Mali and Islamic Extremism
Applying Lessons Learned from Afghanistan

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Abstract: More than eight years into the war in Afghanistan, military leaders realized that they had been approaching the problems of Islamic extremism the wrong way. Despite staggering similarities leading to the rise of Islamic extremism in Mali, military tactics have mirrored those used early in Operation Enduring Freedom. The lessons learned from Afghanistan need to be applied to the growing problem of Islamic extremism in Mali; enemy-centric operations alone will not garner long-term military success or lasting stability. This article addresses the similar contexts between the two countries and how lessons from Afghanistan can be applied to Mali to improve chances for lasting stability.

When Islamic Salafist group Ansar Dine destroyed ancient mausoleums in Timbuktu in 2012, most media outlets compared the attack to the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2000. To

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say Mali is the next Afghanistan or the next Syria is, of course, an oversimplification because the geopolitical atmosphere in Mali has its own nuances and intricacies. One cannot ignore, however, the sense of déjà vu evoked from reading about Mali: the Islamic police enforce strict compliance with their view of sharia law, such as regulating women's dress, prohibiting fraternization with the opposite sex, destroying cultural objects and documents viewed as non-Islamic, and prohibiting games and music.[1]

Over the course of Operation Enduring Freedom, many dollars were spent and lives lost. A great many mistakes were made, and lessons were learned the hard way. These lessons do not have to be relearned, and if they are applied correctly in Mali, they could help win the war against Islamic extremism there. One of the most important lessons in Afghanistan was that military offensives alone were not enough to win the war. As in Afghanistan, Mali's political and social fabric is much too complicated to be stabilized with military offensives alone, which has been the focus. Any gains achieved through military offensives, without an eye to the complexities contributing to the rise of Islamic extremism there, will be short-lived.

Even though the Bamiyan Buddhas had been destroyed almost a year prior and the Taliban had been menacing the Afghan population for years, it took the massive terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 for the world to focus its attention on Afghanistan and the problems of Islamic extremism gaining impunity in the power vacuum there. The Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 rekindled global attention to the threat of Islamic extremism growing in forgotten corners where the national government and the international community seldom make an appearance.[2] The week before the Paris attacks, however, President Barack H. Obama underestimated the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), claiming ISIL had been contained.[3] Shortly thereafter, the 2 December 2015 San Bernardino attacks brought the issue home to Americans. And while attacks at home remain rather isolated events, the violent attacks from Islamic extremist groups, especially those based in Mali (Bamako on 20 November 2015, Ouagadougou on 15 January 2016, Timbuktu on 5 February 2016, and Grand-Bassam on 14 March 2016) continue to increase in frequency. If we do not respond quickly and appropriately, these threats will continue to fester in the lawless regions of countries with weak central governments like Mali's and pose a threat to people in neighboring countries and farther abroad.

To understand how stakeholders can apply lessons from Afghanistan to Mali, this article addresses several key topics ripe for comparison: identifying enemies and allies, understanding the importance of local dynamics and sources of instability, understanding and leveraging foreign powers, and valuing information sharing with local counterparts. At each step of the analysis, parallels

are drawn with Afghanistan to the appropriate extent. The Afghanistan War was very expensive both in terms of the dollars spent and American lives lost. With a little effort, the expensive lessons we learned in Afghanistan can pay dividends in Mali. This will not be an exercise of taking tactics wholesale from a war in a mountainous country in central Asia and stamping them down in the deserts of West Africa, but rather, a conscientious approach that ensures that tactics and strategies used in Mali will have a lasting impact on the global war on Islamic extremism as well as on overall regional stability.

This article describes many of the conditions that make a resurgence of Islamic extremism possible in northern Mali. Descriptions of the operating environment in northern Mali, however, are only used to highlight the complexity of the dynamics and should not be taken at face value as a substitute for in-depth ground analysis. The cruxes of the comparison with Afghanistan are that a thorough analysis of the operating environment is necessary for successful operation, and that much like the early phases of the war in Afghanistan, the military intervention in Mali has largely underestimated the complexity of the situation. A critical examination of the lessons learned in Afghanistan, thus, can be useful to search for solutions to the problems in Mali from a methodological standpoint.

Oversimplifying Allies and Enemies

In Afghanistan, there was a constant barrage of individuals and groups vying for power and operating with various funding sources. Coalition governments initially made the mistake of dividing the population into two camps: those that American forces could work with and those that supported the Taliban. When American leaders backed Hamid Karzai to head the interim government in late 2001 and for the presidency in 2004, there was much optimism that he would be able to unite the country and herald in long-absent peace and prosperity.[4] After almost a decade of his leadership, many Western diplomats and aid workers could see mixed results and wondered how someone that U.S. officials vetted and trained so carefully could take so many actions to thwart progress in his own country.[5] The real problem lay not in Karzai's nepotistic and corrupt practices, but in Western countries naively creating the false dichotomy that "you're either with us or you're against us."[6]

Realist Objectives of Allies

The situation is not as simple as it first appears. Most organizations and individuals will work for their own interests, leading to some desirable policies and actions and some reprehensible ones. Even the United Nations (UN) is not an unfettered force for good. The international community sends thousands of

soldiers into conflict zones every year to protect civilians and prevent atrocities. Yet, every few months, there are reports of UN peacekeeping soldiers raping women or otherwise abusing the local population.[7] Why then do militaries try to define people in terms only applicable to comic books: super heroes fighting super villains? Alliances are formed with the party "on our side." If policy makers better understood the complexities of power dynamics in a region, they could avoid idolizing any one individual or political party and limit the inevitable disillusionment and disappointment when that individual or group fails to uphold American ideals or expectations. Not only does avoiding dichotomous classification of key actors help with our own expectation management, it is necessary for a successful stability operation—any operation that has a chance of creating a durable peace in a given region. In 2010, the *Washington Post*'s Joshua Partlow reported that Major General Michael T. Flynn, the top U.S. military intelligence officer in Afghanistan, wrote a "scathing critique" of U.S. strategy. Flynn considered the American focus on finding and killing insurgents to be less useful and more expensive than "understanding the nuances of local politics, economics, religion and culture that drive the insurgency."[8] Major General Flynn was aware that simply attacking the insurgent groups would not have a lasting positive impact on the war efforts. The issue in Mali is likewise much more complicated than merely tracking down and killing "bad guys" while allying with perceived "good guys" who only held that position because they opposed the bad guys.[9]

