

# The Mali crisis and responses by regional actors

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The 'Mali crisis' denotes a complex series of linked events and dynamics that Mali has undergone since 2012. Regional actors and dynamics have played important roles both in underpinning the crisis, and in current efforts to resolve that crisis and return the country to peace and stability. This paper examines the Mali crisis through a regional lens – first in terms of understanding two most proximate drivers of the crisis, the rebellion of the Tuaregs combined with Islamic extremism in the north of the country. The Tuareg are a minority group in the north of Mali whose few opportunities for livelihoods in the north include regional trade and trafficking of contraband. The Tuareg's mounting dissatisfaction with governance from Bamako was given added force by the return of well-armed and radicalised Tuareg from Libya following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in August 2011. The combined effects of disaffected and radicalised Tuareg rebel groups on the one hand, and Islamic militant groups, notably those emerging from the Algerian conflict of the 1990s, set off the recent crisis in Mali. The paper then examines how the key African multilateral actors – ECOWAS at sub-regional level, the AU at the continental level – responded to the ongoing crisis. The paper suggests that although several significant factors and dynamics that have influenced or even driven the Mali crisis were regional in scope, regional efforts to establish peace and stability in Mali have been too narrowly defined or flawed in attempted implementation. It suggests that resolving the problems in Mali must take into account the complex cross-border dynamics and drivers of conflict occurring within the broader regional, i.e. Sahelo-Sahrien, context.

### **Tuareg rebellion and Islamic extremism**

The beginning of the contemporary crisis in Mali is widely pegged to January 2012 when Tuareg rebels belonging to the *Movement national pour la libération d'Azawad* (MNLA) launched attacks on several cities in the north of the country. The Tuareg rebellion was the fourth since Mali's independence from France in 1960. The Tuaregs are semi-nomadic Berbers who live in the Sahel and Sahara regions. They are spread across the states of Mali, Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso and Libya as a result of the international boundaries that emerged from the decolonisation of French West Africa in 1960. The lifestyle and necessary means of survival of Mali's Tuareg are inextricably linked to inter-regional trade that often crosses state boundaries. Mali's Tuareg and Moor population have been estimated to comprise one-tenth of the population of the country.<sup>1</sup> Other groups in Mali's north include the Songhay, which are the largest ethnic group, the Peul, and Fulani ethnic groups, and Arab tribes. The repeated Tuareg rebellions in Mali

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion on challenges of establishing reliable figures on Mali's ethnic makeup in Bruce Whitehouse, 'Understanding Mali's "Tuareg problem"', Bridges from Bamako blog, 25 February 2013, <http://bridgesfrombamako.com/2013/02/25/understanding-malis-tuareg-problem/>, accessed 30 April 2015.

have largely involved Tuareg from the Kidal region, and have resulted from long-running governance problems and unresolved grievances, including marginalisation of the north and its people, the repeated failure of Bamako to give substance to promises of decentralisation, including funding to local authorities, and the entrenchment of clientelistic practices.<sup>2</sup> These are grievances that have not been satisfied since independence in 1960.

Northern Mali is marked by extreme poverty and few viable livelihoods. One of the few means of livelihood is linked to trade, and increasingly, the smuggling of contraband (cigarettes, weapons, irregular migrants and drugs). The desert environment in which the Tuareg and Arab tribes live is one where movement, widespread networks of support and interaction are critical elements of survival and of daily life.<sup>3</sup> Trade and criminal networks in the north of Mali extend over borders, not only to neighbouring Sahelian states, but further afield into North Africa. This regional political economy of smuggling is, in the view of one noted regional expert, more Saharan in its essence than Sahlien.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, climate change has rendered the north an even more inhospitable and conflict-prone environment; a reduction of Mali's average rainfall by 30% since 1998 and the more frequent occurrence of droughts have resulted in high rates of chronic hunger. The Sahara desert is expanding by 48km per year, reducing grazing land and forcing communities to migrate into areas that are already occupied by other groups, creating further reasons for inter-communal conflict. Water shortages have long been a problem, and are a factor underpinning insecurity and political conflict. Some scholars link the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s to the decimation of the Tuareg's herds, which in recent years drove many to flee to Libya and seek employment in the Libyan security forces.<sup>5</sup>

