

## The Role of Islam and Natural Resources in Current Mali Political Turmoil

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### Abstract

*In the recent times, the Republic of Mali has been striving to restore peace and harmony in the state. The conflict initiated by insurgent Islamist groups fighting against the Malian government for independence in northern Mali. The revolt against the government is associated with the implementation of shariah laws. Despite the current decrepit political condition in Mali it seems to be a site of attraction of Western military intervention. This paper studies the role of religion and natural resources in the conflict. Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world but in reserve it has one of the largest amounts of mineral deposits including uranium and other energy related resources. The significance of this paper is that it critically analyses the legality, motives and purpose of French intervention in Malian conflict and direct US support for it.*

**Keywords:** Mali, Islam, Conflict, Natural resources, Islamist Groups.

### 1. Introduction

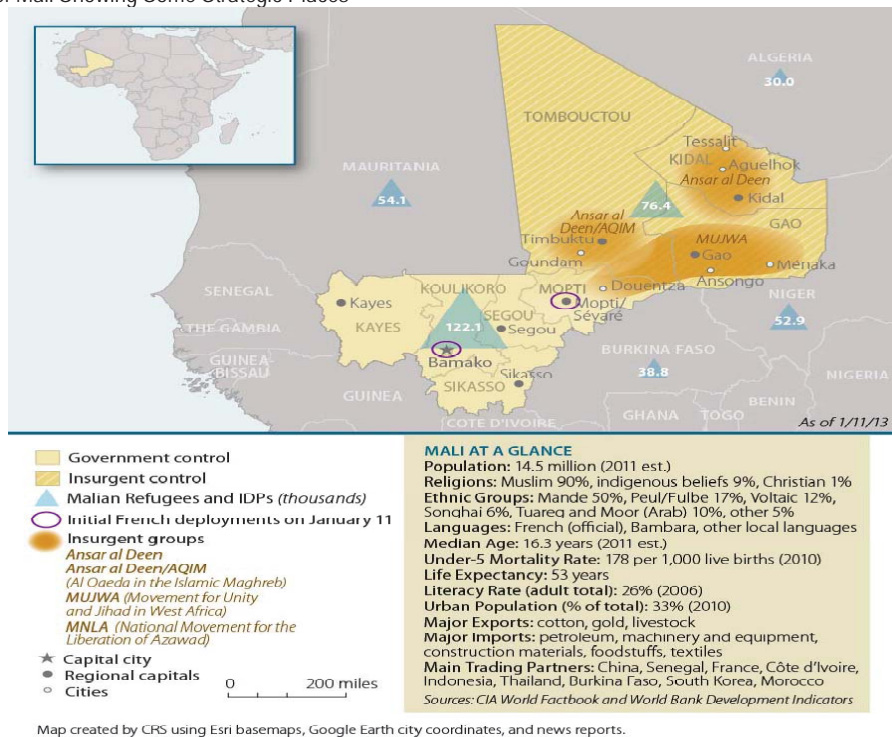
It is a well known fact that most North African countries are battling to restore peace, harmony, and economic stability in their states due to the impact of the Arab uprising from 2010, which led to such dramatic circumstances including toppling the governments of the most entrenched dictatorships and even the prospect for an enduring democracy in North Africa (Way, 2011; Asseburg, 2012). In his words, Lucan Way, contends that:

*"The Arab autocracies of today enjoy better survival prospects than did the communist autocracies of yesterday. Indeed, the contradictory results of the Arab spring so far—including authoritarian retrenchment in Bahrain, massive repression in Syria, and instability in Libya and Yemen—illustrate the paradoxical influence of diffusion in the absence of other structural changes". (Way, 2011)*

Mali is not an exception to the quest for stability and development, as the pursuit for sustainable development is without doubt the Holy Grail for many third world countries, a never ending, tedious, yet elusive (Aliyu M.K, 2012).