The Malian government is working closely with French forces to defeat terrorists in Mali. Yet, certain high officials in Mali's government have likely supported al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), or at least certain political figures with ties to this armed group.[10] Piggybacking off of the Tuareg rebellion of 2012, AQIM provided support for the separatists as they sought control of the northern half of Mali, a region also referred to as Azawad.[11] The Tuaregs have long struggled for increased autonomy in Mali, where they have a strong ethnic identity, but because of colonial gerrymandering, they lack their own country. The 2012 Tuareg insurrection was initially able to succeed because of AQIM's financial and arms support. After the Tuaregs captured Mali's major northern cities, their then-allies turned on them, ousting them from power. Malian government officials, perhaps wanting to weaken the insurgency in the north and perhaps seeking to line their own pockets, colluded with AQIM to prevent leaders of the Azawad territory from successfully seceding from Mali.[12] Foreign soldiers and aid workers need to understand such conflicting national interests and murky motivations that can lead allies to act against the overall interest of stability at times. A discrete view of the enemy and U.S. allies is counterproductive to stability operations.

No More Simple Enemies

"There was a time, during other wars, when U.S. commanders tended to over-simplify the fight: It was the United States versus the communists—or the terrorists," reported Tom Gjelten for NPR in 2009.[13] The longer U.S. forces spent in Afghanistan, the more apparent it became that diagramming the threat networks in a given area of operation would inevitably produce a spiderweb of connections. Now U.S. doctrine recognizes that "threats are not static or monolithic. Threats can arise from divergent interests or competition among states, groups, or organizations in an operational environment." But, there was a time that leaders operated under the old Cold War mentality of having to fight a monolithic enemy, which did not translate well into the new Global War on Terrorism milieu.[14]

Within a few years, most military and civilian personnel deploying to Afghanistan were at least nominally briefed on the various groups operating in their areas of responsibility. Army General Stanley A. McChrystal, commanding general in Afghanistan (2009–10), said in 2009 that Afghanistan had "three regional and resilient insurgencies—we don't just have one in Afghanistan; we've got at least three—and then there are other subinsurgencies."[15] In other words, there was not one unified insurgent effort to overthrow the Afghan government, but rather many factors—some working together and some working against each other—all struggling to gain an advantage over the national government. Despite the initial predeployment briefings, ground soldiers and other stability workers often fell back into using the simpler terminology, referring to the enemy as the *Taliban*, *TB*, or *the insurgents*. Groups that may have been lumped into the insurgent category include Haqqani network, al-Qaeda, Taliban, narcoterrorists, Quetta Shura, and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin among others. Individuals had shifting alliances, and while all of the groups worked against the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), it would be an oversimplification to lump these actors into one group.

Despite the progress made in Afghanistan to understand and distinguish the various threat elements there, a lot of the same oversimplification is now being used to describe the conflict in Mali. When discussing the February 2016 attacks in Timbuktu, Reuters reporters wrote that "militants have stepped up attacks in Mali in recent months as part of a growing regional insurgency."[16] This description is at best misleading and at worst inaccurate, as the Islamic extremist movement in northern Mali is distinct from any ethnic-based or political movements for independence. Unfortunately, the media not only uses these terms but many of the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance staff parrot the media when they teach UN peacekeeping troops who are preparing to deploy to Mali.[17] The term *insurgency* has a particular meaning:

"a usually violent attempt to take control of a government: a rebellion or uprising." Imprecise use can blur the issue for those who are less familiar with the region.[18]

There have been several insurgency and liberation movements in northern Mali in the past half century. The most recent insurgency was laid to rest, at least temporarily, by the Algiers Accord (20 June 2015), where the leaders of the various Tuareg groups, who had been seeking independence, agreed to lay down their arms in exchange for an increased role in the national government. Following the signing of that peace agreement, implementation has been slow, but Malian officials have made efforts to include more Tuaregs in the Malian government and give them more autonomy to govern the northern territories.[19] As a result, while the peace is still fragile, and continued implementation delays could cause a resurgence of violence, the Tuareg separatists have essentially ceased hostilities. Activity by Salafist-Islamic extremists, however, has increased dramatically. The ongoing unrest in Mali since the signing of the peace accord has little to do with the Tuareg insurgency and much to do with Islamic extremists and narcoterrorists. That important, but fine, point is not clear from the Reuters article in February 2016 or from many similar articles.

Many of the people training UN peacekeepers for deployments to Mali have never actually been to Mali and rely on media reports for situational awareness. Importantly, these trainers and the soldiers they train must see beyond the media generalizations—accurate or inaccurate—and be able to impart a fuller understanding of the enemy threat networks that their soldiers may encounter. Mali's threat network includes more than six interrelated organizations that have frequently merged and split into new groups. The following key groups and their descriptions give an idea of the complexity of Mali's threat network.

