
**France and the Fight against Terrorism
in the Sahel
The History of a Difficult Leadership Role**

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Introduction

Except for its extreme poverty and the disastrous effects of a series of droughts, the Sahel region¹ has been largely out of the spotlight of international attention in the past. Yet the rise of terrorism and especially the creation of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007 brought the region into the focus of world politics. Initially, AQIM's activities in the Sahel mainly posed a threat to the stability of the Sahelian states themselves. In an effort to internationalize its agenda, however, AQIM also started targeting Western countries. The kidnapping of several diplomats, aid workers and tourists in the region, several bomb attacks on foreign institutions, but most of all the fear that the poorly governed region could turn into a safe haven for terrorist cells preparing terrorist attacks in Europe, the United States and elsewhere, brought the region onto Western countries' foreign policy agendas.

France, the former colonial power that has close historical links to the countries of the region, has been most affected by AQIM's activities. Between 2007 and 2011, commandos linked to the terrorist group kidnapped several French citizens, launched bomb attacks on the French embassies in Mauritania and Mali and repeatedly threatened to launch terrorist attacks on French soil. This spurred France to assume a leadership role in international efforts to fight AQIM. The present study gives an overview on the development of French policy in the Sahel over recent years. In a first part, it analyzes how the rise of terrorism in the Sahel brought the region back into the focus of French foreign policy. A second part takes a look at the French response to the threat from AQIM and the difficulties France

¹ The "Sahel" region is a fluid concept. In geographical terms, it embraces the semi-arid climate zone south of the Sahara desert. The zone stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Red Sea in the East and covers parts (though not the whole territory of) Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Politically, there is no agreement on which states the "Sahel" region encompasses. This study uses a problem-oriented definition and focuses on those states in the region that are most affected by the problem of terrorism (Mauritania, Mali and Niger) - regardless of whether terrorist activities actually take place, geographically speaking, in the Sahel zone itself or in the Saharan parts of these countries. Recently, there have been signs of terrorism spreading to Burkina Faso, Chad and Nigeria. These countries are, however, not included in the "Sahel" as defined here and are referred to separately if necessary. For a good discussion of the issue, see: Olivier Walther/Denis Retaille, *Sahara or Sahel? The Fuzzy Geography of Terrorism in West Africa* (CEPS/INSTEAD Working Paper No. 35/2010), Luxembourg: CEPS/INSTEAD, November 2010.

faces in this context. As will be shown in a third part, these difficulties are also reflected in France's efforts to lead an international response to the crisis that set Mali in turmoil in early 2012. In a fourth and last part, the study scrutinizes the impact of the French intervention *Serval* on France's role in Mali and in the Sahel - taking into account developments prior to the end of April 2013.

The Rise of Terrorism in the Sahel

France has maintained close relations with the Sahel region ever since it became part of the French colonial empire at the end of the 19th century. After the Sahelian countries' independence in 1960, France maintained its presence in the region, but for a long time the Sahel played a marginal role in French foreign policy. It was only in 2007 that the creation of AQIM brought the region back onto France's foreign policy agenda. Until then terrorism had been a minor problem in the Sahel states. Terrorist activities as well as French concerns regarding the fight against terrorism in the African continent were mainly focused on Algeria, where radical Islamist groups had been fighting the Algerian military régime during the 1990s. This changed, however, when AQIM, an offshoot of the Algerian terrorist *Groupe islamique armé* (GIA) and its follow-up organization, the *Groupe salafiste de la prédication et du combat* (GSPC), extended its activities to the Sahel states and internationalized its agenda by increasingly targeting Western countries' citizens and institutions in the region. Due to its historical links and its continued presence in the Sahelian countries, France became the Western country most affected by the new strategic orientation of the terrorist group.

French Policy in the Sahel from a Historical Perspective

In contrast to most other former European colonial powers, France maintained a strong presence in its former African colonies after decolonization in the early 1960s. Continuing to maintain a privileged position in the French-speaking part of Sub-Saharan Africa, which became known as France's francophone 'pré-carré' (backyard), was thought to underline France's special status as a "third power" in world affairs, able to act independently of the two superpowers during the Cold War. France's post-colonial African policy of an economic, cultural as well as a military nature remained surprisingly stable for almost thirty years. Mauritania, Mali and Niger were not central to French interests to the same extent as countries like Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and the oil-rich states Gabon, Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville on the Gulf of Guinea. Nevertheless, they formed an

integral part of France's African 'backyard', in which it sought to maintain its pivotal position.²

France's striving for a predominant role in the Sahel states was visible in all policy fields. France was the most important trade partner and the main provider of development aid for Niger, Mauritania and Mali. By tying them to it through bilateral military cooperation agreements, France tried to maintain control over the countries' armed forces. It deployed military advisers to the Sahelian states' armies, provided them with arms and logistical support and trained their soldiers in French military schools. In addition to the region's overall strategic importance as part of the 'pré-carré', France held certain specific interests in each of the countries: Niger became France's most important provider of uranium, which Paris needed to run its ambitious civilian and military nuclear programme;³ Mauritania was an important iron-ore supplier for France and was also prominent in French policy during the 1970s, when the conflict in neighbouring Western Sahara spilled over into that country⁴. Poor in natural resources, Mali was never economically important for France. Yet France became the preferred destination for large numbers of Malian workers who left their country to support France's economic upturn in the 1960s and 1970s and formed the largest of all the African communities in France.⁵

After the end of the Cold War, France had to reconsider much of its African policy. The end of East-West confrontation made upholding a pivotal position in the 'backyard' so as to maintain great-power status on the international scene less pertinent and also more difficult, because France was now increasingly having to compete with other external players for influence in French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa. In economic terms, France was turning more attention to other parts of the African continent and especially to those countries which promised to be more rewarding as trade

² For a comprehensive overview of post-colonial Franco-African relations between de-colonization in the early 1960s and the end of the Cold War, see: John Chipman, *French Power in Africa*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

³ French access to Niger's uranium was facilitated by the signing of a bilateral economic agreement securing for France a monopoly in uranium extraction in the country. On the importance of uranium in post-colonial Franco-Nigerien relations, see: Guy Martin, "Uranium: A Case Study in Franco-African Relations", in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 27 (1989), no. 4, pp. 625-640.

⁴ Between December 1977 and July 1978, France intervened militarily when the Polisario front that was fighting for independence of the Western Sahara (at the time jointly administered by Mauritania and Morocco) launched a raid on the iron mines in the city of Zouerate and held hostage a group of French engineers who were working in the country. Phillip C. Naylor: "Spain, France and the Western Sahara: A Historical Narrative and Study of National Transformation", in: Yahia H. Zoubir/Daniel Volman: *International Dimensions of the Western Sahara Conflict*, Westport/London 1993, pp. 32-33.

⁵ Claire Boulanger/Kévin Mary, "Les Maliens en France et aux États-Unis : trajectoires et pratiques transnationales dans des espaces migratoires différenciés", in: *e-migrinter*, no. 7 (2011), pp. 18-19.

partners (such as Nigeria, South Africa and Angola).⁶ In the realm of security relations, the problematic role France played before the Rwanda genocide in 1994⁷ greatly undermined the French military presence in Africa. This led to a scaling down of the number of soldiers stationed in the continent, including the French military advisers in the Sahelian states' armies.⁸ In overall terms, the strategic importance of the Sahel for French foreign and African policy declined significantly during the 1990s and the region no longer loomed large among French foreign policy interests for almost two decades.

