

Political Crisis in Mali: Uneasy Present, Uncertain Future

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Abstract

The security situation in the West African state of Mali started to deteriorate in 2011 when the separatist group MNLA and Islamists took control of the country's north and imposed Shariah. Since 2013, France has been the principal security provider against Islamist militants, though US, EU and ECOWAS have also been supporting the Malian national forces. The civilian regime, however, faced growing internal opposition and popular protests, and this led to two back-to-back coups by the military in the past two years. Immediately after the second coup in 2021, France decided to pull out its troops from Mali. While many scholars hold climate change responsible for the increasing conflicts in the region, there is little evidence to prove this. Instead, the problem is rooted in the weakness of the State to govern, exercise sovereignty over the entire territory, and provide adequate security to the people. This has led to dependence on external powers. With a heterogeneous mix of Islamists, separatists and ethnic militias fighting both the civilian and military regimes, Mali has become a tinderbox and can explode at any time. Unless France and the international community recalibrate their relationship with Mali, we could witness a repeat of an Afghanistan-like collapse.

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Analogies in international politics are perilous. But considering the recent developments in the West African state of Mali, it is impossible to overlook the similarities between the developments leading to state collapse in Afghanistan and the path Mali is now treading. Indeed, there is a strong likelihood that the abrupt French military withdrawal, after nine years, will lead to an Afghanistan-like state collapse in Mali.

Mali is a landlocked country in West Africa. Islam is the principal religion with approximately 90 percent of its 14 million population Muslim.¹ Mali shares its borders with seven countries: Mauritania, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. Geographically the country can be divided into two parts. The country's southern part consists of rich Sudanian savannah as well as the plateau of both the Niger and the Senegal river. The capital Bamako and most of the key cities were developed in the southern part, on the plains of these two river basins, and consequently, 90 percent of its population resides in the southern part. The northern part of the country, on the other hand, remained underdeveloped and sparsely populated. As two of the largest and most well-known deserts, Sahel and the Sahara, pass through its north, it is mostly dry and arid. As with the geography, the characteristics of people living in the north and south are also highly contrasting. For example, in southern Mali, most of the population is black Africans, while the people living in the north are mostly Arabs and Tuaregs.

Today, the country faces a perilous civil war between the radical Islamist forces of the North and the moderate South, and the threat of an Islamist take over.

The Conflict in Mali and the French Role

On 14th December 2021, almost 9 years after its first intervention, the French army wrapped up its operation from Timbuktu city in conflict-torn Northern Mali.² Although the decision to withdraw from Mali was announced a few months earlier, this sudden and rapid pull out of French troops raises concerns of increasing instability in Mali and the greater Sahel region. The fear stems from the fact that despite the presence of French and other international forces, the Islamist separatist movement of the North not only managed to survive, it has been steadily advancing to the country's south. And now, these radical Islamist groups have successfully propagated across two neighbouring countries, Burkina Faso and Niger. In parallel to the Islamist insurgency of northern Mali, the country

is also going through a political crisis resulting from two back-to-back coups.

Like the US army in Afghanistan, France has been providing security to conflict-ridden Mali and the broader Sahel region for the last nine years. When the French Army first intervened in Mali in 2013, they were greeted as liberators.³ However, the relationship between Mali and France took a nosedive in August 2020, when Colonel Assimi Goita led a coup and toppled country's elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and his government. In May 2021, Mali's military carried out its 'second coup', when Col. Goita declared himself President of the transitional government. French President Emmanuel Macron strongly condemned the coup calling it "coup within a coup".⁴

France reacted strongly against the second coup and announced its decision to terminate "Operation Barkhane".⁵ Since 2013, under Operation Barkhane, France has deployed 5,100 strong troops spanning across five countries in the region.⁶ Meanwhile, in the wake of several reports of Russian intervention using their mercenary Wagner Group for security assistance,⁷ France decided to pull out from Mali. However, France remained as part of the Takuba Force which has troops from 14 other EU member countries. Currently led by Sweden, Takuba has established a task force to replace Barkhane in three years' timeline.⁸ However, following the news of Russian intervention, Sweden has also decided to withdraw its troops from Mali.⁹ In fact, earlier, Germany was the only country that explicitly expressed its keenness to remain in Mali.¹⁰ However, with changing dynamics where activities of German forces are constrained, Germany is also considering the withdrawal of its troops from Mali.¹¹

