



Interview with Attaher Zacka Maïga

Networking Coordinator*

Attaher Zacka Maïga was born on 10 May 1963 in Bia, Bourem Cercle, Gao Region, Mali. He has spent his life in the service of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, joining the Mali Red Cross as a volunteer in 1987 before working for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as a nutritionist in a pilot centre for nutritional recovery and education in Bourem from January 1988 to June 1990. In 1990 and 1991 he acted as consultant to a number of organizations, including World Vision and UNICEF.

In April 1992, Attaher Maïga joined the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a “resident” (i.e. local) employee. Since then, he has held many positions. From 1996 to 2000, he was in charge of the Gao office, which employed almost 100 staff, both resident and “mobile” (expatriate). He then took charge of the ICRC’s programmes in northern Mali from 2001 to 2006, ran the organization’s office in the Malian capital Bamako from 2007 to 2008 and was responsible for the Mali communication programme between 2009 and 2011. From November 2011 to November 2014, he was head of the ICRC’s northern Mali sub-delegation, one of the first resident employees to lead an ICRC sub-delegation. Since 2015, Attaher Maïga has been Networking Coordinator for the ICRC’s Mali delegation.

In 1996, Mr Maïga initiated the ICRC’s post-conflict programmes in his country, covering the fields of agriculture, veterinary services and health. In 2009, he launched a pilot migrant project in Kidal, northern Mali. These much-appreciated initiatives

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resulted in his being invited to participate in the 2010 Montreuil meeting, which laid the foundations for the reforms currently underway.

Attaher was the first Mali focal point for the ICRC's Unit for Global Affairs. This role gave him a deeper understanding of trends in the Islamic world and enabled him to help the ICRC adjust its dialogue with Jihadist armed groups. Our interview with Mr Maïga highlights his extensive experience with one of the oldest humanitarian organizations and is an opportunity for him to share his understanding of the ICRC's interaction with the armed groups that controlled northern Mali in 2012, when he was representing the ICRC in the region.

Attaher Maïga holds a degree in public administration from the Institut de Gestion et des Langues Appliquées aux Métiers, Bamako.

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1. Good morning, Attaher. Thank you for agreeing to share your experience of dialogue with armed groups in the Sahel region. First of all, could you tell us about the setting in which you worked prior to the start of French military operations in Mali in January 2013? What was the role of the ICRC during this period and what dealings did you have with the armed groups in question?

Prior to the arrival of the French military in 2013, operational conditions in Mali had been difficult owing to the sheer number of different armed groups active in the area, including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith) and the Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO; Movement for Unification and Jihad in West Africa). These armed groups had seized control of northern Mali, the armed conflict had escalated and the State had been unable to ensure the provision of basic social services in that part of the country; these circumstances had had a significant impact on the needs and vulnerabilities of the civilian population. Against this background of diverse humanitarian needs, the ICRC had begun work in northern Mali, particularly in the towns of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. During the period 2012–2013 we were one of the major humanitarian organizations on the ground, working to meet a large proportion of people's needs. The humanitarian aid we provided included distributing food, installing water supply systems and building community health centres. This work helped us to win the trust of the civilian population and the armed groups in Mali; our credibility was pivotal to establishing a direct dialogue with these groups.

Our efforts to make contact with the armed groups in Mali dated back to 2007. Our first step had been to approach community leaders to help us to gain direct access. We then sent a letter through an intermediary who we had first contacted in 2010 in Timbuktu indicating our desire to engage in dialogue with the mujahideen, along with a document in Arabic describing the ICRC, our

mandate, our principles and our activities. These initial efforts proved fruitless. In 2011 we sent the same documents to another contact in Kidal. It was only in April 2012 that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb confirmed receipt of our letter and took steps to contact us.

2. How did you initiate dialogue with these groups? What ICRC decisions had made this contact possible, and what concessions had been necessary?

I was staying in Bamako when I was contacted by one of the people who had previously helped us to engage in dialogue with armed groups. This person informed me that one of his friends wanted to meet with ICRC officials. I jumped at the opportunity and immediately travelled to Gao, where a face-to-face meeting was to take place.

Our reputation and credibility among local communities played a pivotal role in establishing a dialogue with the armed groups. Our humanitarian work in the area enjoyed the broad support of the civilian population. This support had a significant influence on the decision of the armed groups to talk to us. This was made explicitly clear to me by the members of the armed groups themselves, who informed me that civilians had described the ICRC as a trustworthy organization and had told them that anyone who attacked us was attacking the local communities.