The Evolution of the Terrorist Threat in the Sahel – From GIA to GSPC to AQIM

For a long time Algeria was the only African country in which terrorism posed a serious threat to national stability. The terrorist threat in the North African country emerged in 1992, when the military assumed power in January 1992, dismissing the result of the first round of the parliamentary elections held in December 1991 that had been won by the Islamist *Front islamique du Salut* (FIS). This led some supporters of the FIS, which was dissolved straight after the military takeover, to found the GIA and the *Armée islamique du salut* (AIS). Both groups waged a bloody guerrilla war against the Algerian military régime that killed an estimated 100,000 people between 1992 and 1997.⁹ France was initially critical towards the military takeover, but quickly came to terms with the military rulers.¹⁰ This brought it into the line of fire of the GIA which tried to internationalize its activities.¹¹ In the mid-1990s, the GIA took hostage and killed several French

⁶ Tony Chafer, "Chirac and 'la Françafrique': No Longer a Family Affair", in: *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 13 (2005), no. 1, p. 18. For the development of French African policy after the end of the Cold War, see also: Yves Gounin, *La France en Afrique: le combat des anciens et des modernes*, Brussels: De Boeck, 2010.

⁷ In the years before the 1994 genocide, France supported the Hutu government of President Habyarimana politically and militarily. When, after Habyarimana's death in April 1994, Hutu militias started large-scale killings of the Tutsi population, France was accused of complicity in the genocide. For the French role in Rwanda, see: Daniela Krosiak, *The Role of France in the Rwandan Genocide*, London: Hurst & Company, 2007.

⁸ Rachel Utley, "Franco-African Military Relations: Meeting the Challenges of Globalisation?" in *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 13 (2005) no. 1, pp. 25-40.

⁹ Benjamin Stora, "Ce que dévoile une guerre. Algérie, 1997", in *Politique étrangère*, vol. 62 (1998), no. 4, pp. 487-497 (487). For the history of the GIA and the AIS, see: Mohammed M. Hafez, "Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria", in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 54 (2000), no. 4, pp. 572-591.

¹⁰ Benjamin Stora, "Conflits et champs politiques en Algérie", in *Politique étrangère*, vol. 60 (1995), no. 2, pp. 337-338.

¹¹ The strategy of the AIS, on the other hand, remained focused on targeting the Algerian government directly. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria (ICG Middle East Report 29)*, Cairo/Brussels: ICG, July 30, 2004, p. 12.

citizens on Algerian soil,¹² and in 1994 and 1995 it carried out several terrorist attacks in France and/or targeting France. Most prominently, this included the kidnapping of an Air France flight from Algiers to Paris on Christmas Day in 1994 and several bomb attacks in Paris, of which the most serious left 8 dead and 86 injured in the Saint-Michel RER station in Paris on July 25, 1995.¹³

Until the end of the 1990s, the Algerian government managed to weaken the GIA significantly by strengthening the country's security apparatus and initiating a serious crackdown on the group. The GIA also lost support among the Algerian population because of the numerous massacres of civilians it carried out over the years.¹⁴ The weakening of the GIA led some of the group's leading members to found a new organization called the *Groupe salafiste de la prédication et du combat* (GSPC) in 1998. The GSPC largely abandoned the GIA's internationalist agenda and concentrated its attacks on the Algerian security forces and state institutions. Nevertheless, it was unable fundamentally to challenge the Algerian government. So, from 2003 onwards, the group shifted some of its activities to the South of Algeria, where the grip of the Algerian régime was weaker and where the terrorists had more room for manoeuvre.

GSPC's move to the South coincided with two important changes in the group's strategy. Firstly, it marked the beginning of the spread of terrorism to the Sahel countries. The latter were used as safe havens for GSPC operations in Algeria because government control in Mali, Mauritania and Niger was weak. Meanwhile the Sahelian states became targets themselves, with the GSPC claiming responsibility for attacks on local military installations and patrols, as for example in Mauritania in June 2005.¹⁵ Secondly, the group internationalized its agenda and made an effort to move away from focusing solely on destabilizing local governments. On various occasions, GSPC leaders issued threats to European countries and the US. This was, however, not followed by attacks on Western

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

¹³ For a list of the 1995 GIA attacks in France, see: Jeremy Shapiro/Bénédicte Suzan, "The French Experience of Counter-terrorism", in *Survival*, vol. 45 (2003), no. 1, p. 81.

¹⁴ Massacres of the civilian population were used by the GIA as a means to intimidate those who did not support the group. There were allegations that the military régime itself was involved in some of the massacres so as to delegitimise the GIA. There is, however, no proof of this so far. ICG (see n.11 above), p. 13.

¹⁵ Stephen Ulph, "Algerian GSPC Launch Attack in Mauritania", in *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 2 (2005), no. 11,

Source:

<[http://www.jamestown.org/programmes/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=503&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=238&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programmes/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=503&tx_ttnews[backPid]=238&no_cache=1)>.

citizens and institutions at that stage, either in the region itself or on European soil.¹⁶

Only with the re-branding of the GSPC into “Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb” in early 2007 did both trends become central features of the group’s strategy. In addition to a series of attacks on Algerian government institutions and security forces¹⁷, AQIM stepped up its attacks against the Mauritanian and the Malian armies.¹⁸ The internationalization of the group’s agenda became more pronounced as well.¹⁹ The change of name was very much part of this strategy, because AQIM leaders hoped that, by establishing the group as the North African branch of the global Al Qaida network, it would be able to increase support within radical Islamist circles around the world, recruit more fighters and, most important of all, generate more financial resources. Following the founding of AQIM, the group increased its attacks on European and US citizens and institutions, killing four French tourists in Mauritania in December 2007, after having previously (December 2006) bombed a bus carrying British, Canadian and American workers, killing one of them.²⁰

Most significantly of all, AQIM added the kidnapping of foreigners to its terrorist activities. In 2003, the GSPC abducted 32 European tourists in Southern Algeria, who were released after a few months, most likely after a ransom had been payed by their respective governments.²¹ This, however, remained the only kidnapping of foreigners carried out by the GSPC. Yet, from 2008 on, the kidnapping tool was increasingly used by AQIM as a means for exerting political pressure on the hostages’ countries of origin, for achieving the release of prisoners linked to AQIM, but most of all for making money through ransom payments.²² Since the outset, some AQIM members have been involved in various forms of organized crime such as trading in contraband (cigarettes, cannabis, cocaine) and the business of illegal migration so as to raise income. However ransom payments proved to be much more lucrative and have since

¹⁶ Andrew Black, “AQIM’s Expanding Internationalist Agenda”, in *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1 (2008), no. 5, pp. 12-14.

¹⁷ The year 2007, in particular, saw a number of bloody bomb attacks in several Algerian cities, culminating in a series of attacks in Algiers on December 11, 2007. Katrin Beinhold/Craig S. Smith, “Twin Bombs Kill Dozens in Algiers”, in *The New York Times*, December 12, 2007.

¹⁸ For a list of the attacks in the North and the South, see: Ricardo René Larémont, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism and Counter-terrorism in the Sahel”, in *African Security*, vol. 4 (2011), no. 4, pp. 255-256.

¹⁹ Black (see n.16 above).

²⁰ For the transformation of the GIA into the GSPC and AQIM, see: Guido Steinberg/Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 12 (2007), no. 3, pp. 407-413.

²¹ ICG (see n.11 above).

²² For a list of all the foreign hostages taken between 2008 and 2011, see: Larémont (see n.18 above), pp. 253-254.

become the main source of funding for the terrorist group.²³ Since ransom payments are not made public, it is difficult to find reliable data. Nevertheless, it is estimated that AQIM and related terrorist groups operating in the Sahel have accrued an income of approximately 40 to 65 million dollars through kidnapping-for-ransom since 2008.²⁴

AQIM's Increasing Targeting of France

France has become a key focus for AQIM's increasing activities in the Sahel countries and the internationalization of its group agenda. After the founding of AQIM in 2007, the group's leaders mentioned France frequently as the main target of their activities. To justify their hostility towards France, AQIM and Al Qaida representatives gave several reasons: first, the continued political and economic presence of the former colonial power in the region, which they regard as interference in local affairs. France is also seen as an ally and supporter of the corrupt local regimes, which the terrorist groups see as their main enemies. Secondly, there is France's participation in the international military intervention in Afghanistan and, thirdly, the introduction of a law prohibiting the public wearing of full-face-veils in France in April 2011. The law followed a ban of all religious symbols (including Muslim headscarves) from French schools in 2004 which was also referred to by AQIM and Al Qaida as a justification for threatening France.²⁵

As a consequence of the above a number of violent attacks carried out by AQIM after 2007 targeted French institutions and citizens:

- The killing of four French tourists in Mauritania in December 2007 (see above) led the organisers of the famous Paris-Dakar rally to cancel the 2008 rally and relocate it to South America, from where it has not returned to Africa since.
- In August 2009, a bomb exploded in front of the French Embassy in Nouakchott (Mauritania) and injured several persons including two French gendarmes.