Ansar Dine

Ansar Dine means "The Defenders of the Faith" and was founded in late 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Malian Tuareg from the Ifoghas group and former leader of several Tuareg separatist movements. Ansar Dine played a central role in the Islamist coalition that controlled much of northern Mali from spring 2012 to January 2013. In an effort to avoid discrete categorizations, it is important to note that in 2003 Ghali played a key role in securing the release of 14 tourists kidnapped by the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became AQIM.[20] He negotiated three additional hostage releases between 2008 and 2011.[21] Ghali's ethnicity and his constantly changing alliances may lead people to confuse his motives with those of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the Tuareg political group that sought independence for northern Mali. Ansar Dine has claimed responsibility for the 12

February 2016 attacks on the northern Mali military base in Kidal that left three Guinean soldiers dead and dozens wounded.[22]

Al-Mourabitoun

This group is led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a one-eyed Algerian and former commander of AQIM. On 4 December 2015, Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (a.k.a. Abdelmalek Droukdel), leader of AQIM, confirmed a merger with al-Mourabitoun, which is currently considered the face of AQIM. Al-Mourabitoun is loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the emir of al-Qaeda, and has claimed responsibility for the hotel siege in Bamako, as well as the one in Ouagadougou. Belmokhtar is likely behind the February 2016 attacks in Timbuktu.[23]

AQIM

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb emerged out of militant groups, particularly the GSPC, active in Algeria's civil war (1992–2002). AQIM falls under the larger umbrella of al-Qaeda, founded by Osama Bin Laden and currently headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In addition to its attacks within Algeria, AQIM has staged numerous kidnappings and raids in Sahelian countries. A key member of the Islamist coalition in northern Mali in 2012–15, AQIM merged with al-Mourabitoun near the end of 2015. AQIM leadership, headed by Belmokhtar, has officially condemned the actions of ISIL for dividing jihadists, and for slaughtering innocent Muslims. Yet global al-Qaeda leader, al-Zawahiri, praised ISIL's attacks on Paris.[24]

Boko Haram

Based out of Nigeria, Boko Haram is aligned with ISIL and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (a.k.a. Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai). Although some Nigerians may be operating in Mali, the terrorist activities of Boko Haram are not coordinated with or aligned with AQIM, al-Mourabitoun, or MUJAO (see below).[25] Moreover, when Boko Haram and ISIL increase their terrorist activity, al-Qaeda and its offshoots increase theirs, perhaps out of a sense of friendly jihadist competition to establish an Islamic caliphate and rule the world.[26] The more notoriety each group attains, the better their recruiting efforts.

Macina Liberation Front

The Macina Liberation Front (MLF) was organized in February 2015.[27] Most of the approximately 4,000 members are ethnically Fulani (a.k.a. Peul), a predominantly nomadic herding culture with populations spread across the Sahel region.[28] Amadou Koufa, an extremist preacher from central Mali, leads the

MLF. Koufa's mentor is the leader of Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghali. Leaders of the MLF claimed responsibility for the August 2015 hotel attack in central Mali and for the November 2015 hotel attack in Bamako. It is unclear whether MLF conducted the attack in coordination with al-Mourabitoun or whether one or both groups were scrambling for relevance by claiming responsibility for attacks committed by other groups.

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)

Founded in December 2011 as an offshoot of AQIM, MUJAO has conducted kidnappings and bombings in Algeria, Mali, and Niger. From spring 2012 to January 2013, MUJAO was a member of the Islamist coalition that controlled much of northern Mali with an especially strong presence in the northern city of Gao. In 2013, the leaders of MUJAO and the Masked Battalion announced a merger of the two, renaming themselves al-Mourabitoun. The leaders of the new group are known to be drug traffickers trading in the Sahel and southern Algeria areas.[29] Then in 2015, al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM, retaining the name al-Mourabitoun.

These groups, with the exception of Boko Haram, are all very closely linked and have occasionally rotated leaders between groups. In effect, al-Mourabitoun is the current name of the groups that were once independently known as AQIM, MUJAO, and the Masked Battalion. The Macina Liberation Front and Ansar Dine are also closely linked, but distinct groups. Understanding the power structure and the cults of personality surrounding the leaders of the groups active in a given area is important for influencing stability in the region. To predict and prevent belligerent activity, it is imperative to understand how these groups are internally structured, funded, and equipped. We need to know how they are linked to each other and what their connections are with local populations and the neighboring countries. Understanding the familial and ideological ties between groups and local populations is imperative to any effort to root out Islamic extremism. Coalition forces may be able to kill Mokhtar Belmokhtar or other high-ranking officials, but without targeting the conditions that allow the groups to operate in the area, the leaders will only be replaced.[30]

Local Dynamics and Sources of Instability

While a comprehensive understanding of enemy groups and threat networks is an integral part of any military operation, killing the "enemy" or securing a town will have short-lived results without an eye to stability operations. For any politician or analyst who argues that targeted strikes are needed without getting bogged down in "nation building," the point is missed. The question is not one of nation building, but of expending the resources required to impact lasting regional stability. As Major General Flynn noted in Afghanistan in 2010, "the

military won't be able to defeat the insurgency just by chasing Taliban fighters across the country. . . . It's not about killing our enemy."[31] According to U.S. doctrine on unified land operations, offensive, defensive, and stability operations must be performed simultaneously during all operations.[32] The lessons learned by United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan are ones that could help the French and UN forces in Mali. After more than 10 years in Afghanistan, the U.S. and NATO developed and refined the doctrine on stability, a military function that was not fully developed in traditional war and has been slow to catch on in the new age of asymmetric warfare where conflicts between nations or groups have disparate military capabilities and strategies.[33] According to analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "understanding Afghan popular perceptions at the province, district, and local level are critical and usually ignored in official reporting. . . . success in the area must be based on Afghan terms and values and the focal point for all activity must be the impact on Afghan perceptions and attitudes."[34] The same is true in Mali.

It can be hard to understand why a population allows such a brutal regime to operate in its midst and to enforce laws contrary to their own beliefs. Why did members of the Afghan population allow the Taliban to brutalize them, to enforce a harsh interpretation of sharia, and to prohibit many traditional Afghan activities, such as dancing, singing, and kite flying?[35] The answer to that question may not be so different from the answers in Mali, where extremists have decreed that "music is not allowed, soccer is not allowed, cinema is no[t] allowed, and television is also not allowed. Everything is haram."[36] Reports indicate that the Tuareg rebels used violent tactics to achieve their objectives. They were known for raping and forcibly marrying off women to their men without the consent of the women or the women's families.[37] In some areas, such as Gao, certain elements of the population welcomed the brutal form of justice brought by the Islamic extremists. While some were sympathetic to the jihadist agenda, others merely welcomed a reprieve from the lawlessness and crime that had existed during the 2012 Tuareg rebellion.[38] An environment plagued by unpredictable violence is worse than one where harsh laws are imposed and strictly enforced. That was a major reason the Afghan people did not initially oppose the Taliban rule following the lawless period of civil war in the early 1990s. Even once the GIRoA did establish its own courts, many people continued to seek out Taliban justice rather than bring their cases to the government courts, citing government corruption, indifference, and ineptitude.[39] Without the establishment of legitimate forms of dispute resolution and judgment enforcement, either by government courts or through traditional community justice, people will likely continue to resort to the harsh sharia justice offered by Islamic militants.

