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The Rise of Islamic Terrorism in Mali

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The Radisson Blu hotel attack in the Malian capital, Bamako, on 20 November 2015, which killed more than 20 people, is one of the latest terrorist strikes in the African continent, which is witnessing a rise in Islamic extremism. Islamist groups such as Al-Mourabitoun (AMB), Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Dine (AAD), Movement of Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and, more recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are constantly engaged in deadly and violent form of terrorist activities in the hope of extending their power. Mali, in particular, has become extremely vulnerable to extremism by these groups. Against this background, this paper explores the terrorist challenges in Mali. It focuses on the November 20 hotel attack, the factors behind the rise of terrorism in Mali, the terrorist groups operating, their motive, target, tactics and mode of financing. It also assesses the capacity of the national, regional and international responses and the implications.

Terror Problem in Mali

In 2015, Mali has witnessed a rise in terror attacks, not only on military targets, but also on soft targets. According to the IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Network) report on Mali, the pace and severity of asymmetric attacks by different Islamist groups against civilians and security forces in northern Mali has increased, despite the security efforts and successes in expelling violent extremists from some parts of the vast northern region. Since June 2015,

attacks on both Malian and Western targets spread further south, near the borders with Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso and far beyond traditional militant strongholds.[1] On August 7, 2015, about 17 people were killed including four MINUSMA peacekeepers during the siege of a hotel at Sevare in central Mali, some 600 kms north east of Bamako, located near the Malian armed forces post.[2] At least 342[3]people have been reportedly killed in 2015 – including UN peacekeepers, foreign personnel and contractors in terrorist attacks.

Given the rise of attacks on soft targets, the Bamako hotel attack did not seem unpredictable to many analysts. It was a carefully planned and executed operation designed to send a message. The UN and French sources claim that the aim was to derail the peace process between the Tuareg separatists and the government. An agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali emanating from the Algiers Process was signed between the government and Tuareg separatist group *Coordination des Mouvements de L Azawad* (CMA) on 20 June. Islamic extremist groups like Ansar Dine had spoken out strongly against the Accord and accused separatists of betraying the local population after they signed the agreement. The attack happened as the hotel was preparing to host the latest meeting of a committee working toward the Accord's implementation. The hotel, being a popular spot among expatriates and foreign diplomats, was a chosen target, as it was intended for having maximum international impact, further demonstrating the global nature of this challenge.

As the attacks happened on the heels of the Paris attack, concerns were raised regarding the likelihood of ISIS linkages with the event, though there was nothing to suggest so. A senior Sahel analyst from Crisis group has said that in the attack may be both local and global factors was at play: an attack that has been planned for a long time may have been accelerated. Both incidents, however, appear similar, as it highlights the deadly style of attack on soft targets, which is gaining prominence among various terror groups, be it the siege of Kenya's Westgate Mall or Mumbai hotel attack.

Mali in the Spotlight

The Bamako hotel attack brought Mali back in the spotlight, which had faded as global attention had shifted to Boko Haram rampages in West Africa and to ISIS. Two years after the

French intervention and deployment of the UN Mission, there has been an increase in terror assaults by various Islamist groups, casting light on the worsening security situation, wherein competing parallel Islamist terrorist networks are expanding their presence. The increase in terror attacks and the severity of those attacks by these groups point to the competitive dynamics being played out in the region, with each group seeking to maintain its relevancy. Various analysts have stated that these groups seem to be forming a network to contest ISIS dominance in despicability and media coverage. There are apprehensions that as ISIS increases its attacks, terror groups in the region may feel the pressure to step up attacks in order not to lose out their recruits and funding to ISIS. This competition dynamics that is observed makes the terror problem in Mali more complex, as the rise of terrorism can be attributed to various factors that are at play at the national, regional and global levels.

Background: Mali Political Violence

Although Mali has historically been a country with relatively low, though recurring, levels of violence, a dramatic spike in terror attacks and mortalities has occurred since late 2011. This centred on two distinct, yet intersecting violent campaigns; one by the Tuareg separatists, an ethnic minority constituting 10 per cent of the Malian population,[4] and the other by Islamist terrorist groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM).