Even though Mali is situated in West Africa but bounded by Algeria to the North whose border crosses the axis of Libya, Egypt and Tunisia where the uprising took place. Mali has a population of about 14,517,176 people (Mali preliminary census, 2009) comprises of multi-ethnic groups predominantly Mande people with Islam as the major religion. Mali is rich in natural resources such as uranium, salt, and Gold placing it the third largest producer of gold in the African continent. (Reuters, 2012). Despite the riches and bounties available in Mali, yet about half the population live below the international poverty line of US\$ 1.25 a day (Human Development Indices 2013).

### The Map of Mali Showing Some Strategic Places



This map is adopted from congregational services report prepared by Alexis Arief  
Retrieved 28/04/2013 on [www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov).

Currently, Mali has fallen into a difficult political situation caused by clash of interest that has local and international dimensions. Understanding the internal politics in Mali and its relationship with international actors will give a clear picture of the perpetual crisis that is taking place presently in the region. One of the aims of this paper is to evaluate the role of Islamist groups in the current Mali political instability. They have militarily take control of the whole Northern Mali and impose Shari'ah law before the French forces drove them away from the region. David j. France's analysis on the factor that gave Islamists the opportunity to take control of Northern Mali is relevant:

*"The military coup provided a strategic opportunity for the Tuaregs rebels, who had by then formed an unholy alliance with the Islamist jihadist group Ansar al-Deen to tighten their military control over the whole of Northern Mali"* (David, J.F 2013).

The composition of Islamist groups as well as their subdivision will give an insight of the powers and tentacles they have in the country, the region, the continent and the entire world thus, given them the opportunity to overpower the government and took over control of the Northern part of Mali.

The paper will also examine the role of natural resources in fuelling the ongoing political turbulences in the country, much have been said and written about causes of the conflict in Mali, the expansion of islamists threat in Sub Sahara by insurgent islamist groups and threat to international security. Little is however said about the influence of Natural resources in stimulating the current Mali political turmoil.

One of the key objectives of this paper is to answer the question why French and its allies have interest in Mali conflict. The paper therefore, unveils the motive and the purpose behind French intervention in the current Mali crises. In short, the paper covers among other issues; the causes of the current Mali conflict and the intricacy behind it, the role of the Islamists and rebel groups in Mali's political instability and the role of natural resources in Mali political turmoil. At the same time, paper provides some valid evidences behind French intervention in Mali's chaos.

## 2. Causes of the Conflict

The conflict in Mali is a multifaceted or rather multidimensional mixture of long term grievances by various actors and groups. The conflict can be rooted to three distinct but interrelated types of conflicts merged together to develop the current crisis in Mali. At first, it was initiated by secessionist rebellion by Tuareg ethnic group in Northern Mali agitating for an autonomous state. Secondly, political and constitutional crises occasioned by military overthrow of the democratically elected government and lastly an attempt by Islamist jihadists to military take over Mali and establish a terrorist state based on shari'ah law (David J.F). To have a clear picture of the causes, it is required to look into demands of each of the aforementioned group to see the justification of their grievances. To begin with, the present Tuareg rebellion against the government of Mali has its roots in the long term inequity and segregation from the affairs of the state by successive Bamako based governments (David, J.F 2013). "The fundamental grievances of Tuareg rebels are their claim of decades of discrimination and exclusion from the political and economic processes by the government" (David, J.F 2013).

Tuareg minority group who live in Azawad in the Sahel and Sahara region in Mali took up arms against the government fighting for separate and the right of Tuareg minority. Between 1985 and 2009, the government signed a number of peace deals and cease fire treaties with Tuaregs without addressing any fundamental problems of the minority. The oath made by Bamako based government of greater sovereignty and development rule for the Tuareg in the North vanished in thin air. (David, J.F 2013).

The series of rebellion attacked by the Tuareg shows a weak political system despite democratic practices, disillusionment in the lack of economic and social development in the north and south, government laxity in state management and unprecedented external shock of the Libyan crisis (International Crisis Group, 2012). As such, disgruntle soldiers led by captain Amodou Sanago revolted against president Toure' for his ineffective response to the Tuareg rebellion into a military coup on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012 that overthrow the president and dissolved constitutional rule, ahead of planned democratic presidential elections in April 2012.