To conduct any kind of stability operations, peacekeepers must first develop a clear understanding of the battlefield, which involves deeper comprehension of the social fabric in the zone of operation than what is required during the intelligence preparation of the battlefield in offensive and defensive operations that are by nature enemy-centric. Stability operations use the population as the center of gravity.[40] U.S. military doctrine directs us to review political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information (PMESII) factors.[41] When identifying such factors for the purpose of stability operations, it is necessary not only to identify and list key factors of the society as found on the CIA's World Factbook website, but the significance of each factor as it relates to stability must also be considered.[42] The PMESII exercise for situational awareness must be applied to the various operating environments in northern Mali for peacekeeping troops to have any chance of having an impact on stability there. Below is a cursory analysis of the PMESII factors in Mali that is important for all military troops operating in the region. Necessarily, the specific data for each subregion will vary slightly from the overall analysis of the country. Further, the dynamics that impact a region's stability change over time, and any unit deploying to Mali must constantly make sure its PMESII analysis is current.

Political Factors

Mali is, theoretically, a representative democracy. In 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was elected president following the interim government set in place after Mali's military coup d'état in March 2012. In August 2012, Cheick Modibo Diarra, the prime minister, announced the formation of a government of national unity.[43] With that said, the regional ethnic divisions remain. The Bambara, southern Mali's dominant ethnic group, holds most positions in government. The northern parts of Mali are largely Tuareg, but they have not traditionally been represented by the central government. The current crisis stems in part from long-standing structural conditions, such as weak and ineffective governance, and northern communities' deep-seated feelings of being neglected, marginalized, and unfairly treated by the central government. The peace accord of June 2015 purports to grant more government positions and autonomy to the Tuaregs, but has met many delays in implementation.[44]

In comparison, Afghanistan's leaders attempted to address some of the ethnic tensions by creating quotas for each ethnic group in parliament. This system worked well in Afghanistan, where ethnic and familial tensions dominated the political arena during the struggle for power therein. At the same time ethnic quotas were established, peace activists ran public service campaigns encouraging cooperation and friendship between ethnicities. The author specifically remembers a message in 2012 that showed different animal species

forming bonds with each other and prompting people to consider that if monkeys and turtles can get along, human beings of different ethnicities should be able to get along also. Mali's neighbor, Niger, also ran a campaign encouraging national unity over ethnic divisions with the result that many people no longer vote along ethnic lines and there is frequent interethnic marriage. In fact, while working with the Nigerien military in 2015 and 2016, every single class member interviewed told the author that ethnic cohesion is the most important stabilizing factor in Niger. These two examples indicate that the implementation of the peace accord quotas along with a campaign for cooperation between ethnic groups might have a strong positive impact on integrating northern Mali into Mali's central government. In many parts of West Africa, however, representatives from the former colonial powers place more emphasis on ethnic distinctions than do the locals. Tying political power to ethnicity may end up creating more problems than it solves, or it may be necessary in the short term to undo the damage of colonial *line drawing*.[45] Just because ethnic quotas were an acceptable political solution in Afghanistan, does not mean they should be applied to Mali without further analysis.

While the government of Mali is technically secular, religious factors dominate the way politics plays out on the popular level. The government has a religious council that advises on major decisions. With more than 90 percent of the population following Islam, the tenets of Islamic law are important for implementing political change. The international community should be accustomed to working within an Islamic framework for governance as Afghanistan is an Islamic republic where the constitution and all the laws are based on Islamic law combined with Russian and French codes.

Military Factors

The security forces of Mali have never had a strong presence in its northern territories. The coup accelerated the collapse of the state in the north, allowing the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the Tuareg separatist movement, to easily overrun government forces in the regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu and proclaim an independent state of Azawad in April 2012.[46] The population does not have strong allegiances to a government with which it has never or rarely interacted. This is not to suggest that a stronger presence of Malian security forces would create stability in and of itself, but the power vacuum created by the government's inability or unwillingness to govern in the north has left a population that primarily identifies more with ethnicity than with nationality and is vulnerable to abuses by militants. Many locals in the northern city of Gao, for example, supported the presence of MUJAO because, prior to this jihadist presence, theft and other crimes in the area were left unchecked. Even if the accused suffered horrendous punishments without

trial, the overall population had a greater sense of security and law and order with the jihadists. In the absence of power for good, the people were left with a choice of the lesser of two evils; thus, a peaceful people with moderate and tolerant religious beliefs accepted, at least to some degree, Salafist rule.[47]

Malian forces now have control over all urban areas in northern Mali; however, a recent UN Human Rights Council report indicates alarming rates of arbitrary arrests and prisoner abuse by the Malian armed forces.[48] When people feel targeted or threatened by the Malian forces, they often revert to supporting the Islamic extremist groups.[49] In contrast to the reports of abuse by Malian soldiers, surveys indicate that the population responds positively to increased interaction with the police. A 2015 Afrobarometer survey reported a positive correlation between police bribes and public confidence in police. That is, as reports of police bribes decrease in Mali, popular opinion of police competency also decreases.[50] This finding is contrary to the normal trend of a negative correlation between corruption and public opinion and requires further investigation and analysis. The likely explanation for the positive correlation between the decreases in bribes and confidence in police is that there have been fewer requests for bribes—the population has had fewer encounters with the police due to police reticence to get involved in the conflict in the north. Perhaps in the areas surveyed, people are more concerned with the police taking an active role to prevent violence and crime than they are with the problem of paying an occasional bribe.

