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EDITORIAL

Conflicts Colliding in Mali and the Sahel

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Introduction

Instability in Mali and the western Sahel cannot be isolated to a single monolithic cause. Long the site of chronic malnutrition and food insecurity, the Sahel is also now home to drug traffickers and terrorist groups that are profiting from "ungoverned spaces" across the region. As a result, simmering humanitarian, development and governance crises are intersecting with global, regional and local security concerns. Mali and the Sahel are embedded in what might be called a regional conflict system. The system can be parsed into discrete levels: inter-state rivalries are often fused to national political competition while subnational conflicts tend to feature political, ethnic, sectarian and territorial dimensions. The most destabilizing conflicts may not even be taking place at the regional level, but rather consist of vicious disputes within localities (Ould Bah 2013).

The international community is seized by the various crises unfolding across Mali and the Sahel. The French military intervention launched in January 2013 illustrates European unease. Meanwhile, the United States has also sent a small number of military personnel to Mali to support allied forces fighting there, and it is soon opening a drone base in nearby Niger. Experts concede that the greatest threats are not directly to Europe or the United States, but rather to the wider neighborhood – particularly the Maghreb and West Africa. The media is replete with stories of Boko Haram in Nigeria collaborating with Malian groups. Indeed, Boko Haram has reportedly become increasingly active, leading Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan to declare a state of emergency in three states in the country's East, near the border with Chad and Niger. The impacts of French-led pressure are already being felt. France's military intervention in Mali prompted Mokhtar Belmokhtar's "Signed-In Blood Battalion" to attack the Amenas energy facility in Algeria in early 2013. And Islamist militants are reportedly flocking to Mali from Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and even Syria.

Amidst all of the preoccupation with Mali, it is worth asking what is actually going on in the Sahel. Why did yet another "model democracy" in Africa succumb to instability so rapidly? How much of the problem in Mali is home-grown, and how much a product of regional factors? What kinds of opportunities were and are available for preventive action? In what way can peace and stability be resurrected in Mali and the wider Sahel? What kinds of lessons can be extracted for national, regional and international cooperation? These are not just esoteric questions, but have profound implications. This issue of *Stability* asks the hard questions as policy makers and practitioners in Mali, the Sahel and around the world plot out their next steps. Invited authors were carefully selected to offer critical insights on the intervention to date and on the broader regional dynamics.

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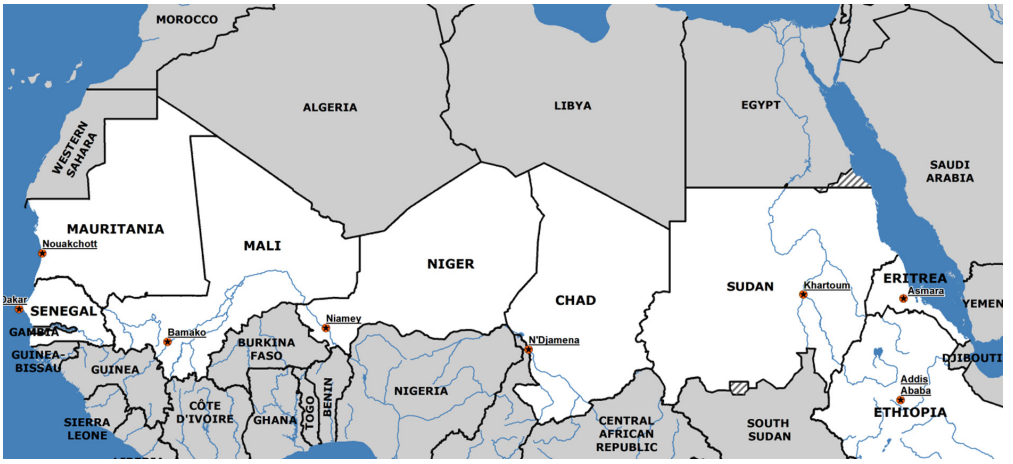

