

The Crisis Management Concept recently presented at the EU Foreign Affairs Council paves the way towards what is likely to be the next CSDP mission. This policy brief looks at the prospects for the proposed EU training mission in Mali.

# EU engagement in the Sahel: lessons from Somalia and AfPak

It examines in particular what lessons might usefully be learned from the EU's previous contribution to international peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and to what extent the fragile security situation in Northern Mali has the potential to become another Afghanistan.

On 19 November, the Council of the EU welcomed the Crisis Management Concept for a possible EU training mission for Mali, paving the way for the launch of a CSDP operation replicating the work done in Uganda with Somali troops. And many in Brussels have started to speak of EUTM Mali, as if EUTM and more generally the EU approach to the

crisis in Somalia was a relevant model for action in Mali.

Comparisons are always a methodologically and politically tricky exercise. Still, it may be worth looking at the main features of EU engagement in Somalia and analysing the extent to which lessons can be learnt for the Sahel.

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## Comparing with Somalia

In Somalia, the EU has supported an African peace enforcement operation managed by the African Union (AMISOM) financially, technically and politically. In parallel, the EU has directly trained Somali troops loyal to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). These two actions were supposed to contribute to the counter-terrorism effort led against the Al Shabaab militia.

More generally, the EU has been committed – most visibly since 2011 via its Special Representative for the Horn of Africa – to supporting political efforts aiming at the restoration of stable governance structures in Somalia, and it has developed a regional strategy to implement a comprehensive approach to the security-development nexus in the country.

AMISOM was launched in 2007. It took five years for it to achieve some of its key objectives, due also to a myriad of internal and external factors. Such a lengthy process gives an idea of the timeframe to be considered when dealing with complex governance crises – made only worse by the partial occupation of territory by armed and terrorist groups and the rampant corruption fuelled by illegal trafficking. Although AMISOM claims victory over Al Shabaab, some analysts from ISS Africa still warn about persisting violence in the form of bombs and suicide attacks.

The EU has been supporting AMISOM financially (covering most AU salaries) for several years with funds of up to €350 million. Its contribution came from the EDF's African Peace Facility (APF), whose reserves are now coming to an end. Discussions about the need to diversify AMISOM funding and go beyond the AFP show that additional resources may have to be identified to support an African force in Northern Mali.

According to the latest decisions made by the African Union, AMISOM staff are expected to amount to about 17,000 in the coming months. This is the result of an uneasy multi-annual engagement by several African states (Burundi and Uganda in particular, but also Nigeria, Djibouti and others) in a

rather risky operation, in addition to Ethiopian and Kenyan bilateral interventions. Initially, the first AMISOM troops deployed in 2007 did not count more than 1,700 staff from Burundi. In the Sahel, the envisaged size of a possible Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) force does not exceed 3,300 troops, according to open sources. And it remains to be seen how fast these will be deployed. The training of Somali troops by EUTM Somalia on Ugandan territory has been quoted as a possible model for a similar mission in Mali. Launching EUTM required a lot of international coordination and consultation in a complex regional environment. Several EU Member States (in addition to France, which is in the lead on this initiative) have now confirmed their readiness to contribute to

this several-hundred-strong CSDP operation in Mali. Yet the numbers pledged during the planning phase will have to materialise in the course of 2013. And, apart from the Somalia model, questions remain about the location of the mission, the scope of its mandate and its coordination with the AU, ECOWAS and the UN as well as other EU instruments. Furthermore, due to climatic constraints (the rainy season has just started), the mission is not expected to be fully deployed and operational before next spring. With training cycles lasting several weeks at the very least, the first Malian troops trained by the EU would not become operational until summer 2013, if plans are not derailed. Analysts also underline challenges related to the security situation on the ground: the



Hungarian EUTM trainer receiving his CSDP medal

spring 2012 *coups* and deep rifts within the army have generated tensions which have to be managed skilfully by competent and politically savvy European trainers.

The success of the Union's engagement will significantly depend on the quality of coordination with the Malian political leadership on training the troops (let alone reforming the security sector, which must be foreseen at some point). In this context, EUTM will have to be seen as a tool and incentive to enhance political leadership over re-invigorated and reunited Malian troops.



## 'Malgeria' as a new 'AfPak'?

Northern Mali has been compared to a potentially new Afghanistan, and local terrorist groups to the Taliban. Some reports and analyses have highlighted the existence of a terrorist crisis belt from Somalia to Mauritania (including Northern Nigeria). The main challenge in the region is to collect reliable information from sources on the ground as analysts often have to resort to second-hand data and politically motivated sources. There is indeed, according to military and security experts, a growing terrorist threat in Northern Mali, with a core group of several hundred fighters and perhaps a couple of thousand 'followers' or affiliated elements. Precise figures are not given in the press. AQIM (al-Qaeda in Islamist Maghreb) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) are usually portrayed as the most radical groups and the foreseeable enemy of external military intervention – whereas Ansar Dine and the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) would be groups with which negotiations are possible and even desirable. AQIM (which still holds some French hostages), its network and connections do present a risk of terrorist attacks in other parts of the region, be

gional criminal networks will confer them legitimacy on the ground, there must be no complacency about human rights violations or mounting security threats.