Nine years into the mission, France feels weary of the current Junta and its leader Col. Assimi Goita. After the first coup by the military, the interim government promised to restore democracy by holding the Presidential election within 18 months and fixed a February 2022 deadline.¹² However, after the 'second coup', citing security issues, Goita decided to put off the presidential election until 2026, jeopardising the process of democratic transition.¹³ Immediately after the announcement of the postponement of the election, the West African regional economic bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decided to impose strict economic sanctions and trade embargos against Mali.¹⁴ In addition, ECOWAS decided to cut Mali from its other neighbouring countries by closing both land and air borders and recalling their ambassadors from Bamako, thus restricting people-to-people movement. The trade

embargos and closure of borders will hit the cross-border food markets and impact Mali with increased prices and limited food supplies. ECOWAS is also seizing every single asset of the country kept in the central bank of West Africa.¹⁵ As the announcement of delaying the election irked France, its reaction to this announcement was imminent, France not only supported the ECOWAS moves but also urged the European Union to impose similar sanctions.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the Junta government of Mali has refused to budge under foreign pressure, and has labelled the French act as “illegitimate, illegal and inhumane”.¹⁷ The majority of the country has expressed its resolute support for the junta despite the opposition of the imperial powers.

Lately, the Malian population, including the current Junta, has become extremely apprehensive about France’s military presence in the country. To understand the reason behind the strong anti-French sentiments in Mali, it is important to underline that despite the long military presence of France in the region, it failed to contain the Islamist insurgency. In fact, several reports confirmed extrajudicial killings and torture by the French-led security forces. As per the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), in 2020, the French-led security forces killed more common Malians than the Islamists.¹⁸

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Questions are also being raised about the opaque bilateral defence accords that were signed between Paris and Bamako in 2013.¹⁹ As the Foreign Ministry of Mali has officially demanded the revaluation of the accord, this would further plummet their relationship, curtail the French role in Mali and push them further away.²⁰ And as per the latest news, the junta leaders have decided to expel the French envoy from Mali after the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian termed the current transitional government as hostile and outrageous.²¹

The Russian Role

It is speculated that the French decision to withdraw from Mali and impose harsh sanctions is defined by their insecurity regarding the Russian presence in Mali. Despite continuous denial by both the Russian and the Malian government, several sources using satellite data have revealed the presence of more than 200 Russian mercenaries in Mali.²² French officials have unambiguously expressed their opposition to working

alongside the Russian private army, “Wagner Group”.²³ The group has been accused of several human rights abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya, and Syria.²⁴ Earlier, both the EU and US imposed multiple sanctions on Wagner.²⁵ Other EU countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, have also indicated their reluctance to work alongside the Russian private army and declared their intention to withdraw their entire troops from Mali.²⁶ Their decision of pulling out, in all probability, would impact the decisions of Norway, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, and Lithuania as these countries are scheduled to deploy their troops in Mali later this year.²⁷

While France has cited delayed elections and Russian involvement as the prime reason behind its decision, the citizens of Mali feel that the inability to control Malian politics is at the root of French frustration. In recent years, France has been constantly accused of practicing neo-colonialism and controlling the internal affairs of its ex-colonies.²⁸ However, the principal beneficiaries of this political chaos may well be the Islamists. While the government is busy consolidating its rule and the international community is fighting to advance their vested interests, Islamists are likely to exploit the chaos and might wreak havoc in the country and the region.