In November 2011, the Tuareg nomads, who had fought for Muhammar Gaddafi in Libya, returned to Mali with arms and formed the Movement *for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA)* – for establishing an independent Tuareg state called Azawad. The foundation of MNLA marked the beginning of a new and violent phase in Malian conflict. In the year 2012, about six months after President Amadou Toumani Touré was toppled in a military coup, the political vacuum that was created provided the opportunity to Tuareg separatists armed with sophisticated weapons to start the armed rebellion movement against the government. That coincided with the campaign of violence by groups aligned with Al-Qaeda, MUJAO and Ansar Dine, demanding their own form of Islamic law and governance. Both the Tuareg separatists and the Islamist groups allied with each other to fight against the government, but their cooperation broke later.[5] Although it is not clear why the groups fell out, the secularism of the MNLA and the rising violence against civilians by Islamist groups in the North, including AQIM

and MUJAO were the likely causes. Escalation of clashes between both these groups later led to Islamists gaining control over large swathes of northern region.

Malian troops lacked the arms to fight the rebels. After a request from the Government of Mali, the French intervention in 2013 drove the Islamists out from areas such as Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, which they had seized.
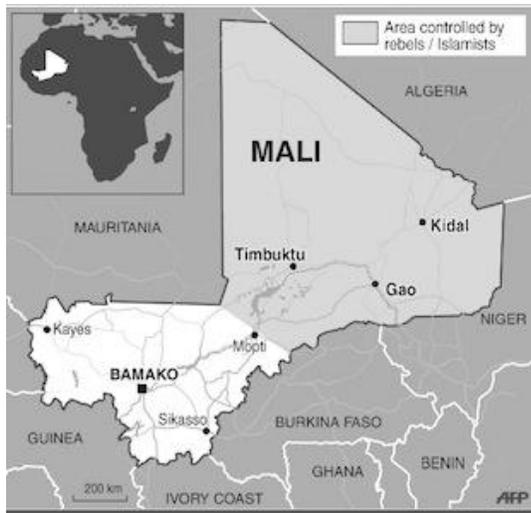
Source: Agence France Presse

But France could only disperse them and did not destroy them. In an effort to put Mali on the path to normalcy, elections were held to select a new President, and a peace accord was signed in early 2015. However, all these efforts did not prevent the Islamist groups from launching attacks. At present, the central government is weak and highly dependent on France and the UN for enforcing peace and stability. So far, the peace agreements between the government and the Tuareg separatists have been slow to yield the desired result.[6]

Factors behind the Rise of Mali Terror Problem

A complex set of factors have led to the rise of terrorism in Mali. The first critical factor has been the Libya uprising in 2011 and 2012 political crisis in Mali, that provided the opportunity to the Islamists and the separatists with sophisticated arms to carry out violent armed rebellion that resulted in Islamist extremists gaining control over large swathes of Mali's territory, drawing international attention and intervention into Mali's security and politics.

The second is the crisis in governance. The central government that was restored after French intervention in 2013 is still very weak to govern the northern territories. Due to weak law enforcement and chronic corruption prone criminal justice institutions, the vast Sahel region has become a sanctuary for local radical Islamic groups, terrorist cells and a conduit for

drugs, arms and human trafficking, organised crime and money laundering, which help to sustain funding for terrorist activities. Lack of concerted and coordinated efforts to address the underlying governance issues has made Mali vulnerable to terrorism.

The third could be the competition that seems to be played out in the region, with each of these groups trying to outpace the other by carrying out violent attacks in order to assert its power.

The fourth important factor has been the failing peace process between Bamako and northern groups, including the Tuaregs, who seized northern Mali in 2012. The peace negotiations have left out the Islamists and dealt with the Tuaregs, while the Islamists are the most serious challenge to the state. Groups such as Ansar al Dine have spoken strongly against the peace agreement. The day when the hotel was attacked in Bamako, peace talks were supposed to be held. The terrifying attack was a kind of strike on the Mali's fragile efforts to restore peace after years of fighting.

Fifth, the French Factor is also important, as some of the groups have targeted French interests in the region because of its intervention and long term presence in Mali. The intentions of groups like Al-Mourabitoun have been to attack France and its allies in the region for their involvement in Mali. The attacks in Bamako and Paris clearly suggest that France's strategies against terrorism are being challenged both at home and abroad.

The sixth crucial factor has been large scale poverty, inequalities, lack of education, unemployment, particularly in the northern areas and lack of dynamic government policies for disadvantaged communities, which provide space for radicalization.