Figure 1: Mali and the Sahel Region. Source: European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office, 2 August 2012

There is an urgent need for informed analysis of the opportunities and pitfalls of intervention in Mali and the region. Indeed, short-, medium- and long-term planning is proceeding apace. In January 2013 at the African Union headquarters, donors pledged almost half a billion dollars for an international campaign to tackle Islamist militants in Mali. The European Union recently held a separate conference in Brussels in May 2013 – *Together for a New Mali* – at which donor nations pledged US$4.22 billion for Mali over two years, an amount exceeding the US$2.57 billion requested by the Malian government.

And while bearing hallmarks of the old model of stabilization, the intervention in Mali is shifting from a French-led operation to activities supported by regional forces, operating under United Nations mandates. The "regionalization" of stability operations there, as in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, underlines the ways in the West is reshaping its interventions in Africa.

Securing or Securitizing Mali and the Sahel?

Mali and the Sahel (see **Figure 1**) offer an intriguing if depressing study of the archetypal conflict ecosystem. Layered atop so-called structural drivers of conflict are overlapping armed groups with converging and diverging interests. Many of these actors are able to draw on diverse sources of financing, many of them linked to international networks of organized crime and terrorism. What is more, the region has been subjected to prolonged and repeated interventions – including relief, development and military action. With support from analysts closest to the ground, this edition of *Stability* attempts to begin unpeeling these layers. It reveals a bewildering level of complexity that must be comprehensively engaged if genuine security is to be achieved in the region.

As is well known to humanitarian specialists, Mali suffers from entrenched poverty, unemployment, inadequate basic services, high rates of population growth and food insecurity (Gilpin 2013). This is at least partly a product of its colonial legacy and considerable land mass. But under-development is also exacerbated by weak governance and corruption, widening the gap between elite decision-makers and citizens (Ould Bah 2013). The country´s sharp socio-economic inequalities are reflected not just in relation to income, but also land ownership and ethnicity (Gilpin 2013). Moreover, population displacement fuelled by conflict and food insecurity threatens to spread across the country´s borders throughout the Maghreb and West Africa.

Political analysts have long feared that Malians are vulnerable to the agendas of range of armed factions across the region. Key stakeholders include Tuareg groups, particularly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).[1] The MNLA, while a secular entity, initially sided with Islamists in 2012 in order to push government forces out of north Mali.[2] Meanwhile, Islamist groups include Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which migrated from Algeria to Mali in recent years. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), led by a Mauritanian, broke off from AQIM and pursues a broader Islamist agenda across West Africa, including northern Mali. Ansar al-Dine (Movement of the Defenders of the Faith) promotes Sharia law across Mali and the broader Islamic world; founded by a Tuareg, the group also includes Arabs and members of ethnic minorities in northern Mali who are threatened by the MNLA.

Predictably, these diverse armed groups do not necessarily share common agendas. They have, however, vastly complicated the situation in northern Mali. Indeed, they not only oppose the state and international actors, but also one another. As authors in this special edition show, Tuareg-Islamist tensions persist, as do tensions between Tuaregs and non-Tuaregs in northern Mali. Sectarian elements have also recently emerged, with Islamists generally promoting a form of Salafism (and, in a few cases, Wahhabism) that contrasts sharply with the Sufi tradition which tended to predominate in Mali. Analysts predict a growing sectarian struggle inspired by events in Syria and Lebanon but with implications from Mali to Pakistan.