²³ For the links between AQIM and organized crime in the region, see: Wolfram Lacher, *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region* (The Carnegie Papers), Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 9. For the business of hostage-taking see also: Serge Daniel, *Aqmi, l'industrie de l'enlèvement*, Paris: Editions Fayard, 2012.

²⁵ "Al-Qaeda Kidnappers Tell France to Drop Veil Ban", *The Irish Times*, October 10, 2010. For a collection of anti-French statements from AQIM members, see: Mathieu Guidère, "La tentation internationale d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb" (*Focus stratégique* 12), Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, December 2008, pp. 37-45.

- In January 2011, a similar incident occurred at the French Embassy in Bamako (Mali), injuring two people. The attack was carried out by an individual who was not acting on behalf of AQIM. Nevertheless it certainly added to the tension.²⁶

In addition, a number of the Westerners kidnapped were French:

- In November 2009, a French humanitarian, Pierre Camatte, was taken hostage by AQIM in Mali. He was released three months later, presumably in exchange for the liberation of four AQIM fighters from Malian prisons.
- In April 2010, French aid-worker Michel Germaneau was abducted by an AQIM commando in Niger and held hostage in Mali for about three months until he was eventually killed (see below p. 15).
- In September 2010, five French citizens were among seven hostages who were abducted from the Arlit uranium mine in Northern Niger. One of them was released in February 2011, but four of them are still being held by AQIM.
- In January 2011, two young Frenchmen, Antoine de Léocour and Vincent Delory, were abducted in Niamey, the capital of Niger. Both died during a failed Franco-Nigerien liberation attempt a few days later (see below p. 15)
- End of November 2011, two French citizens were kidnapped from their hotel in Hombori in Northern Mali. As of today (April 2013), they are still detained by AQIM.
- In November 2012, a French tourist was abducted in Western Mali, near the border with Mauritania, by the AQIM splinter group *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le djihad en Afrique de l'ouest* (MUJAO). He is also still held by his kidnappers.
- In December 2012, a French engineer was taken hostage by the Nigerian terrorist group Ansaru in Northern Nigeria, close to the border with Niger.²⁷

²⁶ The person responsible for the attack, a young Tunisian, tried to join AQIM but was rejected by the terrorist group. By attacking the French Embassy in Mali, he wanted to prove that he was able to carry out a terrorist act on his own, without the support of the terrorist group. "French Embassy Attacker Acted Alone: Mali Government", *Reuters*, January 7, 2011.

²⁷ For a list of the various terrorist attacks and kidnappings targeting French institutions and citizens in the Sahel countries, see: Henri Plagnol/François Loncle, Rapport d'information No. 4431 sur « La situation sécuritaire dans les pays de la zone sahéenne », *Assemblée nationale*, March 6, 2012, p. 36. For a regularly updated list of French hostages kidnapped by radical Islamists in the Sahel since

The French Response

Because it was most directly affected by AQIM's activities, France took a leading role in international efforts to counter terrorism in the Sahel region. Several interests guide French action in this regard. First, the country is worried about the fate of its citizens in the region. The kidnappings showed that nobody was safe from AQIM, whether diplomats, business-people, aid workers or simply tourists. In 2010/2011, around 8,000 French citizens lived in the Sahel states.²⁸ Some of them have left the region since and the number of French citizens travelling in the region has also shrunk due to the travel alerts issued. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable number of French citizens living or working in the region who could be targeted by AQIM.

Secondly, France sees its economic interests in Niger as under threat. Niger has, in relative terms, lost importance as a uranium provider because France increasingly imports the metal from the world's two biggest producers, Kazakhstan and Canada.²⁹ Furthermore, the French nuclear company AREVA is now facing tougher competition from companies of other countries (mainly China) because in 2007 it lost its monopoly of uranium extraction following a decision by the Nigerien government.³⁰ Yet, the country still remains France's largest supplier, accounting for about 40% of French uranium imports.³¹ France is afraid that terrorism in the region might have a negative impact on AREVA's activities in the country. This was confirmed by the September 2010 kidnapping of the seven AREVA contractors in Arlit. It delayed the opening of another mine AREVA will be operating in Niger from 2012 to 2014. The mine, which is located in the city of Imouraren, is intended to more than double the company's production in the country.³²

2010, see: Zoom: les otages français en Afrique, *Le Monde* (Online), Last updated on February 20, 2013.

²⁸ 4,463 in Mali (January 2011), 1,810 in Mauritania (January 2010) and 1,572 in Niger (December 2010).

Source: <<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo/>>.

²⁹ Philippe Bernard, "L'uranium, matière première des liens franco-nigériens", in *Le Monde*, October 7, 2010.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hervé Kempf, "Ecologie: Prêche dans le désert", *Le Monde*, September 22, 2010. For the importance of uranium from Niger for France, see also: Emmanuel Grégoire, "Niger: un État à forte teneur en uranium", in *Hérodote*, no. 142 (2011), pp. 206-225.

³² Niger says "Imouraren Uranium Mine on Track for 2014", *Reuters*, February 21, 2012.

Lastly, the French government is increasingly worried that AQIM might be able to infiltrate the Sahelian community living in France and carry out terrorist attacks on French soil.³³ In 2009, an estimated 95,000 people of Sahelian origin lived in France, with by far the largest part of them (80,000) having roots in Mali.³⁴ In general, the largely Muslim population from the Sahelian countries is known to be rather moderate. Nevertheless, a radicalization of members of the community, who in general live in poor economic conditions and/or are illegally in France, is seen as a risk by some.

Bilateral Security Cooperation with the Sahelian States

Initially, France focused on bilateral cooperation in the security field to support the local governments in strengthening their capacities to counter the problem of terrorism. This included traditional military aid (the deployment of French military advisers, the provision of military equipment and the training of military officers), but also financial and logistical support for the local Gendarmerie and police forces.³⁵ In a high-level meeting between leading officials from France, the US, the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) in Paris in September 2009, French representatives agreed with US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson, that what the US diplomat called a “lead from the side” would be better suited to tackle the problem of terrorism than a more robust action by outside players.³⁶ It was hoped that a policy with limited visibility would make it possible to counter the threat of terrorism in the Sahel without providing AQIM with further legitimacy among the local population as a defender against outside intervention.³⁷

However, the support France granted the security forces in Mali, Mauritania and Niger to enable them to contain the problem of terrorism was insufficient. In Mauritania and Niger, French support at least contributed to the maintenance of a certain level of control over

³³ Thomas Hofnung, “Le dilemme sahélien de Paris”, *Libération*, July 11, 2012.

³⁴ Source: <<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo/>>.

³⁵ For the details of French security cooperation with Mauritania and Niger, see: Plagnol/Loncle (see n.27 above), pp. 71/72.

³⁶ The United States opted for a similar approach. Within the framework of its Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), the US supports the governments of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad, Senegal, and Nigeria in enhancing their capacities to combat terrorism. TSCTP, which followed on from the so-called Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI) in 2005, adopted a comprehensive approach. It has an important military training component (Operation Enduring Freedom Trans Sahara (OEF-TS)), but also includes work in the fields of democratic governance, economic development and public diplomacy. Source: <<http://www.africom.mil/tsctp.asp>>.