The 2012 rebellion differed from previous ones in large part because the regional context had changed, with a stronger AQMI presence in the north, the fall of the Gaddafi regime, and the establishment of lucrative trade and smuggling routes that brought financial benefits to both traditional chiefs and rebel and Islamist militant groups. While dissatisfaction had been building among the Tuareg, with occasional attacks by the MNLA against the Malian army in the north in late 2011, the

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<sup>2</sup> Susanna D. Wing, 'A New Hope for Peace, but Old Challenges Remain in Mali', IPI Global Observatory, 10 March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfram Lacher, 'The Malian crisis and the challenge of regional security cooperation', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Arsenault, 'Climate change, food shortages, and conflict in Mali', Aljazeera.com, 27 April 2015.

rebellion began in January 2012, spurred by the return to Mali of Tuareg fighters who had been involved in Libya's wars. With the fall of the Gaddafi regime, over 1500 heavily armed Tuareg fighters returned in convoys to the north of Mali. And these Tuareg were mobilised and more prepared for rebellion than in any previous era, including through the presence of a wing of young Tuareg and Arab intellectuals supporting independence, helping to transcend some of the divisions that have historically fractured the Tuareg.<sup>6</sup>

Islamic extremist groups in the north of Mali comprise the other main trigger of the contemporary crisis in northern Mali. One of the main armed groups, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was a Salafist product of the Algerian civil war of 1991-2002. In response to its military losses in northern Algeria, one faction of AQIM withdrew to the extreme south of Algeria and further into the Malien Sahel. From here AQIM and its various affiliates and rivals sought not to conquer the Malian state, but to engage in smuggling and trafficking, aided by the negligence or active collusion of Malian officials linked to the regime of former President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), while seeking to extend their influence across the vast Sahelo-Saharan region from southeastern Algeria to Mauritania, Mali, and Niger to Lake Chad.<sup>7</sup> While certain Islamist groups in Mali such as Ansar ed-Dine are led by Tuareg and other northern Malians, AQIM's leadership remains largely Algerian. More broadly, political and economic interests divide, on the one hand, the Algerian, Libyan and Moroccan Islamists who control the main Islamist katibas ('battalions'), hold the most important positions, and profit the most from their control over the main smuggling and trafficking routes, and on the other hand, the sub-Saharan and Saharouis Islamists.<sup>8</sup>

Unhappiness within the military with the government's management of the response to the rebellion, and especially its perceived ill-equipping of military forces which were unable to effectively counter rebel assaults, resulted in a military coup in the south of the country by a group of mid-ranking officers on 22 March. The Tuareg separatist group MNLA, in a loose alliance with radical Islamists, moved swiftly to take advantage of the collapse of Mali's military and by April had occupied the northern part of the country, declaring the north to be the independent state of Azawad. However the radical Islamic militant groups – Ansar ed-Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO – soon displaced the MNLA and, after consolidating control over most of the north, imposed a regime of Sharia law across the north.

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion in Andy Morgan, 'The Causes of the Tuareg Uprising of January 2012: the Fourth Role of the Tamashek Dice', Think Africa Press, February 2012. Available at: <http://www.andymorganwrites.com/bko2kdl/>

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Grégoire, 'Islamistes et rebelles touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités et ruptures', *EchoGéo [Online]*, Sur le Vif, 3 July 2013, pp. 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Grégoire, p. 3.

