



Security in the Sahel Part II – Militarisation of the Sahel

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Summary

One year on, the impact of the French intervention in northern Mali has been felt in most of the surrounding countries. These impacts include the displacement of jihadist paramilitary groups from Mali as well as the political consequences for states that have supported the French intervention. In 2014, as France downsizes its forces in Mali, it is implementing a major redeployment of its forces in Africa from coastal and urban bases to forward operating bases in the Sahel and Sahara. Securing Niger and monitoring southern Libya are particular concerns. Meanwhile, the US has been quietly extending its military reach through small deployments of Special Forces, private contractors, surveillance aircraft and drones all across the Sahel. The potential use of military tactics that have bolstered radicalism in other theatres of the 'War on Terror' risks a local backlash, as does the increasing reliance of French and US strategy on some of the region's most authoritarian regimes.

Context

In January 2013 the French military, supported by African troops and 10 non-African air forces, intervened militarily in Mali at the request of its transitional government. Over the following four weeks they recaptured all of the towns in the northern half of Mali. This vast desert region had been seized by Islamist and separatist militia in March-April 2012 and declared independent as the 'State of Azawad', the Tuareg name for their homeland in northeast Mali.

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French troops have continued to conduct security operations across northern Mali to locate and ‘neutralise’ militants associated with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a jihadist group of Algerian origin, and its West African splinter groups. Reduced numbers of French forces now support Malian and African forces, rebadged in July as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The final quarter of 2013 saw an increase in violence in northern Mali, including terrorist attacks, violent protests and inter-communal violence.

Mali’s Neighbours and Region

The French advance into northern Mali displaced rather than destroyed AQIM and its two local allies, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine, a Tuareg Islamist group. Their impact has been particularly felt in Niger and Libya and may also have bolstered jihadist groups operating in northern Nigeria and Tunisia. A new group, al-Murabitun, now appears to pose more of a threat to western and West African interests than its parent group, AQIM.

After initial battles with French and Malian troops in central Mali, most of AQIM, MUJAO and at least the leadership of Ansar Dine, abandoned the towns of northern Mali without resistance, retreating to the Ifoghas massif, where AQIM’s Saharan faction had hidden itself from 2004 to early 2012. While French and Chadian troops captured AQIM bases and supplies in heavy fighting among these ravines in early 2013, at least several hundred militants appear to have moved on through southern Algeria and Niger to regroup in southwest Libya and possibly northern Nigeria. The 16-19 January 2013 attack on the In-Amenas gas facility in eastern **Algeria**, 30 km from Libya, demonstrated that the militants already had bases in Libya and were willing to target both Algerian

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and western (in this case, primarily UK and Norwegian) interests and citizens. The attack was clearly planned in advance and in expectation of the French intervention in Mali.

The same group – the Signed-in-Blood Battalion of Algerian militant Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former AQIM commander – perpetrated three suicide and gunmen attacks in **Niger** in May-June in association with MUJAO, targeting the army garrison in Agadez, the French-owned uranium mine in Arlit and the main prison in Niamey. These two groups subsequently merged as al-Murabitun, meaning the Almoravids – a medieval Maghrebian revivalist movement that conquered parts of the western Sahel and Iberia. The Nigerien government claims the attacks were organised from Libya. Other sources suggest that al-Murabitun has rear bases in northern Niger's Aïr mountains and cooperates with Nigerian jihadist groups on Niger's southern border.

There have not been similar attacks by AQIM or offshoots in southwest **Libya**, although there may be links to Ansar al-Sharia's increasing activities in coastal Libya and northwest **Tunisia**. As in pre-intervention Mali, the post-Gaddafi security vacuum and familiar social structures of southern Libya presents jihadist groups with an ideal safe haven in which to reorganise and a ready supply of weaponry. The so-called 'Tuareg Triangle' between Ubari and the Algerian border is believed to be the new host region to militants displaced from Mali. Animosity between the Toubou people, whose traditional territory extends over the rest of southern Libya into northern Chad and northeast Niger, and Arab tribes, who still dominate AQIM's leadership, may explain the lack of apparent activity by jihadist groups in this area.

In **Nigeria**, Ansaru (a local Jihadist group officially titled Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) successfully attacked a column of the

Nigerian army heading for Mali on 20 January 2013. Boko Haram, a much larger group, which had previously confined itself to attacks on Nigerian targets, kidnapped a French family in northern Cameroon in March 2013, ostensibly in response to the intervention in Mali. Links between AQIM, al-Murabitun, Ansaru and Boko Haram remain unclear but the regional jihad objectives of al-Murabitun and Ansaru are very similar, as is their methodology of kidnapping ‘westerners’ irrespective of their citizenship and organising prison breaks. Boko Haram’s much increased activity in northeast Nigeria since mid-2013 is largely a response to offensive by the Nigerian army but it is likely that some of its combatants were trained by MUJAO in Mali in 2012-13.

