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# A northern knot: untangling local peacebuilding politics in Mali

The conflict in northern Mali has now lasted more than four years. Recently returned from a research trip to the Sahel, Yvan Guichaoua says that until local political processes connect to the bigger picture, peace will remain elusive.

**Yvan Guichaoua**

31 Aug 2016

The UN peacekeeping mission in Mali is one of the world's deadliest. Image credit: MINUSMA

> *The crisis in Mali has made old rivalries resurface, as well as creating new ones*

**In 2012, a powerful separatist insurgency started in Mali, claiming the independence of its Northern part, Azawad. The separatist movement easily defeated the Malian army but was soon defeated itself by Islamist movements, leading to a nine-month occupation of Azawad by jihadist groups. France intervened militarily in 2013 as part of 'Operation Serval' and officially restored Mali's territorial integrity. The aftermath of Northern Mali's 'liberation' turned nasty as various armed groups from the politically highly heterogeneous North started to violently settle**

scores with each other. The crisis had made old rivalries resurface, as well as creating new ones.

But a year ago, a promising process was initiated in Anefis, a small city in northern Mali, not far from Kidal, the hotbed of the political crisis. Armed factions representing various Northern communities gathered and, two by two, discussed the specific issues causing recurring violence among them.

They eventually signed a truce to their respective feuds and promised to deepen their talks and consult their constituencies, to eventually reach more ambitious settlements. That is what the official documents which came out of this series of bilateral meetings say. Unofficially though, promises were also made to address past disputes, for example by awarding compensation for past raids.

## Community-led peacemaking?

> *The Anefis process came as a highly welcome complement to the international Algiers talks*

There were numerous communities involved. Tuareg Imghad signed separate deals, concerning separate issues, with two other Tuareg groups, the Dawsahak and the Ifoghas. The Ifoghas and the Dawsahak also signed specific deals with an Arab faction, the Lamhar. And the cherry on the cake was a deal between this same Arab faction and another Tuareg group, the Idnans. These two groups had been in a fierce rivalry after Idnan armed men took advantage of the French intervention in Mali in 2013 to dislodge Arabs from In-Khalil, a key commercial hub near the Algerian border. At the time, Arab traders operating in In-Khalil lost all their possessions and could not claim them back. They were suspected by the French of having close links with

jihadist groups and Idnan armed men were enjoying French protection for having actively cooperated with Operation Serval.

In Anefis, finally, people from the North whose local feuds had caused much damage to Azawadian lives and the economy were talking to each other and settling disputes peacefully. This process looked like the peacemaker's dream of vernacular, bottom-up systems of vendetta regulation in action. The physical setting would reinforce this impression: people were talking under acacia trees and sharing mechouis to seal their agreements. For observers of Mali's troubled recent history, this process recalled the 'Bourem meeting' in November 1994, which dramatically reversed the dynamic of communal violence spiralling in the immediate aftermath of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s.

The protagonists of the Anefis process had met a few months earlier in much more official and pompous circumstances and under a different hat, in Algiers. Algeria, with the support of the EU, France and the UN, had invited them as part of peace talks between the Malian government, the separatist insurgency which split Mali in two in 2012, and Northern groups rejecting the separatist project. The separatist bloc was notably made of leaders from the Ifoghas, Idnan and Dawsahak Tuareg communities. The Northern anti-separatist front was led by Imghad and Arab (Lamhar) figures. But the format of the Algiers talks would not allow participants from the North to discuss their quasi-private yet so crucial affairs. What was at stake in Algiers were the big political, institutional and security-related arrangements (devolution of power, DDR, and SSR, in particular). Intra-North business was not on the agenda. Algiers was all about North-South, Centre-Periphery matters.

**In this context, the Anefis process came as a highly welcome complement to the Algiers talks. It offered Northern actors in the crisis their own space to solve their more proximate concerns. And in fact, officials from the government and the international community helped with the logistics of the meeting and briefly showed up when discussions happened under the acacias. The two-pronged peace process, big and small, raised many hopes. It would also superficially satisfy the peace studies scholars to whom the "local" and the "vernacular" have become an eldorado of peacemaking.**

## Community-led violence?

> *The puzzle is that a year after the agreement, violence has never been so intense*

Now here comes the puzzle. One year after Anefis, violence, notably between Imghad and Ifoghas armed groups, has never been so intense. Dozens of fighters from both sides died in combats in Kidal in July. What made the whole Anefis process derail? The immediate causes of recent clashes are obscure. Each side blames the other for attacking first. More research is clearly needed to understand the sudden resumption of violence. Two reasonable conjectures can be formulated though. The first conjecture relates to attitudes toward violence of the 'local' actors involved in the process. The second conjecture questions the local essence of this 'local' process.

The Bourem meeting mentioned above has been beautifully depicted by a team of Malian and French researchers. It involved Tuareg pastoralists and Songhoy farmers. Crucially, it was initiated and relentlessly pushed forward by civilians and village chiefs who understood quickly how destructive violence was for their communities and were well-aware of the economic synergies between the two groups. In Bourem, all sides

were victims of prolonged violence. To the contrary, the Anefis process was led by armed men, whose representativeness is questionable and who seem to envisage politics as a zero-sum game. For them, the continuation of violence can be profitable. And the customary chiefs that could weigh in on decisions of armed groups two decades ago are nowhere to be seen anymore.

The second conjecture is that there is actually little to expect from local arrangements between local actors who may have local agendas but are also heavily dependent on external influences. The picturesque, bottom-up approach adopted in Anefis was partly a fiction.

