

Strategic Sectors | **Security & Politics**

# Mali and the Sahel: From Crisis to Military Intervention (2013)

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The thirteen-month period from January 2012 to February 2013 is crucial to understanding the situation in Mali and, by extension, in the Sahel. The French military intervention in January 2013 was decided suddenly, when the crisis in Mali was precipitated by the rebel forces' taking of Konna and decision to set course directly for Bamako, which could have fallen in 24 hours. However, the French intervention did not mark the start of the conflict's "militarisation"; rather it signalled a new phase in a conflict that had already been gradually, but inexorably, moving in that direction, above all in 2012. The key factors are easy to identify, as the different parties made many sudden moves over the year: a) the military coup against President Touré; b) the secession of nearly half of Mali proclaimed by the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA); c) the ruptures and splintering of four insurgent groups, of which only the MNLA is a "nationalist secessionist" group, while the other three (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), and Ansar Dine) are "al-Qaeda Islamists" and, thus, by definition, transnational; and d) foreign interventions, first by the French and later by troops from different countries of the African Union. This is how things stood in April 2013. However, the situation existed within the framework of a complex process of regional instabil-

ity whose comprehension requires some analysis of the context, the background, the main actors and the relationships between them, and some of the key strategic issues.

The Sahel region emerged as a geostrategic priority beginning in 2000. This was the result of the return of combatants from Afghanistan, the need to protect US and EU energy interests in the Maghreb and West Africa, and the growing presence of China on the continent. Today, the events of the last few years – from the outbreak of the Arab Springs in 2010 and the fall of the Ben Ali and Gaddafi regimes in Tunisia and Libya to the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the military intervention in Mali that began in January 2013 – have shown that, from the point of view of security, everything that happens in the Maghreb and West Africa directly or indirectly affects: i) the success of the political transition processes in Maghreb countries; ii) the spread of challenges and threats to regional and international security; and iii) the implications of this lack of security for the international community's strategic interests.

At the political level, the countries in the region are, for the most part, former French colonies (except for Nigeria, which was a British colony) that have become young and unstable republics plagued by constant coups (Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Nigeria) and internal conflicts (among the urban, rural and nomadic populations and as a result of social exclusion due to ethnic and religious differences).

## The Rise of Radical Islamic Movements

The rampant poverty in most countries of the Sahel, the marginal status and exclusion of certain sectors of society, and, above all, the lack of education and professional opportunities for the vast majority of

young people make the region an ideal place for terrorist groups to attract and radicalise new members. The instability in the Sahel has allowed radical groups and al-Qaeda cells associated with the global jihad to reorganise and boost their operating capacity. Their priorities include, among others, the desire to bring down what they consider to be “apostate” regimes, to oppose international interventions in Muslim countries, and to destabilise Western governments and the world economy. The attack on the Algerian gas plant at Tiguentourine on 23 January 2013 proved that, although Algeria is the only country that has been, and remains, capable of combatting the terrorism of AQIM, it is nevertheless still quite vulnerable to regional instability.

AQIM, based in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger and present in Nigeria, Chad and the Sudan, arose in the 1990s from the ashes of an Islamist protest movement mobilised against the cancellation of the 1991 Algerian elections. Following the outbreak of civil war in 1992, the protest movement formed a military arm called the Armed Islamic Group (GIA from the French), from which the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC from the French) ultimately broke away.

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In 2007, Al Qaeda officially confirmed its ties to the GSPC and the name change to AQIM. From that moment on, the newly minted AQIM became al-Qaeda’s fourth armed regional structure, along with the sections in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the nationalist Islamist discourse was shelved in favour of advocating a vision of global jihad.

Although AQIM initially had its bases in the mountains of eastern Algeria, the Algerian counterterrorism campaigns ultimately forced it to relocate to mobile camps in the lawless areas of the Sahel in Mauritania, northern Mali and Niger. There, its members have integrated themselves into the local communities, by marrying members of the Tuareg

tribes and providing social services to populations that have traditionally been neglected by their governments.

MOJWA is an AQIM splinter group formed in January 2012 and allegedly led by the Mauritanian Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou. It claims to have the same objectives as AQIM and also uses abductions as a means of financing its activities. In fact, it has claimed responsibility for the abduction of three Western cooperation workers – including two Spaniards – from the refugee camp in the Tindouf region on 23 October 2011.

The other most active jihadist group in the Sahel is colloquially known as Boko Haram, which means “Western education is sin.” The group’s official name is *Jama’afu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad*, or “people committed to the propagation of the prophet’s teachings and jihad.” This group was founded in north-eastern Nigeria in 2002 for the purpose of spreading the sharia in the country and fighting corruption.

## Organised Crime

Organised crime in the Sahel has always posed a threat to regional and international security, as it is the corridor to Europe for the trafficking of drugs, arms, prostitutes and other humans, as well as other illicit activities, such as money laundering and even the smuggling of nuclear material. However, these types of activities have grown even worse now that the region’s terrorist groups have turned to them to finance their activities.

## Migratory Flows and Humanitarian Crisis

The extraordinary and uncontrolled migratory flows affecting Mauritania and the Ceuta and Melilla borders constitute a risk for the interests of both Mediterranean countries and the EU. The reasons for this are threefold: first, the irregular nature of the immigration; second, the possible spread of radical ideologies and terrorist group recruitment cells that it enables; and, third, the problems it can cause in the receiving countries, such as those related to unemployment, crime, healthcare, education, cultural adaptation and xenophobia, among others.