### **Sub-regional and regional response: MICEMA and AFISMA**

The initial response to the crisis in Mali was a sub-regional one. The regional body ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) responded quickly in condemning both the military coup that had overturned Mali's constitutional order and the occupation of the north, but appeared to prioritize the former. A mediation process was begun under the lead of Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré. Applying travel and economic sanctions against the military junta at the beginning of April 2012, ECOWAS asked neighbouring countries to close common border crossings with Mali and neighbouring seaports to all trade, a potentially devastating move given Mali's dependence on foreign trade with its neighbours. It further froze transfers regional banks to Malian bank accounts, imposed travel bans and froze the assets of junta leaders unless the junta agreed to relinquish power and enable Mali's return to constitutional order.<sup>9</sup> On 6 April, with ECOWAS mediation, the junta leaders signed a framework agreement agreeing to a timetable for the restoration of constitutional order in exchange for amnesty for the junta members and the lifting of sanctions.<sup>10</sup>

ECOWAS also declared that it was preparing its military force, the ECOWAS Mission in Mali or MICEMA, to send to Mali. However, the ECOWAS military response encountered more challenges, due to lack of capacities among member states, and opposition from Bamako as well as Algeria and Mauritania. One problem was that ECOWAS preferred a military response to the crisis, but political and military actors across the political spectrum in Mali rejected a deployment of ECOWAS forces.<sup>11</sup> The junta opposed a mission that prioritized the return to constitutional order in Mali. However other actors similarly raised objections to ECOWAS forces in Mali. In terms of neighbouring powers, neither the key regional actors Algeria or Mauritania are members of ECOWAS, nor did they support the idea of an ECOWAS military intervention, due to concerns about the effect such an intervention would have in sending militants back over their borders.<sup>12</sup> Pushing for an ECOWAS intervention without their support raised the risk of regional actors supporting different sides of the conflict.<sup>13</sup> ECOWAS was also not

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<sup>9</sup> 'West African Ecowas leaders impose Mali sanctions', BBC News Online, 3 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17591322>

<sup>10</sup> 'Mali sanctions lifted: ECOWAS', Times Live Online, 8 April 2012, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2012/04/08/mali-sanctions-lifted-ecowas>

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Konadjé, 'Quel role la Force en attente de la CEDEAO peut-elle jouer au Mali?' 23 January 2013, <http://www.operationspaix.net/83-dossier-du-rop-quel-role-la-force-en-attente-de-la-cedeao-peut-elle-jouer-au-mali-.html>, accessed 19 April 2015

<sup>12</sup> Wolfram Lacher, 'The Malian crisis and the challenge of regional security cooperation', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2013), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfram Lacher, 'Northern Mali: Key is Strengthening Bamako; ECOWAS Plan Harbors Risks', IPI Global "Observatory, 14 September 2012.

well suited to the early plans to retake northern cities from jihadist groups and the MNLA because ECOWAS does not have Algeria or Mauritania as members, and bringing Algeria into any regional effort to address the Malian crisis was seen as essential.<sup>14</sup> Various commentators also suggested that ECOWAS was not an appropriate body to assist with reform of the Malian armed forces, given that armies in certain francophone member states have carried out coups within recent memory, and appear to lack a firm ethos of military subordination to civilian rule.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, MICEMA did not develop beyond the planning stage, and was replaced by a wider AU initiative.

The AU sought to assist in getting the regional force UN financial support, and by ‘continentalizing’ the framework for intervention, overcoming the reluctance of Algeria to support the response by ECOWAS.<sup>16</sup> On 14 July, the AU’s Peace and Security Council formally requested a strategic concept for the force. That same month ECOWAS sent a Technical Assessment Mission, which included AU and UN participation, to Bamako to begin preparations for the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali, or AFISMA. AFISMA was to first help protect Mali’s transitional institutions and to strengthen the capacity of Malian armed forces and, subsequently help the Malian army to restore state authority throughout the north. ECOWAS and the AU thus requested a mandate from the UN Security Council to deploy the AFISMA stabilization force; however in July the UN Security Council withheld support, requesting more information about the ‘objectives, means and modalities of the envisaged deployment’ and ‘detailed options’ for such a deployment.<sup>17</sup>

A concrete response on AFISMA lagged while the threat posed to northern Mali by jihadist groups became more entrenched over 2012. A draft ‘Strategic Concept for the Resolution of the Crises in Mali’ was only agreed on by the AU and ECOWAS on 24 October. It then was used to develop the draft ‘harmonized concept of operations’ for AFISMA. The concepts proposed that the main troop contributing countries (TCCs), Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger, would train, set up bases in the south, and then support the Malian army in its lead role of conducting combat operations to retake the north.<sup>18</sup> According to Thérroux-Bénoni, putting Malian actors central in the intervention process was a

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<sup>14</sup> Lacher, ‘Northern Mali’.

