GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION AND INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA, THE CASE OF MALI

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Abstract

The West African region is characterized by a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity, with a prevalence of armed conflicts, terrorism, illicit trade and international tensions. The region is of significant geopolitical importance, with numerous countries possessing interests in its abundant natural resources. This has led to a proliferation of diplomatic relations between West African countries and external powers, including France, the United States and Russia. However, as has been previously observed, the region is often constrained by a lack of security and the proliferation of terrorist groups. As in the case of Mali, rebel and terrorist groups have become particularly strong and have caused the whole Sahel region to experience insurgencies. The hypothesis of this study is that global powers (the European Union, Russia, the United States of America), in particular France, have worsened the security situation in West Africa, and that the inequality in the policies pursued by these powers has created some grievances in Northern Mali, leading to the proliferation of rebel and terrorist groups.

Keywords: *Terrorism-West Africa, Insecurity, Geopolitics, International Interventions.*

Batı Afrika'da Jeopolitik Durum ve Güvensizlik, Mali Örneği

Öz

Batı Afrika, silahlı çatışmalar, terörizm, yasadışı ticaret ve uluslararası gerginliklerle karakterize edilen sürekli güvensizliğin damgasını vurduğu bir bölgedir. Batı Afrika, çok sayıda ülkenin çok sayıda doğal kaynak üzerinde çıkarlarının olduğu çok önemli bir bölgedir. Fransa, ABD ve son zamanlarda Rusya gibi ülkelerin Batı Afrika'daki ülkelerle diplomatik alanda faaliyet göstermelerinin nedeni de budur. Ancak söylendiği gibi, bölgede istikrar güvenlik eksikliği ve terörist grupların yayılması nedeniyle sekteye uğramaktadır. Mali örneğinde olduğu gibi, isyancı ve terörist gruplar özellikle güçlenmiş ve tüm Sahel bölgesinin ayaklanmalar yaşamasına neden olmuştur. Bu çalışmanın hipotezi, başta Fransa olmak üzere küresel güçlerin(Avrupa Birliği, Rusya, Amerika Birleşik

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Devletleri) Batı Afrika'daki güvenlik durumunu daha da kötüleştirdiği; bu güçlerin izlediği politikalardaki eşitsizliğin Kuzey Mali'de bazı mağduriyetler yarattığı ve bunun da isyancı ve terörist grupların çoğalmasına yol açtığı yönündedir.

Anahtar kelime: *Terörizm, Batı Afrika, Güvensizlik, Geopolitik, Uluslararası Müdahaleler.*

Introduction

The vast and diverse landscape of the West African region is not only characterized by its rich cultural diversity but also natural resources, it is also characterized by its intricate web of geopolitical challenges that continuously shape its socio-political dynamics. Among the number of countries that exist in West Africa, Mali is a perfect study case of the security issues that some countries are facing in the Sub-Saharan Region because the country encapsulates some complex interplay of internal strife and crisis, external interventions, and regional power dynamics.

Situated at the crossroads of the Sahel, Mali has always been portrayed as a microcosm of the broader challenges facing in West Africa. Its recent history and more precisely since 2012 is characterized by political instability, armed conflicts and terrorism and these aspects of the crisis in Mali serve as a reminder of the multifaceted nature of geopolitical tensions in the region. From the eruption of the Tuareg rebellion in the North of Mali to the sudden increasing number of jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda in the Islam Maghreb (AQMI), Mali offers the perfect of cause to effect and the interdependent relationships between local grievances to global security concerns.

However, to deeply understand security issues that exist in the North of Mali we have to put the focus on the geopolitical situation of the entire West African region and the presence of the international community who are craving for control and influence. The involvement of such countries who are Mali's neighbours such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, alongside external actors like France, the United States, and various international organizations only prove how important the crisis was. Moreover, the presence of natural resources like gold and uranium adds another layer to the complexity of the geopolitical situation of West Africa as external actors are competing for economic supremacy amid the chaos.

Under this context, this article seeks to unravel the geopolitical mixture of West Africa with Mali serving as focal point of analysis. While examining the historical antecedents, contemporary challenges, and future prospects facing Mali, we will try to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the region's geopolitical landscape.

