



Malian soldiers man a roadblock after a military *coup d'etat* in Bamako, 22 March 2012.

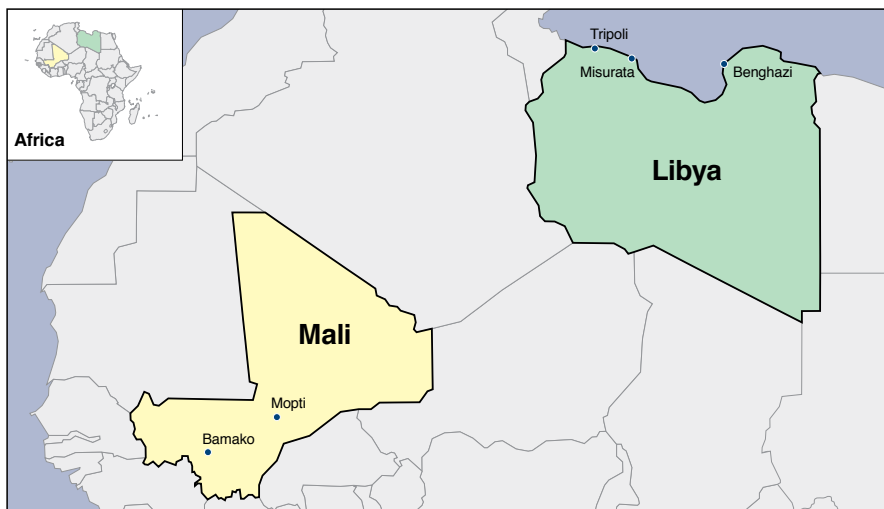
From Tripoli to Bamako, in the Wake of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb...

by Charles Branchaud

The upheavals from the Arab Spring will have more than impacted upon the Maghreb Region of Africa. Of course, they very much affected Syria, and now by extension, the whole of the Middle-East, but their consequences also spread throughout the sub-Saharan region of the Sahel, bringing unexpected changes to countries that were dozing in apparent tranquility.

I arrived in Tripoli on Christmas Day 2011. The embassy had recently been reopened after having been evacuated prior to the air strikes that precipitated the fall of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi earlier in the year. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had asked the Defence to deploy an officer to Tripoli to support the regional Defence Attaché stationed in Cairo, who was going through an extremely busy period. The Arab Spring had indeed touched many of his countries of accreditation, amongst

them Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. As the position had to be filled in a most immediate manner, the Director of Staff of the Strategic Joint Staff, at the time Major General Jon Vance, had selected me to fill this urgent request by Foreign Affairs.



Africa

I had not anticipated that this mission would eventually take me from one end to the other of the Saharan Desert. The effects of the fall of the Gaddafi regime were complex. The Libyan army, which had remained more-or-less on the sidelines during the civil war, was trying to rebuild itself. Not only had Gaddafi been neglecting his army for decades, he did not trust it, and he preferred hiring Sahel mercenaries to impose his will on the Libyan population. Also, Tripoli's streets were controlled by regional militias, who identified themselves by the names of the cities where they were formed, examples being the Misurata, Tripoli, and Benghazi Brigades.



Reuters RTR2L2MV/Louafi Larbi

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi waves from a car in the compound of Bab Al Azizia in Tripoli, 10 April 2011.

The Libyan Armed Forces were indeed in a very poor state. They had been targeted by Allied bombings, as well as having sustained much neglect by Gaddafi, who favoured his *Arab Legion*, an extra-national force in which the dictator had more confidence. The legion was composed of personnel from Muslim countries where Gaddafi had special interests. Thus, several Arab

Legion members came from countries of the Sahel such as Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, and often, natives of Tuareg. A few months later, they would have a significant impact as they returned to their countries of origin with the Libyan arsenal they had kept from Gaddafi's armouries.



Reuters RTR2QQVE/Youssef Bourdjal

A rebel fighter chants 'Allahu Akbar' as he stands near a Russian-made SCUD missile that was found in Junine, about 25 kilometres southeast of Tripoli, 3 September 2011.