<sup>15</sup> Lacher, ‘Northern Mali’.

<sup>16</sup> Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, ‘The Long Path to MINUSMA: Assessing the international response to the crisis in Mali’ in Marco Wyss and Thierry Tardy (eds.), *Peacekeeping in Africa: The Evolving Security Architecture* (Routledge, 2014), p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2056 (2012), S/Res/2056 (2012), para 18.

<sup>18</sup> ‘West Africa bloc ECOWAS agrees to deploy troops to Mali’, BBC News, 11 November 2012. See also Thérroux-Bénoni, p. 176.

significant shift resulting from the AU's involvement.<sup>19</sup> It was also envisaged that AFISMA would only be fully operational by September 2013. The UN Security Council however was reluctant to support a military intervention under the operational concept presented by ECOWAS. Observers voiced skepticism that the proposed 3300 troops from 15 West African states, along with the Malian army, had the necessary levels of professionalism to facilitate the retaking of northern Mali against battle-hardened armed groups accustomed to desert warfare.<sup>20</sup> Moreover troops of the proposed leader of the regional intervention, Nigeria, was noted to have stoked domestic popular sympathy and support for the insurgent group Boko Haram due to their reckless and abusive behaviour towards the civilian population.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in late December 2012 the UNSC unanimously approved SCR 2085 which authorised the deployment of an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. However, the Security Council deferred for 30 days agreeing to provide AFISMA a voluntary and a UN-funded logistics support package, pending the refining of options by ECOWAS and the AU, 'including detailed recommendations for a swift, transparent and effective implementation'.<sup>22</sup>

However, on 10 January 2013 the Islamist group MUJAO captured Konna, a key strategic town in central Mali, from Malian forces, appearing to signal the insurgency's southward movement towards Bamako. Given the degraded state of the Malian army, and the lack of readiness of AFISMA to respond, the Malian interim government requested French assistance and a French-led military intervention 'Serval' was launched on 11 Jan 2013. The French and Chadian forces of Serval had by 18 January chased the jihadists from Konna and restored, at least nominally, Malian territorial sovereignty.

### **From regional to international response: AFISMA and MINUSMA**

The French engagement in Mali was intended to be short and would require a rapid follow-on stabilization mission. ECOWAS and the AU began an accelerated deployment of AFISMA forces from Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria to Mali beginning in January rather than the originally projected September, funded by voluntary contributions agreed at during an emergency donors meeting in Addis Ababa at the

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<sup>19</sup> héroux-Bénoni, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup> 'Rice: French plan for Mali intervention is "crap"', *Foreign Policy Online*, 11 December 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Anouar Boukhars, 'What Next for Mali and Algeria?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 23 January 2013.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085 (2012), 20 December 2012, para 21.

end of January.<sup>23</sup> Despite the contributions that AFISMA made with Serval to recovering northern Mali from the rebel and Islamist forces,<sup>24</sup> France put forward the suggestion that AFISMA be replaced by a robust UN mission, which would have the advantage of more secure funding than AFISMA, to handle the subsequent stabilisation of Mali. The notion of re-hatting was endorsed by ECOWAS and the AU on 7 March 2013, subject to several conditions, including consultation by the UN with the AU and ECOWAS on the appointment of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, with an expectation of 'continuity' in leadership of the mission and contingents.<sup>25</sup> On 21 April 2013 the UN Security Council authorized the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to replace AFISMA with a mandated strength of up to 11,200 military personnel and 1440 police personnel.<sup>26</sup> The AU suggestions were ignored by the Security Council in authorizing and mandating MINUSMA, prompting a sharply-worded rebuke by the AU Peace and Security Council that it had not been appropriately consulted in the drafting of the resolution for the takeover of AFISMA by MINUSMA.<sup>27</sup> There was also resentment that AFISMA should have been provided with the logistical and financial means before the eventual re-hatting to the UN mission, and that there should have been greater continuity in military and civilian leadership from AFISMA to MINUSMA (i.e. military commander and head of mission positions).<sup>28</sup> On 1 July 2013 AFISMA was replaced by MINUSMA with the re-hatting of some 6500 African peacekeepers.

