

## Analysing the Crisis in the Sahel

by Benjamin P. Nickels

### Key Points

- The demise of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi unleashed weapons and warriors into the Sahel, where they mixed with terrorists and rebels who seized Mali's North by routing its military. This helped spark a coup d'État in March 2012, but it also eventually provoked intervention by a French and African coalition in January 2013 that has reclaimed Northern cities and is now hunting down rebels in remote refuges.
- Mali faces not one but several challenges which, together, form its current, complex crisis. The four principal facets of the Mali Crisis are global, ethnic, governmental and environmental in nature, and these facets are internally fractured and synergistically interrelated.
- Responses to the Mali Crisis occur at three principal levels, namely the international, the regional and the national, with the last being the deepest and most fundamental. These three levels are internally diverse as well as interconnected, with links visible through both cooperation and disagreement between levels.
- Given the crisis' complexity and the response's variety, the most valuable tools for enhancing responses to the Mali Crisis would be a common vision of the problem and a shared strategy for tackling it.
- Unity of vision and strategy would help solidify recent military advances, bolster the spread and steadying of Bamako's sovereignty and legitimacy and stave off potential flashpoints generated by friction between levels of response. Three such flashpoints concern terrorism designations, hostages and Tuareg nationalism.

On 22 March 2012, disaffected soldiers took control of Bamako and reversed the regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré, known as ATT, an act that exacerbated Mali's descent into chaos and accelerated a disaster that has propelled the West African nation and the Sahel region to the front pages of newspapers across the world. Something of a consensus narrative of events has since coalesced. The demise of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi unleashed weapons and warriors into the Sahel, where they mixed with terrorists and rebels who seized Mali's North by routing its military, sparking the coup but eventually provoking intervention by a French and African coalition that has reclaimed Northern cities and is now hunting down rebels in remote refuges. One year after the army rebellion, it may be useful to step back from this narrative and to analyze the Mali Crisis, responses to the crisis and ways to enhance those responses.

**The Mali crisis is multifaceted but not multilayered as its dimensions do not relate predominantly through distinctions of depth or primacy.**

### Mali's Multifaceted Crisis

Mali faces not one, but several challenges that together form its current, complex crisis. The four principal facets of

the Mali crisis are global, ethnic, governmental and environmental in nature. For each facet, the past year has provided spectacular examples, all of which are symptoms of much deeper and more persistent problems.

*Global.* Throughout much of 2012, Islamist terrorists like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operated freely in Northern Mali. After gaining territorial control in places like Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, these groups imposed a draconian version of shari'a law, meting out floggings and amputations as punishments for crimes. They also set about destroying heritage sites deemed idolatrous, such as Timbuktu's library and Sufi mausolea and shrines. Affiliated with Al Qaeda since 2007 and active in the Sahel since at least 2003, AQIM has exploited the region and its ungoverned spaces and porous borders for years,<sup>1</sup> building a safe haven in Mali's North from which to conduct attacks against the country's neighbours.

<sup>1</sup> See Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Geneva: GCSP, May 2011.

*Ethnic.* On 6 April 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared the Independent State of Azawad in Northern Mali. By then, Tuareg rebels controlled most of the ground they claimed, having ejected Malian military forces during preceding months. The MNLA is a recent creation, but Tuareg uprisings against Bamako over land rights, pastoralist traditions, and political access have occurred regularly throughout Mali's history, with major revolts coming in the 1960s, the 1990s and the 2000s. Differences — real or perceived — regarding race, culture, history, language and lifestyle have long divided Mali's Tuareg from other Malians (while uniting them with Tuareg in neighbouring nations and Berbers farther afield).

*Governmental.* Since the coup, there has been no stable, functioning government in Bamako. Authority is contested and elites remain divided between a military junta and the transitional civilian institutions to which power was grudgingly passed shortly after ATT was toppled. Coup ringleader Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo has refused to return to the barracks: in December 2012 he helped oust Prime Minister Cheikh Modibo Diarra and managed to receive appointment as head of Mali's security sector reform. Inter-elite struggles have fuelled popular violence: on 21 May 2012, an angry mob invaded the presidential palace, beating aged interim President Dioncounda Traoré unconscious. More than temporary backsliding, the swift and utter collapse of Mali's shell democracy recalls the country's location in Africa's most coup-ridden sub-region and Mali's own volatile political past.

mated livestock herds, devastating floods and heightened food insecurity. Northern Mali and the Sahel have long suffered environmental deterioration, with major droughts in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Estimates for this year indicate intensifying drought, poor harvests and some thirteen million people threatened by a major food crisis across the area. Most of Northern Mali, including key urban centres like Gao and Kidal, are currently considered at immediate high risk of food insecurity (see Map 1).