³⁷ US Embassy Paris, “U.S.-France-EU Discuss Sahel Security Issues” (*Cable No. 09PARIS1339*), September 30, 2009, Source: <<http://cablesearch.org/cable/view.php?id=09PARIS1339>>.

the respective territories. Mauritania became France's closest partner in the region. In addition to bilateral security cooperation, about 1.000 members of the Mauritanian special forces received training from their French counterparts.³⁸ The Nigerien military and police also received bilateral aid from France and at the EU level, France pushed for the establishment of a civilian mission to provide the Nigerien Gendarmerie, Police and National Guard with training to improve their capacities to fight terrorism and other forms of organized crime in the country.³⁹ Nevertheless, terrorist cells remained active in some remote areas of Mauritania and Niger and hostage-takings continued to take place.

In Mali, French bilateral support could not prevent AQIM from tightening its grip on the Northern part of the country still further. In 2010, the Malian government under then-President Amadou Toumani Touré launched a Special Programme for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali (PSPSDN), which was aimed at establishing eleven "secure zones for development and governance" in Northern Mali.⁴⁰ France, together with other donors, supported the programme with 1 million euros in 2010-2011.⁴¹

But the programme did not produce the desired results because it was seriously undermined by the Malian authorities themselves.⁴² The Malian government and also the army were increasingly haunted by corruption and accused of being actively involved in the contraband trade in the country.⁴³ Instead of countering AQIM effectively, they *de facto* sided with the terrorist group and allowed it to use Northern Mali as a sanctuary for its operations.⁴⁴ There were even signs that AQIM managed to infiltrate the Malian army to obtain information about possible counter-terrorism operations. In early June 2011, Mauritania and Mali planned a joint operation to uncover an AQIM camp near the border between the two countries. The plans were, however, leaked from a source inside the Malian military and had to be abandoned for several weeks until Mauritania carried out the operation on its own without consulting the Malian government.⁴⁵

³⁸ Plagnol/Loncle (see n.27 above), p. 72.

³⁹ The mission, called EUCAP SAHEL Niger, started to operate in August 2012. It consists of 50 experts and has a mandate for two years. European Union External Action Service, CSDP Civil Mission in Sahel, Source: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/1704249/fact_sheet_sahel_coordinated9_july.pdf>.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Mali: Avoiding Escalation (Africa Report 189)*, Dakar/Brussels: ICG, July 18, 2012, pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Christophe Boisbouvier, "Le Mali en simple spectateur", *Jeune Afrique* (Online), July 6, 2011.

French decision-makers were aware of the Malian government's ambiguous policy. At the Paris meeting with the US, UK and EU officials in 2009, French decision-makers described the Malian government's position regarding the fight against terrorism as "ambiguous" and "enigmatic".⁴⁶ This did not, however, have an immediate effect on France's bilateral security co-operation, which was only suspended when the March 2012 coup plunged Mali into chaos.

Towards a more Robust Approach – Direct Military Action to Free French Hostages

France's efforts to strengthen local governments' counter-terrorism capacities could not prevent the increase in AQIM's activities and especially the number of kidnappings of foreigners. When AQIM took a number of French nationals as hostages in 2010 and 2011, in two cases then-President Nicolas Sarkozy opted for direct French military action. By trying to liberate the hostages, France wanted to show AQIM that it has zero tolerance for hostage-taking and rejects any payment of ransoms, which had become AQIM's main source of funding. In July 2010, France thus launched, together with the Mauritanian army, a raid into Northern Mali to free Michel Germaneau. Only a few months later, in January 2011, France again intervened directly to liberate Antoine de Léocour and Vincent Delory AQIM had abducted in Niamey. This time, French special forces cooperated with Nigerien forces to free the hostages in a raid that was staged only a few days after the kidnapping.

Yet, both operations failed. In the case of Michel Germaneau, France did not succeed in finding the hostage, who a few days later was announced dead by AQIM.⁴⁷ In the case of the two men kidnapped in Niamey, France was not successful either and both hostages were killed during the Franco-Nigerien raid.⁴⁸ In addition to the fact that it put the hostages' lives at risk, French direct military action against AQIM was problematic in two other ways as well. Firstly, the presence of French soldiers on the ground gave AQIM further justification for the targeting of French citizens, institutions and interests. Secondly, it was argued that active French involvement in the raids (even though officially only to support local security forces), undermined the local governments' credibility in the fight against

⁴⁶ US Embassy Paris (see n.37 above).

⁴⁷ It is not entirely clear though whether Germaneau was killed by AQIM following the failed French attempt to find and liberate him or whether the 78 year-old aid worker was already dead before because of his poor health. On the raid to liberate Michel Germaneau see: Jean-Luc Marret, "French Counterterrorism Operations in the Sahara", in *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 8 (2010), no. 36, pp. 6-8.

⁴⁸ Un membre d'AQMI raconte la mort des otages français du Niger, in: *Le Monde* (Online), January 6, 2012.

terrorism and thus also French efforts to strengthen the Sahelian states' capacities.⁴⁹

After the two failed attempts to free the French hostages, France refrained from direct intervention. French special forces were permanently stationed in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, and in Mauritania.⁵⁰ They did not, however, engage in further rescue operations. It is not known whether this was because France abandoned its strategy to free the hostages by military means or whether it was simply not able to locate them and take direct action. There have been rumours that AREVA paid a ransom to obtain the liberation of the three hostages freed in February 2011. These rumours have, however, been repeatedly denied by French officials.⁵¹

The Difficult Relationship between France and Algeria - the Key Challenge to Effective French Support for Stronger Regional Cooperation

In view of recent events showing that neither bilateral security cooperation with the Sahelian states nor direct military action have been able to weaken AQIM, French policy-makers turned their attention towards the political and financial support for stronger regional cooperation to counter the terrorist group's activities. Regional efforts to fight AQIM were strengthened in April 2010 with the establishment of a Combined Operational General Staff Committee (*Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint*, CEMOC) in the city of Tamanrasset in Southern Algeria. CEMOC was created to improve the coordination of the efforts of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger to counter AQIM's activities. For this purpose, it was planned to hold regular meetings of the armed forces' chiefs of staff of the CEMOC partner countries as well as joint operations between the anti-terrorism units of the four countries' armies. To support CEMOC, a coordination unit for linking the intelligence services of the four countries, called *Unité de fusion et de liaison* (UFL), was established in Algiers in September 2010.⁵²

France's difficult relationship with Algeria, its former colony, however, proved to be a major stumbling block for effective French support for regional cooperation. French government officials acknowledged that Algeria is the key player in the fight against

⁴⁹ "French Analyst Accuses Sarkozy of Elevating AQLIM's Status", *BBC Monitoring*, October 1, 2010.

⁵⁰ Rémi Carayol, "Au Burkina Faso, l'armée française se fait discrète", *Jeune Afrique* (Online), May 16, 2012.

⁵¹ Pascale Combelles Siegel, "To Pay or Not to Pay? The French Hostage Dilemma", in *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 9 (2011), no. 30, p. 5.

⁵² "Un centre du renseignement pour lutter contre le terrorisme au Sahel", in: *Radio France internationale* (Online), September 30, 2010.

terrorism in the Sahel.⁵³ Yet the Algerian government opposed itself to any form of military support from and/or cooperation with France.⁵⁴ Algeria has been sceptical with regard to most French actions in the Sahel and criticized Paris for either being too soft or too assertive in its anti-terrorism approach in the region.