My passage in Tripoli served the purpose of gathering information to better understand the intentions of the Libyan military, as they were rebuilding their armed forces. It also served the purpose of understanding the influence the militias had in each region of the country. It should be understood that many of these militias often clashed over control of a given territory – resulting in shootings and deaths, not only among themselves, but also, and more frequently, among innocent civilians.

In addition, Western states were worried about the disappearance of certain weapons. This was particularly true with respect to portable air defence missiles (MANPADS), as well as for the location and condition of the SCUD missiles that the Libyans still held in their arsenal. Therefore, part of the work also involved confirming the state and locations of these missiles. The compilation of this information, in collaboration with other Western allies and local contacts, became a full-time job.

Questions were also raised by virtue of the mass displacement of 4x4 vehicles leaving Libya and heading southwest into the Saharan desert and towards the Sahel. We would soon understand the consequences of this exodus. Indeed, as we tried to analyze the impact of the non-dissolution of the militias on the new Libyan order, an issue which continues to hamper the Libyan Government. As it transpired, former Tuareg soldiers of Gaddafi's *Arab Legion* fled by the 'back door,' and were returning to their home countries and taking arms other materiel.

In a very short time, Tuareg independence movements such, as the *Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA), would take charge of these returning soldiers, who, with the fall of the Gaddafi Regime, had lost their purpose. The outcome of the enrolment of returning soldiers by the MNLA, and later by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its derivatives groups (MUJAO, Ansar'Din), would be fatal for the regime of one of the Sahelean countries, namely Mali.

Mali had to this point been considered by the international community to be one of the flagships of the new African democracy. Its governance had been settled by democratic elections for some years, and Canada, like other Western countries, had invested much in this state, mainly through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). However, as is the case in many countries of the African continent, the weakness of Malian political institutions, its limited and recent experience of democratic processes, along with the influence of the trans-Saharan illegal trafficking, would cause these investments to be lost. Despite having benefited from the generosity of several countries, including Canada, training and equipment contributions, the Malian Army struggled to acquire the know-how associated with planning and conducting operations. Among other things, their Personal Administration Staff (J1) could not say accurately how many individuals they actually had in the military. This inability to tally the number of troops available not only impacted negatively upon the management of the Malian Armed Forces (MAF), but also left open opportunities for deceit and corruption.



Reuters RTR3DHPC/Stringer

Soldiers from the Tuareg rebel group MNLA sit in a pickup truck in Kidal, 4 February 2013.



Reuters RTR3D7AM/Benot Tessier

Malian soldiers leaving Timbuktu, 31 January 2013. Mali's president offered Tuareg rebels talks at the time in a bid for national reconciliation after a French-led offensive drove their Islamist former allies into mountain hideaways.

As anticipated, soldiers of the former *Arab Legion* returned from Libya, crossed the Malian border, and assaulted army posts, laying claim on a huge part of northern Mali, leaving the local military in disarray. The Malian Army pulled back south, leaving the northern territories, known as the Azawad, in the hands of extremists.

This area, composed of the three northern provinces of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, is populated by fair skin and nomadic tribes, as opposed to the darker-complected and sedentary culture of the Bantu population residing in southern Mali. This ethnic divide very much splits the country in two very different culture, and as was the case throughout its history, was at the root of many inter-ethnic quarrels. As this was happening, a military coup in the national capital Bamako, headed by a Captain Sanogo, overthrew the Malian government.

This all took place sometime after the Tuareg columns of Gaddafi's *Arab Legion* left Libya. I did not know at the time that I would subsequently meet those columns at their destination on the other side of the Saharan desert, in Mali.

As things calmed down relatively at the time in Libya, and as elections were scheduled to appoint a new government, I was asked to redeploy to Bamako, to support our regional attaché for West Africa, who had been temporarily deployed in the

Malian capital from his normal station in Senegal. I left Libya in late-May 2012, and after a swift reorganization in Canada, redeployed to Bamako at the end of June.

Shortly after my arrival, I established contacts at the Malian Ministry of Defence and asked for permission to move forward to the 'Defensive Line' established in central Mali, north of the provincial capital of Mopti. The Malian line was established approximately along the geographical limits of the aforementioned cultural divide, between nomadic and sedentary populations. In reality, it was the limit at which the rebels had stopped chasing the national army. The situation would remain stable until the Islamists broke the line nine months later, triggering the French-offensive of January 2013.