As we have mentioned in our abstract, one of the main hypothesis is that global powers and mainly France have worsened the security situation in West Africa. The global power's interests are indeed protecting their own geopolitical and economic interests seeking to seize Mali's important resources like and uranium and gold. Our first hypothesis raises then several questions about the real intentions of those global powers engaged in the West African region. The second hypothesis which the focus will be put upon is the fact that terrorist groups such as MNLA, MUJAO and AQMI in the North Mali can be traced back to socio-political differences but also historical factors that engage the people leaving in the North of Mali. The latter have for long expressed the need of the central state of Mali to put decent policies so that they can live normally and get access to a certain decent amount of living. This hypothesis helps us in trying to understand the roots of the extremism that some insurgent groups have been showing in Mali in the last decade. It is particularly full of impact as it highlights at the same time the historical tensions between the central government of Mali and the North part of the country that demands equality in policies undertook by the government.

In this article we will try an economic approach which integrates historical, political, economic and security perspectives while covering the international presence who, despite their deep involvement in the crisis couldn't stop the situation being worse as we saw it in January 2013 when the French intervention liberated key towns in the North of Mali even though after the crisis persisted (Lyammouri, 2021:1).

While focusing also on these factors we will try to know more about the complexities of the geopolitical situation in West Africa mainly because of the actors involved and the longevity of the issues that the Mali situation has created in terms of security issues and the proliferation of terrorist groups. In the first part of this article, we will try to focus on the geopolitical importance of the region while analysing the security issues, in the second part we will delve on the historical security issues in Mali and in the last part we will talk about the factors that influenced the lack of security in Mali.

1. General West African Context

1.1 Geopolitical Significance of the Region

As a region, West Africa has since the 15th century even before the arrival of the Europeans been a very strategic geopolitical area. But before delving on this, it is important to first do a conceptual analysis on what is Geopolitics. The latter is a combination of two words which are geography and politics, it has therefore something to do with the relationships between geographic, economic and political factors. It examines the influence of geography on power in concordance to international politics. This concept was first coined by Rudolph Kellen (Akinfeye, 2014: 18). In the dictionary of "Larousse" the word geopolitics is defined as "The science that studies

the relationship between the geography of states and their politics". Geopolitics is therefore closely linked to the power game that countries play within a well-defined territory. As we can see, this mini war has several players pursuing diplomatic, economic and political interests. If we take all these factors into account, we can say that West Africa has long been a region of major geopolitical importance for many external players.

This geopolitical importance of West Africa doesn't date recently, we will have to go way back in the past until the 15th century even before the arrival of Europeans. We can give the example of Sunni Ali, the emperor of Songhai (1464-1492) who wanted to conquer Jenne and Timbuktu and sought to first cease the land of Niger because of its importance. This was the same for other emperors like the Sudanese ones who were seeking to gain control of the gold in West Africa. The arrival of the Europeans just enhanced the geopolitical importance of that area to the world mainly because of its natural resources. (Akinfeye, 2014: 20). It was only at the beginning of the 15th century that the height of the geopolitical interest of West Africa can be seen because of the start of the slavery trade. Countries such as Portugal, France, England started a fierce struggle for control of all the land and natural resources, but also developed their network of slavery. This system went on to be the most advantageous aspect of West Africa's geopolitical importance because it helped Europe having the edge economy wise and started their domination until the first world war which started in 1914. By that time, slavery ended, and the occupation of West African was complete as France, England, Portugal had made colonies.

Therefore, when the first world war started, soldiers from West Africa went on to help the Europeans in the war and especially France which recruited many soldiers from West Africa, they were followed by the British who used the manpower of the West African region to supply its army when they were in need during the world war. When we consider these aspects, we can say that the first phase of West African geopolitical importance to other nations was in terms of demography as they have recruited. (Akinfeye, 2014: 29)

The second geopolitical importance of West Africa was in terms of its products and resources, especially during the industrial revolution that occurred in Europe. The countries like France, Great-Britain and Portugal understood the need of raw materials and end products which could be found in West Africa. The resources like cocoa, oil palm, cotton, groundnuts and gum arabic were among the products that were mainly important for these countries, which have finally established their superiority over the West African colonies. Moreover, the region has been in global geopolitics when we consider its geographical position. As an example, Dakar which is the capital city of Senegal is closer than any countries to the Americas and this distance was a vital point to the retail sale of products to other countries.