According to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, "police are poorly trained, poorly paid, and lack resources to combat crime effectively."[51] Police and emergency responders in Mali have been known to request money in return for providing what Westerners view as routine police services. Moreover, rogue police elements and bandits posing as police officers will often stop vehicles and demand money.[52] Westerners may notice this rampant corruption and be tempted to expend resources addressing it. While addressing corruption is almost always helpful, in the case of the city of Mopti, public opinion data indicates that priority needs to be given to sending security forces out to the remote regions in the north. Some interaction with an imperfect police force would be better received than the total absence of police.

Importantly, foreign peacekeepers should be aware of the different public perceptions of the various security forces in their areas of operation. With whom they partner and the approach toward partnership arrangements with local forces can have a huge impact on public perception and thereby, mission success.

Economic Factors

Mali is among the 25 poorest countries in the world, depending on gold mining and agricultural exports for revenue and expanding its iron ore extraction in

an effort to diversify. The main threat to Mali's economy is a return to physical insecurity.[53] Foreign investors are unwilling to risk their investments in areas plagued by extreme violence and kidnappings of Westerners. The ability of French mining companies to continue to profit in northern Mali may be one reason that France has taken such an active role in leading the fight in northern Mali.[54]

Often violence arises because of long standing conflicts over the use of resources such as land and water. Having a foreign presence fighting Islamic extremists gives people a tool to use against their personal enemies or economic rivals. Foreign forces must rely, to a large degree, on local intelligence to understand the location and identity of belligerent forces. In an area lacking an effective dispute resolution system, people sometimes turn to the foreign occupying forces to help them enforce what they see as justice. When accusing their enemies of ties to Islamic extremists will get them off a piece of land, stop them from monopolizing a water source, or provide a convenient excuse for violence, some people are quick to turn on their neighbors.

More than individual motives, Malian officials find terrorists make good scapegoats for failures of corrupt and ineffective government. In November 2015, along the border of Niger and Mali, there were several conflicts between Fulani herders and local farmers. The local population killed several of the herders and claimed the dead men were members of MUJAO. The government of Mali is reluctant to involve itself in these violent economic conflicts because it does not want to admit that it lacks control in remote regions.[55] When regular economic conflict can be blamed on a larger security threat, peacekeepers can easily be drawn in and manipulated.

Spending time in eastern Afghanistan during 2011, for example, the author was almost fooled by officials who blamed economic crimes on terrorist activity. A local judge coordinating with the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) told the PRT that he had been the victim of a Taliban explosion and had shrapnel in his leg. He told the PRT that he believed he had been targeted because of his harsh judgments against the Taliban. Upon further investigation, evidence surfaced indicating that the explosive device was left at the judge's front door following a trial in which the judge extracted bribes from both sides and then decided in favor of the party who provided the best bribe. The loser was inconsolable after losing his land-dispute case despite paying a bribe. He apparently felt his only recourse was to drop off an improvised explosive device at the judge's house, pointing to terrorists not disappointed favor seekers. Lack of effective local land dispute resolution mechanisms in this case led to violence that was blamed on terrorist groups. In 2008, the International Relations and Security Network noted "many attacks attributed to the Taliban [were] actually undertaken by tribal groups and [were] really a result tribal of disputes."[56]

The ability of peacekeepers to distinguish between actual terrorist tactics and mere criminality or community conflicts is imperative because the local population's perception that the peacekeepers are unjustly taking sides in normal community disputes can inhibit mission success.

Mali remains dependent on foreign aid, yet corruption threatens the country's access to such aid. As reported by the CIA and repeated by authors on the subject, "The administration's purchase of a presidential jet for $40 million and inflated defense contracts damaged its credibility and led the IMF [International Monetary Fund] to temporarily suspend aid in 2014."[57] If the people are aware that their government's corruption has a direct impact on their access to aid money, confidence in the government will drop, leaving the population even more susceptible to the influences of Islamic extremists.

Social Factors

The boundaries between ethnic groups are highly permeable and context-related in Mali, and while outsiders view ethnicity as a driving factor, Malians do not necessarily emphasize ethnicity in the same way. One of the secrets of Malian pluralism is *sinankuya* or *cousinage*, a pact establishing a friendly relationship between certain families, neighboring groups, and ethnic groups.[58] Western preoccupation with ethnic differences will likely be more harmful than helpful in tackling problems in Mali, nevertheless, the interethnic cohesion and tolerance may be one reason for the apparent lack of resistance to the Salafist occupation. For centuries, Timbuktu has been a center for scholarship and religious tolerance. According to Abderrahmane Sissako, the Mauritanian filmmaker and director of *Timbuktu*, "it's because of this very openness that [northern Mali was] taken hostage by these extremists."[59]

Many popular narratives paint the Malian people as a tolerant, peace-loving population that, without the means to defend themselves, was overrun by extremists.[60] Like many aspects of the war narrative, this picture is an oversimplification. According to Dianna Bell, a Mellon assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Vanderbilt University, "Wahhabi and mainstream Sunni currents of Islam . . . [prevail] in many towns and villages throughout Mali in the present-day."[61] Celeste Hicks, from the *Guardian* reports, "some Sufi leaders acknowledge that a more conservative form of Islam had already existed in Mali through the growing influence of Wahabi [*sic*] groups, which preach adherence to a fundamental reading of the Qu'ran. . . . Much of the horror expressed towards the Islamists concerned their use of violence rather than a rejection of their ideas."[62]

The social fabric of religious beliefs in Mali is a patchwork of "Sufis practicing a mystical, reflective form of worship" living in harmony with "Wahabi [*sic*] groups, which preach adherence to a fundamental reading of the Qu'ran."[63]

Islamic extremist groups have taken advantage of this dynamic to gain leverage in the region. The extremists' teachings are appealing to some, such as the Wahabis, and the harsh and violent tactics, which are unprecedented in the region, leave the Sufi mystics unprepared to fight back.