The claim by Islamist jihadists to take over Mali government was due to the secular nature of governance in the state. A country of about 90% Muslims, with animist and Christian communities making up the remaining 10%, sees the need to establish Islamic state which resulted in joining forces for the movement. To achieve their target they made an alliance with the Tuareg rebels group called National Movement for Liberation in Azwad (MNLA). The government forces were defeated; aftermath turned on the Tuareg and took over control of the North with the goal of implementing Shariah in Mali (AFP, 2012). Based on the above abridgments on the genesis of the conflict in Mali stated earlier, it could be observe that the conflict stems from poor governance, limited implementations of previous peace accords with Tuareg rebel groups and military fragmentation and collapse leading to the complex and multi-dimensional mixture of long term grievances by diverse actors and groups.

## 3. The Role of the Islamist Groups in Mali's Political Turmoil

The role of Islam in current Mali political turmoil can be associated with the Islamist "Extremist" group who connived with various Islamist group internationally with the support of Tuareg rebels to take over control of northern Mali. The groups are advocating for the implementation of Shari'ah (Islamic law) of pan-Islamic political unity.

They are also, agitating for the removal of non-Muslims activities especially western military, political and cultural influence in the Muslim world that they believe to be incompatible with Islam. The groups with this common ideology in Mali are; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who has its stem rooted from Algeria's civil conflict of the 1990s. AQIM aim was to topple Algerian government and constitute Islamic state. AQIM also proclaimed its mission of attacking European countries and united state of America (U.S). The group was initially known as the *Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat*. In 2007, the group changed its name to "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Steinberg G; Isabelle W, 2007). The main source of income for this group is kidnapping for ransom. It is recorded that the group generated about \$50 million U.S dollars in the last ten years. (Corera, Gordon, 2013). According to Corera "AQIM has focused on kidnap for ransom as a means of raising funds and is estimated to have raised more than \$50 million in the last decade" (Corera, Gordon, 2013).

After the Algerian crisis was over, some fragment of the group spread to the neighbouring countries as such, some have been present in northern Mali for at least a decade (Alexis A, 2013). Ansar al deen (Defenders of faith) led by former Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghaly one of the most prominent leaders of the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s. Ansar al deen which has its main base among the Ifora tribe from the southern part of the Tuaregs' homeland wants the imposition of strict Shari'ah law across Mali. Although, According to different reports, unlike the National Movement for

the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), Ansar al Deen does not seek independence but rather to keep Mali intact and convert it into a rigid theocracy (Kosciejew Marc, 2012). Another noted group of Islamist is the movement for unity and jihad in West Africa (MUJWA, a.k.a MUJAO) an AQIM splinter group committee to the spread of Global jihad in West Africa, led by a Mauritanian, Hamada Ould Mohammed Kheirou, and finally Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA): an Ansar al – Deen splinter group now claiming to oppose terrorism and extremism, led by Alghabass Ag Intalla, an influential figure in the strategic city of Kidal and former senior member of Ansar – ad-Deen (David, J.F, 2013).

Already, there are various manifestation and indicators pointing to a resurging wave of Islamist fundamentalism in many parts of Africa, most notably, Algeria, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Niger and Nigeria (Cohen, 2008; Storm, 2009). From the beginning of 2007, activities of various groups with the purported agenda of promoting Islamic law and principles in all facets of social life, or outright Islamization of region have been on the rise (the Economist, April, 2012). Furthermore, many of these groups are believed to have either participated actively in those upspring or have benefited immensely from their outcomes (Bellamy, 2011).

The role of islamist in the current Mali political turbulences can be directly linked with the extent of Libya's inter involvement in West African politic over the past four decades, there was no single conflict, Political uproar or even civil war in which Libya did not participate prominently. From supporting Tuareg rebels in Niger and Mali, to direct training of rebel fighters for Charles Taylor, logistic support to different faction in the Sierra Leonean civil war, Ghaddafi's role was ubiquitous (Cook, 2008).

Effectively, this Libyan predilection created viable corridors through which money, arms machineries flow perpetually between North Africa into West Africa and other parts of Sub-Sahara via Chad, Niger, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali (Cook, 2008). Many of the sprawling Islamist groups in West Africa are believed to have directly participated in Libyan War and have as a result benefited directly from the arms and professional training acquired in those days (Ferran, 2011).