According to Professor Olajompo Abayomi Akinyeye :

"West Africa during the colonial period was a storehouse of vital mineral resources which her colonial masters found indispensable at crucial moments [...], The Sierra Leone iron ore field supplied 50 percent of the iron ore needs of Britain then. The region still remains the reservoir of vital minerals which the world needs. Perhaps the most notable of these is crude oil in which our dear country Nigeria leads the region in supply to the world. Others are uranium from which nuclear power is generated. France, a nuclear Power in the world, has no uranium deposit of her own; she depends substantially on the supply of this product from her former colony of Niger." (Akinfeye, 2014: 34)

This only highlights the significant role that West Africa played in supplying essential resources to sustain industrial economies elsewhere.

1.2 Security Challenges in the West Africa Region

West Africa has always been a region marked by violence and conflict, with direct consequences for the region's security. These security problems can be explained by several factors. According to Alexandre Marc, Neelam Verjee and Stephen Mogaka, one of the main reasons for the security problem in West Africa is rapid population growth. They argue that this rapid growth has become a heavy burden, and that institutions, which must reinvent themselves rapidly, often have problems of equity, which can render them ineffective and illegitimate. (Marc, Verjee, Mogaka, 3:2015). The problem of insecurity in West Africa is not new, but it is only since 2010 that it has attracted the attention of the international community. The turmoil in Mali, for example, and in Nigeria with terrorist groups like Boko Haram, have all served to demonstrate the insecurity that is rife in West Africa.

If we go back in history, mainly to the period when most West African countries gained their independence, i.e. between 1960 and 1975, but also to the advent of the first presidents, we will see that the problem of insecurity has deep roots. On the other hand, conflicts have always been bloody, such as the Biafran war in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, the civil war in Liberia in 1989, the war in Sierra Leone in the early 2000s, the civil war in Guinea-Bissau, and the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2003. (Marc, Verjee, Mogaka, 7: 2015).

In addition, the lack of security in West Africa has been exacerbated by the proliferation of terrorist groups. This is because terrorist organizations and insurgents in some parts of West Africa have forged links with actors who have an interest in destabilizing the region, such as criminal networks, but also at state level, with the inability to react pragmatically when conflicts of this kind arise. The weakness of certain states is another factor in the prevailing insecurity in the region. States are responsible for failing to anticipate the security concerns that have plagued West Africa for decades. As a result, they fail to implement appropriate measures to counter the proliferation of terrorist organizations and insurgents. (Lyammouri, 2: 2021)

When we consider all these factors about security issues in West Africa, it would be possible to say that its gravity is at its peak point. The resurgence of terrorist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria or Niger are the actors that are playing the main role in disrupting security issues in the region. Other factors are Coups d'état that usually weaken states, and we have seen many times since decades that Coups have been a real issue in West Africa. This is the reason why many countries in the Sahel are weak because they don't have strong institutions that can help the government's policies to fight against terrorist groups or take enough measures to solve the insecurity issue.

2. History of Insecurity in Mali

Mali and the Sahel Region. Source: European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office, 2 August 2012

2.1 Historical Antecedents

Mali as you can see is located in the North part of the West African region. In the northeast, it shares its borders with Algeria, to the east the Republic of Niger, Burkina Faso in the southeast, Côte d'Ivoire in the south, Guinea to the southwest, Senegal to west and Mauritania to the northwest. (Oko-Otu, Aro, Ekwe, Nwankwo, Ngene, Aloh, & Nwaigwe, 3641: 2021)

The crisis in Mali has its roots in a combination of historical, political, economic and socio-economic factors. Regarding Mali's political stability, which remains the most important factor, the country has experienced years of political instability, especially with coups d'état marked by political struggles. The main coups d'état took place in 1968 with the overthrow of Modibo Keita by Moussa Traoré, who was subsequently overthrown in 1991 by a popular uprising. The 2012 coup d'état was the crisis that catalysed instability in Mali and plunged the country into a decade-long crisis. The Malian crisis began in 2012 with a series of events that had two main causes: the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali and the coup d'état led by Captain Amadou Haya against the regime of Amadou Toumani Touré. These two events strengthened the rebel and jihadist groups in northern Mali.

