WHAT IS NEXT FOR MALI?
THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT
AND CHALLENGES TO STABILITY

Dona J. Stewart

In March 2012, the government of Mali, one of the most touted symbols of Africa’s democratic potential, fell in a military executed coup. At the same time, a 4-decade-old rebellion among Tuaregs seeking autonomy or independence reached new heights, fueled by weapons from Muammar Gadaffi’s fallen government and perhaps the belief that the Arab Spring could extend to northern Mali. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and their allies were quick to capitalize on the increasing chaos in a territory characterized by lack of government control and poverty, and seized the major cities in the north. The imposition of a severe form of Islamic law and a growing food crisis sent the population fleeing south across Mali’s international borders. The French-led military intervention, Operation SERVAL, ousted the militants from the main cities in the north, but did not address the crisis’ underlying issues, including the grievances that feed Tuareg nationalist movement, the establishment of a civilian-led government in Mali, and the near- and long-term threats to food security. The eruption of this crisis also demands a critical look at the Sahel’s regional security framework, and the U.S. role in it.

In Part II: The Crisis Unfolds, the author examines the recent events that created the volatile conditions leading to the crisis. The Tuareg nationalist movement has existed for over 40 years; there have been at least four periods of rebellion, and military force has been the primary response from the central government. Gadaffi had long been a supporter of the Tuareg, employing them in trusted positions within his military. The fall of his regime sent many Tuaregs home, laden with heavy weaponry, escalating the rebellion to new heights. Due to a steady expansion into the Sahel zone over the last decade, AQIM was well poised to capitalize on the anarchy and seize the north’s major cities.

The fall of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal to AQIM illustrates the need for a critical examination of the U.S.-led regional security framework, which
is the focus of Part III: The Regional Security Framework in the Sahel. Numerous factors hindered the effectiveness of this framework, including the newness of the military partnerships with regional governments, their differing strategic level interests, and the wide range of capabilities among their armed forces. Building partner counterterrorism capability to meet the transnational al-Qaeda threat was the primary focus of the security framework through programs such as the Pan Sahel Initiative and the Trans Sahel Counter Terrorism Partnership. However, this new capability was ill-prepared for a complex crisis that included a largely secular nationalist rebellion, the overthrow of a civilian government by U.S.-trained soldiers, and a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

Long-term stability in northern Mali will require a more multidimensional approach that considers threats beyond those posed by Islamist militants such as AQIM. Physical security, secured through military and law enforcement efforts, is a prerequisite for the development of institutions of good governance. Without such institutions, physical security is fleeting, requiring constant intervention when a crisis erupts.

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