## Connecting local and national

> *It is no secret that anti-separatist movements in the North enjoy some government support*

In 2014 and 2015, the clashes opposing communities in Mali, in Tabankort or in the Menaka region were fuelled by powerful interests centred on drug-trafficking and large-scale cattle robbery. These two businesses have regional and international ramifications. Arrangements made under a tree by executives of these businesses may help establish peace but are ultimately vulnerable to distant dynamics. No political force in Mali (and that includes the UN peacekeeping mission and the French military deployment) makes dealing with the transnational criminal economy a political priority.

Another kind of interference with local affairs is at play in Mali, which directly emanates from the government. It is no secret that anti-separatist movements in the North enjoy some government support. Instrumentalisation of the state and Imghad militias in the North goes both ways. In a stunning yet bizarrely not much commented video, the

recently appointed Chief of the Malian army congratulates the Imghad youth for what they have been doing in Kidal in the past weeks (i.e. confronting the separatist Ifoghas forces). The direct collusion between the state and local militias has never been so explicit, demonstrating that local spoilers of peace processes might in fact not be so local.

The local conflicts dealt with in Anefis were not self-contained in Azawad. They had ramifications beyond, and, as a consequence, were extremely fragile. Recent research in peacebuilding has abundantly demonstrated that top-down, one-size-fits-all peace initiatives have little chances of success if not accompanied by a deep reflection on local appropriation of these processes. But naively trusting local processes to ensure durable settlements emerge can also be mistaken. What ultimately matters for peacemaking is the terms under which local cleavages connect with broader ones.

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**Yvan Guichaoua** is Lecturer in International Conflict Analysis at the Brussels School of International Studies, part of the University of Kent. He has been studying violence in Mali, Niger and the broader Sahel since 2007.

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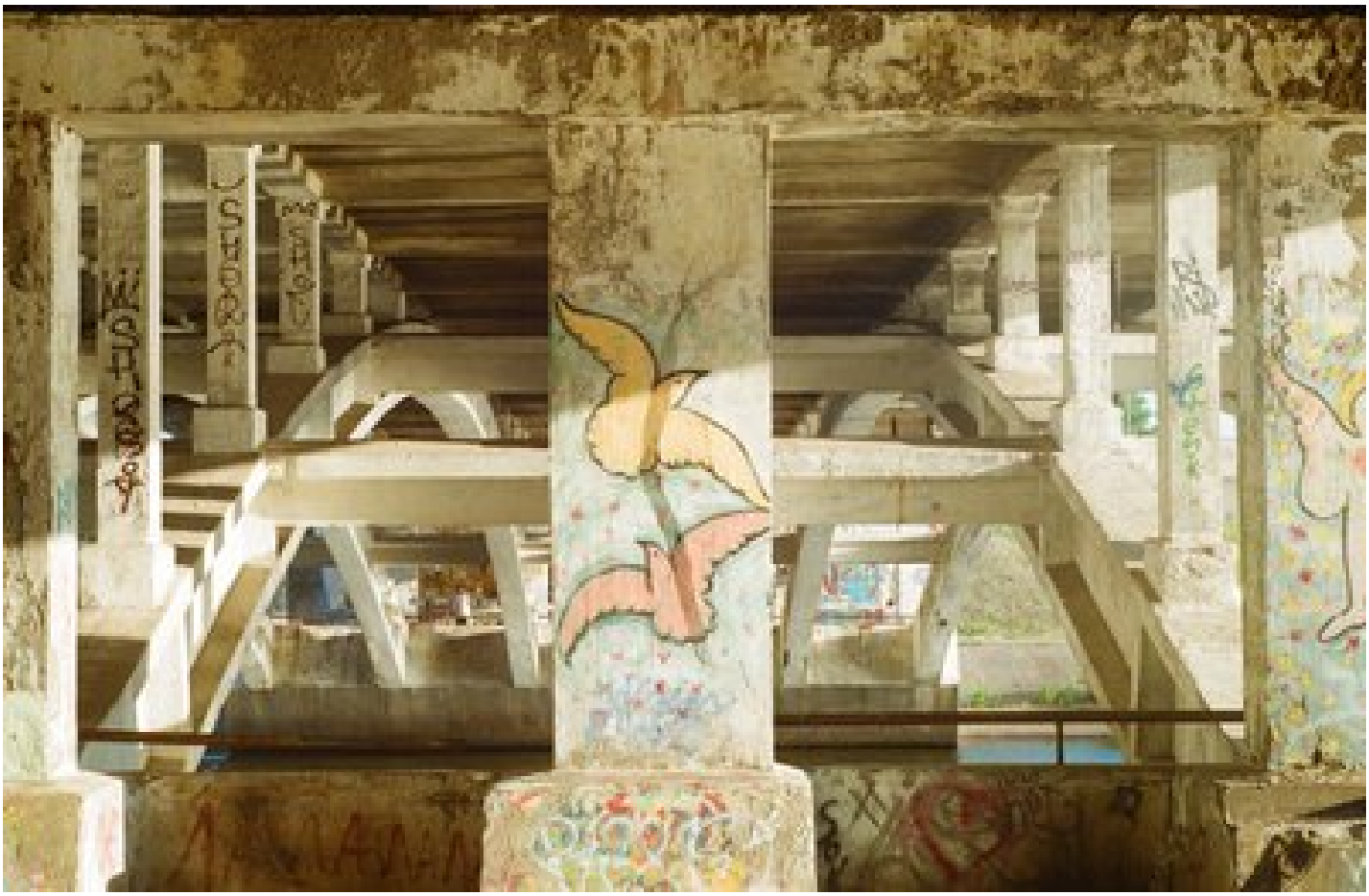

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### Association des Para Juriste de Sikasso

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### West African Network for Peace Building - Mali

WANEP works in Mali to facilitate dialogue between organisations working for peace.

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### Youth Association and Development (AJDM)

AJDM was created 1995 in order to enable citizens, particularly young people, to play a more active role in policy making and development in Mali.

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