3. Could you tell us about the first meeting and how you assessed risk before you showed up?

I was in Bamako when the head of the ICRC delegation, who was based in Niger at the time, called me to tell me that a combatant wanted to meet me. I immediately set out for Niamey. The delegation was worried about me, given the risks involved in attending this meeting. Having reassured the team, we talked at length about the content of any future discussions, as well as our strengths and weaknesses. I needed to be sufficiently prepared for this crucial meeting. Having prepped for the encounter, I travelled to Gao. On arrival, I was taken to see a high-ranking local. After we had talked for a little while, we were joined by a group of mujahideen fighters, including one of the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

After exchanging the usual pleasantries, I fell into conversation with Mokhtar Belmokhtar. I asked him why he had wanted to meet with ICRC officials. He said that he was aware of the ICRC's work and had already met with ICRC representatives in Afghanistan in the 1990s. He said that we were a credible, serious organization. Indeed, he thought ICRC to be the most credible of all the international organizations that they had encountered. He then told me that his group lacked the funds to fully meet the needs of the civilian population, and that they wanted to speak to an organization capable of undertaking that task. Essentially, they wanted our support in assessing and responding to the needs of the local people. I told him that while we wanted to help people affected

by conflict, we were unfortunately not always able to gain access to those communities. Moreover, on a number of occasions, the food aid we had tried to distribute had been destroyed by members of armed groups. Finally, I told him that I had taken note of his request but was unable to give him an answer on the spot, as I needed to consult my superiors on how to proceed. That was the first “official” meeting between the ICRC and these armed groups.

4. How did you start to build trust with these groups? How did they view the ICRC?

Trust was built rapidly; soon after we had confirmed our willingness to enter into dialogue with jihadist groups, we were able to expand our activities on the ground, to provide health care to many wounded and sick people. Having undertaken an independent assessment of needs in the region of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, we distributed more than 1500 tonnes of goods. The leaders of the jihadist groups were pleasantly surprised by the speed with which we had begun our operations. They were so pleased with our work in the field that they brought the media in to cover our efforts to help people in need.

Our humanitarian work and our professional approach had helped to build trust in the ICRC among the mujahideen. In the course of our work, we tried to take on board some of their demands and recommendations. For example, they did not want women or Christians involved in our work. We took the measures necessary to avoid offending them on that count. However, as their trust in our work grew, we were sometimes granted exemptions. For example, if a serious medical case arose and there was no competent Muslim doctor available, I would appeal to members of the armed groups and obtain their authorization to call in a non-Muslim medic. In time, their trust in our work and our credibility enabled us to send in Christian delegates and workers of different nationalities. Little by little, through a process of negotiation, we were able to free ourselves from the various restrictions that the armed groups had imposed at the start of our formal exchanges.

5. Why do you think that the group agreed to talk to us? Did you manage to expand the scope of the dialogue to cover other ICRC priorities, such as the conduct of hostilities?

As I mentioned previously, the armed groups’ decision to enter into dialogue with us had been, to a large extent, influenced by the civilian population and the trust we had incrementally built through our work.

Our exchanges with the jihadists predominantly revolved around health care, security and access to people in need. While the trust we had built had allowed us to progressively expand the scope of our activities and free ourselves from some of the restrictions initially imposed on our work, it is important to stress that the dialogue with the armed groups never really extended to discussing aspects of international humanitarian law or international human rights law. We were only able to address these issues once, in August 2012, during a meeting I

had arranged with the head of the delegation during one of his trips to Gao. During that meeting, Jean Nicolas – the head of the ICRC delegation – had tried to discuss the issue of hostages and other legal matters relating to protecting people caught up in armed conflict. However, his main counterpart was not open to discussing these issues; for him, human rights emanated from divine law and not from a set of rules established by men. More recently, from mid-2020 onwards, the ICRC delegation has been able to broach issues relating to protection with some of the leaders of the armed groups.

6. How has the relationship evolved over time? Looking back, can you identify any particular phases?

The mujahideen advised us to work exclusively in accordance with the standards and principles of our organization. They also asked us to immediately inform them if someone sought to impede our work.

The decision to allow the ICRC to carry out its mandate to help people in need was taken within the framework of a *shura*, or consultative council. Mokhtar Belmokhtar had told other members of these armed groups that we wished to establish a dialogue with them. A council meeting was held to discuss the matter and after two days of deliberations, a consensus was reached. I was informed by telephone of their decision to allow the ICRC to enter into dialogue with the mujahideen in order to carry out its mandate. It is worth noting that the council had been very methodical in its approach.

During the following nine months, no security incidents took place in the field: the armed groups had made our security a priority. However, they had banned us from using the ICRC emblem. Initially, it had been agreed that we could use an alternative *ad hoc* emblem: the initials of the ICRC on a white background. Nevertheless, three days later, we were informed that some of the jihadists did not agree with us using this form of the emblem, including the branch of the Islamic State group led by Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahrawi, who thought that the alternative emblem was identical to that of the Red Cross. We were therefore obliged to operate without any distinctive emblem whatsoever. In the meantime, however, the mujahideen had implemented an alternative identification system which allowed us to avoid security incidents in the course of our work.