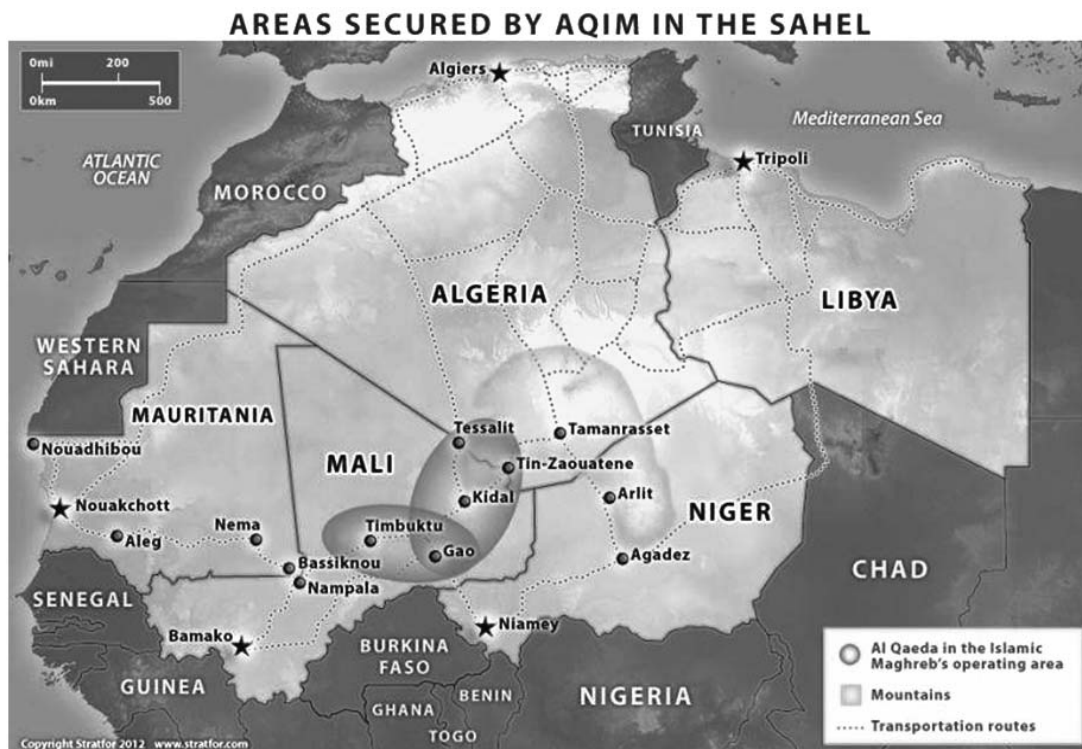
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Given the striking similarities, it is likely that Mali could repeat an Afghanistan-like collapse, lest France and the international community recalibrate their relationship with the government.²⁹ The question is whether this collapse will take the form of an undemocratic but currently popular anti-extremist government led by the military holding on, an Islamist seizure of power or a civil war. The country appears to be on the verge of falling to the Islamists and the international community must find constructive ways to work with the government and all political groups so as not to repeat the mistakes made in Afghanistan. The task is complex, and choices are not apparent or easy.

Extremist Groups in Mali

The Tuareg region, lying on the country’s northern border, has long been a hub for the trading of gold and salt, and at one time of humans shipped out by colonial powers as slaves. The failure of successive Mali governments to integrate the northern

half of the country has culminated in an angry Tuareg rebellion to free Azawad, or Northern Mali. And over time, the region has become a crossroads for the flow of illegal substances and weapons. Extremist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and some other Islamist militants, have taken refuge in the northern part of the country. Transboundary terrorism by these groups is a persistent threat to neighbouring countries, particularly Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Niger, and Nigeria.



Source: Stratfor, 2012³⁰

In 2011, the security situation deteriorated due to the repatriation of hundreds of Malian militants from neighbouring Libya who had fought to defend Muammar Gaddafi, the late Libyan leader. The Tuareg rebels are dubbed as the “Blue People” because of the indigo colour of their customary garments and turbans. They arrived in Mali with heavy armament and arsenals left over from the Libyan conflict. Northern Mali, which they name Azawad, has been the birthplace of their pastoral society and the main objective of their uprising is autonomy and independence from the national

government.³¹ Being war trained in Libya and heavily equipped, these returnees rapidly formed the most powerful Tuareg-led rebel group of the region known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, or popularly known by its French acronym MNLA.³²

MNLA also drew strong support from all three main Islamist groups present in the region: Ansar al Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA or MUJAO in French). The rebel group soon began controlling territory in the north after the national government was overtaken by a military coup in March 2012. Their swift takeover of all of Northern Mali's major cities, including Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, in such a short period of time was nothing short of a blitzkrieg. By April 2012, Tuareg rebels under the command of the MNLA were in control of most part of the Northern Mali and proclaimed Azawad's autonomy.³³ The rebel group MNLA also got reinforced by several renegades of Mali national army, such as Colonel Elhadi Ag Gamou, commander of the city of Kidal.³⁴

Although the MNLA first garnered assistance from several Islamist factions, their relationship quickly deteriorated because of ideological differences. While the MNLA is a secular organisation, Ansar al-Dine and AQIM are Islamist fundamentalist organisations that advocate the imposition of harsh Sharia law in northern Mali and beyond. AQIM was created in the 1990s under a different name with the goal of opposing Algeria's secular government, and in the 2000s it became affiliated with al-Qaeda. On the other hand, Ansar al-Dine (AAD), which means "Defenders of the Faith," was founded in late 2011 with the primary purpose of implementing Shariah rule in Mali.³⁵ Eventually, clash broke out between secular separatist MNLA and the Islamists of Ansar al-Dine in which Ansar al-Dine, with active support from Al Qaeda, managed to oust MNLA group from Timbuktu. Immediately after their conquest, Ansar al-Dine began to impose strict Islamic law in all the conquered northern cities of Mali and beyond.³⁶ They destroyed UNESCO world heritage sites, including seven of Timbuktu's 16 mausolea and the sacred door of the 15th-century Sidi Yahya Mosque and the shrine of a 15th-century saint, a centuries-old monument.³⁷ This was accompanied by demolishing of bars, imposition of burqa or

