Mali's Moment:
The July 2013 Elections

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As the United States drove Islamist insurgents from Afghanistan, many migrated to Yemen, eventually reaching the Horn of Africa, which became the "epicenter" for al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden was indoctrinated by Wahhabist imams in Saudi Arabia, a sect that espouses armed jihad. In 1987, bin Laden formed al-Qaeda (the base) in Afghanistan, with his mujahedeen fighters. In 1991, he moved to Sudan with his al-Qaeda lieutenants and spent the next five years plotting attacks against Western interests.

Wahhabists have expanded their influence beyond the Horn of Africa, into East Africa and across the Sahel. The Salafist movement which started in Egypt has also taken root across the Maghreb and Sahel. Both Islamist movements have strong ties to al-Qaeda, and want to establish Islamic states ruled under Sharia law. The demise of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 did not diminish al-Qaeda's influence. It only emboldened a new generation of Islamist extremists, who are as brutal as their predecessors.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which had its roots in Algeria, attempted to overthrow President Abd al Aziz Bouteflika in the 1990s. In 2003, the Algerian military drove AQIM into northern Mali, where they became affiliated with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. These Islamists have tentacles across the vast Sahel belt.

As the Arab Spring in North Africa unfolded, Muammar Gadhafi warned "that al-Qaeda would take over Libya if he is overthrown." Since Gadhafi's demise, Islamist extremists have taken over large areas of the country. Unprotected caches of weapons from the former ruler's arsenal have fallen into the hands of Islamists across the Sahel. The chaos in Libya was the catalyst that led to the destabilization in Mali, where Islamists have taken control of the northern region—an area the size of France.

Tuareg fighters who once protected Libya's dictator joined hands with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), seeking to establish an independent state in northern Mali. The AQIM and Ansar Dine Islamists wanted to create an Islamic state, and clashed with the MNLA, pushing them aside.

In January 2012, almost 90 Malian soldiers were slaughtered at the Aguel Hoc military base, near the northern town of Kidal, by the well-armed Islamists. The growing frustration by the Malian military, with President Amadou Toumani Toure's lack of support to subdue the Islamists, led to a coup on March 21, 2012, postponing the April

presidential elections. Soon after the Islamists took control of the towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, and instituted Sharia law. Brutal atrocities against the Malian people followed, as well as the destruction of numerous 15th century Sufi shrines and artifacts. Since March 2012, almost 500,000 Malians have been displaced, fleeing to neighboring countries.

The United States had known that Mali was becoming the breeding ground for Islamist terrorists when it launched the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism military training program in 2005, and again in 2007 with Special Operations Forces, training troops from 12 West African countries. The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) had considered setting up a base in northern Mali, but the idea never materialized.

The lack of continued US military support left the Sahel region unprepared to deal with the

Source: The World Factbook, 2013.

growing Islamist threat, with well-armed insurgents coming from Algeria, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and as far away as Pakistan and Afghanistan. The large presence of these Islamists became alarming, since most have grown up knowing only conflict.

The UN Security Council in 2012 passed three resolutions to deal with the Islamist threat in northern Mali. However, the United Nations did not approve military action by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Mali is a member. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice insisted that the postponed elections in Mali take place first before the UN Security Council would sanction military action.

The Algerian government had warned against Western intervention in the region, before the US-backed NATO incursion into Libya. In meetings with President Bouteflika in October 2012, Secretary Clinton asked for Algeria's cooperation to subdue the AQIM Islamists. President Bouteflika was reluctant, since he was very familiar with these insurgents, having chased them into Mali—and didn't want them coming back.

Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou had warned the United Nations that large numbers of Islamists were infiltrating northern Mali, opening a new frontier for jihadists. He urged the Security Council to allow for the use of force to immediately restore the integrity of Mali's territory.

France called upon the UN Security Council to support an African stabilization force saying, "Mali's territorial integrity should be restored as soon as possible and that any lost time would only complicate matters." The United States held firm stating, "Only a

democratically elected government will have the legitimacy to achieve a negotiated political settlement in northern Mali, end the rebellion and restore the rule of law."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also held firm stating, "The United Nations was developing a strategy on the Sahel that would look as a whole at issues including security, response to large-scale crises, and the promotion of democratic governance."

Fearing the spread of the Islamists into other regions, African countries called upon the United Nations to support Mali's request for help, as far back as April 2012, to prevent insurgents from taking over large areas of the northern part of the country.

When I met with Mali government leaders in September 2012, they shared their plans for the presidential elections to be held in July 2013. However, they were concerned about the increased presence of Islamists, and wanted military support immediately to subdue the Islamists saying negotiations with them would be futile. Subduing the Islamists may not have provided a long-lasting peaceful outcome, but it was the only option at that point. Military leaders noted at least 6,000 well-trained troops would be needed, with air power support, to underpin Mali's army.

I visited the Mintao refugee camp in Djibo, Burkina Faso, where 35,000 Tuareg and Arab families had fled Mali's northern towns. The elders expressed a great fear of the Islamists, who had inflicted brutal atrocities against the people. They noted new recruits were joining the Islamist ranks daily, many as young as 12 years of age. The Malian diaspora wanted to go home—but wanted hope for a better future, jobs, food on the table, education for their children and better healthcare.

Mali's Minister of Defense Yamoussa Camara was confident that Mali's army, with the assistance of ECOWAS and neighboring African countries, could prevail in fighting the Islamists. Colonel Oumar Dao, deputy head of Mali's military operations said, "With the build-up of well-armed Islamists outnumbering the Malian military, it was only a matter of time before the Islamists would head south to take over Bamako, the capital." UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon still did not support immediate action saying, "A military operation may be required as a last resort to deal with the hard line extremists...."

On January 10, 2013, Islamists moved south and took control of Konna, a town 30 miles from Mopti, just 300 miles from Bamako. Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traore called French President François Hollande to ask for military help. Troops and aircraft arrived immediately from nearby Chad, retaking Konna the next day. French and Malian soldiers were joined by units from ECOWAS, Nigeria and Chad to participate in the liberation of the northern towns of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal.

The Islamists' growing presence in Mali should have been a concern to the United Nations and the United States long before it reached the critical stage in January, when the French stepped in to fight the Islamists. The United States reluctantly agreed to supply cargo planes to ferry the French and African troops to the battle zones, and provided

tankers for air refueling. A US drone base was set up in neighboring Niger for intelligence gathering.

At this point, the United States needs to participate in training and equipping the African military forces to prepare them for an extended counterinsurgency operation. In addition, armaments and supplies will need to be left behind by the French as well. The insurgents have been dispersed into the vast northern desert and the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains bordering Algeria—but could return.

At the February 14, 2013 House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing on the crisis in Mali, several members asked, "Why is Mali important to US interests?" Ambassador Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs, succinctly stated that Mali's security was important to US national security interests, emphasizing the need "to stop the AQIM and affiliates from spreading into the Sahel region."

Ambassador Carson further noted the Mali crisis is one of the most difficult, complex and urgent problems West Africa has faced in decades stating, "The March 2012 coup and subsequent loss of northern Mali to Islamist extremists demonstrates all too clearly how quickly terrorists prey upon fragile states."

The upcoming July 2013 presidential elections will be a defining moment—Mali's Moment—to unify the country, re-establish democratic institutions and restore Mali's territorial integrity and security.