More surprising, perhaps, is the lack of retaliation against the regional states that supported the French intervention and which have little capacity to prevent terrorist attacks. Neither **Chad**, **Burkina Faso** nor **Senegal**, all of which have troops in Mali with MINUSMA, has suffered or detected a jihadist-linked reprisal. **Mauritania**, which has cooperated closely with French and US Special Forces in combating AQIM along the Mali border and where AQIM mounted multiple attacks in 2005-09, has not suffered either. This may suggest that AQIM’s eastward relocation from Mali has reduced the threat to Mauritania and countries to Mali’s west and south. However, Mauritania is probably second only to Algerians within AQIM and al-Murabitun and Mauritania remains attractive to them as a conservative Arab-based society. Thus, the route through northern Mali may be used more again in future.

French Repositioning in the Sahel

As it withdraws most of its troops from Mali, France has announced a major repositioning of its forces in Africa. The new French military posture will refocus from large coastal bases, designed to train, transport and supply African Union

and regional rapid reaction forces, to smaller forward deployments in the Sahel and Sahara. 3,000 French troops will now be based indefinitely in Mali, Niger and Chad.

The new posture is heavily influenced by US ‘War on Terror’ strategy in Africa, Yemen and south-west Asia, relying heavily on Special Forces, air strike capacities and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). French and US forces (including contractors) already share facilities in Djibouti, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, and there is a small US liaison detachment with the French Combined Air Operations Centre in Chad. Paris has requested US assistance in consolidating its special forces and is a main advocate in the European Council for development of long-range UAVs.

Discussed in Washington on 24-25 January at talks between French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and his US counterpart Chuck Hagel, the French repositioning is explicit about confronting Islamist terrorist groups and the threat to regional security posed by the security vacuum in southern Libya. While the repositioning focuses on Mali, Niger and Chad, supplied via a coastal base in Côte d’Ivoire, it will actually include deployments to over a dozen small bases and elite detachments in the Sahel and Sahara, covering at least seven countries. In some cases it will mean French Special Forces reoccupying desert forts long abandoned by the Foreign Legion.

There will also be greater use of aerial reconnaissance and targeting. French Navy patrol aircraft already criss-cross the Sahara and two MQ-9 Reaper UAVs arrived with French forces at Niamey airport in December after the US fast-tracked French acquisition of and training on these ‘hunter-killer’ drones. These double the effective range of the Harfang target-acquisition UAVs formerly used

by the French in the Sahel, bringing all of Mali, Niger, almost all of the rest of West Africa and much of Algeria, Chad and southwest Libya into range.

France also makes greater use of combat aircraft in the Sahel-Sahara, deploying fighter aircraft from its long-term base in N'Djamena, Chad to Bamako and Niamey airports. This brings northern Mali into range. Since October, French fighter-reconnaissance aircraft have deployed to Faya-Largeau in northern Chad, which brings southern Libya well within range. French Special Forces and armed helicopters have also operated from Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania in pursuit of AQIM.

US and China Extend Their Presence

French and US Reapers now operate from the same facility at Niamey airport, set up by the US in February 2013. While US UAVs in Niger are unarmed, it is unclear if French Reapers will be used for strike missions. US armed UAV bases in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Seychelles currently bring all of the Horn of Africa, East Africa and most of Arabia within range. US private military contractors have also flown unarmed, unmarked light aircraft on surveillance flights all across the Sahel belt since at least 2009. Using covert hubs in Burkina Faso and Uganda and smaller airfields in Mauritania, Niger and South Sudan, they have sought AQIM and the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

Since 2011, US Special Forces have established small bases in the Central African Republic (CAR), South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to assist Ugandan forces seeking the LRA there. They also provide training to several African militaries countering the LRA. As with programmes in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad, these programmes have focused on creating elite counter-terrorism units. Unfortunately, all of these countries plus the CAR

and South Sudan have experienced coups d'état or major army mutinies since this assistance began.

In order to combat Boko Haram, a Nigerian Special Operations Command was announced on 14 January with the US military providing advice, training and equipment. Massive attacks by Boko Haram since December suggest that the Nigerian army's use of indiscriminate force in the northeast has not weakened the insurgency. Rather, the state of emergency is likely to have strengthened the recruitment base of Boko Haram since May.