However, to better understand this 2012 crisis and the implication of Tuaregs, it is necessary to contextualize the issue. Just like other west African states, Mali has experienced the consequences of colonialism in the matter of division of its territory. After the independence, the new Mali government was seeking to consolidate its power in the entire country by aggressive measures. These aggressive measures lead somehow to the marginalization of some ethnic communities in certain parts of the country but mainly in the North of Mali. This approach by the central Malian state has exacerbated the feelings and frustration already noted among the Tuareg and which also led to revolutions, political outbreak and rebellion during the 20th and 21st centuries. Then, by the time this 2012 crisis unfolded, the country has already become a conflict zone between Tuareg rebels, a minority group, and government forces. Even though there had been some clashes in years like 1960, 1990 but also in 2006, the conflict has been exacerbated by the sudden fall of Gaddafi regime and Libyan conflict in 2011. (Aning, Edu-Afful, 128: 2016).

The Tuareg people in northern Mali, who have long felt neglected and marginalized by central government policies, have always resorted to arms and rebellion in their quest for greater autonomy that could lead to independence. The events of 2012 were the result of several factors, the other being the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. The return of the Tuaregs after the crisis in Libya only added to the scale of the crisis that began in Mali in 2012. (Chauzal, Van Damme, 17: 2012).

Internally too, the Tuaregs of the North were often linked to the insecurity that prevailed in the country. Beyond this aspect, the regime of Amadou Toumani Touaré has accentuated the inequalities between the North of Mali and the South. The Arabs and Tuaregs felt that there were disparities in the distribution of certain resources. This inequality in access to certain resources led the inhabitants of the North to demand independence for a long time. This problem with the Tuaregs has been going on for decades, as they are a community shared by Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. They in fact periodically rebelled against the state of Mali, forming rebel factions all over northern Mali, which eventually reached a high level of insecurity impacting the Sahel. Many observers believe that the most important factor is the frustration of the inhabitants of the North, and it is this same frustration that has allowed certain terrorist groups to recruit men to fight for their ideals. In his article, Ousmane Aly Diallo quotes a Fulani tribal chief in northern Mali who was interviewed by Human Rights Watch:(Diallo, 301: 2017)

> The politics of the jihadist is to provide a better alternative to the state. Our people don't associate the state with security and services, but rather with predatory behaviour and negligence. Since 1991, we have complained about banditry, but nothing has been done. In 2015, the presence of jihadists has grown; people are joining them because of their ability to protect us, our animals, and our possessions, especially from Tuareg bandits. There is no justice—our cows are stolen; our people are killed … the jihadists are the response.

This is the feeling that drives the inhabitants of northern Mali, which is why insurgent and terrorist groups have always been the main perpetrators of insecurity since the 1960s. The other period that marked the proliferation of terrorist groups was in 2006, with armed groups demanding greater recognition and autonomy for their region. After years of frustration, the situation escalated in 2012 when terrorist groups and insurgents joined forces with the aim of asserting their claims by force. This led the country into a tailspin of insecurity, with many external players becoming involved in the conflict. (Sow, 2012: 13)

2.2 The Consequences of the 2012 Crisis, the Emergence of Armed Groups and Terrorists.

Mali has been in the last decade one of the most unstable countries in West Africa. In 2012, a double crisis hit the West African country: A coup was organized by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo and in the North of the country the Tuaregs started a revolution to have their independence fully. After the revolution, the rebels and their allies started to control some of the cities in the North and the most important ones were Gao, Kidal and Tombouctou (BBC News Afrique, 2012).

This created big turmoil and security issues, and these issues were one of the main reasons why the Coup happened. The fragility of the Mali state is such that for a very long period, international organizations and countries like France had to intervene to help the Government defeat the jihadist group affiliated with Al Qaida. These events have successfully plunged the country into total chaos, but also into a situation of insecurity with the proliferation of terrorist groups that have taken advantage of the coup d'état in 2012 and the collapse of the Malian rule of law. Since then, terrorist and criminal flows have taken over, allowing certain insurgent and terrorist groups to control the northern part of Mali.