## State fragility and elusive stability

In the final analysis, however, the conditions for peace and security in Mali depend on the ability of the local leadership to deliver – with some external support if needed – a clear and consistent political strategy to resolve the current crisis and ensure the country's integrity and unity. After the establishment of the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia in 2004 (after intervention from neighbouring states and involvement of external powers), it took almost a decade to stabilise the security situation and launch an allegedly democratic state-building process in a country still divided into distinct autonomous entities.

This experience is instructive when considering the timeframe for Mali. The authorities in Bamako have been struggling at delivering a long-awaited (and repeatedly mentioned in African and international statements) political roadmap. Efforts



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it in the Maghreb or Mali's ECOWAS neighbours, as well as in Europe. This may not make Northern Mali a new pre-9/11 Afghanistan, but significant risks seem to exist. Fighting and territorial conquest were initiated by the Tuareg-led MNLA, just returned from Libya where terrorist groups acquired large stocks of arms in the wake of the NATO-led campaign. While automatic comparisons with Afghanistan and the Taliban are misleading, the ambiguous role played by Algeria in its alleged support to Islamist groups and Tuareg forces is reminiscent in part of Pakistan's stance. Only time will tell whether invoking 'AfPak' will inspire visions of and responses to 'Malgeria'.

As for possible connections between Islamists in Northern Mali and other terrorist groups (like Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria), more data is necessary. Experts and intelligence sources seem to agree that connections – business-like relations and training practices – are proved. There is a risk that these lead to active cooperation and offensive strategies against common targets.

Finally, and to get back to the Somalia experience, Islamic and Islamist rule in Somalia has solid historical roots and can in part build on some popular support. While it remains to be seen whether in Northern Mali the rule by Islamists involved in re-

towards reconciliation, dialogue and transitional justice, often overlooked by crisis response emergencies, promise to be as lengthy and painful, if not more. The EU's long-term commitment to peace, security and development in the framework of its (flexibly updated) Sahel strategy could, in that respect, make a difference – provided EU budgets allow it.

Much has been written about the internationalisation of the crisis in Mali. The main difference with Somalia is that, due to geographical proximity, a number of EU Member States (France but also Spain and other Southern European countries) have particularly strong political and economic interests in the region. In Somalia, the EU has supported stabilisation from a back seat, while the UK, along with Italy, played a bigger role and African organisations and states (like Ethiopia and Kenya, though not without rivalry) have intervened directly and bilaterally, acting sometimes as US proxies in the global war on terror. In Mali France, as a permanent member of the Security Council, is playing a more prominent role, while the US seems to monitor developments very closely and to provide support when necessary – but its attention remains focused on other hot spots.



African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops disembark from a United Nations aircraft.

Finding the appropriate regional political framework to provide peace and security in the Sahel had already been a challenge for Europeans before the crisis in Northern Mali erupted. Regional formats like the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) or ECOWAS have sometimes proved inadequate at bringing ECOWAS countries, Algeria as well as international stakeholders around the same table. Successive mediation efforts by Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast or Nigeria have underlined the regional dimension of the crisis. The African Union is also involved, albeit to a lesser extent.

In the end, the choice of a UN special envoy is probably not the best solution for the defenders of African ownership, but it has the advantage of avoiding diplomatic competition at regional level. Former Italian PM Romano Prodi, as former chair of the joint AU-UN panel to consider options for supporting AU peacekeeping operations, is experienced and familiar with North and West African dynamics; and he was probably chosen also for his good relations with Algeria. As a former President of the European Commission, he may also be sensitive to the imperative of coordination with France and the EU. With him in place, appointing an EU Special Representative for the Sahel (as a replica of the choice made by the EU in Somalia with a EUSR for the Horn) will require coherence and coordination between them.

## Conclusions

Northern Mali is neither Somalia nor Afghanistan. Risks are of a different magnitude and contexts, too, are quite different, despite comparable challenges to regional security. Still, experiences from Somalia and 'AfPak' may help understand current trends in 'Malgeria'.

The terrorist threat is closer to European territory but arguably more diffuse and impalpable. Connections between terrorist groups along a supposed 'terror belt' from Mauritania to Somalia still have to materialise but their likelihood is not fantasy. More information-sharing on these threats would perhaps help European public opinion to understand them better. Not unlike Somalia, regional rivalries and tensions around the Sahel have led to a multi-level and multi-layered international engagement for peace and security.

Because the area is closer to some European interests, it requires another type of EU engagement, which, in the long run, may demand support for a credible and sustainable solution to governance in Mali.