The spread of Islam to West Africa and its various forms of practice in the region is an extremely complex subject. It is impractical to expect peacekeeping troops, especially at the lower levels, to fully comprehend all the nuances of religious beliefs in their area of operation. Understanding enough to grasp why the extremists are able to operate and from whom they draw their support will help peacekeepers develop better programs to combat violent Islamic extremism. It is likewise important for peacekeepers to identify and support the local voices for peace and stability; for example, they may choose to give radio time or personnel security for people such as Shiekh Thierno Hady Oumar Thiam, the head of the Sufi Tidjania sect in Mali, who advocates that "our Islam needs to continue to be an Islam of tolerance or we will all be pushed towards violence."[64]

Infrastructure Factors

The northern part of Mali is characterized by vast deserts, few paved roads, and porous borders with neighboring countries. The lack of infrastructure in the north creates a terrain that is easily controlled by nongovernmental forces. Similarly, in Afghanistan, insurgent and belligerent forces took advantage of the country's high mountains and steep valleys to maintain the upper hand in combat. Afghanistan's Highway 1, or Ring Road, was constantly subjected to roadside bombs to discourage movement of government and allied forces. According to the UN, improvised explosive devices have emerged as a weapon of choice in Mali. Their use impedes the delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians as well as access to livelihoods, freedom of movement, and economic recovery for the population.[65]

Mali's infrastructure is not evenly distributed throughout the country. In the last several years, resources have been focused on developing roads and railway lines to connect southern Mali to the Atlantic coast.[66] Many northern Malian cities receive few financial transfers from the capital for infrastructure investments, severely limiting the local government's ability to maintain existing infrastructure and deliver basic public services.[67] In an effort to stabilize the north, more resources have been dedicated to developing local government capacity and infrastructure. Moreover, such initiatives still pale in comparison to the infrastructure initiatives that are improving the economy in the southern part of the country. With few roads or airports and sparse electricity and running water, economic development in the north will struggle to keep up with the south. The disparity between the two halves of the country may have been

less noticeable before the widespread use of mobile technology. Cell phone and Internet accessibility help spread information a lot faster than before, leaving the lesser developed north aware that the government favors their southern neighbors.

Information

While Mali has many difficulties associated with developing nations, it has made significant improvements to its communication networks over the past decade. Mali ranks 50th in terms of cell phone ownership worldwide, leapfrogging many countries by skipping the process of laying down widespread landlines. There are several national and international television stations as well as publicly and privately funded community radio stations.[68] While the increase of telecommunications is a positive step for development and democracy overall, the facility with which information spreads now casts a spotlight on state actions that were previously hidden in the shadows, including highlights of unequal distribution of aid money and development projects. People who had been accustomed to living without, now have knowledge that their neighbors to the south are receiving more government services and project money, which can lead to an increased sense of disenfranchisement and potential alliances with malign actors.

Analyzing Sources of Instability

Only after becoming situationally aware—including all PMESII factors—can peacekeepers expect to effectively analyze situations for underlying sources of instability. Some may argue that the cause of instability in northern Mali is the presence of Islamic extremists, but as U.S. and allied forces learned in Afghanistan, simply killing extremists will not win the war. Peacekeepers need to understand why the extremists are able to operate in a given area and establish programs to undermine their support. Peacekeepers must seek to identify which factors diminish support for the government, increase support for malign actors, and disrupt the normal functioning of society.[69] Unfortunately, it took more than a decade of war in Afghanistan for U.S. and allied forces to learn that military action, or government programming, conducted prior to a full analysis of the environment and sources of instability will be ineffective and may have counterproductive ramifications.[70]

Sources of instability must be considered at the local level, though there may be some commonality across different regions, and at this stage, pollsters can give us some insight into the general feeling about the issues among Malians in different parts of the country. While some surveys indicate expected results based on current conditions, some investigations demonstrate the complexity of understanding Mali's situation from afar. According to Gallup surveyors, public confidence in Mali's government took a drastic decline in 2012.

The timing of the Gallup polls makes it difficult to tell whether the 2012 insurgence and coup were caused by the general low opinions of the government or opinions dropped because of the political instability following the coup.[71] More recent public opinion polls from Mopti, a city straddling the tumultuous north and the relative political calm of southern Mali, indicate that people are more concerned with access to government services than they are with political instability and violence.[72] During the height of hostilities, people identified their most pressing concerns as food security and access to government services. The Gallup surveyors noted that contrary to their expectations, "the villagers were overwhelmingly focused on what they perceived as a much more important crisis: the lack of state public services and infrastructure. The coup and insurgency merely exacerbated state abandonment that had been ongoing."[73] In another study surveying 900 displaced people in Mali, "the most popular idea to resolve the crisis pointed not to a security response but to government reform."[74] These kinds of surveys are critical to isolating and addressing sources of instability. If security is not the primary concern for local residents, but rather access to government services, then peacekeeping resources should be focused on reconnecting the people with their government instead of tracking down and killing extremists.

Survey data should be applied to understanding the area surveyed and generalizations should not be drawn without enough data. Mopti's location between the relatively stable south and the violent north makes the people of Mopti acutely aware of what services are being provided to their neighbors to the south: expectations of government services in Mopti are not being met. If survey data were available for areas, such as Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, it would not be surprising to see a vastly different set of community concerns and priorities. It is possible, even likely, that in an area that had decentralized rule since independence, an increase in government involvement might lead to negative perceptions of the government, especially if accompanied by increased requests for bribes. Therefore, regionally specific analyses of the current sources of instability need to be conducted by each peacekeeping unit on a continual basis.

Millions of dollars from the Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) were spent in Afghanistan and Iraq trying to patch holes in government services, some of which were based on local priorities and others on an imposition of Western priorities. The strategy of "winning hearts and minds" was openly used to justify such expenditures. Little thought, however, was given to the importance of helping the Afghan government win hearts and minds. It took U.S. and NATO forces years to realize that while winning public support could help keep soldiers safe, it would do little for long-term stability in the region. The people know that foreign forces are there on borrowed time, and

their presence will not last. The programs failed to address public perceptions of the Afghan government. Stability—and ending insurgency or other state opposition—requires that people put their faith in their government or at least in legitimate governing institutions. Having foreign countries fill these roles in the place of the national government does nothing to increase the public's confidence in their government.