In his report on the crisis in Mali, Alexis Arieff highlights in particular the fact that the United Nations is expressing fears about the expansion of the terrorist group Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb into northern Mali, having established relations with Islamist groups already in Mali such as Ansar Al Deen, which stands for "the defenders of Deen", and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa. These terrorist groups, having taken almost all of northern Mali, including the towns of Gao and Kidal, have established Sharia law in these regions. (Arieff, 2013: 2)

In the United Nations' report on the situation in Mali, it was stated that terrorist groups were continuing to perpetrate atrocities and recruit new members and the estimation between 3000 and 15000 combatants in the north of Mali.
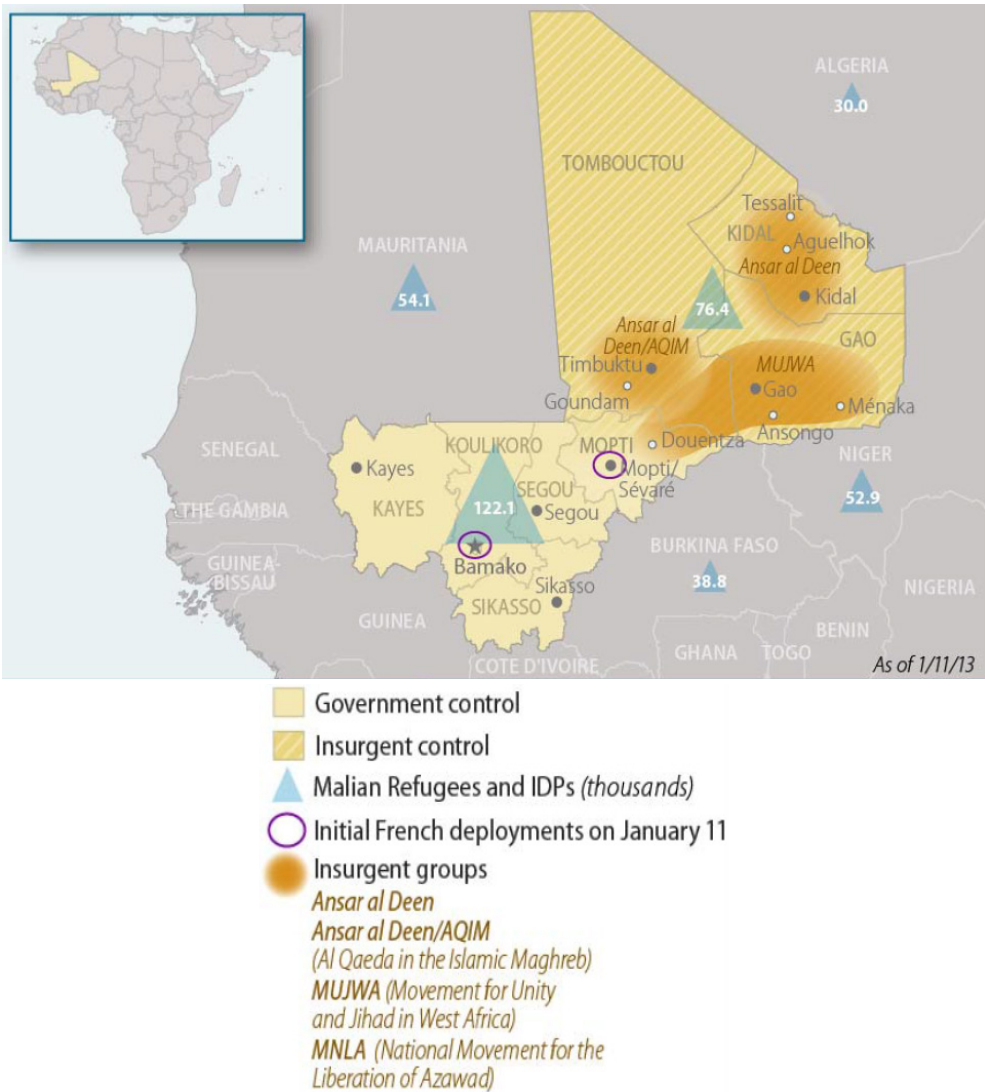
The Mali situation a year after the beginning of the conflict source: CRS. Basemap created by Hannah Fischer using Esri Data 2012. Projection: Winkle II, November 29, 2012. Sources of information depicted include U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) humanitarian updates, news reports, and CRS interviews. cited by Alexis Arieff, 2013

As we see it in this map, we can see that in areas such as Gao and Kidal, the insurgent groups have taken control of those territories despite the evolution of external countries such as France and the United States. The efforts that those countries have put in place is a result of several events that have occurred between October 2011 to January 2012. The main events started then when some Tuareg combatants returned to the North of Mali and created the Movement of the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and after that, the presence of AQMI was felt with a terrorist attack targeting Malian troops and civilians. (Arieff, 2013: 12)

The proliferation of terrorist groups was seen and to measure the gravity and the level of their threat, we must put the focus in a detailed way on some of them.

