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The Mali conflict:
avoiding past mistakes

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>> When radical Islamists launched an offensive against the south of Mali, France had no choice but to intervene militarily. The success of the campaign, however, depends on a sound understanding of the complex dynamics of Mali's internal conflict and fragility. To view the turmoil through the lens of Islamic radicalisation only is a dangerous oversimplification. Equally misguided is the common characterisation of the problem as a simple North-South dispute. Such confusion imperils strategic practice and detracts attention from the essential set of tensions that makes the conflict self-reinforcing. The causal factors are as diverse as the motivations of the competing tribal and ethnic actors and organisations that sustain instability.

Thus, the French military gains in northern Mali will be fruitless unless they are included in a comprehensive strategy that addresses the root causes of the conflict: weak and corrupt state institutions, ethnic tensions, and competition over scarce resources. In the short term, the international community's immediate priority should be to provide urgent humanitarian relief and push for political dialogue and military reform. Promoting extensive consultations with all stakeholders and stabilising civil-military relations are crucial to reconciliation and recovery.

PROTECTING CIVILIANS

To succeed, the French-led intervention in Mali first needs to set attainable outcomes. The immediate priority should be to prevent the Malian army or vigilante militias from exacting revenge on Tuaregs and

HIGHLIGHTS

• International actors need to understand the complex local and regional dynamics of Mali's fragility.

• A comprehensive strategy is required to address the root causes of the conflict.

• Humanitarian relief, political dialogue and military reform are top priorities.

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other light-skinned Arabs suspected of participating in the rebellion that chased Malian troops out of the north of the country. Several human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the International Federation for Human Rights) and news agencies have documented various cases of abuse, torture and executions committed by Malian soldiers. In particular, Islamists accused of belonging to armed movements are an enticing target for poorly-trained and unsupervised soldiers. When radical Islamists controlled northern Mali, they terrorised the population with the imposition of draconian punishments (public executions, amputations, and whippings, among others). The secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) also committed its share of killings, pillage and rape against black women. In the attack against Aguelhoc on 24 January 2012, the MNLA and Islamist rebels executed over a hundred Malian soldiers. So the temptation to strike back is big.

The desire for retaliation also motivates other communities that accuse Tuaregs of contributing to driving Mali to the brink of disaster. In a statement made right after the French intervention, Ganda Koy, the leader of the Songhai militia (Sons of land), warned that all *Tamashek* (Tuareg) should be held responsible for supporting MNLA rebels. These threats should be taken seriously; they risk damaging any prospects for peace and reconciliation in the north. Worse still, given the existing overlap between ethnic communities and armed groups in West Africa, targeting Tuaregs and Arabs increases the potential for spillovers of ethnic tensions into countries that cannot afford to relapse into ethnic conflict (Niger) or for increased militancy (Mauritania).

Unless quickly contained, abuses by the Malian army or militias could contribute to a fertile ground for violent extremism and organised crime to continue thriving. They will also hinder the return of internally displaced persons (230,000) and refugees in neighbouring countries (230,000), perpetuating their suffering and derailing plans for the celebration of presidential and legislative elections scheduled for July. In a declaration to

Agence France Press, EU counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove warned that these refugee camps, especially in Mauritania, might become breeding grounds for radicalism and terrorist recruitment.

WHEN INTERESTS DIVERGE, ALLIANCES DIE

Given the precedents, there is a real possibility that northern Mali becomes caught up in an ethnic and tribal war. The existing divisions, competition and mistrust between and among the different communities render the situation highly volatile. Even within the Tuareg tribes themselves, divisions and antagonism run deep, especially between the aristocratic Ifoghas and their allies on one side, and the Imrad vassals and their Arab and Tuareg associates on the other side. Since the country's independence in 1960, the central government in Bamako has exploited these divisions, opportunistically dispensing favours and playing groups and tribes against one another. This policy of divide and rule has led to a host of problems, including the upsetting of political, social, and economic hierarchies in the north.

The penetration of transnational terrorist groups, organised crime and drug trafficking has worsened these deep-rooted contentions and competition between individuals and communities. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has skilfully used its financial prowess – derived from the toll it imposed on trans-border drug smuggling and the ransom money paid by Western governments – to tap into the social and cultural divide in northern Mali. AQIM has become an attractive employer for the poor in Arab and Tuareg communities, populations long involved in trans-Saharan trade and trafficking. Members of other ethnic and tribal groups (Peuls, Songhai, Malinké, Dogon) who are knowledgeable of modern smuggling routes also scramble for personal riches. Drug money has further disrupted the traditional socio-political patterns and the balance of power between and among communities. Such social upheaval contributed to the 2012 rebellion, with the Imrad

lining up behind the MNLA and the Ifoghas joining Ansar Dine.