Foreign governments taking the lead on security issues can also be detrimental to public confidence in the local government. French troops are leading the fight in Mali right now to keep the extremists in check, and in terms of long-term stability, both the local population and the rebel forces know that the Malian government does not have the capability or capacity to maintain peace in its northern territories. Just as the Taliban took advantage of the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan and ISIS has been taking advantage of the lack of Coalition troops in Iraq, we can expect that al-Qaeda and its offshoots will increase their activities as soon as France reduces its presence in northern Mali unless there is an increased effort to strengthen Malian capabilities. Thus, we need to prepare for that scenario.

Understanding the sources of instability in a given region cannot be done from behind a desk. It is necessary to engage the local population, discover what their priorities are, and identify the factors undermining public support of the government or contributing to public support for the Islamic extremists. The need for soldiers to understand and address local sources of instability is exacerbated by the fact that insecurity in many regions makes scholarly studies and sociological surveys impractical and unreliable. Social scientists do not have the freedom of movement necessary to conduct surveys in the most dangerous zones. When they do publish data from such zones, special attention must be paid to the collection and analytical methods used because the reliability of such data is suspect.[75] Only after peacekeepers and other programmers understand the sources of instability can they begin to develop programming that might stand a chance of having a lasting impact on regional stability.

Understanding and Leveraging Foreign Powers

In 2011, Osama bin Laden was found hiding in Pakistan within walking distance from a major Pakistani military installation. The Pakistani government had mud on its face, so to speak, when it tried to deny that it had been intentionally harboring the world's most wanted man.[76] According to *New York Times* reporter Carlotta Gall, "the Pakistani government, under President Pervez Musharraf and his intelligence chief, Lt. Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, was maintaining and protecting the Taliban . . . to use them as a proxy force to gain leverage over and eventually dominate Afghanistan."[77] The Afghans living near the Pakistani border understood Pakistan's role. Many Afghans refused to play

cricket because they saw it as a Pakistani game and did not want to support anything that came from a country that was constantly fostering violence in their homeland.[78] Similarly, while Iran had been opposed to the Talibization of Afghanistan, it feared a strong U.S. presence there and is suspected of supporting radical armed groups in an effort to defeat the Coalition.[79] In addition to intentional state actions to destabilize Afghanistan, the foreign flow of narcotics seriously helped fund the various insurgent and jihadist groups. The amount of foreign financial and political support for insurgents in Afghanistan is perhaps the greatest reason the conflict continues to this day.[80] Peacekeepers cannot hope to adequately address the problems in Mali without looking outside its borders to identify where the Islamic extremists are getting their training and financial support as well as their weapons.

The Islamic extremists in Mali have been getting a lot of support from nearby Libya in terms of weapons, training, and probably funding. And if tensions between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda lessen, there may be even more support pouring in from this tumultuous state. The fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya made it easier for Ansar al-Sharia members to funnel weapons, including heavy arms, into Mali.[81] According to the UN, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion "was emboldened by the presence of well-equipped combatants returning from Libya in the wake of the fall of the regime there."[82]

Thomas Joscelyn, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, asserts that ISIL's branch in Libya is opposed to al-Qaeda and its front groups.[83] Yet, as ISIL gains momentum in Libya, rival al-Qaeda fighters in Mali are still accessing heavy weapons trafficked from Libya, indicating strong ties to actors in the country.[84] Most of the various extremist groups that are active in Mali are connected with, or have pledged allegiance to, al-Qaeda's Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri not the Islamic State. Al-Zawahiri's praise for ISIL's attacks on Paris, however, indicates a potential lessening of tensions between the groups, which may mean increased support for al-Qaeda offshoots in Mali. The fact that ISIL claimed responsibility for the 12 October 2016 attack in northern Burkina Faso, near the border of Mali, further illustrates the lessening of tensions in the region between the competing Islamist groups.[85]

While it is easy to point fingers at foreign involvement from less stable regional actors, even France's role in the Mali conflict is a double-edged sword. The French military is taking the lead in partnering with Malian forces to maintain control of northern cities and track down and neutralize enemy targets, but certain French actions may be undermining overall stability.[86] Many African soldiers in France's foreign colonies believe France is intentionally teaching them inferior tactics.[87] Collaboration is difficult when the African counterparts believe, correctly or not, that the French soldiers do not respect them. Furthermore, the French effort has been largely enemy-centric.[88] Claude Moni-

quet, a former French intelligence officer, explained that "the French army has expelled insurgents from the cities and so what? Would they retreat? They will come back, exactly as they did in Afghanistan when the Soviets withdrew in 1989, and exactly what they will do in Afghanistan when the last American soldier will retreat."[89] While the French have seen some success on the battlefield, they have been reticent to invest in larger stability efforts that hold the promise of longer-term results. And in the meantime, the French intervention is provoking Islamic extremists to increase their attacks on French and other European targets.[90]

While the French have failed to make the best of their time in Mali, extremist groups, such as AQIM, have been able to leverage foreign powers to fund their enterprises. European willingness to pay ransoms for hostages is a major funding source for AQIM.[91] The *New York Times* reports that "in its early years, Al Qaeda received most of its money from deep-pocketed donors, but counterterrorism officials now believe the group finances the bulk of its recruitment, training and arms purchases from ransoms paid to free Europeans."[92] In fact, between 2008 and 2014, European countries paid more than $125 million to al-Qaeda, $91.5 million of which went to AQIM. The bulk of the ransom money came from France.[93] Since the release of the last French hostage in December 2014, and discounting the Bamako hotel siege, which was short-lived and did not present an opportunity for ransom, there have been no more French hostages taken in Mali.[94] Cutting off the largest sources of funding for these extremist groups is essential to the efforts to contain them. On 14 October 2016, an American aid worker was kidnapped in Niger and taken into Mali. Because al-Qaeda affiliates in the region are usually quick to claim responsibility for attacks, the fact that no one has yet claimed responsibility indicates the kidnapping was likely committed by bandits or narco-traffickers, who will later seek to sell the hostage to MUJAO, the group with the largest presence in the area. It is official U.S. government policy not to negotiate with terrorists or pay ransoms. Yet perhaps recent events have caused bad actors in the area to believe they will benefit somehow by taking an American hostage, either through ransom or a prisoner exchange.[95]