### Implications of a Multifaceted Crisis

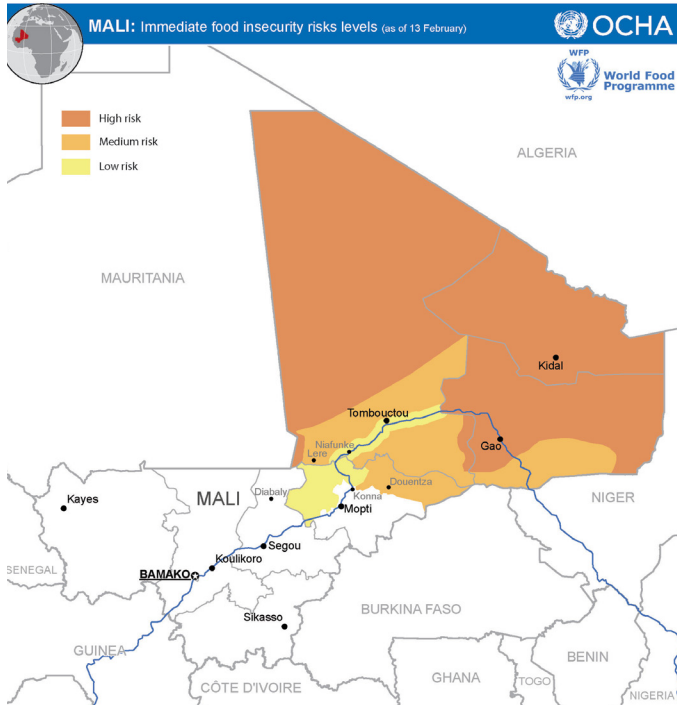
The global, ethnic, governmental and environmental facets of Mali's Crisis are not monolithic; rather, they are each internally fractured. Within the global dimension, for instance, Islamist terrorism has experienced sharp divisions among leaders as well as significant group division and proliferation: beyond AQIM, the region has witnessed the rise of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), "Those Who Sign with Blood" (al muwaqi'un bi al dam), and others. Islamist terrorists have also collaborated with other well-established global actors operating in the region, especially transnational organised crime (TOC) elements that have globalised the local and regional smuggling of arms, drugs and persons, merging time-honoured traditions of cross-border trade with international trafficking patterns. Some have talked of a crime-terror nexus, and certain actions do blur the lines between the two, such as kidnapping for ransom and political concessions. Again, within the ethnic dimension, for example, the Tuareg are divided into several groups — beyond the MNLA are the National Liberation Front for Azawad (FLNA), the Azawad Popular Front (FPA) and others — and over questions of autonomy and independence. Moreover, Mali's Tuareg constitute a minority even within the proclaimed Azawad, where they are outnumbered by other Malian ethnicities, such as the Songhay and the Arabs (or 'Moors').

The four facets of Mali's Crisis are also not independent; rather, they are synergistically interrelated. Global threats combine with the ethnic dimension in Islamist-Tuareg rivalries over territorial control and in Ansar al Din, an AQIM-associated Islamist terrorist group headed by Iyad Ag Ghali, a prominent Tuareg leader in the 1990s Tuareg rebellion. Global threats connect to the governmental dimension in drug traffickers' use of profits to corrupt Malian officials; they connect to the environmental dimension through terrorists and traffickers finding recruits and support from vulnerable Northern populations further marginalized by climate change. The ethnic meets the environmental when Northern Mali's herders and farmers fight over ever scarcer resources.

The governmental and ethnic dimensions are also linked — the coup in the South came after Tuareg gains in the North, whereas support for Azawad stems in part from Bamako's failed programs and military reforms. Finally, the governmental also meets the environmental, as political instability and government mismanagement have materially exacerbated climate change's deleterious effects and translated ecological devastation into social and economic calamity through spiking food prices and refugee flows.

