



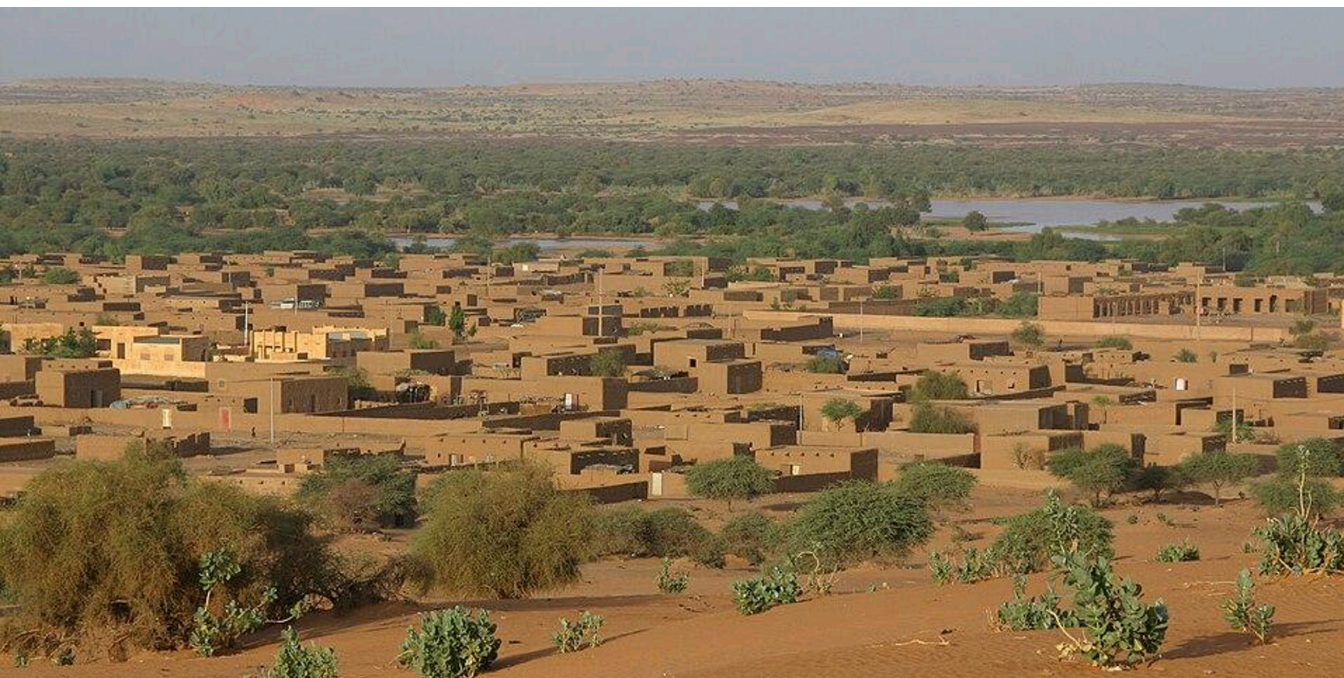
Clingendael

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With Whom to Make Peace?

The Idaksahak in the Malian Peace Process



Menaka - Mali, October 2007

In Short

- The repeated coordinated offensives by the FLA and JNIM since April 2026 underscore the fragility of peacebuilding in Mali;
- The country's Tuareg revolt, Islamist insurgency, and intercommunal conflicts are inextricably linked and must be addressed as such;
- The Idaksahak, a Tuareg community dominant in the Menaka region, illustrate this interrelatedness;
- The peace process launched by Bamako offers some pathways towards reconciliation, but is undermined by the exclusion of armed opposition and civil society;
- Durable reconciliation will require broadening the peace process beyond loyalist groups to the actors currently driving the conflict.

On 25 April 2026, the separatist Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) and militant Islamist Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) unleashed a wave of attacks across Malian territory. They killed key government figures, captured strategic towns, and plunged the country into turmoil. On 4 July 2026, the two groups struck again, hitting Aguelhok, Anefis, Gao, Sevaré and a prison near Bamako. Mali's fragile order stands once again on the brink, with peace a distant prospect. This commentary analyses the peace process spearheaded by Bamako since the international community's withdrawal in 2023. It does so by focusing on one northern Malian community and its place within local politics and peacebuilding: the Idaksahak.

A historically nomadic and pastoralist people, the Idaksahak are part of Tuareg society despite speaking a distinct language. They constitute the dominant group in Menaka and Ansongo and likely number [100,000 to 150,000 people](#). Originally a vassal tribe of the Iwellemmeden Tuareg, they rose in prominence in the 1990s through involvement in militia networks.¹ Today Idaksahak society sits at a crossroads between [several competing political trends](#): independentism, loyalism to Bamako, and militant Islamism. Together, these three forces define the local political climate and make this community a useful proxy for northern Mali writ large.