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hijab for women and many such harsh acts. *“Women are living in terrible fear. They want to put a veil on everything. They are everywhere, everywhere with their guns,”* according to Mrs. Baba Aicha Kalil, a well-known civic activist.³⁸

The International Response

As Islamist groups continued their march towards centre of the country, the French army, at the request of the Malian government, made its intervention in January 2013.³⁹ To defeat the burgeoning Jihadism, France utilised both ground soldiers and air assaults, dubbed as “Operation Serval.” Following the success of Serval, France built a long-term force in 2014. The unit included 3,000 French soldiers as well as soldiers from Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Codenamed “Operation Barkhane”, the principal mandate of the mission was to combat Islamist militants across borders.⁴⁰

In 2013, several countries of West Africa took part in the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). India also supported the formation of AFISMA with a donation of 1 million US dollars to the AFISMA fund.⁴¹ Later, by the Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established and MINUSMA replaced AFISMA.⁴² Within four years of its operation, 118 MINUSMA soldiers died in Mali, making it the deadliest ongoing peace operation of the UN.⁴³ Nevertheless, UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA refused to budge and continues its presence with 12,000 troops.⁴⁴

In 2014, five countries of Sahel namely Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger together established a Joint Force named G5 Sahel to oversee the security issues of the region.⁴⁵ With the deteriorating security situation in the region, in 2017, these five countries, in collaboration with France launched the Group of Five Sahel or G5 Sahel force as a parallel counterterrorism force. France contributed 9 million US dollars along with 70 vehicles, while the European Union chipped in with 57 million US dollars to support the G5 Sahel force.⁴⁶

US never got directly involved in G5 though it contributed 60 million US dollars during its formation, and doubled the amount to almost 111 million US dollars by the end of 2018.⁴⁷ The US, however, deployed 1000 personnel, which includes military, civilians and contractors. Their main objective was to provide security-related assistance and training for all G5 Sahel countries. Out of this, 800 was concentrated in Niger, near

Agadez, where US was building one airfield worth 110 million US dollars.⁴⁸ Earlier in 2008, US had created the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) to counter violent extremists and Islamists. However, headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, the contribution of AFRICOM in Mali remained insignificant as it was mandated with capacity-building exercises, supplying war and non-war devices, logistics assistance, intelligence assistance, and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assistance.⁴⁹

France always claimed the G5 was developing an 'African solution', and an African-led initiative. However, according to several experts, it was a strategy for France to exit Mali in the face of the failure to arrest the deteriorating security situation and the growing opposition of the people. In 2020, as France started to reduce its forces from Mali, it initiated the formation of the Takuba Force as a successor to Operation Barkhane. The principal objective of launching the Takuba Force was to gradually reduce French presence and expenditure on the security of Mali. Thus, it is no wonder that Takuba carries the European flag and not the French tricolour. Currently, half of the 900 - strong Takuba Force is French, and only Denmark, Estonia, Sweden and the Czech Republic are contributing with their soldiers.⁵⁰

Roots of the Current Political Crisis

In May 2021, Mali witnessed its fifth military coup since independence in 1960. Of these, three military coups have taken place in the last ten years. The current political crisis in Mali began in March 2012 when a group of young military officers dissatisfied with the government's approach towards the Tuareg insurgency in the country's north overthrew the democratically elected government. Eight years later, on August 18, 2020, some senior army men dissatisfied with the worsening political and security situation seized a military post close to Bamako. It was the beginning of the military coup and exposed the internal disunity and the failure of the government. The coup of 2020 took place in the wake of three months of anti-government protests and demand for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK). To recall, IBK was democratically elected and was in power since September 2013. As Keita was compelled to quit, both the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court were dissolved. The leaders of the coup under the banner of National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) formed a new transitional government. The Opposition-led civil society group, known as the June 5 Movement (M5-RFP), that led the anti-Keita demonstrations, played a significant role in the formation of a transitional government. Former Defence

Minister of Mali, Bah Ndaw, was sworn in as the President of the transitional government, while Colonel Assimi Goita was appointed Vice President.⁵¹

The coup was condemned by the international community. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the main regional economic block of West Africa, suspended Mali and imposed sanctions. Similarly, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), an 88-member block of French-speaking nations, suspended Mali from the organisation. The European Union followed OIF by suspending its two training missions in Mali: EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali.⁵²

Despite the international hostility, the coup received strong public support. After the coup in 2020, the new government promised an 18-month transition for returning to an elected government and to release all the arrested leaders during the coup.⁵³ Both ECOWAS and the African Union hailed the announcement and lifted the sanctions to assist the country in its democratic transition. A period of 18 months was considered adequate for consultation and drafting of a new constitution to be adopted by the National Transition Council (CNT).⁵⁴ Later, the dates for presidential and legislative elections were fixed for February 2022.