Even more problematically, armed groups and army factions in Mali and across the Sahel are financed by criminality. The Sahel is emerging as key hub for the trafficking of drugs, arms, people and other contraband to Europe. Producers in Latin America are fusing with distribution networks (Ghettas 2012). AQIM has a major stake in the narcotics industry in Mali, as evident by the October 2010 "summit" between Colombian traffickers and senior AQIM figures in Guinea-Bissau (Ammour 2012). Drug traffickers are so powerful and well financed that, as far back as 2009, they purportedly built an airstrip in Goa (in northern Mali) and flew in Boeing 727 aircraft loaded with cocaine; once the cocaine was off-loaded, they burnt the plane to the ground. However, drugs are not the only lucrative and illicit industry. Kidnappings of, most notably, Westerners is on the rise.[3]

The easy availability of illicit financing, the presence of large ungoverned spaces, competition between Islamist and more ethno-territorial factions and regional meddling have led some to equate Mali, or at least northern Mali, with Afghanistan. Media pundits speak of the 'Afghanisation' or 'Somalisation' of Mali, a parallel which scholars criticise as inaccurate and unhelpful (Salah 2012). There are concerns that drawing parallels with other stabilisation contexts could lead international actors to respond to Mali with the same toolkit that has led to uneven outcomes in other settings. Even so, it would be wrong to discount the possibility of learning lessons from other settings. Just as there is a need to learn from Mali's dynamic and rapidly evolving situation on the ground, so too there are opportunities to identify insights from other settings. A number of pieces within this special edition of *Stability* take up that cross-context process of extracting and adapting key lessons.

The Changing Face of Intervention in Mali

There is a global trend toward "burden-sharing" in Mali and elsewhere. The United Nations Security Council and regional bodies authorized a French-led intervention in January 2013 only after exhausting other options. The 4,000 French troops were described as necessary owing to the fact that a military intervention led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) could not deploy adequate numbers until September 2013.[4] At present, the French forces (working in partnership with Malian and Chadian troops), are being phased out along with the short-lived ECOWAS-led African-

led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA).[5] The ECOWAS forces will – changing hats – formally hand over authority to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was approved by the Security Council in late April 2013. MINUSMA will formally be established in July 2013 and will have up to 12,640 peacekeepers, including 11,200 troops and 1,440 police officers (UNSC 2013).

The rapid succession of bilateral, regional and international military and peacekeeping missions is relatively unique to Mali. It also highlights the inability of regional entities to mobilise rapid-reaction forces to respond to security challenges in their own backyards. West Africans continue to rely on Nigerian forces, and no readily-deployable forces exist in the region to respond to situations like the one occurring in northern Mali.[6] With Nigeria itself now beginning a new phase of internal conflict – with the government's announcement of a state of emergency in mid-May 2013 – the potential for a West African solution to insecurity in Mali seems to be, at best, in doubt.

There are also outstanding questions for the now-forming UN mission. How will MINUSMA balance the differing understandings of the causes and consequences of instability in Mali? Will it treat Tuareg groups as defenders of embattled minorities, or will it acknowledge the major abuses certain Tuareg groups perpetrated against Malian forces (and others)? Will it emphasise governance and reconciliation, two issues that analysts see as crucial, or will it focus more fully on 'hard' security? How will MINUSMA balance collaborating with the Malian army in kinetic operations and strengthening its respect for human rights and democratic control? Such questions, which have largely been side-lined, will be particularly difficult to answer given the variety of stakeholders involved.

Questions regarding the Malian security services are on the top of many international agendas and are poorly researched. What is the status of the Malian armed forces? To what extent are they capable and accountable? The International Crisis Group (ICG) recently and somewhat inadvertently highlighted the quandary surrounding the Malian military. It called for the Malian army to re-assert control over the country's North while simultaneously recommending substantial reforms of that very same fighting force, which has been implicated in abuses in the recent past (ICG 2013). Meanwhile, the international community finds itself with comparatively little research into the state of the Malian armed forces, their relationship with civilian authorities and the prospects for reform. A better understanding of the Malian security services and prospects for integration of Tuaregs into the officer corps in the post-conflict period merits more attention.