When, in early 2010, the French hostage Pierre Camatte was freed in exchange for the liberation of four AQIM fighters (two of them Algerians) from Malian prisons, the Algerian government strongly condemned this. It accused France of having struck a deal between the Malian government and AQIM that conflicted with Algerian security concerns. Algiers favoured the extradition of the Algerian fighters to Algeria and was not happy with seeing them on the loose again.⁵⁵ When France, in contrast, launched the military strikes to liberate the French hostages in Mali and Niger, the Algerian authorities did not hide the fact that they were not pleased to see French special forces being active in the Sahel.⁵⁶ It is hardly surprising that Algeria also rejected most of France's initiatives to provide help for the CEMOC platform. In September 2010, for example, Algiers vetoed a French initiative to sponsor a conference on security in the Sahel, arguing instead that the meeting should be organized by the CEMOC partner countries themselves.⁵⁷

The Algerian reluctance towards co-operation with France can be explained by the historical legacy of the two countries' relations. Algiers feared that France might establish itself on a permanent basis in the neighbouring Sahel region.⁵⁸ Since the bloody Algerian War (1954-1962), during which Algerians fought for independence from France, bilateral relations have been extremely delicate. This is mainly due to the fact that France, in the Algerian view, never officially acknowledged the crimes it committed during colonial rule and the Algerian War. Relations were further complicated in 2005, when the conservative French party *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP) introduced a law in the French parliament underlining the "positive effects of colonization". The law, which also aroused very controversial discussions inside France, was heavily criticized by the Algerian authorities and repealed in the end by then-

⁵³ Given that Algeria has been haunted by the problem of terrorism for over two decades, it has developed by far the strongest intelligence and special-operations capacities in the region and effective regional cooperation to counter terrorism in the Sahel is impossible without Algerian leadership. Anouar Boukhars, "The Paranoid Neighbor: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali" (The Carnegie Papers), Washington, DC: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 2012, pp. 12-14.

⁵⁴ Plagnol/Loncle (see n.27 above), p. 73.

⁵⁵ "Alger et Nouakchott dénoncent les conditions de la libération de Pierre Camatte", in: *France 24* (Online), February 25, 2010.

⁵⁶ Laurence Aïda Ammour, *Regional Security Cooperation in the Maghreb and Sahel: Algeria's Pivotal Ambivalence (Africa Security Brief 18)*, Washington, DC: The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 2012, p. 3

⁵⁷ Patrick K. Johnsson/René Dassié, "Algeria Snubs France in Sahel Counter-terrorism Initiative", *Afrik News*, September 28, 2010.

⁵⁸ Boukhars (see n.53 above), pp. 15-16.

French president Jacques Chirac. Nevertheless, the debate on the law put a stop to the signing of a “Friendship treaty” between France and Algeria which was scheduled for 2005 and was then put on hold.⁵⁹

That being said, even without accepting French support, Algeria has been reluctant to play the leading role inside the CEMOC forum that it was expected to play, given its anti-terrorism capacities. This has led to strong criticism, from Western countries but also from Algeria’s CEMOC partner countries.⁶⁰ Why Algeria has been so hesitant to become more involved in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel countries is largely a matter for speculation, because the Algerian government’s official position was somewhat vague on this issue.⁶¹ Some argued that Algeria was happy that it managed to push most of the activities of AQIM’s Southern branch beyond its borders and was able to concentrate on the fight against AQIM’s actions in its own territory. The Algerian government, it was said, feared that if it (or other external players) intervenes in the neighbouring states, the terrorist problem could be pushed back into Algeria and have a destabilizing effect on the country and the current regime.⁶² Others even speculated that Algiers created or at least infiltrated AQIM terrorist cells in the Sahel so as to maintain a grip on the situation in the neighbouring countries.⁶³

⁵⁹ Benjamin Stora, “Algérie-France, mémoires sous tension”, *Le Monde*, March 18, 2012.

⁶⁰ Serge Daniel: “Unsupportive Algeria is a Setback for Terror Hunt”, *AFP*, November 27, 2011.

⁶¹ Alexis Arieff, “Algeria and the Crisis in Mali” (*Les Actuelles de l’Ifri*), Paris: Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), July 19, 2012.

⁶² Boukhars (see n.53 above), pp. 14-17.

⁶³ Jeremy H. Keenan, “Algerian ‘State Terrorism’ and Atrocities in Northern Mali”, *Open Democracy*, September 25, 2012.

The Mali Crisis – A Test Case for France

The dilemmas involved in the French effort to play a leadership role in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel became even more obvious, however, when in March 2012 a military coup plunged Mali into chaos, after the country had already been severely destabilized by a Tuareg rebellion which began in January 2012 in the North of the country. Neither of the two events was initiated by the terrorist groups themselves. But AQIM and two newly established radical Islamist groups, Ansar Dine and MUJAO, profited most from them and, in the wake of the coup, managed to take over control in Northern Mali. The plan to strengthen the local government's capacity for combatting terrorism had thus clearly failed. After AQIM and its two allies took over power in Northern Mali, France opted to support a regional conflict-resolution approach led by the Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS), including a mediation attempt and a military intervention to retake the North. Yet, there was a good deal of controversy around the ECOWAS plan and the issue of French support for it. While certainly not the only problem, the lack of support from Algeria again proved to be a major obstacle.

The Tuareg Rebellion and the March 2012 Coup - AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO as “Victors By Default”

On January 17, 2012, the Tuareg rebel group *Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) took advantage of the security vacuum in Northern Mali and made an attempt to take over power, claiming independence for the region.⁶⁴ However, it was not until

⁶⁴ The Tuareg are a Berber nomadic population which lives in Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso and has been marginalized in those countries. In Mali and Niger, this led members of the Tuareg to take up arms against the respective governments several times in the past (between 1963 and 1964, 1990 and 1995 as well as 2007 and 2009) so as to achieve larger autonomy. The MNLA was formed in late 2011 and significantly strengthened by a large number of Tuareg returning from Libya, where they fought alongside Colonel Qaddafi until his fall in 2011. The return of the former Gaddafi supporters provided the MNLA with additional man- and firepower. This gave the group the final incentive to challenge the Malian army in

March 2012, when a group of military officers staged a coup that swept President Touré from power, that the MNLA was able to occupy the most important cities in Northern Mali (Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu) and declare the region independent on April 6, 2012. Paradoxically, the official aim of the putschists, led by low-ranking army officer Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, was to overthrow the Malian government exactly *because* the latter was not able to counter the MNLA's aspirations for independence as well as AQIM's activities in the North. Yet instead of strengthening the central authorities' grip on the region, the coup made matters significantly more complicated.

In the South of the country, the military junta, under pressure from the international community and especially ECOWAS, handed over power to interim President Dioncounda Traoré and a transitional government under an interim Prime Minister (since December 2012, Django Sissoko). Yet the President, as well as the government, were struggling to achieve credibility among the Malian population because neither had an electoral mandate. In the North, the MNLA's success proved to be short-lived. The Tuareg rebel group quickly came under attack from AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO, which initially fought alongside the MNLA but turned against it after the March 2012 coup and subsequently took control of key strategic cities and regions.

One of these groups, Ansar Dine, was founded by former Tuareg rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghali. Ag Ghali reportedly tried to become a leading figure inside the MNLA before the rebellion in early 2012, but failed to do so. He thus created Ansar Dine as his own power base and, being a follower of fundamentalist Salafism, established it as a radical Islamist group with the aim of imposing Sharia law in Northern Mali.⁶⁵ The other group, the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le djihad en Afrique de l'ouest* (MUJAO) is believed to be a direct offshoot of AQIM. It is not entirely clear though, whether it split from the terrorist group because of internal differences between various members or whether it is still part of AQIM and only represents the group in specific regions.⁶⁶ Ansar Dine was controlling the city of Kidal and sharing control over Timbuktu with a militia led by Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, one of AQIM's main figures, while MUJAO held the city of Gao.⁶⁷

Northern Mali, called the "Azawad" region by the Tuareg and considered as their birthplace. "From Camels to 4x4s: A History of the Tuareg Rebels", *AFP*, March 23, 2012. For a good overview of the various Tuareg rebellions since de-colonization in the early 1960s, see: Pierre Boilley, "Géopolitique africaine et rébellions touarègues. Approches locales, approches globales (1960-2011)", in *L'Année du Maghreb*, vol. 7 (2011), pp. 151-162.