This article therefore looks at the main actors behind these tendencies and their place within current peacebuilding efforts, from the Idaksahak perspective. Through this lens, it becomes clearer how Mali's 'Peace and Reconciliation' process risks being undermined by its selective engagement with armed groups.

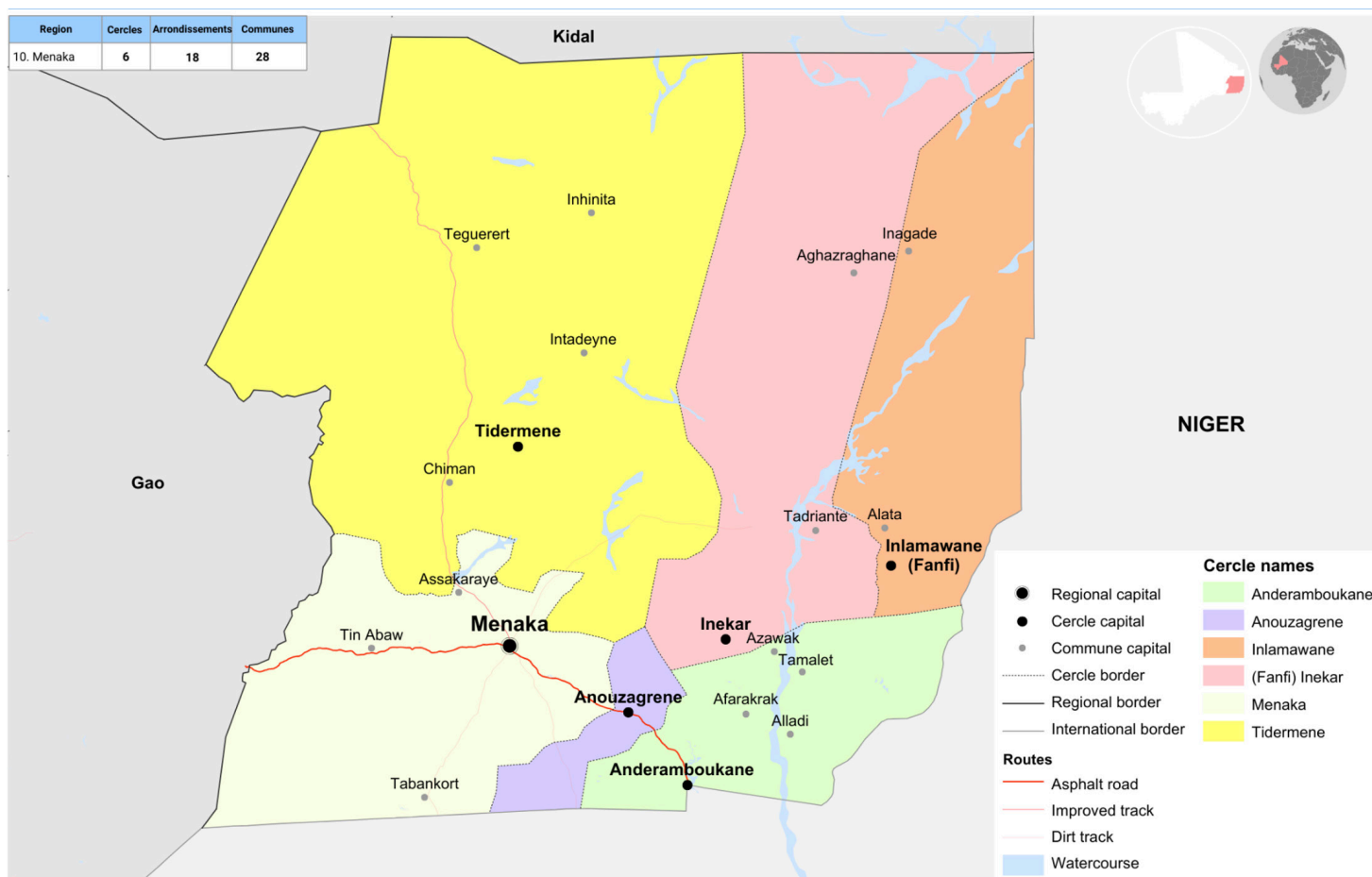
The Mali war: A brief summary

Mali has experienced cyclical Tuareg revolts since its independence. Many Tuaregs feel alienated from the central government. They seek self-rule over an area stretching from the Sahara to the Niger river, which they call '[Azawad](#)'.² In 2012 they allied with Islamist groups and swept aside Malian armed forces beyond Timbuktu and Gao. The Islamists then ousted their erstwhile allies before being defeated themselves by a French-led international coalition. Protracted negotiations between Bamako and separatist groups eventually led to the signing of the 2015 Algiers Accords. A UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, would help implement the agreement, while France's 'Operation Barkhane' would fight the non-signatory Islamist groups.