China is also increasingly active in the Sahel. Its parastatals are the dominant actors in the oil industries of Sudan/South Sudan, Chad/Cameroon and Niger. They also mine uranium in Niger, and China is the primary buyer of iron ore from Mauritania's vast desert complexes. So far, China is the only non-African state to deploy more than a few dozen troops with MINUSMA.

Regional Allies

In order to pursue such forward deployments and offensive operations across the Sahel, the US and France rely on status of forces agreements with friendly states. France also depends on an air corridor across the Algerian Sahara. Securing such access puts host governments in a position of greater power. The highly authoritarian regime in Algiers – the world's fifth or sixth largest arms importer – no longer faces western pressure to improve its dismal human rights record. Indeed, it has received friendly visits from the leaders of France and the UK and the US Secretary of State since late 2012. Mauritania's military-based government faced little criticism over its unfair elections in November.

Chad, Uganda and Ethiopia may be the biggest regional beneficiaries of the militarisation of the Sahel. Each has been governed for over 22 years by a former armed movement. They face little censure of their authoritarian and undemocratic internal policies and have become more assertive as regional military powers. Ethiopia has forces in Somalia while Uganda now has combat troops in operation (by agreement) in Somalia (under AU command), South Sudan, the DRC and the CAR.

Boosted by expanding oil revenues, French alliance and the demise of Libya's Gaddafi regime, Chad has greatly expanded its military reach into Mali, Niger and the CAR, where its troops and citizens now face a violent backlash. It is also a Security Council member for the next two years and will be expected to help guide decisions on UN peacekeeping operations in Mali, South Sudan and potentially the CAR and Libya.

Burkina Faso, long relied on by Paris to negotiate with armed groups in francophone West Africa, is also facing unaccustomed turbulence in 2014 as its president seeks to permit himself an additional term of office. Algeria, which is wary of France's military deployments on its southern border, is set to take over from Burkina the mediation of talks between Mali's government and secular Tuareg and Arab rebels.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

As elsewhere, the western military approach to countering Islamist insurgency in the Sahel rests on very unsteady foundations. This applies to the political legitimacy of allied regimes, the stability and security of locations hosting French and US bases, the traumatic historical legacy of France as the former

colonial power, and the potential for counter-insurgency tactics to provoke wider alienation and radicalisation.

In some respects, the eviction of AQIM and its allies from northern Mali has made the wider Sahara a less safe place, without obviously impeding the capacity of jihadist groups to threaten Europe. In 2014, southwest Libya and parts of Niger are not necessarily less safe havens than northern Mali was in 2012. The insurgency has moved closer to the Mediterranean and closer to critical European energy infrastructure in Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Niger (uranium). Unlike heterodox Mali, controlling Libya's chaotic state is likely to be of interest to Arab Salafist groups, including AQIM.

The separation from AQIM of al-Murabitun may also pose a greater threat to both West African and western interests in the wider Sahel. This is because its strategic direction is towards the weak states of West Africa, including Niger, Mali and Mauritania, where critical infrastructure and individuals are more difficult to protect. The audacious operations implemented by al-Murabitun and its precursors in 2013 attest to its range, training, discipline and cosmopolitan membership. If it does find common purpose with the larger Nigerian jihadist groups, it could represent a severe threat to stability in the already shaky regional power.

While developing and reintegrating northern Mali is a very important opportunity in 2014, foreign donors should devote particular attention and resources to stabilising two other countries: Libya and Niger.

The challenge in **Libya** is to build a strong and legitimate state from the centre, which will eventually be capable of protecting and serving its citizens at the periphery. Given the array of heavily armed and heartily opposed interest

groups in southern Libya and the lack of national or international enthusiasm for disarmament campaigns, the emphasis should be on reconciling rather than controlling them.

The challenge in **Niger** is to deepen the capacities of a broadly functional, broadly democratic state that nevertheless has very little presence outside urban areas. The boom in Niger's extractive sector presents opportunities for deepening state resources and initiating more inclusive development and social provision. International expertise in managing and monitoring extractive industry revenues could play an important role in ensuring such outcomes.

Regionally, there are a number of initiatives that can be supported to share information and build confidence between states and regional communities, including the African Union-led Nouakchott Process on trans-Saharan security cooperation, which attempts to bridge the divide between the West African bloc (ECOWAS) and the disunited states of North Africa.

Photo: *Chinese MINUSMA troops in Gao, January 2014* **Source:** *Mission de l'ONU au Mali - UN Mission in Mali (Flickr)*

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