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The latest coup took place in May 2021, when Colonel Goita detained President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane of the transitional government after a fresh and mounting wave of protests broke out against the interim government, including a general strike by Mali's main trade union.⁵⁵ The leader of the coup, Colonel Goita, who was also part of the 2020 coup and the transitional government, was named as President of the interim government by the constitutional court of the country. France was first to react against the second military takeover within a year. Labelling it as a "coup within a coup", the French President Emmanuel Macron threatened the country with "targeted sanctions". Despite the ineffectiveness of economic sanctions during the last coup, ECOWAS followed suit, and announced a series of sanctions against Mali. However, the popular backing for Col. Goita's coup largely prevailed despite international criticism and sanctions.

Climate Change and Conflict

In 2015, Bill Nye, an American science communicator, came to the limelight when

he linked the Paris terror attack to climate change. In a live discussion on Huffington Post Live, Nye claimed that the socioeconomic roots of the Islamist terror attacks in Europe lies in climate change.⁵⁶ This position was supported by Bernie Sanders, the Democratic presidential candidate during the US presidential debate, where he claimed that climate change is the biggest security threat for the world.⁵⁷ In his words:

“When you have drought, when people can’t grow their crops, they’re going to migrate into cities,” said Mr. Sanders, an avowed democratic socialist. *“And when people migrate into cities and they don’t have jobs, there’s going to be a lot more instability, a lot more unemployment, and people will be subject to the types of propaganda that al Qaeda and ISIS [spread]”*.⁵⁸

This was in line with the academic literature on the climate security paradigm. Michael Mason has defined climate insecurity as the conditions ‘under which the effects of climate variability and/or change are represented as threatening to a group of affected actors’.⁵⁹ Similarly, critical geopolitics and securitisation theory also link the extreme terrorist activities as a response to an existential threat.⁶⁰ Earlier in 2008, Par Thomas Renard had identified three distinct causal links between climate change and terrorism. These are: instigating causes such as poverty and income reduction, inequalities between social groups, poverty and income reduction, inequalities between social groups, the regime type, etc; permissive factors such as failed states; and precipitant events such as loss of a family member or experience of a climate-induced disaster.⁶¹

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While there is a significant literature connecting climate change and terrorist activities, most link these two factors either using a neo-Malthusian argument in which inadequate resources over land, food or water lead to grievances and resource competition, or they use an opportunity cost argument which blames declining opportunities for the rise in conflicts.⁶² Similarly, in his 1919 article, Jonas Vestby has argued for policy interventions that can directly target drought victims to reduce their probability of joining a radical extremist organisation.⁶³

However, despite the series of claims linking climate change and terrorism, there is very little academic examination or empirical evidence of these claims. For example,

Walch studied the impacts of two typhoons in the Philippines (Bopha in 2012 and Haiyan in 2013). He found that the disasters actually reduced the recruitment of victims to armed rebel groups.⁶⁴ Further, analysing four separate cases of non-state armed groups (NSAG) and the patterns of violence, Adelphi concluded that there is no direct link between climate change and NSAG-derived violence.⁶⁵ And in 2016, Diez, von Lucke, and Wellman, in their meta-study found that the United States, particularly the American defence and security sectors are the principal contributors to this climate change-terrorism nexus narrative.⁶⁶ As per their findings, it is of no surprise when ex-American President Barack Obama drew connections between the Syrian drought due to climate change and Islamist terrorism.

In 2015, Peter Brookes from The Heritage Foundation criticised Obama for trying to put the blame of terrorism on climate change and termed it as dangerous as it distracts the world from today's very real, very immediate life-and-death threats from terrorism.⁶⁷ In fact, one year earlier, Martel from The Centre for Naval Analyses (CNA) strongly criticised the effort to draw causal relationships between terrorism and climate change and blamed 'Islam' and 'radical Islam' for the political violence in Syria.⁶⁸ While correlations can abound, and some indirect links can also be established, a direct causal link which blames rising insecurity on climate change appears to be deviating from the root cause. For example, very few Latin American countries have witnessed rise of terrorism, notwithstanding the pervasive harsh negative impacts of climate change. In any case, further study will be required to empirically establish the connection.

