

# New Threats, Old Vulnerabilities? Mali and Comprehensive Security Dispatch no. 8 (10)

**Can extreme weather, climate change and variability explain the conflict in Mali? The need for integrated security analysis is growing. This brief is one of a series that explains the concept of integrated security as it has been developed by an interdisciplinary team of scientists at FOI, the Swedish Defence Research Agency.**

## **The Conflict in Mali – Bringing New Dimensions to the Study of Conflict**

The history of conflict in Northern Mali can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when the semi-nomadic Tuareg people violently resisted French colonial occupation. Since Mali became independent in 1960 it has experienced four Tuareg rebellions, the most recent of which started in 2012. It has been argued that exposure to climatic stresses and scarcity of resources have led to conflicts between the pastoral Tuaregs and farmers. The effects of climate change and changes in climate variability added to the impact of environmental degradation, and of population and land-use pressure. The current conflict followed, and was concurrent with, a major drought in the Sahel. However, there are many different ways to analyze the conflict. Each conflict analysis will lead to its own conclusions and recommendations. A conventional security analysis set to analyze military capabilities among warring parties will inevitably suggest recommendations that address military capabilities, while a humanitarian security analysis, analyzing the role of fragile communities, will provide recommendations that looks at ways to strengthen these. Such conflict analyses are tremendously vertical and “drainpipe” with little horizontal analysis and cross-disciplinary input, despite the complexity and interactions of many factors that pertain to the root causes of the conflict. But what if there were an integrated analysis of the Malian conflict that not only looked at conventional security reasons, but also added other crucial levels of analysis, including climate and environmental processes and their interconnections with human and societal dynamics in time and space? Adding to this, what would be the end recommendations if we were to make use of tools such as satellite images, and climate change and vulnerability assessments?

### *The multilayered nature of the conflict*

The crisis in Mali should be understood in terms of the multilayered nature of the conflict, which includes both internal and external actors. The actors are rooted on both

the global and local level and act on the basis of various sets of ideological affiliations, ethnic identities, interpersonal tension and networks. Add here that military and security assistance to the African continent has grown substantially in recent years, and Mali is currently poised to receive significant resources to strengthen its military power and control. There are therefore many reasons to argue that the conflict is to be understood in different terms and cannot only be regarded as jihadism, a “Tuareg problem”, or north vs south. The political and security concerns that have now reached a critical level according to regional and international actors are not new. To disentangle these relations, an analysis of the conflict needs to look deeper into root causes. It has been claimed that the root causes of the current Malian crisis include corrupt governance, growing criminality in the northern region as part of a Sahelian transnational phenomenon, armed Islamism and continuous social unrest between ethnic groups. But the role of climate variability, climate change impacts and environmental degradation and vulnerability issues also need to be analysed in the conflict context.

### **The Conventional Actor Analysis**

In January 2012 a Tuareg faction, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad, MNLA), sought increased autonomy for three regions of northern Mali: Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. Simultaneously, an alliance between al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest, MUJAO) and Ansar Eddine mounted a military offensive whose aim was to implement their interpretation of Sharia law. In March 2012 a coup d’état overthrew the Malian government, and these three groups gained control of northern Mali. Malian Interim President Dioncounda Traoré then requested military assistance from France, and Opération Serval was launched in January 2013 to regain control of the country. Six months later, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2100



which established the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The European Union (EU) also initiated a training mission, EUTM Mali, in 2013, focusing on capacity building of the Malian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence. During late 2013 and early 2014, armed groups returned to areas previously evacuated during the French operation. However, the alliances and dynamics ruling the situation in northern Mali and the Sahel are fluid and allegiances change easily. A new jihadi group is Al Mourabitoun, which came into existence in late 2013 due to a merger between MUJAO and a former AQIM splinter group. As a consequence of the international military presence in northern Mali territorial control increased in 2014 and AQIM no longer occupy populated centres there. However, in 2015 a series of attacks targeting MINUSMA resulted in numerous casualties and Al Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for a terrorist attack in Bamako in March 2015. Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Mourabitoun, said they launched the attack together on Hotel Radisson Blu in Bamako in November when 20 people were killed.

### **Climatic, Environmental and Socio-economic Vulnerabilities**

The Sahel region has been subject to long-term socio-economic and environmental challenges. Factors influencing household vulnerability in Mali are primarily related to poverty, education, health, migration, gender inequality issues and environmental degradation. Livelihoods in Mali are closely tied to environmental conditions through agriculture, pastoralism and fishing. Hence large sections of the Malian population are highly vulnerable to climatic stresses such as recurring droughts and floods as well as land and water degradation.

Food insecurity is a major outcome of vulnerability in Mali. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated in 2012 that food insecurity affected more than sixteen million people within the Sahel region. It would be easy to conclude that a causal relationship exists whereby food insecurity is due to drought and the current situation is an example of a “climate change conflict”. But although climatic factors are important they are not the sole cause of food insecurity. The famine conditions in the Sahel during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s should rather be seen in the context of maladaptive development policies and projects which ignored climate variability and increased social vulnerability to drought. Even today government institutions rarely address the climate and livelihood challenges experienced in underdeveloped and under-populated areas of the country.

