

Is Mali's conflict a threat to the region?

By Al Jazeera

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Tensions have risen in northern Mali after al-Qaeda-linked fighters seized control of an area where the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) recently declared an independent state.

But just what does this mean for the region and is a military intervention by regional powers an option?

It was already a tenuous truce between the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine group and the Tuareg in northern Mali. Tension has been simmering between the unlikely alliance since the Tuareg and the Islamist group jointly took control of northern Mali after a coup.

The Ansar Dine are insisting on Islamic law in the north of Mali while the Tuareg want a secular state.

Members of Ansar Dine have destroyed several shrines in historic Timbuktu which they say go against Islamic principles. They have also threatened to destroy the city's three ancient mosques, one of which dates back to 1327.

More than 300,000 people have fled northern Mali since the groups took the territory in the days following the March coup d'etat. Western diplomats now warn that Mali could become a hub for al-Qaeda fighters.

With other players like the Movement for Jihad and Unity in West Africa (MUJAO) now gaining influence in the region, is there any hope for unity in the fractured region? Will the conflict spill over into neighbouring countries? And is an external military intervention needed?

Inside Story, with presenter Ghida Fakhry, discusses with guests: Mohamed Larbi Zitout, a former Algerian diplomat and deputy ambassador to Libya; Jeremy Keenan, a professor of social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and author of several books on the Sahara, including *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror*; and Tiebile Drame, a former Malian minister of foreign affairs who was also the regional crisis mediator for interim Malian President Dioncounda Traore.

"The MNLA is a very small minority within the Tuareg community. The Tuareg are a minority in northern Mali. This does not mean that we should not pay attention to their demands and claims. But their claim for independence is not shared at all by the majority of the Tuareg The situation in Mali has become a threat. Not only for the existence of Mali, but a threat for the region, a threat for all the countries that are neighbours of Mali."

Tiebile Drame, Mali's former minister of foreign affairs

EVENTS LEADING TO LATEST VIOLENCE:

- Accused of not dealing with the Tuareg rebellion, President Amadou Toumani Toure was deposed by military officials ahead of presidential elections in March
- A month later, with this power vacuum, Tuareg separatists took control of northern Mali
- A few days later, the military handed over power to a civilian government led by President Dioncounda Traore
- In May, the Tuareg MNLA and Ansar Dine, an al-Qaeda linked group) merged and declared northern Mali an Islamic state, but the truce between the two groups was short-lived
- Rival groups split over the introduction of Islamic law in northern Mali
- In June, the Movement for Jihad and Unity in West Africa (MUJAO), another al-Qaeda linked group, took control of the headquarters of the Tuareg separatists in northern Mali, leaving at least 20 people dead
- Members of the group Ansar Dine destroyed the holy shrines of Sufi saints in historic Timbuktu
- The International Criminal Court is calling the attacks on Timbuktu's holy sites a war crime

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