Ansar ud-Din and Al-Qaeda, and even the Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram in every combat in the hope of support from US or European troops present in the country or close by. Both the absence or presence of Islamist fighters in any given battle or any given place in time remain unverified and largely unverifiable too, although the knowledge that they exist and are there is solid. Absence is always hard to prove and presence is hard to establish. Ansar ud-Din does not communicate with the outside world and neither has AQIM very much recently.[8] The few eyewitness accounts that do some seem to indicate their presence are not conclusive either. The first is that fighters shouted *Allahu Akbar* in the street of Kidal, and that bystanders repeated the slogan. *Allahu Akbar* has been the principal battle and victory cry in the Muslim world over the past 1432 years. Hearing it is as meaningful as hearing *yippiiekayee motherf*#ker!* You know there's Americans around, but you still don't know if they will vote for some religious zealot.

The second shard of evidence, communicated over twitter a few days ago, was that Hassaniyya was spoken in the streets of Gao, an Arabic dialect spoken by the Bīdān or Moors living in the western part of the Sahara. This too is completely circumstantial. The reasoning would be that as many AQIM fighters are presumed to be Mauritanian (a common knowledge as unsubstantiated as anything else by the way), hearing Hassaniyya would indicate the presence of Mauritians and hence of AQIM fighters. Northern Mali has a large indigenous community of Hassaniyya speakers, some members of which might have joined the MNLA, as they had joined previous rebel movements. They might even be simple inhabitants of Gao who have not fled the city in fear of the battle and its possible side effects of vengeful anger by the largely Songhay population against its Arab inhabitants, an effect well remembered from the recent past. The most reliable indications we have that fighters of any kind with orthodox puritanical views on Islam are present come from Kidal, where a barber has indicated that fighters demanded that he take posters of hairstyles showing unveiled women off his walls. From Gao, rumours about the smashing of bars and bottles of alcohol are coming in, but not from the disgruntled bar owners themselves. Again, gossip without a verifiable source.

Nevertheless, the belief in the presence of AQIM as an ally of Ansar ud-Din remains widespread, with the goals of one slowly becoming attributed to the other. Thus, RFI English stated that *Ansar Dine wants the imposition of Sharia, or Islamic law, across Mali*.[9] Again, there is absolutely no proof of these goals being theirs. In fact, there is no proof of AQIM still being present in Northern Mali either and some Jihadi Watcher Websites estimate the group to have retreated back to Algeria.[10] Ansar ud-Din has released exactly one video in which it explains its goals in

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Tamasheq and Fus'ha Arabic: to liberate the Azawad from the unjust rule of Mali and to rule it as an Islamic republic according to Sharia Law.[11] These goals remain firmly nationalist and outside the domain of global jihad which AQIM is supposed to follow. If any comparisons need be made, Ansar ud-Din is most similar to certain Chechen movements, who are also fighting for an independent national state to be ruled according to Islam, but without any plans for a World Wide Caliphate.

Conclusion

I insist on being very prudent in our analysis and acceptance of what largely remains unverifiable hearsay and rumour on the grounds that they can lead to drastic actions, thereby becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Examples abound in history (WMD's in Iraq come to mind quickly), but they can even be given in the very recent past of this conflict. In October 2011, the world of journalists, analysts, and Sahara watchers was abuzz with the word 'manpad': a cool sounding military slang for shoulder mounted heat seeking ground to air missiles. In that month, Human Rights Watch Emergencies Director Peter Bouckaert discovered open and apparently looted arsenals of these weapons in Sirte, Libya.[12] The link between these weapons missing and the Tuareg was quickly made, too quickly. It was directly presumed that the Tuareg repatriating from Libya had the missiles, and that they would be selling them to AQIM, therewith creating a danger for the aviation world. We can now come to the tentative conclusion that this was not the case.