Despite multiple rounds of negotiations since 2014, a peace agreement with the main northern Tuareg rebel groups has not yet been achieved, but is a necessary prerequisite to undertake governance and security sector reforms, and enable focusing the attention of international and Malian security forces on combating jihadist and other extremist groups in the north. Clashes between members of the Coordination and Platform armed groups in the north has in the meantime increased, linked by the UN to competition over control of strategic com-

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Boutellis and Paul D. Williams, 'Disagreements over Mali could sour more than the upcoming African Union celebration', IPI Global Observatory, 15 May 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Festus Kofi Aubyn, 'Policing and Peace Operations in Africa: Reflections on MINUSMA', KAIPTC Occasional Paper No. 39 (March 2015), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Communiqué of the 358<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU) on the situation in Mali, 7 March 2013, para 13 (ii).

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2100 (2013), 25 April 2013.

<sup>27</sup> African Union Peace and Security Council, Communiqué, PSC/PR/COMM. (CCCLXXI), 25 April 2013, para. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Cecilia Hull Wiklund and Gabriella Ingerstad, *The Regionalisation of Peace Operations in Africa: Advantages, challenges and the way ahead*, FOI-R-4031-SE, February 2015, p. 30.

mercial and trafficking routes in the region.<sup>29</sup> With the continuing failure to achieve a peace agreement between Bamako and the main armed opposition groups in the north, MINUSMA has been subject to repeated attacks by rebel and Islamist groups; due to the rate of casualties among its personnel, is considered the most deadly UN mission.<sup>30</sup>

MINUSMA is operating in parallel with French forces that have a regional (Sahélien) counterterrorism role through Operation Barkhane. MINUSMA also faces declining confidence among Malians, especially in the north. According to a public opinion poll conducted under the auspices of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, only 28% of northern Malians in Gao, Kidal and Ménaka held a positive view of MINUSMA.<sup>31</sup>

The trajectory of the sub-regional and regional responses to the crisis in Mali suggests several lessons about the impact and influence of regional actors. First, the responses of ECOWAS and the AU demonstrated limitations of the African Peace and Security Architecture. While ECOWAS was initially quick to respond to Mali's crisis, it was limited in what it could do due to its membership (which did not include the key state of Algeria, and to a lesser extent Mauritania) and its resources (lacking the capacities and funding to mount an intervention without external means of support). And yet, ECOWAS is considered 'first in class' among the Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs) both in terms of preparing its brigades for the African Union's Standby Force, which is supposed to be operational in 2015, as well as due to the ECOWAS' prior experience in conducting interventions in various crises that have affected the sub-region. However, that experience and advanced capacities were not sufficient to provide a solution for the Mali crisis.<sup>32</sup>

The African Union's efforts to reframe the multilateral context for the African intervention from sub-regional to continental demonstrated how the AU could complement and collaborate with a REC in a conflict management initiative. However, AU-ECOWAS relations also suffered from lack of coordination and occasional tensions that delayed arriving at a consensus. The AU's AFISMA plan also ran into similar challenges

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<sup>29</sup> UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali*, S/2015/219, 27 March 2015, para. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Between 1 July 2013 and 1 May 2015, the mission has experienced 49 fatalities. MINUSMA Facts and Figures, 1 May 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minusma/facts.shtml>

<sup>31</sup> Mali-Mètre, 'Enquête d'opinion "Que pensent les Maliens?"', Numéro Spécial pour Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, janvier/février 2015, pp. 40-41. Can be accessed at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mali/10100/>

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Jacques Konadjé, 'Quel rôle la Force en attente de la CEDEAO peut-elle jouer au Mali?' 23 January 2013, <http://www.operationspaix.net/83-dossier-du-rop-quel-role-la-force-en-attente-de-la-cedeao-peut-elle-jouer-au-mali-.html>, accessed 19 April 2015.