Seeing Mali's Crisis as multifaceted has important implications. The crisis has global, ethnic, governmental and environmental building-blocks that are discrete, differ in kind, and stand in relative parity — with their ancillary divisions being

**Map 1: Mali: Immediate food insecurity risk levels**



Sources: WFP and partners (including local authorities)

*Environmental.* Relatively underreported, Northern Mali is experiencing an ecological emergency that is dramatically reshaping living conditions throughout the Sahel. Declining precipitation and rising temperatures, due to climate change as well as recurring climatic cycles, are generating drought and desertification; growing populations, meanwhile, are accelerating land degradation and resource depletion. The upshot has been climate-driven migrants and refugees, deci-

of secondary importance. The Mali Crisis is therefore multi-faceted but not multi-layered: its four dimensions do not relate predominantly through distinctions of depth or primacy. Mali's global threats are as deep as its environmental problems; its governmental shortcomings are as fundamental as its ethnic challenges. External events, like fallout from the Libya Crisis, have therefore only triggered — rather than caused — the 'Mali crisis'.

**Unlike the Mali crisis and its facets, responses to the crisis are resolutely multilayered with the deepest and most fundamental one at the national level.**

The four facets of the crisis are also interrelated but not inseparable. While hybridisation may make it impracticable, different dimensions of the crisis might permit piecemeal and sequential action. Good governance could be reinforced even though global threats persist; ethnic relations could be improved despite lingering environmental challenges. Finally, the four facets of Mali's Crisis are easily misunderstood. Global threats can be misperceived as homogeneous or conflated with ethnic challenges, for example, while pre-eminence among facets risks being assumed rather than argued.

### Multilayered Responses to the Mali Crisis

Like the Mali Crisis itself, responses to the crisis have been multiple. The three principal levels of response are international, regional and national. The urgency and gravity of the spiralling crisis has generated significant activity on all three levels.

*International.* Numerous international organisations, such as The World Bank and the Sahel and West Africa Club, have responded to the crisis by launching or bolstering campaigns of research and reporting, awareness raising, policy advocacy and direct programming regarding Mali. The United Nations (UN) has addressed different facets of the Mali Crisis through various agencies and organs devoted to issues like refugees, humanitarian affairs and international peace and security. In 2012, the UN Security Council (UNSC) took decisions on Mali in UNSC Resolutions 2056, 2071 and 2085, the last mandating for one year a Chapter VII African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). France took the critical step of direct action on 11 January 2013 through Operation Serval, intervening on Malian territory with considerable air power and some 4,000 troops. European nations and the United States have provided airlift, transport, communications, intelligence and other support; hundreds of millions of dollars for AFISMA have been committed by countries throughout the world, from Japan to Bahrain.

*Regional.* The African Union (AU) has used its moral authority and organisational capabilities to respond regionally to the Mali Crisis. The AU has condemned the coup, sanctioned its leaders, suspended Mali's membership, encouraged political transition to civilian rule, rejected Azawad's independence and emphasized development in Northern Mali. The AU has also convened donors at conferences to elicit funds, and it appointed a high representative for Mali and the Sahel to coordinate efforts. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been nearly indistinguishable from AU positions. With AU concurrence, this sub-regional body has implemented steps to resolve the governmental dimension of the Mali Crisis, such as brokering deals between Mali's military junta and civilian leaders. African fighters in AFISMA, meanwhile, have conducted attacks that have dealt serious blows to AQIM leadership in Northern Mali.

*National.* The Malian government — notwithstanding its inner turmoil, which is itself a facet of the Mali Crisis — has managed to make some contributions to responses, especially toward countering the global and ethnic dimensions of the crisis in Mali's North. Malian forces have accompanied French forces throughout Operation Serval. They have returned to urban centres, participated in military operations and projected national authority in the North. These efforts have been marred, however, by disturbing accusations of torture, disappearances and executions of prisoners at the hands of Malian soldiers, with revenge exactions doled out according to alleged association with Islamist terrorism or apparent ethnic community affiliation. Nevertheless, with time, Malian troops are becoming the predominant face of operations, occupying public space and effecting patrols in important cities (see Map 2).

### Implications of Multilayered Responses

Like the facets of the Mali Crisis, each layer of response is internally diverse. At the international level, organisations and nations are not of a single mind regarding appropriate and preferable courses of action. During much of 2012, for instance, the United States government emphasised a strategy based on thorough planning, military training and free and fair elections, whereas French officials stressed stifling terrorists and re-establishing order in Northern Mali immediately — through African partners, with authorities in Bamako (such as they are), or on their own, if necessary. At the regional level, divergent positions exist as well. Niger has counselled more strongly for military action, whereas Burkina Faso has preferred negotiations, going so far as to host Ansar al Din

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**Map 2: Contested control over Mali**



Source: BBC, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21293616](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21293616)

delegations in Ouagadougou. Roles and responsibilities for sub-regional bodies and nations have also become clouded. ECOWAS has taken a lead role, but its membership excludes critical players like Mauritania, Algeria, Libya and Chad; AFISMA, on the other hand, has received African troop pledges

from countries as far away as Burundi.

