# Domestic and Regional Challenges in Mali after the French Intervention

*by Gerald Hainzl*

### Key Points

- *In Mali, insecurity is likely to play out well into the foreseeable future. Political solutions cannot be expected until an elected government takes over in Bamako. Even then, successful negotiations regarding the status of Northern Mali will prove to be particularly problematic.*

- *Mali is in need of a full-fledged national dialogue and a type of truth and reconciliation commission in order to move past the crimes committed during the occupation and the recapture of the North.*

- *Although militant groups have suffered severe losses, they could still carry out lastingly many of the activities in the textbook of asymmetrical warfare.*

- *The discussion of whether Françafrique is back or not does not have an impact on the situation in Mali. French troops are in Mali. France is committed to contribute and will play a military role in the future, whether it is within the United Nations-mandated, African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFIS-MA) or, more likely, with a rapid reaction force designated for Mali.*

- *A regional organisation should take the lead in dealing with cross-border issues, be it transnational crime or Islamist militancy. While ECOWAS is usually regarded as the relevant one for Mali, in terms of member states, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (Cen-Sad) seems much more suitable to deal with cross-border challenges.*

- *International crisis management will be pursued according to the experience and political will of involved organisations on a modular basis. There will be a hybrid mission (UN together with regional organisation), a training mission provided by the European Union and a regional organisation taking care of the political processes.*

On 11 January 2013, France initiated an intervention in Mali in order to stop rebel and Islamist fighters marching towards the capital Bamako. Exactly one month later, on 11 February, French President François Hollande claimed victory against Islamist insurgents. On 18 February, a group of seven tourists was kidnapped in Cameroon, near the Nigerian border, by Ansaru, a militant group loosely affiliated to the Nigerian group Boko Haram. One day later, a French soldier was killed in a clash with Islamist fighters in the mountainous region in Northern Mali. France originally planned to leave Mali in March 2013, but

has since extended its commitment.

This paper looks at the post-French intervention period, including possible future developments. It focuses on whether a particular regional organisation could bring together the countries of the Sahel-Saharan area in a joint comprehensive strategy aimed at solving the security challenges the region faces. It is not only terrorists and Islamist militants or rebellions that should be tackled, but also the criminal activities (such as the drug trade and human trafficking) which appear to be the underlying motivation of many of the groups engaged in

**Cen-Sad could well serve as the better regional body to deal with all common security concerns, including criminal, separatist and militant threats.**

militant activities.

## From disruption to dialogue

The 'insecurity of everything' in Mali will continue in almost every social and political realm. Many Malians do not want to reconcile with secessionists in the North. Negotiations with the Mouvement pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) have proven to be especially contested within society, as this group had aligned itself with Islamist forces in 2012. Officers of the Malian armed forces are rebuilding forces with a view to retaliate for the massacre of Malian soldiers that was committed by Islamist forces occupying the Northern territories.[1]

For the Islamist militant groups, notably Ansar Al Din, there seems to be no cogent way to achieve political inclusion in the near future. Several reasons account for this. First, militant groups are composed of foreign fighters, mostly from the region (e.g., Algerians, Mauritanians and Nigerians) but, reportedly, also from more distant places. Secondly, these groups do not have a political agenda, a necessary prerequisite for tangible negotiations. Finally, the radical ideology of the groups and their resort to violence make their inclusion in the political framework in Mali questionable.

Malian soldiers remain sensitive about their lack of equipment. Tellingly, the editor of a Malian newspaper was arrested in March 2013 when he published a report examining the dearth of military supplies. The international community should not forget that it was these same complaints from the military that led to the coup in March 2012.

Additionally, the Malian Armed forces still refuse to comply with international military standards. Humanitarian organisations in Mali reported, for example, gross human rights violations and ethnic reprisals committed by Malian soldiers on the move to the northern territories. The presence of international troops may be sufficient for now, but violent clashes are likely to happen if these conflicts are not sorted out while the international community can still exert some influence.

The tensions are not, however, cast in an 'us (Southern Mali) versus them (Northern Mali)' ideology that can lead to violence. As shown in the recent past, internal differences within the Malian armed forces can also lead to violent clashes. External actors, such as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), must take these deep-rooted differences within the armed forces into account when setting out tasks for the military.

The French were welcome in Mali as long as they liberated the cities in the North and sustained offensives against the Islamists. French insistence on reconciliation and talks with northern groups, however, is not well received within Southern Malian society.