Before the French military forces entered Mali, the mujahideen contacted me to tell me that they did not want to wage war in Gao or Timbuktu, and even less so in Kidal, as these towns had large civilian populations and they did not wish to place civilians in danger. They had therefore decided to withdraw from these towns to save civilian lives. They also assured me that wherever they operated, they would try to make sure that we could continue to do our work.

New armed groups emerged on both sides of the conflict in the wake of the French military operations. Given the evolving situation, our lack of a distinctive emblem made it difficult for the parties to the conflict to identify us as a humanitarian organization. We therefore resumed using the red cross emblem,

especially in view of the increased risk of attacks and air raids. Unfortunately, this move caused anger among certain armed groups and led to a breakdown in our relations with them. They claimed, “we told them not to use the emblem, but as soon as the army arrived, as soon as the white men arrived, they betrayed us and started to use the emblem again”. From a security point of view, it was a very difficult period for us. It was under these circumstances that one of our teams was abducted.

It is important to remember that the inter-community dynamics in the region at that time did not play in our favour, with frequent accusations of ICRC bias towards one or other community. Given this unfortunate turn of events, I sent an envoy to meet with the head of the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest, with whom I had spoken to at length on the telephone. I explained to him that conditions on the ground had forced us to go against their wishes by using the emblem. I made it clear that we did not seek to defy them and that the ICRC remained a neutral and independent organization. At the same time, we were approached by one of the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb who, for his part, reassured us that his group had no problem with the ICRC and that if the contrary had been the case, they would have let us know.

7. Did the fact that the ICRC engaged in dialogue with some of these groups create tensions in your relations with European armed forces, especially the French army?

The fact that we engaged in dialogue with jihadist groups did not cause any problems or tensions between the ICRC and the European armed forces in the region. I had a very good relationship with representatives of the French army, whether they belonged to Operation Serval or Operation Barkhane. We cooperated closely with the European armed forces, who were aware that, as a neutral organization, we engaged in dialogue with all parties to the conflict. For example, after planning the following week’s activities with the sub-delegation on Fridays, I would head over to meet with the French army the following day to share our weekly plans with them. I should, however, mention that certain members of our teams did not always scrupulously respect all the security rules established by the European armed forces and were sometimes reprimanded by them.

8. Was there a lot of debate between the leaders of these groups and Islamic scholars from civil society concerning the application of Islamic law, including criminal law; could you explain to us the role that the ICRC played in these discussions?

We had no direct influence since these issues were, in principle, outside the material scope of our discussions with the armed groups. We did, however, try to influence their actions indirectly by contributing to the internal debates between religious

leaders in Mali and leaders of armed groups. For example, during a seminar on the scope of application of Islamic law (*Sharia*) organized in Bamako by the Islamic High Council in Mali, we handed out documents to council members on relevant topics, including examples from other settings where the ICRC operated. A further opportunity to raise awareness among the armed groups of some of these issues arose when they approached us to request medical assistance during the amputations they planned to perform. We firmly opposed that suggestion and used the opportunity to raise awareness of the fact that such practices were banned.

9. How did you go about discussing health care in danger? What problems did you face and what arguments did you use to resolve them?

Certain members of the armed groups met with me to inform me that some of the nurses working at the hospital had stolen medicines meant for the use of people in need. They had identified twenty-one suspects who they argued must be punished in line with Islamic law, namely through the amputation of a hand. I was opposed to the idea and immediately informed the head of the ICRC delegation of the situation. The delegation leadership then held talks with the armed groups, making it clear that even if it were established that the allegations were founded, it would be up to the ICRC to decide whether it wanted to pursue the case. It later turned out that the allegations had been made in order to settle scores. Some members of the armed groups thought that there were informants working at the hospital who passed on information to the government in Bamako. We also used this opportunity to raise awareness of the rules protecting health care services during armed conflicts and to remind the armed groups that their members did not always comply with those rules. Later on, we also organized a seminar for the armed groups on the issue of health care in danger. The issue had been taken up by the head of the delegation, who made telephone calls to one of their leaders and also asked me to pass on messages to them on his behalf.

It is also worth pointing out that the armed groups' concern with maintaining credibility also motivated them to be more open to discussing the issue of protecting the medical services.