⁶⁵ Peter Beaumont, "The Man Who Could Determine Whether the West is Drawn into Mali's War", *The Observer*, October 27, 2012,

⁶⁶ Alain Antil, "Le Mujao, dernier venu des mouvements islamistes armés du nord", in: *Ultima Ratio* (Blog), May 2, 2012,

Source: <<http://ultimaratio-blog.org/fr/archives/4532>>.

⁶⁷ "Mali: des islamistes détruisent les derniers mausolées de Tombouctou", *Le Monde* (Online), December 23, 2012.

The French Reaction: Support for an African Solution

In the aftermath of the military coup in March 2012 there were speculations about possible direct French intervention.⁶⁸ However, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy ruled out any implication of the French military and France limited its immediate engagement to the suspension of its development (including military) aid to Mali.⁶⁹ Instead, France announced that it would support a regional solution to the Mali crisis spearheaded by ECOWAS - a position that was maintained when François Hollande took over office from Sarkozy in mid-May 2012.⁷⁰ ECOWAS was largely absent from the attempts to fight terrorism in the Sahel before 2012. The fact that two of the states affected by AQIM's activities, Mauritania and Algeria, are not members of the organization made its involvement difficult. Only when Alassane Ouattara, the President of Côte d'Ivoire⁷¹, and Blaise Compaoré, his counterpart from Burkina Faso, started taking active steps to find a solution to the Malian "double crisis" (the unclear question of who is in power in the South and the problem of the North being controlled by AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO), did ECOWAS become a player in the Sahel. Under the leadership of Compaoré, who was designated as chief mediator. In the South, ECOWAS brokered an agreement between the interim government in Bamako and the coup leaders. With regard to Northern Mali, the regional organization proposed the deployment of a 3,300-strong intervention force to train the Malian army (first phase) and support the Malian security forces seeking to reconquer the North of the country (second phase).⁷²

As a keen backer of ECOWAS' plans to negotiate and intervene, Paris was behind United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085 of December 20, 2012 supporting the ECOWAS mediation efforts and authorising the deployment of the planned military force, dubbed the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA).⁷³ French politicians continued to rule out any presence of French soldiers on the ground, but offered logistical and financial support for the African force.⁷⁴ In addition, France at the EU

⁶⁸ Christophe Châtelot, "La France embarrassée par la crise malienne", *Le Monde*, April 6, 2012.

⁶⁹ Alain Barluet, "Paris tourne sans regrets la page du « mauvais élève » ATT", *Le Monde*, March 23, 2012.

⁷⁰ Lydia Polgreen/Alan Cowell, "After Seizing Land, Rebels in Mali Declare Cease-Fire", *The New York Times*, April 6, 2012.

⁷¹ Alassane Ouattara holds, since February 2012, for two years the rotating presidency of ECOWAS.

⁷² Anne Look, Mali, "ECOWAS, Not on Same Page on Military Intervention", *Voice of America*, September 18, 2012.

⁷³ *United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2085 (2012)*, Doc. No. S/RES/2085 (2012), New York, December 20, 2012.

⁷⁴ "African Mali Intervention in 'A Matter of Weeks': France", *AFP*, October 16, 2012.

level introduced the idea of setting up an EU mission in Mali to support ECOWAS during the first phase of the planned operation - the formation and training of the Malian army.⁷⁵

The Trouble with Algeria

In Mali, as in the Sahel region in general, history-laden Franco-Algerian relations have proved to be a major obstacle for the French leadership role in the fight against AQIM. Algiers made clear that it preferred searching for a political solution to the crisis in Northern Mali before any kind of military action to reconquer the region was envisaged.⁷⁶ Algeria thus supported a political dialogue between the various players in the conflict and the Malian interim government. The main aim of this dialogue was to convince the MNLA and Ansar Dine to break away from and isolate AQIM and MUJAO. AQIM and MUJAO, which in April 2012 kidnapped seven Algerian diplomats from a consulate in Gao and in September 2012 killed one of them,⁷⁷ were regarded as terrorist groups by Algiers with which there was no point in talking. Yet the MNLA and Ansar Dine, whose leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, was reported to be on good terms with the Algerian government, were seen as partners for a possible negotiated solution.⁷⁸

Algeria wanted to avoid France and ECOWAS becoming directly involved. Algerian officials repeatedly accused France of exploiting the situation in Mali so as to install itself in the Sahel region and bolster its economic interests there.⁷⁹ ECOWAS was seen largely as a puppet of France in this context and, in addition, the Algerian government feared that a badly executed ECOWAS intervention in Northern Mali could have a destabilizing effect inside Algeria.⁸⁰ In Algiers there was no trust in the regional organization's capacities to tackle the terrorist challenge in a region with which most of the ECOWAS member states' armies are not familiar. If military action was necessary, Algeria preferred that it should be undertaken by the

⁷⁵ Andrew Gardner, "EU Plans Military Mission to Mali", *European Voice*, October 16, 2012.

⁷⁶ "Algeria Reportedly Unhappy with France's Stance on Northern Mali", *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, October 12, 2012.

⁷⁷ "Malian Extremists Execute Kidnapped Algerian Diplomat", *AFP*, September 2, 2012.

⁷⁸ "Algeria Working to Split Tuareg Islamists from Al-Qaida in Northern Mali", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 10 (2012), no. 20, pp. 1-3.

⁷⁹ *BBC Monitoring Middle East* (see n.76 above).

⁸⁰ Peter Tinti, "Understanding Algeria's Northern Mali Policy", *Think Africa Press* (Blog), October 5, 2012, Source: <<http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/understanding-algeria-northern-mali-aqim-mujao-ansar-dine>>.

Malian army and/or the Sahelian states themselves and not by external players.⁸¹

Algeria's critical stance towards a French-supported ECOWAS intervention was supported by the fact that there was neither a unified Malian army nor a consensus between the different army factions and the Malian authorities (President Traoré and his government) regarding how to intervene in the North and with whose support. Captain Sanogo, the leader of the March 2012 coup continued to act as a spoiler to a coherent Malian position ever since he officially agreed to hand over power to civilian authorities. In September 2012, the Malian government officially asked for the deployment of an ECOWAS force, which was strongly opposed by Sanogo who did not want to see ECOWAS soldiers on Malian soil. Instead, he wanted external support from the West African regional organization to be limited to the provision of military assistance to the Malian army, which under Sanogo's leadership should carry out the task of reconquering the North on its own. Sanogo feared that an ECOWAS intervention in Mali might significantly weaken his position.⁸² In mid-December 2012, he even went as far as staging what was called another "mini-coup" and forced then-Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra to resign. One of Sanogo's main reasons for forcing Diarra to step down was that the latter had become a strong supporter of an ECOWAS intervention.⁸³

⁸¹ Alistair Lyon, "Algeria Caught in Quandary over Mali Crisis", *Reuters*, October 14, 2012.

⁸² David Lewis/Adama Diarra, "Analysis: Mali Leadership Limbo Holds Up Military Action Plan", *Reuters*, September 27, 2012; Malika Grogga-Bada/Baba Ahmed, "Mali: à qui joue Sanogo", *Jeune Afrique* (Online), October 22, 2012.

⁸³ For the relationship between Sanogo and Diarra see: Peter Tinti, "Mali's Coup 2.0: Adjusting to the New Normal", in: *Think Africa Press* (Blog), December 13, 2012, <<http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/coup-2-adjusting-new-normal-sanogo-diarra>>.

Operation Serval – Changing the Odds?

On January 11, 2013, France decided to alter fundamentally its strategy regarding the Mali crisis. When the alliance of AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO captured the city of Konna in Central Mali, French President Hollande responded to a call from Malian President Traoré and deployed French special forces to Mali. The initial goal of the intervention was to stop a further push southwards by the three terrorist groups which could have brought them even closer to the Malian capital, Bamako. Very quickly, however, France went beyond a pure “emergency operation” and *de facto* embarked on the intervention to reconquer the North that was originally supposed to be undertaken by the Malian army with support of the African force AFISMA.