*"We have been one of the main beneficiaries of the revolutions in the Arab world," Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a leader of the north Africa-based al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM], told the Mauritanian news agency ANI Wednesday. "As for our benefiting from the [Libyan] weapons, this is a natural thing in these kinds of circumstances." (Ferran, 2011).*

After the collapse of Qaddafi government in Libya 2011, heavily armed Tuaregs and non- Tuaregs who had partake in Libyan war returned to Northern Mali with sophisticated weaponry (David, J.F 2013). They formed the MNLA in 2011 as the political-military platform to continue their fight for self- government.

It was these heavily armed and well trained MNLA- led fighters that routed the government forces in March 2012 and declared northern Mali the independent state of Azawad. As a result of that, the northern of Mali became a breeding ground and hidden cave for diverse groups of militants and Islamist led by AQIM. These groups do not only denied the government of Mali from realising the dreams of better governance but also organised sophisticated criminal enterprises that involved drugs and human trafficking, arms smuggling and kidnapping of western nationals for ransom. These criminal activities became a source of funding and were a source of moneymaking business for stakeholders, including corrupt Malian government officials, state security agencies, local leaders, separatist rebels and Islamist extremists (David, J.F 2013). This made jihad insurgency a lucrative economic activity. As such, economic opportunism became a motivation for the growing number of jihadist groups in the region (Marchal, 2012a). Roland Marchal in his report highlighted that:

*"Negotiating the release of foreign hostages kidnapped in the Malian Sahel region has also been a profitable business for the negotiators (this has also been observed in Somalia, where law firms facilitating such negotiations may be making as much money as the pirates who kidnap the hostages)". (Marchal, 2012a).*

#### 4. The Role of Natural Resources in Mali Political Turbulence

Mali is an "Eldorado" of one of the most highly demanding natural resource in the world. The uranium, serves as a source of fuel in nuclear power plant for energy generation. The major application of uranium is in military sector which is used as a fissile explosive material to produce Nuclear weapons. This mineral resource plays a significant role in international politics as any country that owned the technology of processing it (aside from so called super powers) will virtually become a threat to international security. Any effort to pin down countries from possessing this material and its technology is of high interest to U.S and its like.

Uranium potentials are located in the flea area of Mali which is thought to be about 5000 tonnes (Teichmann R, 2013). Exploration of uranium is currently in its full swing carried out by several companies in Mali. The kindal project, in the north eastern part of Mali, with an area of 19,930km, the project covers large crystalline geographical province known as L' adrar Des Iforas. Uranium potential in Gao region alone is thought to be 200 tonnes. As most of the natural resources in Mali (specifically Uranium) is located in the Northern part of the region, its role indeed serve as a focal point for both Islamist groups who declared Northern Mali as independent state and the European companies who venture into exploration of the precious mineral.

Another important Natural resource that plays a vital role in the central court of current Mali political crises is Gold. Mali is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Africa's largest producer of gold with large scale exploration ongoing. Multinational mining companies consider Mali as the best area for siphoning natural resources specifically gold without considering the impact of environmental degradation, improving the state welfare which violates the fundamental human right (Stephanie, P et al, 2010). According to Stephanie, report on environmental problems and development says "Investors see in Mali the perfect environment for resource extraction with none of the responsibility of honouring human rights, contributing to the state economy or respecting environmental conditions" (Stephanie, P et al, 2010).

A Malians mythical believe which says that "gold belongs to the devil" (FIDH) and according to this tradition, gold appears when the devil is happy and disappears when he is upset. This gives the foreign investors a negative connotation because they deal so extensively and so exclusively in Mali's gold resources (Jul-Larsen et al 2006). Mali has therefore been traditionally a mining country since the days of the Great Malian Empire in 1324 during the era of great emperor Kankou Moussa (Teichmann, R 2013). Mali currently has seven operating Gold mines which include; Kalana and Morila in southern Mali and Loula in western Mali. Advanced Gold exploration projects include; Kofi, Koddieran, Banankoro, Napalm and many more.