Climatic variability and seasonality have led to the development of traditional coping strategies that to a great extent are characterised by migration and movement such as seasonal labour circulation, transhumance and the nomadic way of life. However, as the livelihoods of agriculturalists and settled populations are dependent on water resources, fertile land and grazing areas, relations between groups in the various communities have been characterised by a history of micro-conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, including disputes over land and resources, and political disputes. More recently, such disputes have also begun to include conflict over various types of trafficking, such as the smuggling of arms, drugs, alcohol and subsidised goods. The interconnectedness of vulnerable natural and human systems, and tensions brought about by extreme poverty and desperation, as well as the fragile nature of security and stability in Mali and the region, are thus important factors explaining why people are turning to violence and crime.

### *Does vulnerability to climate variability and change lead to conflicts and Tuareg rebellions?*

It has been argued that Mali is an example of conflicts attributed to climatic factors becoming manifest and the farmer–herder conflict may be related to climate change. However, some researchers claim that climate change and environmental stress in Mali are best seen as possible contributory factors to conflict. The severe droughts of the 1970s and 1980s had an impact on the Tuareg rebellion of the early 1990s, but complex historical and political factors and regional instability were more significant determinants of the insurgency in northern Mali than environmental stress. Long-standing conflicts such as the Tuareg rebellion are complex and highly political and are not readily explained by an environmental security narrative alone. Mali is vulnerable to climate change impacts and conflict situations.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Wider Understanding of Security and the Means to get there**

In recent decades the scholarly understanding of security has widened. There has been a substantial change of emphasis from national security which focuses on the survivability of the nation-state to human security. But rather than discriminating each other, the two approaches have come to adapt one another despite being fundamentally different.

The conflict in Mali could well be analysed through a conventional security analysis in which the centrality of the state is central to the focus. However, looking at the “state-vs-non-state actors” does little to help us understand the root



causes of the conflict and the means to resolve the existing grievances. There are good reasons to take a more holistic approach investigating the resilience of natural and human systems—an approach that brings into the analysis climate change factors, ecosystem analysis, livelihood assessments, urban-rural dimensions, migration patterns, access to water, food, education and health infrastructure, and gender relations. The vulnerabilities in Mali described here to a large extent fall within the common understanding of human security. However, despite these long-term socio-economic and environmental issues that have rendered the region vulnerable and insecure, it has arguably been the occupation of the northern Mali territory by Islamic insurgency groups which has acted as a tipping point for increased involvement by regional and international actors, as it reinforces the global threat of transnational terrorist groups gaining influence.

In sum then, an analytical integrated security approach would be applicable to encompass and understand the conflict and accomplish sustainable security. One step in the direction of widening the security discourse may be that the failed states concept is being replaced with the concept of fragility (state fragility), and more emphasis is being put on the human beings who are suffering in these states where vulnerability is becoming stressed. There are many different tools available to achieve this. By connecting technical assessment and monitoring tools like Pleiades (satellite images), environmental impact and vulnerability assessments, etc. with conventional armed conflict analysis. A deeper understanding could be gained and more sustainable recommendations be formulated.

### Further Reading

Benjaminsen, T. A. 2008. Does supply-induced scarcity drive violent conflicts in the African Sahel? The case of the Tuareg rebellion in Northern Mali. *Journal of Peace Research* 45/6: 819–36.

Goulden, M., Few, R., Abebe, L., Brooks, N., Daoud, M., Konaté, M. K., Sarney, E., Smith, D., Umoh, B., Vernon, P., Weiner, J., Yamba, B. 2011. *Climate change, water and conflict in the Niger River Basin. International Alert and University of East Anglia, Norwich.*

Ingerstad, G., Tham Lindell, M. 2015. Stabilizing Mali. *Neighbouring states' political and military engagement.* FOI-R--4026—SE. Stockholm: FOI.

McIlvain, Moran A., Mulugetta Y., Raleigh, C. 2014. *Climate change and security in Africa. Clear risks, nuanced impacts.* GMACCC Paper no. 1. Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change.

Schott, M. 2009. Human security: international discourses and local reality – case of Mali. In *Facing global environmental change.* Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace, Vol. 4, pp. 1105–14.

Simonsson, L. 2005. *Vulnerability assessment of Mali.* Stockholm: Stockholm Environment Institute.

Tham Lindell, M., Mattsson, K. 2014. *Transnational threats to peace and security in the Sahel.* Consequences in Mali. FOI-R--3881—SE. Stockholm: FOI.

Wilandh, H. 2014. The complex dynamics of the conflict in northern Mali. *Opinion Internationale.*

This brief was written by an interdisciplinary team of scientists at FOI, the Swedish Defence Research Agency. It could be read as a stand-alone document but can also be read in the context of connected briefs on integrated security of which this particular topic is a cohesive part.

The project leader was Mikael Eriksson (Defence Analysis) and lead scientists included Annica Waleij (CBRN Defence and Security), Birgitta Liljedahl (CBRN Defence and Security), Louise Simonsson (CBRN Defence and Security), Christer Andersson (Defence and Security, Systems and Technology), Richard Langlais (Defence Analysis), Michael Tulldahl (Sensor and EW Systems) and Ulf Söderman (Sensor and EW Systems) Many other members of FOI provided support.

For further information on related activities of this project please consult [www.foi.se](http://www.foi.se).