Security Challenges in Mali

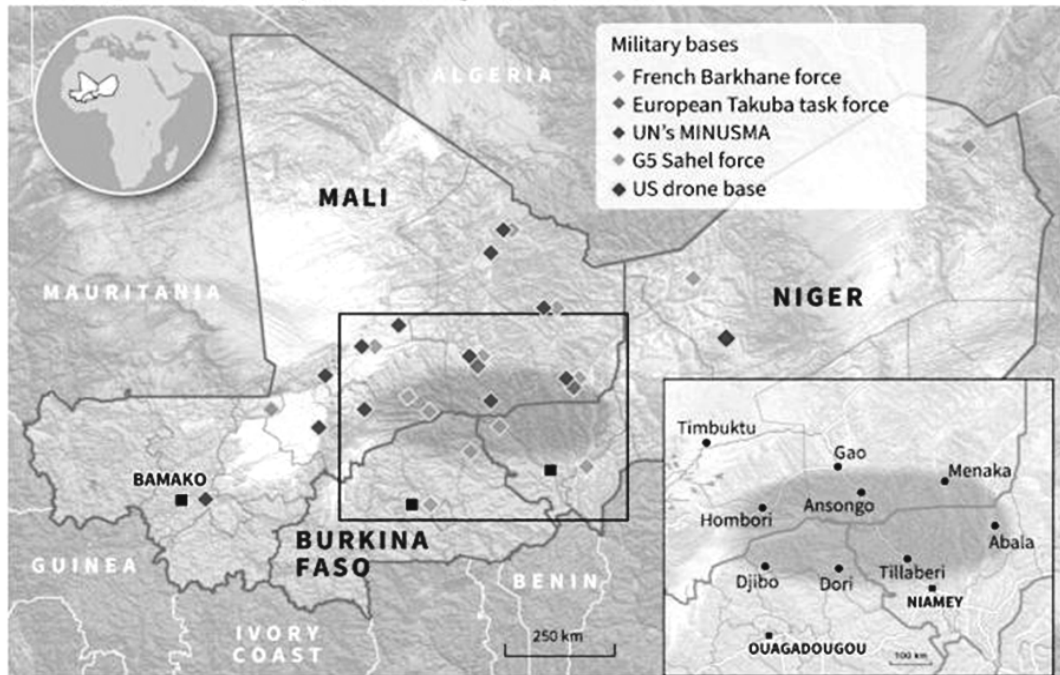
At present, the jihadist threat in Mali originates largely from four different terror groups: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, loosely translated as Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), the local al-Qaeda branch in Mali, and Boko Haram.⁶⁹ Among them, ISGS and JNIM are more active and they have started penetrating other neighbouring countries of coastal Africa. Keeping their current activities in consideration, Mali has emerged as another global hub of cross-border terrorism.⁷⁰

In the crucial tri-border region where Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso converge, ISGS is waging out devastating operations against both civilians and soldiers.⁷¹ In October

2017, the ISGS assassinated four members of the US Special Force and another four from Niger troops in Mali. This was followed by the launch of a series of massive assaults targeting military outposts in Mali and Niger in late 2019. In August 2020, another six French charity workers along with their local aides were killed by ISGS, again in Niger.⁷² The deadliest among all was in 2017, when militants killed more than 132 civilians and seriously injured dozens more in a northern village of Burkina Faso.⁷³ In retribution, French troops tracked down and executed ISGS chief Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in September 2021.⁷⁴

"Three-border" region

The zone, also known as the Liptako-Gourma region, is the most violent



International efforts, particularly the G5 Sahel joint force and Task Force Takuba operation, have so far been able to contain ISGS activities. However, past record suggests that every time a big leader falls, another bigger leader emerges.

Contrastingly, in 2017 emir Iyad Ag Ghaly founded JNIM integrating and consolidating all four Salafi-jihadist factions operating individually in the region: AQIM,

Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina and al-Mourabitoun. In the last few years French forces managed to kill several high-profile leaders of JNIM including Yahya Abu al-Hammam, second-most-senior leader of JNIM after Ghaly and Bah Ag Moussa, the closest associate of Ghaly.⁷⁵ Despite the setbacks, JNIM managed to thrive in Central Mali, which is increasingly reassembling a Caliphate.⁷⁶ JNIM is also accused of encouraging a wave of interethnic violence known as “pastoral populism” in central Mali, particularly among the Bambara, Dogon and Bobo communities.⁷⁷

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In essence, ISGS and JNIM are competing organisations. In recent years, they have clashed more than 125 times, that resulted in the deaths of 731 fighters from both sides.⁷⁸ However, despite their rivalry, there are several occasions when they collaborated to confront their common enemies.⁷⁹ Despite this history, the United Nations announced in February 2020 that JNIM and ISGS were still cooperating in the region, which can be considered as “Sahelian Exception”.⁸⁰ Going forward, both JNIM and ISGS, in all likelihood, would mutate and continue to disrupt civil life and keep MINUSMA and other security forces busy. Au contraire, if their ideological differences become too acute, their coordinated attacks would be reduced and indirectly help the security forces.

