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SECURITY IN THE SAHEL: Part I – Stabilising Mali in 2013-14
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Summary

One year after French and African military intervention recaptured northern Mali from Islamist and separatist armed groups the stability of this Sahel region is still heavily reliant on the presence of armed foreign troops. While the election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and his party in polls in the second half of 2013 has established a relatively strong new government, its achievements so far have mainly related to reversing the effects of the March 2012 military coup in Bamako. Progress in reintegrating and reconciling the north, internally and with the rest of Mali, has been partial. Apart from sporadic terrorist attacks, talks with Tuareg separatists have foundered, inter-communal violence and urban protests have flared, and one-third of the north's population, including many civil servants, still feel too insecure to return home. Part I of this two-part special briefing analyses challenges for stabilising Mali. Part II will examine regional security challenges and the increasingly militaristic French and US response.

Context

On 11 January 2013 the French military, at the request of Mali's transitional government, began a major intervention by air and land to counter an offensive by Islamist militia moving from northern to central Mali. West African and Chadian troops joined them in the second half of January. Eight NATO air forces plus Sweden and the UAE provided non-combat assistance with air transport, aerial refuelling and reconnaissance. Over four weeks, French-led forces recaptured all of the towns in the northern half of Mali, which had been seized by Islamist and separatist militia in March-April 2012.

French troops have continued to conduct security operations across northern Mali to locate and 'neutralise' suspected Islamist militants. In late February, French and Chadian troops captured the main Malian rear base of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in the Ifoghas massif close to the Algerian frontier, killing its emir in the Sahara, Abou Zeïd. Reduced numbers of French forces now support Malian and African forces, rebadged in July as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

Five Myths of the Malian conflict

From the perspective of 2014, several myths and misconceptions are apparent concerning the nature of Mali's 2012-13 crisis and conflict. The implication of these five misrepresentations is that international terrorist networks are much more deeply implanted in and threatening to the Malian state than they actually are.

1. **Mali was a failed state in 2012:** While the authority and capacity of the Malian state collapsed completely in northern Mali in early 2012, life in the rest of Mali (home to 90% of the population) was not greatly affected. There was no collapse in public order elsewhere and the national government fulfilled almost all of its normal functions, suffering more from international aid sanctions than alienation of its territory. Mali has never succeeded in governing and integrating its three northern regions while otherwise administering a reasonably effective state. The challenges of governing the north are as much related to geography (a small population widely dispersed across an agriculturally unproductive terrain) as to social and political differences between southern and northern populations.

2. **'Azawad' separatists represent the mainstream northern perspective:** While the north fell rapidly under the offensive of the Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA – a secular Tuareg separatist group) and was declared independent as the State of Azawad in April 2012, support for northern separatism has never been tested. In 2012, Malian Tuareg clans were split three ways, supporting the MNLA, Islamist groups with a pan-Malian or regional agenda, and the Malian state or status quo. While most of the northern territory is dominated by Tuareg and Arab clans, culturally and physically distinct from southern Malians, the majority of the northern population resides along the Niger valley, where 'black African' ethnic groups are numerous. These have been present for many centuries and are overwhelmingly opposed to separation. The implication is that autonomist solutions are not necessarily the means to prevent future rebellions by Malian Tuareg and Arabs. Many northerners favour closer integration given that the north has few of its own resources to finance its development. Past efforts at decentralisation have often stoked conflict for control of local patronage networks.

3. **Radical Islamism characterises Mali's Tuareg and Arab populations:** While Islamist groups rapidly displaced the MNLA in most of the north in mid-2012, these were largely foreign groups concealed behind the façade of the Tuareg-led Ansar Dine, which mobilised Malians more along clan than religious lines. Real power in Timbuktu region was exercised by AQIM and in Gao region by the AQIM-splinter Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Unlike these foreign jihad groups, Ansar Dine disintegrated under French assault. Most Malian 'Islamists' appear to have been opportunistic, seeking access to al-Qaida funds and weapons, or anxious to bypass caste hierarchies of Tuareg society.

4. **AQIM aimed to take over the Malian state:** The unexpected Islamist offensive into central Mali of January 2013 was not intended to capture Bamako, as widely cited by France and media. Rather, it was directed at seizing and neutralising the Malian armed forces' two frontline bases at Sévaré and Diabali, to prevent them being used to attack the north by a planned West African intervention force. The AQIM strategy for Mali, discovered by journalists in Timbuktu after the French intervention, is clear that heterodox Sufi Mali has little potential to become a Salafist state and that the primary opportunity for al-Qaida in the vacuum of northern Mali was to organise to infiltrate and attack Algeria and other North African states.