The Insurgent Groups

After the events of 2012 which was accentuated by the rebellion of the Tuaregs, various violent extreme Islamists groups have been increasingly active in the North of Mali. But the first insurgent group that erupted came from the region of Kidal, still in the North and their main purpose was to get more recognition and help due to precarity in Kidal. The region is a desertic area and agriculture and farming are difficult to do due to climate characteristics. That insurgency was quickly crushed by Malian troops with the help of troops from the Soviet Union.

Between 1991 until 2012, other insurgent groups started to fight against the central state asking to have much more chances to receive the same policies that the Malian government is establishing in the South of the country and that the fact the North is being deprived is not equal. This was the 1991 insurgent, the second one insurgency that occurred was in 2006 by the Tuareg tribes and this insurgent group was mainly composed by formed Tuaregs who integrated the Malian army forces, they created a rebellion which attacked the military base and took most of their logistics. However, due to some lack of understanding and rivalries between Tuareg groups, the rebellion was easily repelled. But despite being repelled, some members of insurgent groups created the Alliance of Democracy and Change (ADC) which later became the Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006. (Sow, 2018: 14)

In 2011, when the Arab spring started and ended Khaddafi's regime, many insurgent groups including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), this insurgent group was created 2011 by rebel groups that were part of the Libyan crisis. This was a big boost among Tuareg groups that were fighting in the North of Mali as their logistics became bigger and because of that MNLA which became the strongest rebel group was formed. The group started its rebellion against the central state of Mali in January 2012 and took control of the North of Mali by April 2012 with the help of the Islamist group Ansar al Dine. After the crisis of 2012, transnational jihadist groups were using the disorder in the country to make some terrorist attack and to spread fear within the population of the North specially in Gao and Kidal as they claimed those who must create an Islamic state.

However, MNLA is not the insurgent groups that are causing insecurity, these include the High Council for the Unity of Azawad, which was founded by one of the leaders of one of the Tuareg tribes, Alghabass Ag Intallah, who was previously a member of Ansar al Dine. His faction operated mainly in Gao, Ménaka and Timbuktu, and had an Islamist ideology geared towards strict adherence to the Shariah charters. (Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel)

The Terrorist Groups

Since the start of the conflict in Mali, most studies have focused on the activities of AQIM, this terrorist group's presence in West Africa is a very long one since it was among the initial regions impacted by Al-Qaeda's international terrorism. (Bullejos, 2019: 66) Further, the MNLA nationalist armed rebellion, which is why the ancestry of one of the most influential terrorist groups, the MUJAO, has been overlooked. According to Jessica M. Huckabey, who is cited by Berahim Sow, MUJAO is in some ways descended from AQIM and is an Islamic terrorist organization linked to other jihadist groups in northern Mali. It was in October 2011 that the MUJAO began these hostilities by kidnapping 3 European men who were working in humanitarian aid in southern Algeria. In December of the same year, their Mauritania leader, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, publicly declared war on France because of what he called "France's hostility to Islam". Its main objective was to Islamise the whole of West Africa, so it carried out a suicide attack on a gendarmerie in southern Algeria in March 2012, and in December the United States blacklisted the group as a terrorist organisation. (Sow, 20, 2018)

The other terrorist group which was formed came into life after a Fulani preacher created in January 2015 the Macina Liberation Front, but this group's purpose was not really to create an Islamic state but to recreate the Fulani empire. Many scholars have linked this organization to Ansar Dine and some other important terrorist groups in Mali and according to Sow, their main act of terror happened in August 2015 when they attacked the hotel named "Bylos" and killing at same time 12 people who were part of the peacekeeping operations of the United States. The other terrorist groups that we can mention is the Group for the support of Islam and Muslims, this terrorist group was also a branch of Ansar Al Dine which were the main driving point of terrorism in the North of Mali. (Sow, 23, 2018)
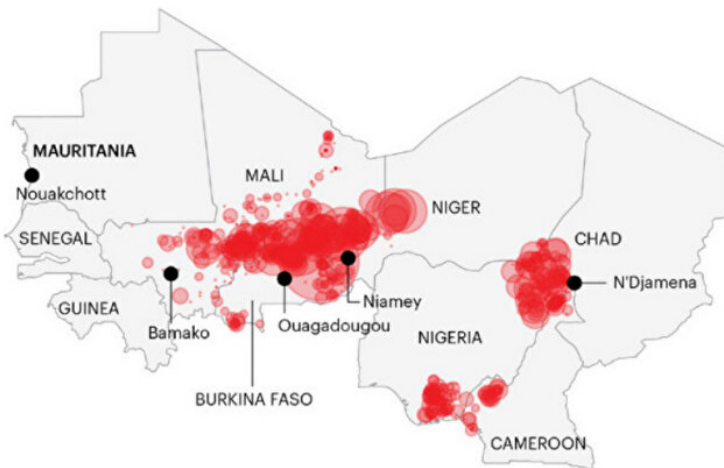
Map showing the activities of terrorist organisations in the Sahel between 2007 and 2021,
Source: Mecra, 2022