Moving Forward while Looking Backwards

Mali´s instability is embedded in a regional conflict ecosystem. Interventions must focus on Mali, but will prove fruitless if the wider region is not simultaneously taken into consideration. Indeed, this issue of *Stability* shows that the conflict in northern Mali was in many ways precipitated by regional dynamics. Tuareg fighters who had helped prop up Muammar Qaddafi – and who returned, with their sophisticated weapons, to Mali once the Libyan regime fell – triggered the latest conflict in Mali. An Algerian group took revenge for the French intervention in northern Mali, and Islamist fighters from Sudan and elsewhere in East Africa (and beyond) reportedly now see the western Sahel as the newest front in the battle against the West. Nigerian troops are collaborating with forces from Chad and Niger to combat Islamist rebels in Nigeria's North and East. Of course, the aforementioned regional dimensions are only among the best known. Much remains to be learnt about relations among governments and identity groups that cross borders. To what extent and how do security services collaborate? What potential is there

for a regional conflict? Who has the legitimacy in the region to prevent, through force or negotiations, such a conflict?

As responses to insecurity in Mali and the Sahel are further considered, designed and implemented, it is also important to emphasise the critical role of development. Donor nations recently acknowledged this fact in pledging US$4.22 billion for Mali in 2013 and 2014 – 60 per cent more than the Malian government had requested. Yet such pledges often fail to become reality, as disbursement rates and absorptive capacity lag. In addition, Oxfam (2013) and others have raised concern about the international community's long-term commitment to Mali and the Sahel. Will donors treat the "Together for a New Mali" conference in May 2013 as a one-off symbol of concern for the country and its region, or will they provide the long-term forms of assistance necessary to foster a sustainable recovery?

Questions also persist over the nature of the development assistance provided to Mali. The outcomes of the Mali donor conference in Brussels raise a number of key areas that require attention – from public financial management to decentralisation, anti-corruption and justice sector reform (Donor Conference for Development in Mali 2013). But they also appear to reflect a number of long-term technical priorities which, aside from rather brief sections on private-sector and social development, may or may not yield visible, tangible progress. Evident improvements in the quality of life – and in food security – are also urgently needed. Behind-the-scenes progress is important, but material conditions must also improve so that the Malian authorities have sufficient 'space to manoeuvre' as they go about making difficult institutional and political reforms. However, will the international community ensure that local priorities are factored into development planning, especially when its presence on the ground is relatively limited? Will lessons learnt from other, recent conflict-affected contexts be reflected in the design of any security-focused development strategies? Will sufficient attention to on-going humanitarian challenges be maintained despite the renewed focus on sustainable recovery and governance?

The special issue of *Stability* can be faulted for raising more questions than it answers. But this is, of course, one of the primary tasks of scholars of contemporary affairs. And it is extremely important to start asking the right questions and identifying knowledge gaps. The outbreak of armed conflict in Mali has revealed a profound lack of understanding about the Sahel within much of the international community, excluding France. This special issue comes at an important time and is intended to feed into policy debates and, just as important, identifies promising entry points for still more research to broaden understanding and informed engagement. Such enquiry must build not only upon the expertise of militaries and peacekeepers but also upon the decades-long knowledge base that area experts, humanitarian and development personnel have developed concerning the Sahel, its cultures, its geographies and the opportunities and challenges it provides for those seeking to meet basic needs and promote peace.

Notes

[1] This is the term used locally to refer to a would-be but never-recognised state in northern Mali.

[2] The MNLA later abandoned them after recognizing that Tuareg separatists had become the junior partner in a loose coalition with Islamists (Francis 2013).

[3] The practice reportedly generated at least US$70 million for AQIM in recent years, though Al Qaeda is far from the other group involved in abductions (Ammour 2012).

[4] And this, despite being authorized by the United Nations in November 2012.

[5] AFISMA came to comprise several hundred West African soldiers, particularly Nigeria.

[6] These forces will also encounter issues pertaining to ethical conduct – overcoming past abuses associated with UN peacekeeping missions – and oversight.

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