The French intervention was applauded at the international level. Indeed, France, supported by Malian as well as other African troops (mainly from Chad), succeeded relatively quickly in achieving the main goals of the intervention: stopping the terrorists from extending their influence further south, driving them out of the main cities in the North and destroying their logistical capacities. Nevertheless, the challenges that France and the international community were facing before the intervention was launched, remain largely unchanged.

The Challenge of Stabilizing Mali

Despite the relative success of the French military intervention, terrorism remains a problem in Northern Mali and may do so for some time to come. Shortly after AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO were forced to cede control of the key cities in the North, the terrorists changed their strategy and have since been engaging France and its African allies in guerilla warfare.⁸⁴ Some fighters took refuge in remote desert or mountain areas in Northern Mali, from where they continue to operate. Since January 2013, they have carried out a number of suicide attacks. These attacks mainly targeted Malian and

⁸⁴ Peter Tinti/Adam Nossiter, “In Mali, the Peril of Guerrilla War Looms”, *The New York Times*, February 16, 2013.

other African troops and killed several Chadian and Malian soldiers in Kidal and Gao.⁸⁵

The search for a solution to the political conflict in Mali also had to be put on hold. On January 29, 2013, the Malian government adopted a “road map” that presents a two-step-approach to tackle the political crisis. It includes, firstly, the plan to return to constitutional order by holding presidential elections in July 2013 and, secondly, the (re)launching of negotiations with those groups in the North which distance themselves from terrorism and recognize the country’s territorial integrity.⁸⁶ The extent to which the “road map” can be seen as feasible is, however, not yet clear.

Holding elections in July will be difficult. The main challenge will be enabling the Northern population, including the approximately 150,000 Malian refugees who fled the conflict to neighbouring countries, to vote. If this cannot be achieved, it could undermine the legitimacy of a newly elected President and government.⁸⁷ Furthermore, no solution has yet been found to avoid the continued meddling of the Malian army, and especially the March 2012 coup leader Sanogo, in Malian politics. Since the French intervention, Sanogo has kept a rather low profile. His popularity among the population has declined because Malians saw that he too was unable to counter the terrorist threat in the North - his main argument when he legitimised the March 2012 coup. Nevertheless, as President of the army reform committee, Sanogo remains one of the most important figures in the Malian military. It cannot be ruled out that he will use this position to intervene in the political process again in the future.⁸⁸

Negotiations with the groups in the North are certainly a key to solving the Malian crisis in the long term. However, it is not yet clear which groups will be ready to participate and if a process can be set in motion. Various obstacles have to be overcome. Reconciling the differences between the Tuareg and the Malian authorities in Bamako will be especially difficult.⁸⁹ But it will also be crucial to address the

⁸⁵ Baba Ahmed, Mali – “Suicide Bomb Kills Three Chadian Troops in Kidal”, *Associated Press*, April 12, 2013; “Two Malian Soldiers Killed in Suicide Attack near Gao”, *France 24* (Online), May 5, 2013.

⁸⁶ Who exactly the groups that could participate in negotiations will be is, however, not yet clear. For details on the road map see United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, UN Doc. No. S/2013/189, New York, March 26, 2013, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Wolfram Lacher/Denis M. Tull, „Mali: Beyond Counterterrorism (SWP Comments 7/2013)“, Berlin: *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (SWP), February 2013, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Malika Grogga-Bada, “Mali: Sanogo, un petit tour et puis revient”, *Jeune Afrique* (Online), March 18, 2013.

⁸⁹ Ansar Dine participated in the attack on Konna and has since been delegitimised as a possible negotiating partner. The MNLA has announced that it wishes to take part in the talks, but its relationship with the Malian authorities in Bamako remains tense. For the differences between the Malian government and the MNLA, see for example: Andrew Lebovich, “Post-Conflict Mali: Reprisal or Reconciliation?” *Think Africa Press* (Blog), February 27, 2013.

differences between various ethnic groups in the North. Otherwise, there is a serious risk that the existing grievances between these groups could be a breeding-ground for inter-ethnic conflict. Especially the rift between the Tuareg and Arab population on the one hand and various “Black” ethnic groups on the other remains strong. The “Black” ethnic groups blame the Tuareg for crimes they committed against the “Black” population during the 2012 rebellion as well as the Tuareg and the Arabs for crimes they were responsible for throughout the crisis after the March 2012 coup, when most of the Tuareg and Arab groups coalesced with AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO. The former, on the other hand, are afraid of revenge killings by “Black” militias, whom they see as allies of the Malian government.⁹⁰

The Danger of a “Spillover” of Terrorism in Mali into the Neighbouring Countries

In addition to the challenge of stabilizing Mali, there is a risk that the military intervention in Mali will have destabilizing effects on the already vulnerable neighbouring countries. The danger of a spillover of the terrorist problem in Mali is particularly high in Mauritania and Niger. Given the long borders they share with the Northern part of Mali, there is the possibility that some of the radicals who were driven out of Northern Mali escaped to both countries. The Nigerien and Mauritanian governments promised to secure their borders to avoid Malian terrorists trickling in. In practice, this will be difficult to realize due to the porous nature of those borders.⁹¹ In Mauritania, several radical Islamists with links to terrorists in Mali were recently arrested.⁹² There are also fears that the camps of refugees from Mali could be used to recruit fighters for the terrorist cause. Mauritania hosts the largest number of refugees from Mali, currently about 70.000.⁹³ In Niger, it is known that Arab groups in Western Niger have links to MUJAO and that in the North of the country several radical Islamist cells close to AQIM continue to exist. The influx of fighters from Mali might strengthen these groups.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Mali: Rising Ethnic Tensions Threaten New Violence*, December 20, 2012.

⁹¹ Vincent Duhem, “Mali: l'impossible contrôle des frontières”, *Jeune Afrique* (Online), February 1, 2013.

⁹² Bakari Gueye, “Mauritania Arrests Mali Terrorists”, *Magharebia*, March 19, 2013.,

⁹³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Urges Reconciliation Efforts in Mali to Avoid Long-Term Displacement*, March 1, 2013.

⁹⁴ Just as occurred in Mali, in Niger there is the risk that the Islamist problem will merge with the Tuareg question. Niger managed to integrate the ethnic group better than Mali had in the past. Still, it cannot be ruled out that the Tuareg of Northern Niger might revolt again. This could be the case if revenge activities against the Tuareg in Northern Mali by the Malian army and/or Black ethnic groups continue

Yet not only the two Sahelian neighbours who were facing the problem of terrorism on their soil before are faced with risks stemming from recent developments in Mali. There are concerns that fighters from Mali might make their way to Burkina Faso, Senegal (which both have borders with Mali), Nigeria and even as far as Chad, Tunisia and Libya.⁹⁵ In Senegal, Burkina Faso and Chad, leading government officials have repeatedly raised concerns about the spread of Malian terrorism into their countries. The links between radical Islamists in Mali and the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram remain obscure, but it is widely believed that they exist.⁹⁶ Libya has so far rather been seen as a source of trouble for Mali than as a potential victim, but this could change soon. The South of Libya is still largely beyond government control and it has been reported that radical Islamist groups are active there. This has raised concerns that Malian Islamists might get there via Niger to join these groups and use the region as a safe haven.⁹⁷

The Continued Need for a Regional Approach

In the short term, the French intervention changed things in Mali for the better. It prevented AQIM and its allies from extending their influence further into Southern Mali and the offensive operations in Northern Mali significantly weakened the terrorist groups. In the medium term, however, there is a risk that if France maintains its current leadership position for too long, this could have a detrimental effect. Consequently, there will be no alternative for France but to transfer the responsibility for tackling the double challenge of stabilizing Mali and avoiding a spillover of the terrorist problem into the neighbouring countries to local and regional players.