As it can be seen from this map, the activities of these terrorist groups have had a major impact on Mali's territory and have contributed greatly to its insecurity. These terrorist groups have been active for a very long time in a region where poverty is a reality.

However, we have seen the importance of the Sahel region for some European countries but also the United Nations. That's why in the last part of our article we will try to put our focus on their interventions in the Mali case and insecurity issues in West Africa.

3. The Interventions of External Actors in the Mali Conflict

3.1 The Intervention the United Nations and Ecowas in Mali

In view of the advance of the terrorists in northern Mali, the UN, in its resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013, decided to create MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali). France was chosen to lead this peacekeeping mission. Minusma is therefore the only PKO to: Not only does it have a solid, long-term mandate and include European troops, but it is also the only PKO to conduct an anti-terrorist operation in the same region. In addition, the UN has taken over from MISMA, a force of regional forces, namely ECOWAS and the African Union. This time, unlike other peace operations, the UN decided to control everything and to take the lead in operations with the cooperation of sub-regional organizations. It has therefore assumed responsibility for all operations. It is also worth noting the effort made by certain UN members to participate in this peace operation.

MINUSMA's primary mission was to assist and support the political process, ensure respect for human rights and, above all, facilitate the organization of free elections in Mali. Unlike other peacekeeping operations, MINUSMA took a completely different approach to this intervention: historically, UN operations were simply intended to help maintain peace and facilitate the post-war transition. However, a completely different approach was adopted, a robust approach, in other words the use of forces by peacekeepers if necessary. When MINUSMA was created, it had 1,829 military personnel.

The Security Council gave MINUSMA a mandate to focus on the protection of civilians, support for political dialogue and national reconciliation, and humanitarian aid. However, after 10 years of presence in Mali, opinions are very mixed about the effectiveness of this mission: one of the most notable actions is the demand of the Malian authorities for the "immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA".

This declaration is the consequence of several disagreements between the United Nations mission and the Malian junta led by Assimi Goita. These disagreements between the two parties follow a number of accusations that have broken trust. The report by MINUSMA's human rights and protection division accused the Malian army of perpetrating the Bounty massacre in 2021. (United Nations, 2021).

3.2 The Intervention of Ecowas, the United States of America and France

As part of their agenda to counter terrorism, actors such as ECOWAS, the USA and France were quick to commit their armed forces to re-establishing democratic order in Mali and combating the advance of the terrorists and their occupation of northern Mali.

In 2012, following the outbreak of the crisis in Mali, ECOWAS called for the creation of an International Support Mission for Mali (MISMA), whose main backbone is made up of troops from other African countries. ECOWAS initially planned to send ECOMOG. The aim of this mission was to halt the advance of the Tuareg rebellion and restore constitutional order. However, the ECOWAS intervention was tricky because the Malian junta did not want the intervention and rejected international intervention. Furthermore, this ECOWAS military response faced several challenges due to the lack in military supplies but also opposition from the Bamako, Mauritania and Algeria. (Caparini,7: 2015). The fact that the Malian state was opposed to any intervention of the ECOWAS was more of a lack of trust according to Hassane Guindo. He states that the authorities in Mali consistently banned the presence of ECOWAS forces in Bamako. (Guindo, 6: 2018). It should also be noted that in the case of Mali, the African Union have also shown signs of weakness and a lack of sovereignty when it comes to security and defense. ECOWAS's mission has not been made any easier by the Malian junta, which has repeatedly disagreed with the sub-regional organization.