All the companies that operate in the Gold mines in Mali province are owned by the European. Two (2) world actors in gold mining are IAMGOLD a Toronto based company has its mining site in Mali, RANGOLD a mine business company operating mainly in Mali has its Headquarter at Saint Heiler, Jersey. Therefore, any effort to hinder the exploration of natural resources available in Mali will attract European countries to interfere in internal politics of the state. Owing to the economic benefit gain from Mali natural resources.

## 5. The Interest behind French Intervention in Mali

France invaded Mali with a vengeance in military attack lunched on 11-Jan, 2013. This follows the claim that "Islamist Terrorist" and "Jihadist" have taken control of the northern Mali and are threat to international security and the well being of the local population. The incursion has received a warmth go ahead and support from France allies. Europe, Canada and United State of America are lending a hand with monetary aid and military support (Links, 2013). Links adds that: "The invasion has received universal support from France's imperialist allies. The U.S, Canada and Europe are assisting financially and with military transport" (Links, 2013).

Even though the attack by France and their allies was a respond to the request of the interim president of Mali and has received the blessings of the United Nations (UN) based on UN Security Council Resolution 2085, which was facilitated by France (David, J.F 2013) yet, the invasion was full of scepticism from critics and analyst around the world. However, the reason lies in the determination of the world's imperial powers to keep the humans and natural resources of poor regions of the world as preserves for capitalist profit. (Links, 2013)

France as the major actor of the march, its president Hollande claims that "France has no other interest other than the goal of fighting against terrorism" and in another statement stated that the military intervention would last "as long as necessary" broached the debate among analyst who argued that the real motive for French intervention in Mali is to protect French economic interest in the country and especially in neighbouring Niger (Elischer, 2013).

This was based on the fact that the uranium mines in neighbouring Niger and the uranium deposit in Mali are of particular interest to France, which generates 78 per cent of its electricity from nuclear energy (Links, 2013). The French nuclear power stations heavily depend on uranium import from Niger. In terms of economic and financial terms, France is the largest exporter of electricity in the world, with an estimate €3 billion annual sale (David F.J 2013). Based on the fact highlighted above it can be said that the pre-emptive military intervention in Mali is to protect the spill over of the conflict to Niger where French has significant economic and mining interest. Already French employees of the French nuclear company Areva in Niger have been kidnapped and were crossed to Malian territory for ransom. This was one of the major factors that instigated the urgency of French intervention in Mali. The conflict in Northern Mali encroaching Niger territory will have a devastating effect in the financial status of France.



Also, by analysing the motive behind French allies in participating immensely for the attack, taking Canada as a case study. IAMGOLD a Canada's gold mining company operates two mines there in Mali. As a result of the economical benefit derived by Canadian government in the land of the poor Mali, all effort to support French government in attacking the so called Islamist will be done by Canada and its like.

## 6. Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Based on the issues raised two main elements are observed in the role of Islamists and natural resources in the current Mali crisis. Even though French intervention has some concerned about national and international security challenges, but the main security concern is that Al-Qaeda should not be given the opportunity to establish itself in northern Mali, because their presence will hinder French uranium mining activities in the region of Niger. Also, for AQIM to have control of the northern Mali, this will give the group direct access to control the natural resources of the territory thereby having some means of financing their terrorist activities. In a nut shell, the natural resources in northern Mali and Niger is the magnetic force that attracted both the islamists and the international actors to have interest in occupying the northern Mali.

To restore peaceful coexistence in Mali, there is a need for the government to come into negotiation with the demands of the Islamist groups and the Tuareg minorities who are demanding better economic and social environment. On the part of the Islamists, they should respect human rights and the principle of democratic and plural governance especially, with regard to religion. The international actors should keep aside sentiments and economical benefit and provide political and financial support to Malian political and social initiatives that seeks to resolve the crisis by uniting all the community.

Mali has descended into a serious and difficult political situation that has local, national and international dimensions. Understanding this complexity is a prerequisite for reasoned action by political actors who are willing to bring Mali devastating situation into a total halt. Natural resources in Mali are playing a significant role in fuelling the amber of the crises which resulted to complex clash between the foreign gladiators and the Islamist present in Mali.

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