10. What impact did inter-community conflicts have on dialogue with different armed groups?

In 2012, inter-community tensions were not as acute as they are today; their impact on the dialogue with different armed groups was minimal. Moreover, we enjoyed the trust of the armed groups who, as I noted earlier, had expressly agreed to engage with us and to allow us to do our work. They were committed to ensuring that our operations continued without impediment. In each region we had a focal point who served as our guide. We could contact them whenever trouble arose. Moreover, I was invited once a month to see the emir to ensure that everything was fine. As far as my own personal safety was concerned, my car was never

searched, I was free to move around and I was treated as an important person. I pleaded for the Islamic police, the *hesba*, to refrain from arresting any ICRC staff members; if any problems arose involving a member of our organization, the ICRC needed to be consulted before any proceedings were brought.

Today things are very different; there is a plethora of armed groups operating in Mali with, at times, unclear agendas and ambitions – although some of these groups do try to facilitate our work as and when we ask them to do so. We are trying, albeit with great difficulty, to win the trust of this new generation of armed groups that, unfortunately for us, are not familiar with our past work. Our credibility and reputation are still an asset in this process, even though carrying out humanitarian work is much more difficult today than it was in 2012.

11. Coming back to more general issues, how important is the fact that you belong to a local community? Do international staff face different challenges when it comes to establishing and maintaining a dialogue with armed groups?

First of all, I have to point out that the armed groups did not want to negotiate with *me* as an individual, but with the ICRC as an institution. I was merely an envoy through whom they were able to communicate with the ICRC. Having said that, I must admit that my background did have a significant impact on the nature of the relationship between the ICRC and the armed groups. Having grown up in the area, I was familiar with the local environment, which lent me a certain legitimacy *vis-a-vis* local communities and armed groups – both Arab and Tuareg. Moreover, I had already worked to help vulnerable people during previous conflicts in Mali. That was why, in 1992, the rebel groups chose me to be the main intermediary in the dialogue between them and the ICRC. However, it is important to remember that I am also a product of the ICRC: working for our organization has also shaped my behaviour and my personality. Although I do hail from a local community in Mali, the training and experience I gained with the ICRC has helped to make me the man I am today.

I am a man of principle who never allows himself to be influenced by emotions when working in the field. I remember that in the 1990s my own community accused me of being pro-Tuareg and pro-Arab because the sub-delegation for which I worked focused on supporting Tuareg and Arab communities, which were among the most deprived. Four of the nine community health centres that we built in 1998 were located in Tarkint, a commune inhabited by Arabs and Tuaregs. In contrast, my own commune – where I was in charge of implementing community projects – had no such infrastructure.

Furthermore, when writing activity reports, I did not hold back from recording violations committed by members of my community against members of Tuareg communities. I was never party to any form of selective justice. Those values and principles were instilled in me by my colleagues at the ICRC, to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. These factors facilitated our efforts to establish and maintain a dialogue between the ICRC and the armed groups in Mali.

The fact that I grew up in Mali and am familiar with local customs has certainly helped to facilitate dialogue with the armed groups. However, I have no doubt that anyone, of any nationality, could also establish and maintain a dialogue with these groups as long as they upheld the values and principles promoted by the ICRC. In order to have the same comparative advantage as me, it would be enough for someone to try to understand the local context in which these groups operate, as well as the socio-cultural norms in that region.

12. Looking back, what did you learn from this experience? What are the mistakes that an international organization should avoid making when seeking to establish a dialogue of this kind?

In my opinion, the one mistake you should never make with these groups is failing to honour commitments towards them. I remember that after my very first meeting with one of the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, he asked me what made a “good” Muslim. By way of reply, I suggested that a good Muslim prayed daily, attended mosque and observed *zakat* (alms giving). He responded that a good Muslim was someone who kept his word and honoured his commitments. Loyalty is extremely important to these armed groups. That is why I opposed the ICRC’s decision to stop delivering water to Gao; the news had been passed on to me in Niamey by a combatant who was very concerned about what would happen to the communities in need. I asked him where he had got his information and he told me that he had been following the news on Radio France Internationale. I assured him that it was only a rumour and that I would obtain further information when I got to Gao. Once I had verified that his information was, in fact, correct, I handed in my resignation to the head of the ICRC delegation in Gao. I then continued to distribute 20,000 litres of diesel to communities, to the great surprise of the mujahideen, who had heard over the radio that the ICRC was withdrawing. They therefore assumed that the rumours were false—something I was only too happy to confirm. Fortunately, the ICRC leadership later decided to reverse their decision to withdraw.

13. How can an organization like the ICRC “institutionalize” your practical experience?

In my opinion, the best approach would be to record these experiences in writing and to disseminate them. We should not be afraid to write about our experiences or to keep a record of our dealings with armed groups, especially since they do not forbid us to do so. As far as I am concerned, my experiences have been particularly useful for other humanitarian organizations present in Mali, for whom I have worked as an adviser.

Thank you, Attaher, for sharing your broad experience with us.