Terrorist Groups in Mali and their Intent

Al-Murabitoon which claimed responsibility for the Bamoko hotel attack is one of the four major Islamist militant groups operating in northern Mali, which include Ansar al-Dine (AAD), Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM).

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is al-Qaeda's North African wing with roots in Algeria. Made up mostly of foreign fighters, it wants to spread Islamic law and liberate Malians from the French colonial legacy. It is known for kidnapping Western nationals. The group has attracted despondents and unemployed youth and migrants from southern Mali, Senegal, Niger, Mauritania and other neighbouring countries. AQIM's main leader is the Algerian Abdel Malek Droukdel.

The Ansar al-Dine (AAD) began as an Islamist militant group. It is a group consisting of local Ifoghas, Tuaregs, Berabiche Arabs and other ethnic groups, who like Boko Haram in Nigeria, want to institutionalise Sharia law in northern Mali. The founder and head of the Ansar Dine is Iyad Ag Ghali, a former Tuareg leader of the 1990s. The majority of Ansar Dine fighters are Tuaregs from Iyad Ag Ghali's Ifoghas tribe and Berabiche Arabs from the Timbuktu area. A number of its militants are Tuareg fighters, who returned from Libya after fighting alongside Muammar Gaddafi's troops.[7]

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mujao) is an AQIM splinter group, whose aim is to spread jihad to the whole of West Africa. It objected to Algerian dominance of AQIM's leadership. It advocates Islamic law and has waged a campaign of violence against Tuareg separatists. It is alleged that its membership comprises both locals and foreigners from the Sahel region and North Africa.[8]

Al-Murabitoon is an Al Qaeda affiliated group that aims to implement sharia (Islamic law). The group was formed from a merger between al-Mulathamun ("The Masked Men") Battalion (AMB) headed by Algerian jihadist, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in 2013. Both groups were offshoots of AQIM. In 2012, Mokhtar Belmokhtar split his al-Mulathamun Battalion (AMB) from AQIM. In January 2013, AMB had masterminded the attack on a gas facility in Algeria that killed 40 people. In May 2013, AMB and MUJAO carried out twin suicide bombings in Niger that killed at least 20 people, which they claimed was in retaliation for the participation of Niger's President, Mahamadou Issoufou, in a Paris rally to show solidarity in the wake of the Paris terror attacks in January.[9] Both the groups merged in August 2013. It was reported that al Mourabitoun had suffered a

split this year in May 2015 when some of the members pledged allegiance to ISIS.[10] In July 2015 Al-Mourabitoun officially allied itself with al-Qaeda and renamed itself "Al Murabitoon – 'Al Qaeda in West Africa'.

The Bamako hotel attack was the third attack by this group. Its intentions have been to "rout" France and its allies in the region. The group carried out attacks against French interests in the region, African military units coordinating against Islamist forces, and African civilians. Al-Murabitoon accused France of killing "peaceful children, women and old men" during its 2013 intervention in Mali.[11] The hotel attack, coming a week after the Paris attacks, could be to send out a message to France against its attempts at fighting terrorism in Mali.

Terror Tactics, Finance and Recruitment

The tactics used by the Islamist groups like Al-Mourabitoun and AQIM, include guerrilla style raids tactics and suicide bombings of military, government and civilian targets. AQIM members have frequently kidnapped, and sometimes executed, aid workers, tourists, diplomats and employees of multinational corporations.

They are funded likely through kidnapping for ransoms and criminal activities, such as trafficking arms, vehicles, cigarettes and persons, according to the U.S. State Department.[12] The group controls important lucrative trafficking routes by which drugs, cigarettes and even people are transported. Analysts say that the AQIM also smuggles narcotics, providing a vital Sahel way station between suppliers in Latin America and European markets. [13]

While trafficking activities have clear transnational dimensions with these groups having transnational networks, at local level, their activity is possible through the regulation and coordination of the local elites and power brokers.[14] According to the UN sanctions committee, Al Mourabitoun head, Belmokhtar's "family connections with local tribes allow [AQIM and affiliated groups] to capitalize on criminal opportunities in the southern Maghreb, such as smuggling, to finance terrorism."[15] The group also likely receives funding through its connections to other terrorist organizations.