of capacity and funding that ECOWAS' MICEMA had encountered, relying on the UN to provide financial and logistical support to sustain their planned deployments.<sup>33</sup>

### **The need for regional solutions**

To what extent are the causes and consequences of instability regionalised? As discussed above, regional factors played a role in Mali's crisis, strengthening Tuareg capacities and fostering an extremist Islamist presence in the north, further sustained by trade, smuggling and trafficking networks. Wolfram Lacher asserts that the regional dimension to the Mali conflict is significant, but that it has been misunderstood as encompassing chiefly the Sahel region, when it should more accurately be seen as part of the Sahelo-Saharan region. However, broadening the regional perspective to include key North African states of Libya and Algeria is a much more challenging task than dealing with the weak, aid-dependent states of the Sahel. The task of devising regional solutions is not made any easier by the historic rivalries and lack of trust among the key states of Algeria, Libya and Morocco.<sup>34</sup>

Including Algeria in any solution for the Mali crisis is necessary, as indicated by its trade links with northern Mali, the influence of Algerian salafists on the militant Islamic movement in Mali and elsewhere, Algerian (and Mauritanian) opposition to the planned ECOWAS military intervention MICEMA, and Algeria's role mediating between Bamako and northern groups since the 1990s. However regional initiatives have been limited by regional rivalries, such as Algeria's 'pays du champ' (core countries) initiative to counter criminal and extremist networks that involved Mauritania, Mali and Niger, but omitted Libya (which refused to join) and Morocco (which was excluded by Algiers); in the end the initiative failed to result in operational cooperation of the member countries.<sup>35</sup>

Certain key Western initiatives have also adopted a circumscribed regional approach. For example, the EU's 2011 Sahel strategy targeted the security-development nexus but was limited to Mauritania, Mali and Niger, even while recognising that similar challenges affected parts of the other Sahelian states of Burkina Faso and Chad, as well as neighbouring countries of Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Nigeria, 'whose engagement is necessary to help resolve them', and that 'developments in the Maghreb have consequences for the situation in the Sahel'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Thérout-Bénoni, pp. 176-177.

<sup>34</sup> Lacher, 'The Malian crisis', p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Lacher, 'The Malian crisis', pp. 2-3.

<sup>36</sup> European Union External Action Service, 'Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel', 2011.

Revised in 2014, the Strategy was formally extended to Chad and Burkina Faso, while political dialogue on conflict prevention and security was to be pursued with West African and Maghreb neighbouring states.<sup>37</sup>

Other organisations including ECOWAS, the AU, UN, World Bank and African Development Bank have each developed Sahel-specific strategies, but there is little or no harmonisation among them. These initiatives are also flawed by their predominant focus on military solutions to countering terrorist groups and organised crime, as opposed to the governance and development deficits that drive radicalisation and conflict.<sup>38</sup>

While smuggling, trafficking and hostage taking for ransom have been major sources of funding for militant Islamist groups activities, regional experts have argued that jihadism represented by AQIM and other extremist groups in the Maghreb states is fundamentally driven by poverty and the absence of viable livelihoods, and that smuggling and corruption thrive in part as a result of the dearth of intra-regional trade arrangements.<sup>39</sup> Responses to the crisis in Mali must seek to address not only the poverty and lack of livelihood opportunities that drive northern youth to militantism and smuggling, but given their intermingling with foreign armed groups and the wider political economy of smuggling and trafficking across the Sahelo-Saharan region, these must be seen as part of a complex regional system requiring integrated and multidimensional regional responses.

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<sup>37</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020', Brussels, 20 April 2015, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Anouar Boukhars, 'Rethinking Security Across the Sahara and the Sahel', FRIDE Policy Brief No. 199 (April 2015), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Harmon, 'From GSPC to AQIM: the evolution of an Algerian Islamist terrorist group into an Al-Qu'ida Affiliate and its implications for the Sahara-Sahel region', *Concerned Africa Scholars*, Bulletin No. 85 (Spring 2010), p. 24.



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