This may have severe consequences for France's positive perception within Mali and will definitely impact the upcoming Malian elections.[2] A victory of people who are not committed to a peace process with a non-inclusive agenda will not pave the way for reconciliation.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Mali's GDP went down by 1.5 per cent in 2012. This, added to a poor harvest in 2011, means that 27 per cent of Mali's population (almost 4 million people) is at risk of food insecurity. The construction and public works sector was hit especially hard by donors' suspension of assistance. Tourism-related sectors have also suffered disproportionately. The decline of these industries is further complicated by higher food prices, which contributed to an average annual inflation of 5.3 per cent.[3] It was only strong showings in gold mining and a recovering agricultural sector that helped to prevent a sharper decline Mali's GDP.

The pursuit of societal normalcy should be the priority agenda in the next phase. Many cattle-herders sold their livestock when they fled their homes in 2012 and do not currently have sufficient resources to return to their homes or invest in new livestock. Farmers are in a comparable situation. They were unable to plant as a result of their displacement and will therefore be unable to harvest within the upcoming months. This will generate a difficult environment for displaced Malians returning to their homes; international organisations must be prepared to provide the necessary food, livestock and seeds to enable self-sustainability. The lack of staple foods was not an urgent problem at the time the rebellion in the north began, but should be considered as one of the triggers that contributed to Mali's situation today.

In Mali, a national healing process (possibly promoted through a truth and reconciliation commission) will be necessary for several reasons. First, and most importantly, such a process could provide an official truth narrative for all Malians and would help reintegrate the north into the country. Second, it would open the possibility of extending amnesty to men who fought for rebel (or Islamist militant) groups, if they did not hold command positions or committed no serious crimes. Third, such a commission could publicly discuss the failures and infringements committed by the Malian armed forces. The announcement of the establishment of a Commission on Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR) on 6 March is a good step in this direction. This commission, however, seems to be more or less a national political platform to enter into negotiations with the MNLA and perhaps other willing groups. It lacks a clear strategy to come to terms with the past on an individual basis, although its tasks do include identifying human rights abuses during the conflict.

---

1 www.news.co.uk/news/world-africa-21339130, 5 February 2013.

2 Ibid.

3 International Monetary Fund, *IMF Country Report 13/44*, Mali, February 2013, p.4.

2

Mali, or any other country in the region, is not likely to become a new Afghanistan. Although these regions are often compared, the only thing they have in common is the lack of a central government that is able to exercise authority throughout the country where it claims sovereignty. The history of the conflicts, the ideology and number of actors and the security/political settings differ too much for conclusive correlation or causal interrelationship.

**A rapid reaction force for Mali would be advantageous, strengthening the goals of AFISMA and providing backup.**

The situation in Mali began when a mixture of Jihadists (mainly from West Africa, but also from other parts of the world) joined forces in Mali in order to spread across the region. They mixed with local groups (from rebel groups to criminal organisations) with different agendas, and were able to conquer parts of the country, but unable to hold their gains when an external intervention started. As only some of these groups have a political agenda that would allow for negotiations with the government in Bamako, there is a certain probability that rebel groups (or associated factions) will return to the use of guerrilla tactics to combat foreign forces and terrorise the population. The Jihadists of the Mouvement pour l'Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) have already sworn to carry on fighting and announced that they will continue with suicide attacks, attacks on convoys, laying mines and roadside bombings.

The danger of continued asymmetrical warfare by these groups is reduced as a result of the successes of France and its allies in Mali's mountainous northern region. The threat still exists, however, and might increase in the future. Another possibility is the export of militant groups to other countries in the Sahel-Saharan region, or to southern countries such as Nigeria. Boko Haram has had personnel trained in camps in Mali (especially in Timbuktu), which could well contribute to Mali's and its country of origin's problems.

When the French intervention started, the Islamist militants did not offer much resistance, instead they melted away into the population and the desert areas of Mali. Many militants have withdrawn to the mountainous area of the Adrar des Ifoghas, an area (along with Gao) where heavy fighting took place between the intervention forces and Islamists in late February 2013.

Speculations have abounded that the French intervention in Mali might herald the return of the so-called Françafrique. Speculations regarding French intentions do not alter the situation on the ground. The French military is present in Mali and fighting insurgents alongside the Malian armed forces and African allies. Undeniably, the intervention took place as French interests were at stake, whether it was the protection of French nationals, French economic interests in the region or, as France is argu-

ing, eliminating the threat that Islamist rebels pose to the security of both West Africa and Europe.

The more interesting question is how long France will have to stay in Mali. While President Hollande announced in early March 2013 that the withdrawal of French troops would begin in April, some days later his defence minister declared that handover of responsibility to African forces would take place when the liberation of the whole country has been achieved. In any case, the French seem to be militarily committed to remain in whatever role they feel is necessary. France might well be the only external actor able to exert enough political pressure to ensure serious negotiations between all the relevant political forces in Mali.