MUJAO had previously received funding through regional drug smuggling. MUJAO had also been involved in a 2011 kidnapping of three aid workers in Algeria, who were later released in exchange for a ransom payment. In October 2012, David Cohen, Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the U.S. Treasury Department, said that KFR was "the most significant terrorist financing threat today."[16]

Recruitment

The primary recruiting area for Al Murabitoun, AQIM, MUJAO includes northern and western Africa, particularly Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. The group's exact recruiting methods are unknown, but one likely tactic is the promise of fighting French influence and interests in the region.[17]

According to Hiroute Guebre Sellassie, Special Envoy of the Secretary General for the Sahel, youth and women in the Sahel, who constituted a vast majority of the population, were the targets of recruitment into these movements. Up to 41 million youth under the age of 25 in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger faced hopelessness and were at risk of radicalization.[18]

External Linkages and Transnational Dynamics

Terrorism in Mali is a cross-border regional phenomenon having direct negative impact on the peace and stability of the entire West African region. Its rise in Mali is linked not only to the fallout of Libya uprising, but also to the logistics and financial network. It has been stated by many scholars and observers that the Islamist militants in Mali have local support networks in the neighbouring countries for recruitment, gathering information, supplying arms and ammunition and securing logistical resources and equipment. They are also actively involved with terrorist groups, like *Boko Haram* members in Nigeria.[19] The links between the AQIM and Boko Haram have been affirmed in an *Al Jazeera* interview with the leader of AQIM Droukdel, in which he claimed that his 'group would provide *Boko Haram* with the training and logistics needed to expand its reach and defend Muslims in Nigeria. Various videos released confirm the involvement of Abubakar Shekau of *Boko Haram* with the Islamist armed groups in northern Mali. *Boko Haram* militants could have joined the insurgency in northern

Mali in alliance with MUJAO and AQIM and Abubakar Shekau and his commanders may have found refuge in northern Mali to escape the clampdown of the Nigerian security forces or to assist their Malian counterparts in fighting against what it believed to be 'foreign attacks'.[20] In the recent attacks in Bamako, there were speculations that the terrorists could have linkages with *Boko Haram* as they were speaking English.

Countries like Benin, Cameroon and Chad are considered to be potential targets for radical elements in Mali due to their proximity to Mali and their widespread socio-economic and political issues.[21] The rise of extremism in Mali serves to corroborate speculation that Mali could turn out to become an incubator where the Islamist groups are involved in training and mobilising Africans for violent jihad[22] (Hinshaw, 2013, 1). Such transnational characteristic of terrorism in Mali has become a growing concern for the countries in the region, the African Union and international policy makers.

National, Regional and International Responses to Terrorism

The challenges of terrorism stemming from simultaneous operation of different extremist groups having linkages and networks with other groups in the neighbouring countries, and its escalation in Mali are indeed tremendous. Responding to such challenges would be hard for any nation and Mali is one of Africa's poorest nation with 43.6 percent of the population living below poverty line, according to the World Bank. Covering around 480,000 square miles, Mali shares borders with seven countries including Algeria, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal,
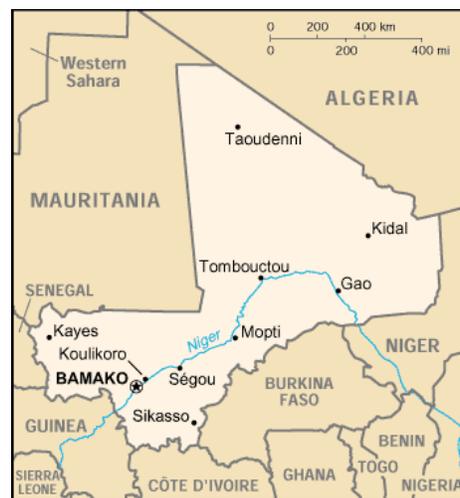
CIA World Fact Book Mali

Guinea, Cote- d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. Nearly 65 percent of Mali's territory in the north is desert. Given the vast territory and Mali's lack of capacity to govern, it is engaged with various regional and international partners, both militarily and politically, to deal with the challenges of terrorism. The major international actors are France, the UN and the US and regional actors are the African Union, ECOWAS, and the Group of five Countries. Mali has been relying heavily

on the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and French forces to provide stability and security to the northern region.