Additionally, the long periods of drought caused by climate change in the Sahel have led states and international agencies working on the ground to sound the alarm regarding some 15 million people in the region who may fall victim to famine. This could lead to massive migratory movements that, when taken in conjunction with the 467,000 people displaced by the conflict in northern Mali (175,211 refugees and 292,648 internally displaced persons, according to data from the UNHCR), entail a critical situation for the region.

### Acceleration of the Crisis

The biggest and most dangerous threat was the possibility that those political actors with criminal and/or terrorist backgrounds would establish a dynamic of synergy and mutual cooperation, which indeed they did beginning in February 2012. However, above all, it was the period from December 2012 to January 2013 – which saw the sudden irruption of militias (with the ensuing rapid territorial conquest) now directly focused on seizing power in Bamako – that marked a turning point in the management of the whole conflict, culminating in the French and international military intervention at the start of 2013.

All of this had, among other things, immediate and direct repercussions for the personal safety of expatriate cooperation agents working for NGOs and for the interests of foreign and local companies in the region, as well as the safety of their employees, with a clear impact on the EU's vital interests.

The aforementioned attack on the BP-Amenas power plant in Algeria by an AQIM splinter group and its immediate (albeit dramatic) outcome confirm that the situation has entered a stage of acute militarisation of the management of the entire crisis area.

Three variables should be taken into account in this “complex of vulnerabilities”:

- **Territoriality:** Armed action has been based on territory, not on state or institutional objectives. The terrorist groups are not so much trying to attack a state, its symbols or its armed forces, or to terrorise the population, as they are trying to take control of a terrain in which the State is absent, nearly devoid of inhabitants, and to capture

those who come close to or enter it, thereby increasingly expanding their territorial jurisdiction and becoming more mobile.

- **Internationalisation:** The groups' members have become international, they deliberately choose interstate spaces and international victims, they interact and collaborate with international networks, and they feed on a global perception and target a global audience.
- **Economic criminality:** These groups have adopted an entrepreneurial view of armed activity and violence. This change has led to a sort of criminal partnership with both the new traffickers (drugs, arms, humans, etc.) and traditional actors and agents of conflict (bandits, smugglers, Tuaregs) in an obviously dangerous mix.

Based on the underlying and cross-cutting threats and factors, and beyond the current phase of active militarisation, the response to the Sahel's problems requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach, encompassing diplomacy, security and development. Such an approach would include three overlapping types of interventions: *intrastate*, that is, within a single state in the region (territorial); *interstate*, that is, between neighbouring countries (regional); and *external*, meaning interventions by the EU and the US carried out in parallel with the others (global), which, while respecting each state's independence, would prevent bilateral issues and struggles for regional hegemony from deteriorating the situation further.

With regard to strictly military measures and instruments, it is necessary to create or increase the capacities of the affected states' own military instruments by means of cooperation on:

- a. personnel training activities carried out within the context of military and law enforcement training programmes; unit training; the use of special forces; assistance with local operations (i.e. joint planning and/or supervision and monitoring of the implementation of such operations rather than taking actual command of local forces);
- b. equipment handling and technological capacity-building; temporary provision of material and equipment (drones, surveillance aircraft, satellites, border surveillance systems) to ensure specific capacities, such as peacekeeping,

humanitarian assistance, coastal surveillance or maritime interdiction.

- c. exchange of information and general or specific intelligence for local operations (from external sources: drones, surveillance aircraft, satellites) and the capacity to obtain and analyse intelligence. Special forces units can be used as a supplementary tool.

Aware of the security problems plaguing the region, the EU developed a Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel during the Spanish Presidency in 2010. It does not focus exclusively on security (the fight against crime and AQIM's terrorism), but rather also takes aspects of development (infrastructure, job opportunities for young people, local consolidation) into consideration in order to overcome the risk of radicalisation of marginalised populations. In this context, it has conducted technical and political missions over the last three years in the most affected countries in order to assess the situation and identify possible actions so as to develop a broad regional strategy.

### Some Conclusions

The main reasons the Sahel has become a danger zone are the weakness of the states and the vast amounts of space. These are the most important factors determining what needs to be done to find a strategic solution. It is critical to take a comprehensive regional approach aimed at preventing a unity of purpose, action and implementation between organised crime groups (drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking and smuggling), terrorist groups and parts of the local population.

At the regional level, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) must seek political solutions and intensify cooperation to tackle the region's challenges. Although due to the conflict in Mali, multilateral bodies such as ECOWAS have indeed taken on an important role in managing the conflict, their ability to succeed will certainly be affected by the limited capacity that their Member States have in operational terms to respond to this type of conflict.

So long as the transition processes in the Maghreb

remain unfinished, and the weak governments of the states of the Sahel and the threats to international security continue to exacerbate the already chronic weakness of the countries of the Sahel, the international community will need to play a decisive role, focusing its actions on technical assistance in areas such as: electoral reform, economic growth and diversification, and regional security.

The military action taken by France and its allies is not a long-term plan, nor a solution in itself; however, in the current phase, it is a critical tool for establishing a certain security framework. It must be accompanied by an endorsement from the UN Security Council and more than nominal EU involvement.

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