However, with the support of the UN, the United States and, above all, France, ECOWAS met on 16 June 2013 in Côte d'Ivoire and decided to send a 3,300-strong military force to Mali to fight the Tuareg rebels and Islamists in northern Mali. In addition, a series of sanctions were imposed on Mali for failing to meet the ECOWAS transition deadline of 2021. 27 February 2022 was the date agreed between the Malian junta and ECOWAS, but the transition period was extended to five and a half years. Following this decision to extend the transition period, ECOWAS organized an extraordinary summit on 9 January 2022. Following this summit, a series of economic sanctions were confirmed by the WAEMU (West African Economic and Monetary Union): The closure of land and air borders between ECOWAS countries and Mali, the recall of ambassadors of ECOWAS states, the suspension of all financial and material transactions between ECOWAS countries and Mali, and the freezing of the Republic of Mali's assets in ECOWAS banks. (Ecowas, 2022).

The second intervention we will touch upon is the one of France, it has been the European country most involved in the conflict in Mali. In fact, it has taken part in two military operations, the Serval and Berkhane missions. The first mission was launched on 11 January 2013 at the request of the Malian government under UN supervision. According to Mathieu Bere, this mission which was launched after the Azawad group created their own state in the North of Mali had three main objectives:

"1) assisting Mali's army to stop the progress of the armed groups toward Bamako, 2) helping Mali preserve the integrity and unity of its territory by regaining control of the northern cities conquered by insurgents, and 3) facilitating the implementation of international decisions through the deployment of two complementary missions, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) for Mali's armed forces." (French Defense Ministry 2013, cited by Bere)

The geopolitical importance of the Sahel region was such that international players such as France could not afford to allow terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda to flourish in West Africa. The main purpose was to prevent the situation from getting worse until it becomes like Afghanistan which is now being controlled by Talibans. (Bere, 65: 2017). France's other mission, Berkhane, was set up in synergy with the Malian armed forces on 1 August.

Aout 2014 had as its main mission to push back the organizations affiliated to Al Qaeda in the North of Mali and to recuperate territories such as Gao and Kidal which were under the control of Tuareg terrorists.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape of West Africa is inextricably linked with the issues of terrorism and insecurity. During the period between 2010 and 2012, Mali was the epicentre of a complex array of challenges, characterized by a climate of political instability, insurgencies, terrorism and sporadic instances of ethnic violence. The proliferation of terrorist and insurgent groups not only contributed to regional instability but also rendered the West African region a security concern due to their activities. The proliferation of jihadist groups and the involvement of Al-Qaeda, on the one hand, and rebels seeking greater recognition, on the other, have constituted a significant challenge for the Malian state. Some terrorist groups have assumed control of pivotal strategic locations, including Gao, Kidal, and even Tombouctou in the northern region, resulting in the fragmentation of the region. The political uncertainty that followed the coup d'état made it challenging for the central government to develop effective strategies to combat terrorist groups. The involvement of international actors in Mali, including United Nations peacekeeping missions and French military operations in Berkane and Serval, has proved effective in repelling the advance of rebels and terrorists. However, as previously stated, these military endeavours have been hindered by a political situation that is far from stable. This has intensified the security crisis in Mali and the Sahel in general, and this inability has benefited the rebels and the Tuaregs. In conclusion, it can be stated that foreign interventions in Mali have exacerbated the crisis in Mali. They have not only reinforced divisions, but also undermined the efforts of the Malian authorities to effectively address insecurity.

The pivotal issue at this juncture is the formulation of strategies to impede further incursions by terrorist and insurgent groups. It is challenging to provide a definitive response in light of the prevailing political circumstances in Mali. Since 2021, the

country has been under the rule of Assimi Goita, who seized power through a coup. Despite the Malian army's re-establishment of control over strategic cities such as Kidal, the situation remains fragile. It is therefore imperative that the current leaders of Mali return power to civilians and that ECOWAS undergo comprehensive reform in order to effectively address the threat posed by terrorists and insurgents. The geopolitical importance of West Africa has also been reflected in international interventions, which have undoubtedly played a role in stabilizing the region.

However, as findings these interventions have primarily been driven by the desire to protect the interests of external actors. It is therefore imperative that ECOWAS member states unite to combat the terrorist groups that pose a significant threat to countries like Niger and Burkina Faso. This would be in the interest of all self-declared independent countries, as it would reduce their reliance on external powers.

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