National responses

At the national level, the Government of Mali initiated various activities to counter Islamist extremism. Mali established a new Ministry for National Reconciliation and Development of Northern Regions. It has held a National Dialogue in the north in November to foster national reconciliation, address the grievances of population, and identify measures to reduce instances of violence in the north.

Mali used counter narratives to denigrate terrorist propaganda and established a mechanism to amplify the voices of victims of terrorism. Malian officials and prominent religious leaders routinely condemn violent extremist ideology and terrorist acts. Most Malians practice a tolerant form of Sufi Islam; as a general matter, violent extremist ideologies have not found a receptive audience among Malians. [23]

Regional Responses

The countries of the region have taken greater leadership and ownership of the initiatives addressing the security challenges in the Sahel region, which are reasons to be optimistic. Platforms such as the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel), the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Lake Chad Basin Commission are engaged in enhanced partnerships and coordination with international actors to deal with the challenges. United Nations entities working in the region have also improved coordination and coherence under the United Nations integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS).[24]Regional intervention forces in Mali have been strengthened over the last few months. For example, Chad is contributing more than 2,500 soldiers against terrorist groups in northern Mali, and is part of a five-country coalition against Boko Haram together with Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Benin.

These regional initiatives, though provides the most promising path toward enduring stability for the Sahel region, yet it remains to be seen, how far the North and West African governments will eventually manage to work together.

International responses

The UN

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by the Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013 to support political processes in that country and carry out a number of security-related tasks. It is composed of 11,200 military personnel and 1,440 police personnel. The resolution was strong, as it gave MINUSMA a rare "peace enforcement" role, authorizing peacekeepers to use "all necessary means" to enforce its mandate, which included the protection of civilians and the promotion and protection of human rights. MINUSMA, as part of its mandate, significantly expanded its northern presence in 2014 and is involved in long-range patrols to stabilize the key population centres and other areas where civilians are at risk. It is also taking active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas and is also involved in supporting national political dialogue and reconciliation.

France

France has an integrated counter-terrorism strategy entitled Operation Barkhane in place for the Sahel region. It replaced the previous French mission in Mali, Operation Serval. In cooperation with Malian forces, Barkhane launched numerous operations to degrade violent extremist elements operating in northern Mali, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Murabitoun (AMB), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar al-Dine (AAD). Operation Barkhane is not only restricted to Mali. It has a broader regional scope in Africa's Sahel region. It is mandated to operate across borders to target Islamic extremism in Chad and Niger also. The 3,000-strong counterterrorism force will remain in Mali indefinitely to complete the mission's mandate.

The US

The US has been providing security assistance to Mali with emphasis on promoting democratic institution, responsive governance, respect for human rights and enhancing regional security by building institutions to counter transnational threats. U.S. foreign assistance to Mali totalled more than $135.4 million in FY 2014.[25] Mali has also been a focus country in other USG assistance initiatives, including Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the

Trans-Sahel Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSTCP),the Security Governance Initiative (SGI). The U.S. State Department believes that the best strategy for dealing with terrorism in the Sahel remains working with regional governments to increase their capability, foster regional cooperation and counter violent extremism.

Algiers, however, has abjured a direct counter-terrorism role for Western powers—namely, the United States and France—but it has welcomed indirect support, according to Congressional Research Library, (CRS).[26]

Conclusion

Mali has increasingly been a key site linked to terrorism in North Africa, with well-publicized cases of connections to neighbouring countries emerging in recent days. Many state and intergovernmental actors are involved in Mali to prevent and combat terrorism. But the simultaneous operation of different terror groups in the country, with regional and global networks of illicit trade in drugs, weapons, goods, and people has made the terror problem increasingly difficult to counter.

The November 20 attacks in Bamako proved that all the efforts by these actors have been insufficient to annihilate terrorism in Mali. Different approaches adopted for the national, regional, and international responses in Mali have curtailed the chaos, but have not built durable stability, and viable long-term solutions are yet to appear.

Experts say that the recent coordinated attacks in Bamako are a warning that Mali might rise to rival Syria in terms of interventions and attention received throughout the global war on terror. If the terror groups of Mali decide to mount a credible alternative to ISIS' African affiliates, more attacks can be expected. African and international policymakers need to pre-empt this race by multiplying the counter terrorism tools at their disposal in Africa.

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The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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