By 2023 the Accords were falling apart. Years of ineffectual peacebuilding and France's failure to defeat the Islamists convinced a military-minded junta to evict its international partners and pursue a more aggressive approach. It captured Kidal and pushed independence groups towards the Algerian border but was unable to secure complete territorial control. Meanwhile, Bamako launched [its own peace process](#), culminating in a 'Charter for Peace and Reconciliation' in July 2025. Significantly, Azawad separatists, Islamist groups, and sections of civil society were (and continue to be) excluded from the Charter's drafting and implementation. As [former Prime Minister Moussa Mara noted](#), peace is being made only with those who do not fight the state, while the armed groups have been left out. He asked "how can we achieve peace, let alone reconciliation, when those who are fighting have not been involved in the process?" This key question is addressed here through the prism of Idaksahak politics.

1 Grémont, C. (2024), 'L'émancipation politique au commencement de la tribu ? Réflexion sur la notion de tribu à partir des revendications des Idaksahak (Nord-Mali)', in: Guédon, S. (ed.), *La tribu au Maghreb et au Sahara (Antiquité-Temps présent)*, Pessac, France: Ausonius Éditions, p. 145-150.

2 There remains some internal disagreement regarding Azawad's relationship to the Malian state, as well as to its southern border. Both full independence and regional autonomy have been political objectives at times. Maximalist interpretations of the territory include ethnically-mixed areas well south of the Niger bend. Only the region north of the river has a Tuareg majority.



Map of Menaka region, based on OCHA

Pro-Bamako networks

The Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) formed in 2016 when rebel leader Moussa Ag Acharatoumane seceded from the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA). The MSA sought to better [represent the interests](#) of Idaksahak and Chamanamas populations within the peace process. French and Nigerien support proved decisive. Both countries [saw the MSA](#) as a [potential ally](#) against extremists and [invested heavily](#) in the relationship. The armed group soon split between its two constituent communities,³ strengthening its communal character.

Ag Acharatoumane has shaped the MSA-D as a vessel for Idaksahak emancipation within the Malian state, a remarkable development given his previous leadership role within Azawad independentism.⁴ It joined [the pro-Bamako 'Plateforme' coalition](#) in 2019 and has largely [remained in that camp](#). Within Menaka, the MSA-D's ascendance granted it political capital, disrupting traditional hierarchies. It allied with the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA) in 2016, which [shares its interests](#)

3 MSA-Daoussak, also known as MSA-D or MSA-1; and MSA-Chamanamas, also known as MSA-C or MSA-2.

4 Ag Acharatoumane was co-founder of the Mouvement National de l'Azawad (MNA), served as spokesman for the MNLA, and even designed the Azawad flag.

in this respect.⁵ The Malian government, for its part, has used the MSA-D as a [conduit for state power](#) in a hard-to-reach region. They regularly cooperate on security matters. The same was previously true of [Niger and France](#), while the Russian-affiliated [Wagner Group](#) and [Africa Corps](#) have also forged ties.

Much of this cooperation has gone through Ag Acharatoumane himself. He was for instance [granted a seat](#) in the transitional legislature in 2020. This approach fits within Bamako's general [governance strategy](#) for the North. Since the 1990s it has forged clientelist networks, granting power and economic rents to local actors while fragmenting any possible opposition.⁶ The rise of the MSA-D correspondingly constitutes one of several steps within a reconfiguration of hierarchical power relations in Menaka benefiting Idaksahaks. This clientelistic strategy is however not without its critics, and it has deepened divisions within community leadership. It may very soon face renewed competition from the MSA's independentist rival, the FLA.

Azawad self-determination

Ag Acharatoumane's pro-Bamako volte-face alienated those parts of Idaksahak society which remain committed to the Azawad project. Consequently, many of them [reintegrated the CMA](#). Several prominent leaders also joined the pro-independence High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA) around 2017. This included [Siguidi Ag Madit](#), head of the influential Iduguritan faction. They opposed

Ag Acharatoumane's [ascension as tribal leader](#) through his ties to Bamako. They also disapproved of the MSA-D's operations against Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), which they saw as a cover for targeting Fulbe communities and stealing their cattle.

