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A turning point or a new round of escalation:

an analysis of the political and military consequences of the fighting in northern Mali



At the end of July 2024, the Malian armed forces, supported by the PMC Wagner, launched another offensive in the north of the country against the formations of the unrecognised Tuareg Azawad state: this time the fighting took place on the very border with Algeria, in remote desert areas near the town of Tin Zaouatine.

Brief background and timeline

Initially, this operation could only be seen as one of the many stages in the confrontation between the Malian government of Colonel Assimi Goïta and Tuareg separatist groups, which escalated in the summer of 2023. However, probably unexpectedly for many, the success of the rebels, including the deaths of Malian soldiers and representatives of the Russian PMCs, immediately made the events near Tin Zaouatine one of the most discussed topics, whose echoes reached even Russian citizens, and the results were actively interpreted in their favour by various parties: the world even began to talk about the “ukrainian trail”.

The political reality of contemporary Mali is largely shaped by two key events/processes: 1) The consequences of the large-scale Tuareg [uprising](#) in 2012 against the continued rule of Bamako in northern Mali, the historical domain of the “desert rulers”; 2) The consequences of two military coups in 2020 and 2021, which brought to power in Mali an interim government led by young army officers, under [pressure](#) from international organisations, regional neighbours, Western states and the United States. Under such difficult conditions, there are prerequisites for the expansion, or more precisely, the establishment of relations between Russia and Mali in the field of security and cooperation in the military-industrial complex. The fact is that for the politically unstable government of Assimi Goïta, which has to contend with a whole range of internal and external adversaries and threats, assistance from one of the world’s most influential players is almost the only way to survive, and the permanent security crisis provoked by the actions of separatist and terrorist groups creates a constant demand for the “[import](#)” of relevant services. At the same time, the penetration of Russian influence in Mali coincided with the displacement of France, which once controlled large swathes of West and Central Africa and maintained a significant presence in the region, including military bases, until 2020. While at first the deepening of Russian-Mali cooperation was not advertised in the domestic media, today the fact of allied relations between Moscow and Bamako is no longer questioned, and the military presence is recognised at the highest level. Russian servicemen participate in combat and security operations alongside Malian troops, both through the Ministry of Defence’s “African Corps” and in a more informal status through the PMC Wagner.

Potential impact of the battle of Tin Zaouatine on the campaign: Malian government and allies

It seems that the assessment of the possible consequences of the defeat of a government convoy near Tin Zaouatine should be based primarily on an analysis of more general aspects, including questions of military prestige and political will, since, [according to all sources](#), the losses in terms of men and equipment are not irreplaceable, at least in terms of the resources available to the Malian army and its Russian allies. However, due to the specific nature of desert warfare, in particular the limited number of contingents, the destruction of one of the government forces’ units allows the Tuaregs, and apparently the JNIM jihadists (an organisation banned in Russia*) who supported them on the battlefield, to temporarily remove the threat from one of the few settlements close to the Mali-Algerian border.

However, despite the rather localised nature of the rebels' success, the Malian armed forces, supported by fighters from the PMC Wagner and the African Corps, are capable of taking control of even the largest Tuareg outpost, as [the battles for Kidal](#) have shown.

The most important consequence of the defeat at Tin Zaouatine for the government forces and their allies, however, is different. This is the ability to analyse and correctly assess events in terms of future combat operations. There are basically two alternatives: 1) the Malian armed forces, with complete air superiority, can launch attacks on the few Tuareg settlements, demonstrating their power and inflicting damage on the enemy's personnel – this is the scenario that has been implemented so far; 2) the Malian command, as well as the leadership of the PMC Wagner and the African Corps, will temporarily abandon large-scale “retaliatory operations” or limit themselves to demonstrative short-term attacks to restore the favourable situation in the region.

In other words, the main problem is to understand the nature of the current war and to choose the most effective tactics and tools to achieve the objectives. Manoeuvre warfare in the vast expanses of the Sahara is fundamentally different from frontal warfare: in fact, despite Russian support, the government forces are unable to achieve a decisive victory over the Tuareg because control of remote settlements does not provide an advantage against Azawad supporters using guerrilla tactics. On the contrary, as the experience of fighting in Ethiopia in the 1980s [shows](#), rebels controlling rural areas may in some cases deliberately “cede” urban centres to a less mobile enemy for subsequent attacks on communications.

Potential impact of the battle of Tin Zaouatine on the campaign: Tuaregs and Jihadists

Having won their first major victory in recent times, the Tuareg leaders, in turn, found themselves in a very “piquant” situation. On the one hand, over the past decade the Tuareg separatists have avoided close ties with JNIM* (an Al-Qaeda affiliate) and ISIL (an organisation banned in Russia*) – radical Islamist groups in the Sahel – and their brief cooperation with the extremists in 2012 ended in betrayal by the latter. On the other hand, the consolidation of joint efforts against a common enemy seems too attractive, especially in the light of the military success in Tin Zaouatine.

Although the defeat of the government convoy does not change the logic of the fight for the Tuareg from a military point of view, such a success and, equally important, the further response of the Malian and Russian military, including air strikes on Tuareg settlements, is likely to radicalise and Islamise the groups fighting for an independent Azawad. Perhaps such an outcome could have far sadder and more far-reaching consequences for Bamako than the defeat of an army unit.

* banned organisations in Russia

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