Now that the battles in the North are over – for the moment at least – we know that none of the Malian military aircraft (MIG jets and MI24 helicopter gunships) has been taken down, or even been fired at with manpads. If the Tuareg had these arms, they would surely have tried to use them, and if AQIM is fighting alongside the Tuareg nationalists, and if they had indeed bought these weapons from them, they might have tried to use them too. There was none of it. However, the suspicion that the Tuareg had these weapons and brought them into Mali from Libya was enough for the Malian government to try to remilitarize the North, probably at the insistence of the US Government, in violation of the Algiers Agreement of June 2006 between the government and the Tuareg rebel movements preceding the MNLA, thereby increasing the tense relations with the nationalist Tuareg, and giving the MNLA a legitimate reason (in its own eyes at least) to attack.[13]

Rumour and misunderstandings fuel conflict. This is known already from the oldest chronicles of mankind and its holy books. If we want conflicts in the Sahara and the larger Muslim world to stop, we perhaps should take heed of the last Sura in the Quran. *Say: I take refuge with the Lord of Mankind, The King of Mankind, The God of Mankind, From the evil of the slinking whisperer, Who whispers evil into the hearts of Mankind, From among Jinn and Mankind.*[14]

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[1] Lecocq, Baz, and Paul Schrijver. "The War on Terror in a Haze of Dust: Potholes and Pitfalls on the Saharan Front." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, no. 1 (2007): 141-66.

[2] Azawad is the name of a large *wadi*, a dry desert riverbed, and its surrounding country north of Timbuktu. The name has been taken up by separatist Tuareg as the name of their future national state. At the moment of writing, 2 April '12, the independence of the Azawad seems a *de facto* reality. I shall therefore use both Azawad and North Mali to indicate the area of conflict.

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[3] The *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad*, Azawad National Liberation Movement, a secular nationalist movement striving for independence of northern Mali founded in late 2011. It is the latest incarnation of Tuareg nationalist rebel movements active since the 1960s.

[4] The Gama'at Ansar ud-Din (Arabic: Society of Companions of the Religion) is another Tuareg movement in Mali, adhering to orthodox modernist sunni Islam. The Tamasheq Gama'at Ansar Ud-Din is not related in any way to the Ansar Dine movement in Southern Mali, although they probably share religious convictions. See below.

[5] CNRDRE stands for *Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de l'Etat*, National Committee for the Return of Democracy and the Restoration of the State.

[6] See the analysis of Malian support for the coup by my colleague Gregory Mann.
<http://africasacountry.com/2012/03/29/malis-democracy-down-but-not-out/>

[7] AQIM is a chapter of Al-Qaeda founded in 2007 out of the Algerian based GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) which has been active in the region since 2003 and consists of three *katiba*'s or sections. Not much is known about this Al-Qaeda chapter. The Arabic name of the movement, at-Tanzim al-Qâeda fi Bilâd al-Maghreb al-Islâmiyya is mistakenly translated as, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, hence abbreviated to AQIM. The correct translation would be The al-Qaeda Chapter in the Islamic Lands of the West. The difference between leaving 'Maghreb' untranslated and hence referring only to North Africa, and translating it to 'The West' hence referring to both North Africa *and* Western Europe, would do more justice to the global intentions of this movement. It is now believed that AQIM has recently split into two factions, one consisting of the Algerian members, still known as AQIM, and one consisting of recent recruits from West Africa (Mauritania, Mali and Nigeria) now calling itself Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). These are, again, rumours that are barely verifiable in their own right. "General thoughts on Tuareg and AQIM" <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/> (accessed 02/04/12).

[8] "General thoughts on Tuareg and AQIM" <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/> (accessed 02/04/12)

[9] <http://news.yahoo.com/armed-islamist-group-claims-control-northeast-mali-162904447.html> (accessed 02/04/12)

[10] <http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/2012/04/01/general-thoughts-on-the-tuareg-rebellion-and-aqim/> (accessed 02/04/12)

[11] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr6C49Zvhlc&feature=BFa&list=FLmv9mp53nsWTTdzv5Qo9caw&lf=mh_lolz

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[12] <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0907/The-deadly-dilemma-of-Libya-s-missing-weapons> (accessed 02/04/12)

[13] The rumour that the Tuareg did indeed have manpads but that they have been bought from them by the US is neither confirmed nor denied, and most likely never will be.

[14] Quran, Sura 114, an-Nas (Mankind).