This unsettling of the status quo and the appearance of new vested interests, buttressed by criminal associations and tactical alliances, complicate the search for a peaceful resolution to the current crisis, as different and rival groups jostle to carve out a prominent role in any power-sharing agreement with Bamako. Even if the French and African forces manage to neutralise AQIM and its affiliates, it will be very difficult to manage intra-elite rivalries within and between the communities of northern Mali.

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Several communities are attempting to readjust to the changing balance of power on the ground. For example, armed groups are dividing along ethnic and tribal lines. Some have disintegrated into community-based militias, while others have transitioned into purely ethnic organisations. It is critically important to take into account the interests of each of these groups when renegotiating the power balance between Bamako and the main stakeholders in the north. This would go a long way in pushing groups to sever ties with insurgents or violent extremists.

Many groups and individuals who joined terrorist and criminal organisations in the region were motivated by financial or local reasons. EU intelligence estimates put the number of violent extremists in the Sahel at between 500 and 1,000. According to the EU's counter-terrorism coordinator, a third of them are die-hard ideologues who are ready to die for their cause. The other two thirds can be peeled off from terrorist groups through pressure and inducements.

Thus, it was unsurprising to see defections in the ranks of Mali's armed actors as soon as the French

intervened. Alike in other ethnic and sectarian conflicts, alliances of convenience change when interests begin to diverge. The split within Ansar Dine is only one notable example of the volatile mix of ethno-national Islamist movements, organised crime and hybrid transnational terrorist organisations. The moment incentives changed, the alliance faltered. In a context marked by the vicissitudes of tribal allegiances, clan loyalties, and nomadic alliances, conflating ethno-national Islamist groups with transnational terrorist groups is dangerous and counter-productive.

The only way to isolate AQIM is to include the new Islamic Movement for Azawad, which split from Ansar Dine, in the negotiations with Bamako. Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb thrive off local insurgencies and can only be marginalised if they lose local support and sympathy. The expansion of US counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel and the deployment of French Special Forces might weaken AQIM and its affiliates, but it will not destroy them. Western forces and African troops cannot hold vast territories, and even if they could, they would not manage to eliminate terrorists who are by their very nature nomads and who recruit internationally, as evidenced by the militant attack on the In Amenas natural gas field in eastern Algeria, near Libya. The attack was hatched in northern Mali and executed by a multinational group of militants who crossed through Niger and Libya.

When put under extreme military pressure in its sanctuaries in the rugged Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains near the Algeria border, or at the Wagadou Forest near Mauritania, AQIM will simply retreat to Libya where it has strategic depth thanks to years of trafficking. Tunisia is also vulnerable, as the country is quickly becoming a smuggling corridor for arms dealers between Libya and Mali. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) – a splinter offshoot of AQIM – will also seek to regroup in Mauritania, Niger and the Sahrawi refugee camps in north-western Algeria. MUJWA's core membership comes from the Malian Lamhar tribe, as well as ››››››

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Sahrawis, Mauritanians, and Nigeriens. Given its sociological makeup and deep involvement in organised crime, MUJWA could probably fracture into several small criminal organisations in line with its followers' country of origin.

Thus, it would be a mistake to view the Mali conflict through the narrow prism of counter-terrorism. Algeria's experience in combating terrorism is instructive in this regard. The Algerians want to give the impression that they have settled their 'Islamist' problem by pushing armed actors into the fringes of their territory and into their neighbours. But despite their hard-line eradication policy, they have failed to stamp out residual militancy within their own borders. In reality, Algeria has only managed to contain the terrorism threat. In the eastern Kabylie region, abductions and attacks on military barracks persist. The Bouira region in central Algeria remains restive, with regular skirmishes between armed militants and Algerian security forces. The major lesson from the Algeria case is that massive military budgets and battle-tested security forces are not enough to eradicate terrorism. In addition, the victory is only temporary if the danger is not tackled but simply exported to neighbouring countries.

There is no doubt that violent extremists and narco-traffickers are roaming the Sahara deserts of the Sahel. But banking on eradicating terrorist groups is as illusory as relying on ill-disciplined and ill-trained African troops to suppress them. The principal problem in Mali and elsewhere is that the main stakeholders in the conflict, including government officials, military men and insurgents, are all seeking financial gain and influence. Awareness of the characteristics that mark the Malian 'political marketplace' is the first step towards finding interim solutions to the current crisis.

POLITICS IS KEY

One lesson that the United States learnt after 11 years of fighting the Taliban is that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. Pashtun alienation from the country's core –

which is dominated by ethnic Tajiks – remains the main driver that fuels Taliban insurgency. The US made a mistake when it excluded the Taliban, and by extension the Pashtun tribes, from the major international conference it organised in Bonn in 2001 to discuss the future of Afghanistan. Repeating the same mistake in Mali would jeopardise the prospects for durable peace.