The 2017-2023 period was especially fractious. The arrest of Ag Madit's son in January 2018, ostensibly for aiding jihadist groups, was for instance rumoured to be orchestrated by Ag Acharatoumane to bring his father back into the fold.⁷ Fighting also occurred between [MSA-D/GATIA and the HCUA](#) in northern Menaka. The tide turned somewhat in 2020 with some defectors [switching back](#) to the MSA-D. Pro-independence groups' inaction against militant Islamists [may have played a role here](#).⁸

The CMA was eventually driven out of Menaka in 2023 following renewed hostilities with Bamako. The MSA-D [elected to not get involved](#). The CMA's decision to form the [Azawad Liberation Front \(FLA\)](#) in November 2024 therefore had little direct impact locally. [A vocal Idaksahak faction](#) nevertheless remains within its ranks. For now, their influence is minimal, and they have been unable to provide either protection or meaningful political representation. But with Kidal in separatist hands again, and the FLA [stating its desire](#) to conquer Menaka, they may soon become very relevant. That said, a third set of actors may complicate things: militant Islamists.

Militant Islamism

While many Idaksahaks followed Ag Acharatoumane into the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in 2012, some instead joined nascent militant Islamist groups. These were oftentimes individuals who

5 Like the Idaksahak, the Imghad are a traditionally vassal tribe which upended existing hierarchies through involvement in armed groups. Significantly, GATIA leader Ag Gamou became governor of Kidal in 2023, although he was expelled by the recent FLA-JNIM offensive.

6 This co-optation through economic rents has remained remarkably stable post-2020 coup. Zanoletti, G. (2023), *Le djihad de la vache: Pastoralisme et formation de l'État au Mali*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, p. 240-241; Chebli, D. (2022), 'Économie transnationale de la violence et autonomisation des milices au Nord du Mali', *Cultures & Conflits* 125, no. 1, pp. 98-101; Grémont, C. 2019. 'Dans le piège des offres de violence. Concurrences, protections et représailles dans la région de Ménaka (Nord-Mali, 2000-2018)', *Hérodote* 172, no. 1, p. 60.

7 The incident is too complex to discuss in detail. However, the accusations that both Ag Madit and the HCUA as a whole maintained ties to ISSP likely do hold some merit. Grémont, 'Dans le Piège des Offres de Violence', pp. 59-60.

8 In a notorious incident in April 2023, CMA-affiliated groups retreated from Tidermène rather than face ISSP on the battlefield, allowing the municipality to be captured.

felt alienated from both the Malian state and communal power structures. Several opponents of Ag Madit within the Iduguritan enlisted, as did some young Idaksahaks from Indelimane. Other recruits had similarly marginalised backgrounds including – significantly – Fulbe. Many of the latter emanated from [militia networks formed in the 1990s](#) during Fulbe-Idaksahak pastoralist conflicts. Through various splits and mergers, these fighters [formed ISSP in 2015](#). The group gained power over much of Menaka following the departure of international forces in 2022–2023. It is currently holding the regional capital under siege, [briefly capturing it](#) in late April.

The fighting between MSA-D and ISSP has sometimes been described as a [communal conflict](#) between Fulbe and Idaksahaks, not least because of [ethnic massacres](#) perpetrated by both sides. Protection from violence in fact constitutes [a major driver](#) of Fulbe enlistment into extremist groups. Still, it is more accurate to describe the conflict as opposing [some Idaksahaks and Fulbe](#) against [some other Idaksahaks](#).

Still other Idaksahaks turned towards ISSP's rival, JNIM, for support. In 2023, JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali [received allegiance](#) from several notables near Inekar. He reportedly presents himself as [a unifying figure](#), solving conflicts between communities. With recent successes in neighbouring regions, he may call upon those allegiances again. For now, ISSP remains the dominant force in Menaka.⁹ It has [strengthened its local governance role](#) since 2023, creating “overlapping and competing networks of informal governance” parallel to the Malian state. With Islamist groups excluded from talks, Bamako's current peacebuilding efforts are unlikely to achieve much on this level.

9 Although one recent JNIM-ISSP clash took place in Menaka, the group has, if anything, strengthened its hold over the region. Abd'Allah. (2023, 13 Novembre), [‘Dans le nord-est du Mali, l'État islamique en voie de « normalisation » ?’, Afrique XXI](#); Charles, M., and Karr, L. (2025, 24 November), [‘Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in West Africa Interactive Map and Campaign Analysis’, Critical Threats](#).

What can the peace process do?