It is difficult to explain to the uninitiated, how African forces operate in both peace and conflict. They are deeply influenced by their communities of origin, their family, and their tribe, whether they are of sedentary or nomadic background. It must also be said that their security forces have been much influenced by the colonial legacy.

Additionally, impunity throughout the chain of command is common, and it has a huge impact upon military discipline. The Malian Army was corrupt and incapable of facing its challenges.

Reuters RTR3DNO5/Stringer



Tuareg Malian soldiers under the command of Colonel El-Hadj Ag Gamou patrol a street in Gao, 11 February 2013.

Reuters RTR3CH3X/Joe Penney



A French army officer talks to his Malian and Senegalese army counterparts where a meeting is taking place for the intervention force provided by the ECOWAS grouping of West African states in Bamako, 15 January 2013.



A fighter with the Tuareg separatist group MNLA stands guard outside the local regional assembly in Kidal, 23 June 2013.

The Malian defensive line was established on a northwest-southeast axis just north of the city of Mopti. On paper, their defence seemed feasible, given the number of men they claimed to have deployed. However, it soon became clear that what I had been presented with had nothing to do with reality on the ground, especially at the moment of the Islamist attack in mid-January 2013.

At locations where the Malians had claimed to have battle groups in defensive positions of at least 600 men, the situation was in reality much different. Those positions were manned by ill-prepared, ill-equipped, and ill-trained small companies of less than 100 men each.

The Islamist fighters were seasoned and mobile, two qualities that the Malians lacked. Further, they were equipped with all the material they had brought back from Gaddafi's armouries, as well as the equipment that was abandoned by the Malian Army in their rout to the south during the spring of 2012.

At the beginning of January 2013, the Islamists probed the Malian defences and began their assault on 11 January, breaking the defensive line in less than 48 hours. The significance of this breakthrough is important, and it serves to explain the reality of the situation well. The Malians had had more than eight months to prepare their defence... Having realized the impact of the Malian Forces debacle, the French Government quickly intervened to defeat the Islamists.

Although there has been much speculation with respect to the objective of the Islamist attack, it is unlikely that it was meant to reach Bamako. Rather more plausible was the taking of SÉVARE's airport, a landing strip whose ownership was crucial, either to deny or to support any operations to retake the north.

Regardless, the Islamist offensive highlighted the Malian lack of preparation and incapacity to react to a well-known and defined threat. The capacity imagined by the authorities proved significantly lower than their claims. The French defeated the Islamists in a swift campaign that has demonstrated their capabilities to project power in this part of the world. As this is written, the French Army has begun to withdraw troops from Mali. Their organisation in the Sahel will be reshaped, but a significant contingent will remain in Mali for the foreseeable future. The United Nations deployed a mission to Mali to replace the deficient African Force that briefly deployed in the wake of the French intervention. Left crippled, the Malian military is still unable to realistically fulfill its role. Incapable of assuming the burden of reforming the Malian Army alone, France is now leading a European Union Training Mission (EUTM) to help rebuild the Malian forces. EUTM was formed to address Malian gaps. However, even with the training support provided by the European Union in forming units to deploy north, recent events have shown that much is still to be done.

While Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has clearly been much depleted by the French engagement, elements of the organization have escaped, and they remain a threat to the stability of the region. As for the MNLA, it has reorganised and its influence is still very much felt in the northern province of Kidal, where it recently defeated a Malian offensive.

Mali held democratic elections in the summer of 2013, and after a grandiose ceremony of investiture in Bamako, President

Keïta is left with serious challenges ahead of him. It will be some time before Mali can enjoy its carefree tranquility again.

Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Branchaud is currently J5 Plans Africa at Canadian Joint Operations Command Headquarters. He has served on many occasions in Africa.



Reuters RTX16C4J/Vincent Kessler

Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta arrives in the plenary room of the European Parliament ahead of his address to the assembly in Strasbourg, 10 December 2013.