## Cen-Sad as possible peace broker?

A solution for peace in Mali is closely related to solutions for the whole region. Therefore, strategies for the future should not only concern Mali, but the whole area. Neighbouring countries, as well as countries as far away as Sudan (Darfur) or Nigeria, could suffer from individuals or groups returning from Mali. A regional or sub-regional organisation seems to be the best actor to deal with the issue. Yet which regional/sub-regional organisation should take the lead? The African Union (AU) would probably be the first organisation to be addressed; but there are also sub-regional organisations recognised by the AU that could take over this task. Established and well-known sub-regional organisations, however, do not cover the whole operational area of Islamist insurgency. ECOWAS is focused on West Africa, while ECCAS covers Central Africa from Chad to Angola. The Union of the Arab Maghreb, too, is not an option, as only North African countries are members. These regional organisations may, therefore, be only the second best option to provide the forum necessary to coordinate the efforts of individual states.

One organisation that has already tried to take a lead role in the Sahel-Saharan region and which includes almost all affected countries is the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (Cen-Sad). Although founded by the late Muammar Gaddafi in 1998 and intended to extend Libya's influence on African countries, the organisation has grown from its original six-members to 28 countries. Cen-Sad could well serve as the better regional body to deal with all common security concerns, including criminal, separatist and militant threats. The idea of using Cen-Sad gained momentum in mid-February 2013, when a meeting of the heads of states and governments of Cen-Sad member states took place in the Chadian capital N'Djamena. The summit set-up two permanent committees, one on peace and security and another one on sustainable development.

3

The only terrorism-affected country in the region that has not yet joined Cen-Sad is Algeria. As Algeria is one of the key countries in fighting insecurity in the Sahel-Saharan region, a way should be found to include it into the decision-making process as well as in the implementation strategies.

**International Crisis Management in the Sahel**

The African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), which was supposed to take the lead in crisis management in Mali in 2012, long before France intervened, was not formed until French troops entered the country. The member states of ECOWAS were, for whatever reason, either unable or unwilling to make a military contribution. Aware of this problem, France 'invited' Chad to send soldiers to Mali and Chad responded by sending 2,000 troops. France also indicated its desire to hand over responsibility in Mali to the United Nations as soon as possible and is therefore pushing for a UN mandate. In that respect, the hybrid concept tested with the African Union/United Nations Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in Darfur/Sudan might be repeated in Mali, namely a joint mission composed of forces from both the UN and a regional organisation.

Since the preconditions for keeping the peace are different from the situation in Darfur, some additional modules from the international crises management toolbox should be added. No African country that was part of AFISMA was also involved in fighting in Northern Mali and they are not prepared to send troops to fight insurgents. It is very possible that AFISMA would be unable to deal with a renewed military attack from any armed group in Mali. For this reason, a rapid reaction force for Mali would be advantageous. On one hand, such a force could strengthen the goals of AFISMA by being there as a backup. On the other, the force would also be available in case of a new advance from insurgent groups. Due to the history of the conflict, the political implications, the military presence, the knowledge of insurgent hide-outs, and considering the external actors already at play, France would be an ideal candidate to be tasked to lead such UN-mandated rapid reaction force.

The handover to the United Nations will give back the freedom of action to France enabling it to end its national operation in Mali as a 'success', precisely when the painstaking job start. France could also re-hat its troops with the blue helmets of the United Nations and stay in Mali with a smaller, UN-funded force. This would benefit France (as it has already spent almost 100 million Euros), but also the African Forces who are currently financed by donor pledges from the Addis conference (but will definitely run out of funds due to the as-yet undetermined duration of AFISMA).

From a broader perspective, empirical expert knowledge in international crisis management gained during the last decade could ensure the repetition of approaches that have previously been successful: an African-led hybrid mission similar to UNAMID and a European Training Mission similar to EUTM Somalia point in the direction of a modular system of international crisis management. There are currently seven UNDPKO-led missions in Africa, with Mali next on the agenda, for a total of more than 110,000 personnel involved. Other missions, such as AMISOM in Somalia or the SADC mission to the DRC are UN-mandated, but led by regional organisations. It seems that each organisation or country involved tries to provide what it is able, while still keeping in mind security, financial and other constraints – as well as the political situation at home.

No matter how circumstances in Mali and its neighbouring countries within the region shape up in the future, one outcome should definitely be avoided: a peace process with several competing international processes (mediators and special representatives as well), but no peace. It is therefore essential to have a joint effort with all involved external actors, giving the time necessary to the parties to exchange views and find a lasting way out of a most complex crisis.

28 April 2013

**About the author**
Gerald Hainzl is Senior Researcher at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management at the National Defence Academy in Vienna and a Lecturer at the University of Vienna. He has been researching African conflicts for over twenty years.