The three layers of response are also interconnected. International, regional and national collaboration is evidenced in Western and African forces cooperating in AFISMA, the European Union (EU) planning training for the Malian military, Bamako requesting International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations on its territory and so on. Links between layers are also apparent in disagreements. International and regional levels have clashed, as when UN and Western partners declined to back and finance AU and ECOWAS intervention proposals, due to concerns about planning and a keenness for non-military options. Regional and national levels have also quarrelled, as when resistance and resentment surfaced in Mali over ECOWAS demands to restore civilian governance straightaway, or when Chad — arguably AFISMA's most committed African player — pressured Mali to do more militarily in its own North.

Viewing Mali's response in terms of international, regional and national levels also carries implications, some analogous to seeing the Mali Crisis as multifaceted. Each level of response has in and of itself a coherence — a collective track record and familiar profile in terms of types of interests, capabilities, resources, and so on — that makes the level recognisable as a distinct agent; each level, moreover, is able to act with some autonomy, as witnessed by the preponderance of international actors in decisions about intervention. Unlike the Mali Crisis and its facets, however, responses to the crisis are resolutely multilayered. The deepest and most fundamental is the national level, which has the most to gain through success, the most to lose from failure, the greatest authority to act and ultimately the largest impact on outcomes. Too, Bamako's worrisome inability to serve as an effective player or a viable partner for regional and international responses lends some credence to the occasionally oversimplified comparisons of Mali to Somalia or even Afghanistan.

### The Way Forward

Given the crisis' complexity and the response's variety, the most valuable tools for enhancing responses to the Mali Crisis would be a common vision of the problem and a shared strategy for tackling it. Stakeholders from all levels could unite (or at least prioritise) their interests with the former and harmonise (or at least de-conflict) their actions with the latter. Improved vision and strategy would yield direct and practical benefits, facilitating the definition of roles and responsibilities, the identification of benchmarks and timelines and the estimation of requirements and costs.

Achieving this common ground much earlier in the crisis would have been preferable, of course, and its non-exis-

tence could not and did not prevent reaction. Commonality nonetheless remains a worthy goal: without it, responses face potential flashpoints from friction between the international, regional and national levels. Terrorism designations represent one potential flashpoint. International actors' uncompromising approach toward Islamist terrorism has come into conflict with regional and national decisions to engage borderline groups, like Ansar al-Din, in negotiations, tactical alliances, power-sharing arrangements and so on. Hostages are a second potential flashpoint. It is an open secret that European governments have permitted the payment of millions of dollars in ransoms to secure the release of hostages held in Northern Mali (and elsewhere in the Sahel); aggressive regional-level military actions in Mali, especially Chadian forces' successful strikes against top AQIM leaders in places like the Adrar des Ifoghas, put European hostages at direct risk of retaliation executions. Tuareg nationalism represents a third potential flashpoint. Beset with internal conflicts, Malian officials are nevertheless united on the Tuareg question, systematically trumpeting national sovereignty, denouncing ethnic autonomy or independence and vowing to crush the Tuareg insurrection. Yet international actors, like France, have proven willing to work even with a full-fledged Tuareg independence movement, enlisting the help of the MNLA for Operation Serval, for example.

Without a common vision and shared strategy, moreover, recent positive developments may prove ephemeral. Recent military advances are precarious. For all of France and AFISMA's real accomplishments, much tough fighting on unforgiving terrain and at high casualty rates likely lies ahead, while little clarity and consensus exists around definitions of victory and understandings of whom among traffickers, terrorists, Tuaregs and others constitute the real enemy. The spread and steadying of Bamako's sovereignty and legitimacy is also far from complete. Novel approaches to nation-building with the North have yet to appear and upcoming elections will face an uphill battle. The elections will confront a shattered and scattered electorate, with more than 100,000 Malians in exile in neighbouring nations and many times that number displaced internally, and they will occur at the height of 'lean season,' a planting period of intense work, high rainfall and low food stocks.

With such trying times ahead, finding the tools to enhance the multilayered responses to the multifaceted Mali Crisis is an urgent task. With unity of vision and strategy, prospects might look brighter two years after Mali's coup than they do on this first anniversary.

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NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

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