5. **Northern Mali is a hub of 'narco-terrorism':** The link between AQIM and trans-Saharan drug trafficking groups remains unproved. While smuggling has always been a vital part of the

regional economy, the evidence that the Malian Sahara constitutes a major route for cocaine to the Mediterranean is largely anecdotal or constructed by US prosecutors with geopolitical motives. The most obvious connection between AQIM and organised crime is its role in kidnapping for ransom, by which it has gained tens of millions of dollars from European governments, not least France.

Drivers and triggers of the 2012-13 crisis

The security and governance vacuum that existed in northern Mali, especially in the Kidal region, in 2012 was not new. Neither the Malian state nor France ever exercised much authority north of Timbuktu or east of Gao. The novel aspects (triggers) were the surge in supply of light weapons and experienced Malian (often Tuareg) combatants after the fall of Libya's Gaddafi regime in October 2011, as well as the sudden overthrow of the Malian civilian government in March 2012, itself linked to the government's failure to reinforce the army in the face of a major insurgency. These were exploited opportunistically by a largely North African group (AQIM) that was interested in denying state control over its Saharan safe haven, rather than in creating its own state there.

The long-term drivers of conflict in northern Mali are essentially linked to the marginalisation of the region and especially its remoter Tuareg-populated areas. This is more a question of economics than politics. Tuareg leaders win seats in parliament and cabinet, and even held the prime minister's office in 2002-04. But ordinary Tuareg and Arab citizens feel discriminated against in seeking education or work outside of the north, especially in government jobs and the security sector. Many also feel ill-treated by southern officials stationed in the north.

Northern Mali is very poorly integrated into the national and West African economy and sees little state social provision, development investment or livelihood opportunities. Climate change, desertification and recurrent droughts have particularly affected the Tuareg's traditional pastoralist economy and brought them into conflict with agriculturalists or urban populations. Subsidised goods in Algeria and markets for illicit goods and services (cigarettes, labour, drugs) around the Mediterranean make smuggling the most viable livelihood for many, including some government and security officials. Sporadic use of the military to tackle usually tolerated smuggling activities, often at the behest of foreign states, has frequently precipitated armed revolt by northern Malians.

Mali in 2014

Mali made progress in renewing its institutions in 2013. However, these gains were disproportionately experienced in Bamako and the southern regions, which in 2012 suffered more from turbulence in government and the army than from the northern security crisis. Developments likely to improve human security nationwide include: a newly elected government, dialogue on reconciliation and decentralisation, pledges of massive foreign

development aid, and wholesale reform of the security sector. However, the situation in the north remains precarious and unsustainable as of January 2014.

Security generally improved across the north in 2013, although the UN Secretary-General described the final quarter of 2013 as being "characterised by a marked deterioration in the security situation in the north. [...] terrorist and other groups had reorganized themselves and regained some ability to operate." Suicide bombings, gun and rocket attacks and use of landmines have been sporadic in Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Tessalit and Timbuktu towns, linked to MUJAO and, to lesser extent, AQIM. Communal violence and violent urban protests have flared.

Civil servants have been able to return to their functions in Timbuktu and Gao regions, although not all have done so, notably in the justice sector. In Kidal, where Malian security forces were only able to redeploy in July and the MNLA continued to occupy administrative buildings until November, the security situation is still too unstable for the government to resume even its very basic 'normal' services.

Only one-quarter of the 560,000 Malians displaced in 2012-13 (nearly half of the northern population) have so far returned. Many Tuareg and Arab refugees say they will not return to Mali before a comprehensive peace agreement is in place. A provisional agreement signed by the government, the MNLA and two other Tuareg and Arab armed groups in late June has been poorly implemented. Peace talks were supposed to resume in November but have been boycotted by the MNLA. There have been occasional clashes between the MNLA and Malian troops, particularly those from a loyalist Tuareg-led unit. Clashes between the MNLA and its Arab rival, the Azawad Arab Movement (MAA), were recurrent in 2013, including as Tuareg and Arab clans fought for control of trans-border crossings. Human rights groups have recorded numerous instances of Malian troops or loyalist northern militia abusing, raping or killing Arab and Tuareg civilians. Thus, deadly violence continues at a low-level as the conflict becomes increasingly intra-northern and scores are settled.