How Can the International Community Help?

With billions of dollars spent on counter-terrorism operations to prevent the country from going under Shariah, Mali draws a close parallel to Afghanistan. As the northern regions of Mali remain impoverished, the Islamists are resorting to hunger as their new weapon to entice more people to their brand of Islamic law, the Shariah. In the meantime, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, more than 400,000 people have been displaced inside the country⁸¹ and another 160,000 Malians have moved to neighbouring countries.⁸² As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the negative impacts of climate change exacerbate the situation, the role of other continental and international players will have a significant impact on Mali’s destiny.

France and other European countries have been present in the country since 2012, providing security against extremist insurgencies. However, their confrontations with the Islamists groups have remained largely futile due to their lack of investment in local capacity building and disregard for the local context. As these Western leaders miserably failed to comprehend the local social agency that is the source of the current issue, they couldn't come up with any local solution. And palpably, their attempts to settle the political situation by imposing their own political and social ideals also failed. Even the attempts of ECOWAS, the West African regional economic organisation also failed which highlights the difficulty of implementing democratic ideals outside of elections.

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Clearly, both ECOWAS and France have reacted rather strongly and imposed strict economic sanctions. The current actions of France underpin vengeance as it is pressuring the EU and its other partner countries to boycott Mali. In contrast, the Military junta is using these sanctions to build its legitimacy by fuelling anti-French sentiments among its citizens. In October 2021, thousands of Malians came out on the road of Bamako in support of the Junta and they raised their voice against French presence in Mali. However, this support for the military government is transitory and any future breaches of human rights, particularly by the Wagner Group, would swiftly crush this loyalty. Meanwhile, both Russia and China voted against the strict sanctions by the United Nations and promised to support Mali in its adversity caused by the economic sanctions.⁸³

Russia and China voted against the strict sanctions by the United Nations and promised to support Mali.

At a time when the fight against Islamist insurgency in Mali is in critical stage, these geopolitical rivalries would ultimately benefit the Islamists and separatists. Since the country is under a Military Transitional government under strongman Colonel Assimi Goïta, the military has been exerting greater influence over the country. However, with a weak and fragmented Malian Army also preoccupied with the external stakeholders while trying to establish its legitimacy after the coup, it is in no position to take on and defeat the rebels. The Islamists are likely to advance further south or even expand their influence into neighbouring countries.

Considering the latest event, it is just a matter of time before the unrest in Mali spreads further south, to the Gulf of Guinea's coastal countries, particularly Benin and Ivory Coast.⁸⁴ Given their better connectivity and more resources compared to landlocked countries, they can be used by the Jihadis for supply or as transit zones. This would make them even stronger and more lethal. These Islamists can use the internal conflicts of each country to stoke more anti-establishment sentiment and maintain a steady stream of recruits. In 2017, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo together launched the Accra Initiative to jointly carry out operations to prevent cross-border violence in the Gulf of Guinea subregion and even in 2021, under the operation Goundalgou-4, they have conducted joint military operations.⁸⁵

As Mali has turned into the epicentre of Islamist insurgencies in Sahel and beyond, the Western forces must reunite and put more efforts to work with the military junta. Given that Chad, Mali and Burkina, three of the five Sahel countries where operation Barkhane was undertaken, are ruled by military juntas, it would be futile to enforce any more stringent sanctions on Mali.⁸⁶ Beyond a doubt, this series of military coups has far-reaching ramifications for the country and must not be overlooked but the Islamist threat at present is clearly more serious and imminent.⁸⁷

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The world must recognise that the Islamists are the bigger enemy and need to first deal with it by cooperating with the transition government. Despite their transnational expansion, this terror groups are mostly home-grown and hence, the task of dislodging them must remain with the Malian and ECOWAS armies.⁸⁸ France is currently holding the rotating presidency of the EU. It must swallow its pride and persuade other EU countries, along with the US, to back the national army in this war of survival against the Jihadists.

Can Mali Avert the Collapse?