Current military progress in northern Mali cannot be consolidated if it simply restores the previous intolerable status quo. External interventions usually end up empowering some factions over others and reducing the costs of intransigence on the part of the winners. The international community's top priority in Mali must be to foster political reconciliation. It is necessary to pressure the coup's leaders and the political elites in Bamako to launch a national dialogue that incorporates representatives from all communities in both the South and North, including ethno-national Islamists who renounce violence. The international community, especially France, might be inclined towards secular forces, especially the MNLA, which proclaims itself as the legitimate representative of the Tuareg people. However, the MNLA is a minority group that does not count on the support of the main Tuareg tribes.

In any reform process that intends to change the distribution of power and resources, there will be losers and winners. It is critically important carefully to assess the political and economic implications of the reforms and take into account the interests of the different stakeholders when renegotiating the power balance between the disadvantaged groups on the one side and the powerful ones on the other side. It is essential to mitigate the adverse effects of reform, as some powerful groups will most probably resist accountability checks. For reforms to be successful, governments need to establish broad-based and inclusive coalitions with influential sectors in society, as well as with international donors and investors.

This will not happen, however, unless there is progress in the political process in Bamako. The

country's institutions have been paralysed since the military coup of 22 March 2012. Even though the junta was forced to cede power to an interim government led by Dioncounda Traoré, the new administration has been reshuffled twice and has been unable to assert itself politically. The upcoming presidential and legislative elections scheduled for July 2013 intend to shore up the legitimacy of Mali's institutions. However, while important, elections alone will not resolve Mali's crisis. Political parties are decrepit, corrupt, and bereft of fresh ideas. They are also numerous and fragmented. In lieu of fresh faces that can signal regeneration, potential candidates are products of the old order and the entire political class is uniformly discredited. Under such conditions, it is hard to expect a high turnout. In previous electoral contests, it ranged between 20 and 40 per cent.

Elections will therefore not offer any quick fixes to Mali's problems. Putting the country together requires widespread dialogue and international assistance. The good news is that there is a precedent for cooperation and compromise. In 1991, after demonstrations led to the end of President Moussa Traoré's 23-year rule, an inclusive national conference was held that set the country on a path to democracy. Political dialogue and regional mediation were also used to deal with Tuareg rebellions. The key is to learn from past mistakes and apply the lessons learnt.

THE WAY FORWARD

The US's and the European Union's (EU) past approaches towards Mali have focused mainly on building the capacity of the security sector, neglecting the underlying institutional and social roots of insecurity. The EU can play a crucial role in helping Mali address its internal stresses. The immediate priority is to push for political reconciliation and provide urgent humanitarian aid. As soon as the situation in the North stabilises, the EU should invest in civilian security and accelerate development projects so as to 'ensure that the population sees an immediate difference in daily life', as suggested by counter-terrorism chief

Gilles de Kerchove. Promoting economic empowerment and extensive consultation with all stakeholders is necessary for peace building activities. This requires a responsible national leadership as well as determined EU donors who are willing to link economic assistance to political progress in the negotiations over the future of Mali.

The EU also needs better to coordinate its activities with the US and other international and regional actors. Competing international peace initiatives and training missions can cancel each other out. The EU and the US have sent hundreds of military instructors to help train soldiers from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), but there is little coordination between these efforts. The main challenge is how to avoid the flaws that dogged previous training missions. From 1997 to 2007, France trained over 18,000 African forces with little results to show. The United States has not fared any better. The US has spent millions of dollars training Malians soldiers only to see many of them flee or defect to the rebels' side.

The challenge for the EU and other external actors is to stabilise civil-military relations and bolster the capacity and professionalism of local security forces. The Malian army is in ruins and in desperate need of urgent reforms and restructuring. It is demoralised, disorganised, ill-equipped and plagued by factionalism. The EU's training mission to Mali (EUTM) is planning to rectify these problems by training four battalions of approximately 1,800 soldiers over a period of 15 months. But building the capacity of the Malian army to combat transnational terrorist groups and organised crime must be accompanied by security sector oversight and efforts to strengthen the judicial system, from criminal to civil law. In situations of high criminality and terrorism, the professionalisation of the armed forces, police, prosecution and other actors in the criminal justice system is a must.

The EU can also help by promoting regional cooperation in intelligence-sharing, the monitoring of financial flows from drug-trafficking, and ›››››

›››››› conducting joint military operations. So far, international efforts have been hindered by several factors. First, Western governments and international donors have focused on propping up the capacity of individual fragile states, largely ignoring that insecurity is a product not just of internal factors but of external ones as well. Second, international policy has typically overlooked the relationship and connections between different conflicts in the region. And third, competition and differing perceptions of threats among neighbours have hindered regional cooperation.

Ultimately addressing Mali's fragility will require both a local and regional approach. International actors must assist Mali to respond to the legitimate grievances of its population and build a more inclusive and sustainable political settlement. They must also support region-wide efforts to strengthen security institutions and improve security cooperation in order to reduce the space for Islamic militants and illicit networks across the Sahel.

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