Physical security in the north depends on 2,500 French troops with armour and attack helicopters, 5,500 troops and 950 police from MINUSMA, and the presence of the small, ill-equipped Malian army, rather than the police. MINUSMA is only at half its authorised strength as non-regional states have been reluctant to commit to keeping peace where suicide attacks occur. Staffing MINUSMA has been a huge undertaking for West African states, which mostly lack suitable training and equipment. Ten have provided at least one company. Chad and Togo, the two largest contributors, have very poor human rights records and had to deploy troops not trained to UN standards. MINUSMA also lacks critical equipment, especially helicopters, and is dependent on French support. France wants to reduce its force to 1,600 in February and under 1,000 by April. This is a year behind Paris' original schedule. Nigeria withdrew most of its large contingent in August to bolster its domestic campaign against Boko Haram.

Elections in July and August chose a new President to replace the 17-month ineffective, military-influenced transitional government. A new parliament was elected in November and December, returning a large pro-presidential majority. Both elections were organised fairly

transparently by Malian authorities and held in all areas without significant violence, although overall voter participation was low and the MNLA organised a boycott in several Tuareg-populated areas. Even so, at least five Tuareg and three Arab deputies were elected to the 160-seat Assembly, including several Tuareg clan leaders of the 2012 rebellion co-opted into the presidential party.

The **political challenges** for Mali are now four:

- The immediate challenge is to resume peace negotiations with the MNLA and MAA, which have not yet agreed disarmament, demobilisation or reintegration (DDR) of their cantoned forces. Implementation of DDR programmes following Tuareg rebellions in the 1990s and 2006-07 was unsatisfactory. The new government does not believe it must offer serious concessions to the separatists and has pursued a policy of dividing the armed opposition, co-opting elements of its leadership and slowly increasing its own armed presence in the north.

- Second is the concurrent challenge of translating nation-wide consultations on decentralisation into a practical process of reconciliation, especially in the north. This process has begun in Gao region. However, the MNLA believes that reconciliation should only follow a peace settlement and believes Tuareg interests will be squeezed out by region-level dialogues addressing wider issues.

- Third is the need to confront Mali's culture of patronage politics, which has historically generated consensus among a small elite in Bamako at the expense of accountability and service to the rest of the nation. The lack of antagonism between political leaders is encouraging but the meagre presence of opposition parties in the Assembly is unlikely to be an effective check on the executive.

- The final challenge is tackling corruption at all levels of government, a prerequisite for many states to disburse aid. A start has been made on this but the emphasis appears to be on vilifying the previous governments rather than putting better systems in place for the future.

Security sector reform (SSR) has been an encouraging dimension of the 2013 transition. A large EU mission is retraining the Malian army as a basic infantry force. Work to re-establish the security forces via a roadmap for reform began in December and will take several years. More importantly, the processes of reconciling divisions within the army caused by the 2012 coup and junta and of subordinating the military to civilian control have made progress since President Keïta took office in September. A civilian defence minister has been appointed and the heads of the army, police and intelligence have been changed. The new head of the army is Maj-Gen Mahamane Touré, widely respected as the former Commissioner for Peace and Security at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Former junta leader Gen Amadou Sanogo was arrested on 27 November and charged in relation to the disappearance of 23 rival soldiers in April 2012. Once seen as the preferred candidate of the junta, Keïta has been definitive in demonstrating his independence.

Nevertheless, serious questions remain over the professionalism, capacity and respect for rights of the security forces, especially in relation to Mali's northern regions and population.

Development assistance to reconstruct the state, especially in the North, holds promise now that the political transition is concluded. Donors pledged $4.2 billion in May to fully implement the government's recovery and reintegration plan. While France claims that about $1 billion was disbursed in 2013, its impact was limited other than financing the transition elections. The Malian government has a relatively good capacity to absorb aid but close attention will be required to see that funds are spent transparently and wisely rather than to reinforce patronage networks. Northern infrastructure is more lacking by neglect than conflict-damaged.

Policy Implications

The conclusion of the electoral transition with the inauguration of the National Assembly this month presents an opportune time for Mali's government and donors to refocus on the challenges of state and nation-building. The new government may welcome external expertise on several priority issues:

- DDR of northern combatants is a crucial sticking point in the stalled negotiations with armed groups and must be informed by good practices elsewhere as well as recognition of the failures of the 1990s and 2006-07 processes in Mali. Negotiating the reintegration of Tuareg and Arab personnel will be critical as part of wider reconciliation within the security forces.
- SSR should focus more on the policing and justice dimensions than simply reforming the army to fight in the north. Peace and justice in the north means having an accessible police force and judiciary capable of upholding the law for all citizens.
- Reform of the justice sector is also necessary to empower the fight against corruption that President Keïta has promised and is crucial to the effective utilisation of reconstruction aid.
- To facilitate the resettlement of displaced persons, reconciliation *within* the north should precede but still link to national reconciliation and be separated from commitments to decentralisation, which are likely to exacerbate inter-communal tensions in the diverse north.