In Mali, France still profits from great support among the local population because it liberated the country from the radical Islamists. Yet, if France remains present in Mali as the pivotal external player in the long run, it could lose the support of Malians, who will not be keen to live under the tutelage of the former colonial power for a long period of time. This will be especially true if the terrorists are not defeated and if the political and economic situation in the country does not improve. The financial costs for France of being on the

and/or if Tuareg interests are not taken seriously in political negotiations with the Malian government. For the possible impact of the Malian crisis on Niger, see: Mathieu Pellerin, *L'Afrique en questions n° 15: La résilience nigérienne à l'épreuve de la guerre au Mali* (Actuelle de l'Ifri), Paris: Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri), February 11, 2013.

⁹⁵ David Lewis, "Analysis: After Algerian incident, West Africa Fears Mali spillover", *Reuters* (Online), January 18, 2013.

⁹⁶ Jean-Philippe Rémy, "Les liens troubles entre Boko Haram et AQMI au Nigeria", *Le Monde*, March 10, 2013.

⁹⁷ Christophe Boisbouvier, "Terrorisme: la poudrière libyenne", *Jeune Afrique* (Online), March 11, 2013.

frontline in the fight against terrorism are already high. A long-term engagement in Mali will be too expensive for the French military which is also affected by the financial crisis. The risk of French citizens, companies, aid organizations and institutions in the region becoming targets for terrorist activities could also increase.⁹⁸ This was demonstrated by the hostage-taking of a French family in Northern Cameroon in mid-February 2013. The kidnappers, the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram, justified the hostage-taking not entirely, but in part with reference to the French military intervention in Mali.⁹⁹

Consequently, French decision-makers went out of their way to hand over the leadership in tackling the Malian crisis to regional players. Initially, France pushed for a quick deployment of the AFISMA force to take over the task of stabilizing and securing Northern Mali together with the Malian army (as planned in UN resolution 2085 from December 2012). Due to financial and logistical problems, however, the African force was not able to deploy fully. In February 2013, Paris thus launched an initiative to transform AFISMA into a UN peacekeeping force, which was approved by the UN Security Council on April 25, 2013.¹⁰⁰ The UN force will operate alongside the French *Serval* force, which will be reduced from 4,000 (as of early April 2013) to 1,000 soldiers by the end of 2013.¹⁰¹ In parallel, France successfully lobbied in Brussels to launch the EU mission to train Malian soldiers earlier than originally planned. The mission, called EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali was launched on April 1, 2013 and has since been training a first group of 2,000 Malian soldiers.¹⁰² At the political level, France welcomed the creation of the reconciliation commission in early March 2013 and encouraged the Malian government to include as many parties as possible in a political process.¹⁰³

With regard to the wider Sahel region, too, decision-makers in Paris are aware that it will be necessary to revive regional efforts to address the terrorist problem. This will, however, be an even more serious challenge than in the case of the Malian crisis and no

⁹⁸ For the risks of a French long-term engagement in Mali, see: Etienne de Durand, "Does France Have an Exit Strategy in Mali?" *Foreign Affairs* (Online), February 20, 2013.

⁹⁹ Adam Nossiter, "Video Shows Group Holds Family Seized in Cameroon", *The New York Times*, February 25, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ The UN force, called *United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA) is planned to be 12,600-strong and it is to be deployed on July 1, 2013. Neil MacFarquhar, "U.N. Votes to Establish Peacekeeping Force for Mali", *The New York Times*, April 25, 2013. The main reason behind the idea to transform AFISMA into a UN peace-keeping operation was to ensure the funding of the force. As a UN operation, the force will be financed out of the UN peace-keeping budget instead of by the contributing nations themselves.

¹⁰¹ "Mille soldats français resteront au Mali "de façon permanente"", *France 24* (Online), April 6, 2013.

¹⁰² Alex Duval Smith, "Turning Mali's Army into a Fighting Force", *BBC News*,

¹⁰³ Laurent Fabius, *Point de presse: Situation au Mali*, Paris, March 8, 2013.

concrete efforts have been undertaken since January 2013. The CEMOC structure remains the starting point for regional cooperation, but it has failed in effectively combatting terrorism and needs to be significantly improved. An important precondition for CEMOC to become more effective is that Algeria should finally agree to play a leadership role and cooperate more strongly with the other countries in the region. Since the beginning of the French intervention, Algeria has been sending out positive signals in this regard. In security circles in Algiers, there is a growing feeling that something needs to be done to combat the terrorist threat in Mali and the Sahel. The attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Eastern Algeria in late January 2013 showed that the country is as vulnerable to a possible spillover of the terrorist problem in Mali as are all the other states in the region.¹⁰⁴ Whether this really translates into a more active role played by Algeria in regional efforts to tackle the Malian crisis as well as the terrorist problem in the Sahel remains to be seen, however.

The same holds true for Algeria's relations with France. In principle, Algiers has shown itself willing to work more closely with Paris since January. It supports French military action in Mali despite its former opposition to outside (and especially French) intervention in the Sahel. It granted France overflight rights for its air operations in Northern Mali, took steps to secure its border with Mali and is providing France with intelligence support to identify terrorist targets. France, for its part, has also gone out of its way to ensure the Algerian government that it focuses exclusively on anti-terrorism and does not aim to install itself in Mali and the Sahel region in the longer term. However, whether this leads to improved Franco-Algerian bilateral cooperation to tackle the security challenges in the Sahel region in the long term also remains to be seen.

¹⁰⁴ Anouar Boukhars, "What's Next for Mali and Algeria?" Washington, DC: *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 23, 2013.

Conclusion

France finds itself in a difficult situation with regard to its desire to play a leadership role in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. On the one hand, the “light footprint” approach it pursued between 2007 and early 2012 did not produce satisfying results. Bilateral cooperation with the Sahel states in the security sphere was not enough to counter terrorism effectively in the region. In Mali, it was unable to avert the breakdown of a government plagued by rampant corruption behind a democratic façade. Despite external support, Mali’s security forces were incapable of countering the takeover of power by AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO in the North of the country after the Tuareg rebellion and the March 2012 coup. Mauritania and Niger are faring better than Mali, but there are still parts of the two countries where the respective governments have limited control and where some of the kidnappings took place.

On the other hand, a more active approach also remains problematic. This has already been shown by the direct French military actions to liberate three French hostages in 2010/2011 and it has become even more obvious since France launched the *Serval* operation in Mali. By intervening directly, France succeeded in reducing the terrorist groups’ influence in the North of the country. Nevertheless, a long-term French military presence may have a detrimental effect. It could bring the remaining radical Islamists further support from the local population which does not like the involvement of external players and particularly that of the former colonial power. For France, the financial and possibly also the human costs could be high and lead to a decline of support for a strong French role in the Sahel inside France. Last but not least, it increases the risks for the French population living, working and travelling in the Sahelian countries. The possible dangers for France itself are hard to assess. There is, however, the possibility that terrorists might plan terrorist attacks on French soil and thus French action could lead to a result that France had wanted to avoid in the first place.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma for France. Given the shortcomings of both bilateral cooperation and direct action, French policy-makers recently started to return to the approach they had already favoured before the start of the intervention in January: the focus on the support of locally- and/or regionally-driven efforts to fight terrorism. In both cases, a good deal of work remains to be done. In Mali, a political process has to be brought back on track to address the internal political and ethnic splits within Malian society

and the challenge of transferring the task of stabilizing Northern Mali to a UN peace-keeping force will be a difficult one. With regard to the wider regional context, there is no way around improved cooperation between the Sahelian countries. Better cooperation between France and Algeria is an essential condition for a coherent international approach to such cooperation. Algeria, which remains the key player in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, supported the French intervention in Mali and since then it has been inclined to become more actively involved and to cooperate with France. Nevertheless, the weight of history continues to cast a shadow over relations between the two countries and it is not clear yet how sustainable the latest Franco-Algerian rapprochement will prove to be.