It is essential that any well-conceived plan to address stability in Mali factors in foreign interests, both official and unofficial. Many governments have interests in the situation in Mali for financial reasons, for their own nation's security, for a play for regional influence, or for other less obvious reasons. There are also international terrorist and criminal groups—some vying for a new world order and others simply wanting to keep the situation unstable so they can continue their criminal enterprises unperturbed. Any well-conceived strategy must account for all of these factors and take measures to encourage and support the foreign interests that will positively impact stability and limit

those that have a negative influence. Increased border security might discourage the flow of arms into Mali, or human trafficking and drugs through Mali, all of which fund Islamic extremist groups there.[96] Conducted in the wrong way, however, increased border security may exacerbate tensions between local populations and the government.

Sharing Information

During the past several years, France has been collaborating with Tuareg forces in northern Mali to fight the Islamic extremists there. The ability and willingness to leverage the Tuareg's factional competition demonstrates a profound understanding of local dynamics.[97] France has been taking the lead on the fight in northern Mali despite the UN resolution, which clearly states that the mission should be African-led.[98] Some question France's motives for intervening in such a direct way, while others applaud the initiative to keep Islamic extremism in check.[99] Regardless of motive, if France does not efficiently partner, train, and share intelligence with its African counterparts, whatever gains French forces achieve in the region will be short-lived.

It is important that all efforts to neutralize Islamic extremists can be handed over to Malian forces in the near future. The concern is that the Malian security forces and justice system will not be able to effectively take over control of the situation if there is not a concerted effort to partner and communicate with them from the very beginning. As a part of Operation Enduring Freedom, U.S. and NATO forces took the lead on enemy targeting for reasons of efficiency and capability. They often encountered problems sharing information with their local counterparts. Sometimes communications were classified more highly than necessary out of an abundance of caution. People would even send classified communications summarizing meetings with local government counterparts, which lead to a counterproductive result where Afghan officials were banned from reading the NATO reports of the statements the officials had made themselves. Other times, there were legitimate security reasons to classify certain targeting information, but the failure to share the information regarding perpetrators who were handed over to the Afghan justice system with the government led to a failure to prosecute, and the terrorist suspects were released. To achieve sustainable security and stability, local governments need to be able to prosecute their own criminals; it is counterproductive for foreign forces do the bulk of the targeting if they are unable or unwilling to share their evidence with the local courts and prosecutors. In Afghanistan, this problem with communication not only hurt the security situation by putting terrorists back on the battlefield, but it also injured government reputations in the public eye. Without being privy to the details of the case, the population would know that a suspect had been arrested and that the courts had released the suspect

without trial.[100] This catch-and-release system was more detrimental to public perceptions of the government than it would have been had the criminal never been arrested in the first place.

In addition to partnering with and training Malian forces, a larger effort needs to be placed on sharing information and stability operations tactics with the other African and UN troops operating in Mali. Currently the predeployment training for African countries contributing to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as MINUSMA, does not have a standardized or in-depth module on understanding the conflict in Mali or the local sources of instability.[101] In fact, despite the fact that MINUSMA is purportedly a stabilization mission, where the *S* stands for stability, the UN does not have any clear doctrine on stability operations.[102] Instead, the MINUSMA predeployment training focuses on military maneuvering, driving, shooting, and practicing task organization. All are important military functions, but sending UN peacekeepers to Mali without giving them the tools to impact stability in their area of operation is a waste of resources that not only limits their ability to affect stability in the area, but also puts their own soldiers at greater risk than necessary. The more the soldiers are able to improve the stability in a region, not only by neutralizing the enemy's ability to wage war but also by strengthening government accountability to its people and undermining factors that cause the people to support Islamic extremists in their midst, the safer it will be for soldiers operating in the area.

Conclusion

Applying the lessons learned from Afghanistan does not mean we need to take programs and trainings that the United States used in Afghanistan and apply them directly to the problems in Mali. Quite the opposite. If nothing else, American policy makers learned in Afghanistan that cookie-cutter solutions rarely work. When officials decided to emulate the successful local Iraqi policing program, Sons of Iraq, by creating a similar Afghan program called Village Stability Operations, hopes were high that they had found a way to allow the locals to police their own problems.[103] For a variety of reasons, however, results were meager at best. The lack of success may have been due to a range of differences between Afghanistan and Iraq. But the United States' inability to account for these differences doomed the program to failure. What works in one location cannot be imported wholesale to another.

More emphasis needs to be placed on training soldiers to identify and target sources of instability, meaning peacekeepers need to be trained not only with basic military skills but also on how to conduct in-depth situational awareness and analysis. Forces should move toward a more nuanced approach to threat matrices and local dynamics and away from black-and-white classifications of the enemy that lumps all belligerent groups together. Moreover, intelligence

units need to be trained to expand their focus from enemy-centric to population-centric measures so they can understand and address local priorities. Since belligerent groups use complex means to fund their operations, military and civilian stakeholders in Mali will also need training on how to identify and neutralize funding sources for those groups.

All of these lessons were learned slowly and painfully during more than a decade of war in Afghanistan. Many people with experience in Afghanistan never even saw the lessons implemented. Now, the challenge is to apply the lessons learned to the problems facing Mali without starting again from ground zero. If peacekeepers can do that, perhaps they will be able to prevent another extended engagement, promote sustainable conditions for stability, and snuff out the fuel that has been feeding Islamic extremism in the Sahel.

Notes

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