With a heterogeneous mix of Islamists, separatists and ethnic militias, posing a threat to the country's unity and the central government, Mali is on the verge of exploding. Although MNLA is a secular organisation, it is fighting to secure Tuareg independence by the balkanisation of Mali. In any case, Islamist factions have largely overcome MNLA

and is in complete control of Jihadist activities. These organisations are more concerned with imposing Shariah rule and raising Salafist black flags throughout Mali, as has been done already in Timbuktu and other rebel-held territories.

The leadership of Mali faces stark choices as they take steps into the uncertain future. They could either continue the standoff with the West and plunge into years of civil conflict, as in the Central African Republic and Congo. Alternatively, they can set a reasonable election schedule, make peace with the West and combat the shared enemy, the Islamists.

From here, Mali can go in one of four directions:

1. A democratically elected government that is backed by the West.
2. Another phase of military dictatorship, with the risk of tyranny and violations of human rights.
3. The country is divided, with a Tuareg state governed by MNLA in the north.
4. Complete surrender to Islamist forces as it happened in Afghanistan.

Instability in Mali has already destabilised the Sahel, a region facing a number of developmental challenges that terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaida are increasingly exploiting. While the country is going through a period of uncertainty, its future will have significant implications for the region's stability.

Relationship between India and Mali

The relationship between India and Mali has traditionally been cordial. In May 2009, after India opened its embassy in the capital Bamako, within three months Mali reciprocated by opening the Malian embassy in New Delhi. However, the relationship between India and Mali goes back to the 1950s when India was raising its voice against colonialism at different platforms. According to Anjani Kumar, the Indian Ambassador to Mali, since January 2020, India enjoys popular appreciation in Mali due to several factors: its rich history, cultural diversity, traditional family values, its position on African issues, strong democratic institutions, strong education infrastructure, and its willingness to share its expertise with others since its independence.⁸⁹ Indian soap operas, films and music also constitute India's soft power in the region as a whole. Though the

Indian community in Mali is relatively small, approximately 400, they are still making significant contributions in different sectors such as mining, power, pharmaceuticals, oil and gas exploration, construction and agro-industry.⁹⁰

In 2012, when Mali was plagued by both coup and Islamist insurgency, India offered 1 million US dollars to strengthen Malian forces. It also contributed to the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), a military mission led by ECOWAS.⁹¹ Since then, India and Mali have collaborated in different areas, in different forms. The President of Mali visited India twice, during India Africa Forum Summit in 2015 and during the inaugural ceremony of the International Solar Alliance in 2018.⁹² In 2021, India and Mali signed five bilateral agreements to facilitate and expand cooperation.⁹³

Over the years, India has extended its development assistance to Mali in different forms. Under Lines of Credit, India has already completed seven projects worth a total of 303.6 million US dollars.⁹⁴ In addition, India has extended soft loans totalling 353.6 million US dollars for various developmental projects, including in the power sector.⁹⁵ India is also undertaking the construction of a 393 kilometres of high voltage (225 kV) double circuit transmission line to connect Mali's capital Bamako to its southern region, Sikasso.⁹⁶ Executed by Kalpataru Power Transmission Limited (KPTL), Tata Projects and Mohan Energy, this 100 million USD project is India's biggest project in Mali so far.⁹⁷ India also committed another 100 million US dollars for three solar projects during the ISA Founding Conference.⁹⁸

During the visit of India's Vice President Hamid Ansari to Mali in 2015, India committed 0.5 million US dollars in cash aid for the revival of UNESCO World Heritage Site Timbuktu.⁹⁹ The assistance materialised in 2017 during the visit of Union Minister of State for External Affairs M J Akbar.¹⁰⁰ India's appreciation of Mali's cultural and historical legacy was prominently displayed when New Delhi organised the exhibition titled 'Taj Mahal meets Timbuktu'.¹⁰¹ For capacity building, India is offering 70 Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) training slots for courses in diversified fields and 7 Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships for undergraduate, post-graduate and doctoral programmes. India has also extended e-Vidya Bharati and e-Aarogya Bharati (e-VBAB) Network Project to Mali that would provide free tele-education courses to medical and other professionals.¹⁰² Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, India has provided 2 consignments of life-saving medicines. Mali has also

received covid vaccines under the “Vaccine Maitri Initiative”.¹⁰³ Due to India’s expanded Duty-Free Tariff Preference (DFTP) Scheme for least developed nations (LDCs), Mali enjoys zero duty on over 95 percent of its exports to India.

However, significant developmental cooperation would be difficult to sustain amid growing conflict and instability in Mali. The world, Africa and India have genuine reasons to be concerned about the expanding conflict and the threat of Islamist take-over of yet another fragile state.

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