The current process offers several promising pathways to peace. Firstly, it introduces new mechanisms for conflict resolution. In early 2025 the association ‘Tamouzokh’ [was launched with great fanfare](#) in Bamako. Spearheaded by Minister of Communication Ag Ilyène – himself an Idaksahak – its stated purpose is to “build a bridge” to solve those problems that have damaged “the social fabric” of northern Mali. Since then, Tamouzokh [has organised several meetings](#) between Tuareg groups to resolve historic grievances.

Secondly, the government has launched a renewed Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) drive aimed at disarming loyalist militias. In so doing, it may reduce the chance that communal disputes escalate. [The first phase \(DDR-I\)](#) began in November 2025. The objective is to integrate 2,000 fighters into the armed forces and 1,000 into civilian life. [350 MSA and GATIA members](#) are involved in Menaka thus far.

What are the risks?

Peacebuilding suffers from a poorly-defined institutional framework. The Charter offers many recommendations to promote reconciliation, but few concrete measures. [A governmental watchdog](#) was appointed in March 2026 to monitor its implementation but lacks enforcement mechanisms. The current approach contains few meaningful innovations upon the Algiers Accords and furthermore is more restrictive in scope. Violence, moreover, remains rife in Mali. Communities are unlikely to disarm should the government not fulfil its promise of protection.¹⁰ The recent offensive by opposition groups, [excluded from DDR-I](#), underscores this risk. Past Malian DDR initiatives

10 For instance, Youssef Toloba, leader of the Dogon-affiliated Dan Na Ambassagou, has rejected the DDR plans, requesting more weapons instead. Daniel, S. (2025, 17 March), [‘Mali: Youssef Toloba, chef militaire de la milice Dan Na Ambassagou, demande des armes contre les jihadistes’, RFI](#).

have also paradoxically increased violence. The prospect of peace dividends caused [competition and fragmentation](#), while legitimating the use of violence to become an interlocutor. Bamako must tread carefully, should it want to avoid past mistakes.

Inter-community dialogue, meanwhile, remains restricted to pro-government groups. Despite arguably constituting the most salient communal conflict in Menaka, talks between Fulbe and Idaksahaks have yet to take place under the current framework. Negotiations involving anti-government forces are likewise off the table. Mali could take inspiration from [past Nigerien approaches](#), which have had some success at calming tensions.¹¹ Bamako furthermore risks alienating Malians through its security strategy. Since 2023, [violence against civilians](#) by government forces and their Wagner Group/Africa Corps allies has spiked.¹² Menaka has been spared from the worst of this, though this may partially reflect [limited engagement](#) in the region.¹³

The government's clientelist politics in Menaka come with their own risks. Local [trust in traditional authorities](#) is exceptionally low, while many Idaksahaks remain ideologically committed to the Azawad project. Other ethnic groups, meanwhile, have not benefitted from Idaksahak emancipation.¹⁴ This double marginalisation – within the Malian State and the Azawad project – stands to fuel longstanding communal grievances. In turn, this reinforces the appeal of actors who do promise political inclusion: mainly, [militant Islamist groups](#).

Conclusion

Pulled apart by Azawad nationalism, militant Islamism, and loyalism to Bamako, the Idaksahak community forms a microcosm of northern Mali. Here, as elsewhere, peacebuilding is shaped by the Malian government's approach to these forces. The 'Peace and Reconciliation' process offers meaningful perspectives for the resolution of longstanding disputes. However, it is undermined by its selective engagement with local actors – doubly so considering the interrelated nature of Mali's separatist, Islamist, and communal conflicts. At best, this approach will hamper their resolution. At worst, it risks driving up support for anti-government groups.

The Idaksahak are not the only ones to be at a crossroads. Mali is facing its gravest crisis since 2012. The JNIM-FLA offensive threatens the stability not merely of the north, but the entire country. It also represents an opportunity. The current exclusionary path to peace is as well-trodden as it is unsuccessful. True reconciliation may require going off the beaten track and embracing all interlocutors. The moment is critical. It is up to all political forces in Mali to meet it.

11 The Nigerien High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) has been locally successful at defusing conflicts. It could form a blueprint for Malian peacebuilding.

12 In 2024 the Wagner Group killed more civilians than ISSP and JNIM combined.

13 ACLED Data. Roughly 3.6% of Wagner/Africa Corps-related events took place in Menaka, compared to 0.9% civilian deaths and 1.7% of total fatalities.

14 Gaoukoye, A. *Ménaka, les Fleurs du Mensonge*, Paris, France: L'Harmattan, 2022, p. 109.

About the Clingendael Institute

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