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**GEOSTRATEGIC DIAGNOSIS OF THE  
CONFLICT IN MALI**

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**Abstract:**

This document analyzes main geopolitics factors in Sahel region as well as the threats to be considered in the Mali conflict. From this analysis, most appropriated strategies are explained in order to solve the conflict in a period of time suitable for the international community.

**Keywords:**

Sahel, Mali, Azawad, jihadism

## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Mali has led the territory of the Sahel to the front pages of newspapers, which usually does not get the attention of the media. However, to explain the conflict in Mali, it is necessary to analyze the Western Sahel, which extends through Mauritania, Mali, Algeria and Niger.

The difficulties for the pacification and stabilization of conflict require the participation of the international community and the realization of a geopolitical analysis of the region, whose outline is presented in this document.

An accurate diagnosis of the conflict, based on a geopolitical analysis is essential for the international community to adopt the best possible strategy to avoid Mali becoming a pole of expansion of jihadist terrorism throughout the Sahel and, especially, by Mauritania and Niger. In the long run, this threat would affect the entire Maghreb and, by extension and proximity to European countries such as Spain.

The name Sahel means shore or edge of the sand sea that is the Sahara: a sea of 8 million km<sup>2</sup>. The southern limit of this sand sea is the Sahel, with a length of 6,000 km, which extends from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

Let us now focus our attention on the western Sahel. This is an area where the States of the region are unable to fully exercise its sovereignty. This is due mainly to its economic, structural, political and military weakness, all enhanced by endemic corruption. Certainly, it is the largest failed territory in the world, making it one of the most dangerous on a global scale and a focal point of regional instability.

## MAJOR WESTERN SAHEL GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS

In this territory, borders are long, porous and very difficult to control, which facilitates illicit drug trafficking, smuggling and human beings trafficking. A conducive area for organized crime groups and terrorists to move from one country to another without any difficulty, seeking the shelter of cross border territories that allow them to protect themselves from the action of stronger States such as Algeria.

To this should be added the delineation of borders, which did not always take into account the location of ethnic groups and peoples, as the Tuareg: nomads with their own culture and even their own writing, called Tifinagh. After decolonization, the Tuareg have been scattered among Algeria, Mali, Niger and Libya. According to their way of life and traditions, they are not comfortable under any State, and the feeling of being marginalized has led them to undertake up to four rebellions against State power. The last one started in January 2012

against the government of Bamako, who had marginalized them, especially in infrastructure and services, compared to other regions of Mali.

The regime of Muammar Al-Qadhafi had the support of the Tuareg, who came to constitute several army brigades of the Libyan leader. With his demise in October 2011, it is estimated that two brigades moved to Azawad, Mali Tuareg area, while much of the Libyan arsenal was scattered through the region, which has become a large market for illegal arms trade.

Every country in the Sahel is a cluster of ethnic groups and tribes, among which the feeling of caste, ethnicity or community dominates over the national identity one, which has resulted in a number of ethnic conflicts.

- In Mali, there are Arabs and Tuaregs in the north, Songhai and Fulani people in the center, and Bambara people in the Bamako area.
- In northern Mauritania there are populations of Arab and Berber culture, mostly white, called Bidani; while the south is dominated by black African culture tribes, such as the Wolof, the Halpulaar or the Soninke.
- In Niger, majority ethnic groups are the Hausa and Fulani, but there are Tuaregs, Baggara, Tubu and Zarma people (Songhai).

This multi-ethnic conglomerate fosters feelings of discrimination and ethnic clashes which hamper the growth of the countries.

Political and economic mismanagement of some governments in the region, coupled with corruption, delegitimizes and undermines them against the power of ethnic groups, which become responsible for rebellions and revolts.

The large distances among capitals, Nouakchott (Mauritania), Bamako (Mali), Algiers (Algeria) and Niamey (Niger), from their respective Sahelian territories favor their marginalization, underdevelopment and insecurity. These circumstances are worsened by the advance of desertification, cause of famine and pandemics.

The population of the Sahel is mostly young, jobless and without any hope for a better future. Niger has more than 7 million people under the age of 18. The same number as Spain with a population three times higher. Young people whose desperation makes them easy to manipulate by radical groups, which promotes accepting the jihadist assumptions.

The dominant religion in the region is the Sunni, which in the case of Mauritania is practiced with the Malikite rite, and in Mali and Niger a Sufi orientation predominates, sometimes with Animist reminiscences coming from black Africa. In any case, there are visions of Islam very distant from Salafism, in which the jihadists are supported by.

All these factors, in addition to the low presence of States in the region, define an ideal scenario where rebel groups, terrorists and organized crime jihadists can operate with the only restriction of not waging war against each other. In the words of Mr. Mehdi Taje, head of the African Studies at l'Institut de Recherche Strategique de l'Ecole Militaire (IRSEM), "Sahel vulnerability causes the vulnerability of States".

## SECURITY SYSTEMS OF THE COUNTRIES OF WESTERN SAHEL

Let us see what means are available to the countries of the western Sahel to address insecurity throughout its territory:

- Mauritania, with an area of 1,040,900 km<sup>2</sup> and a population below 3.5 million inhabitants, has an army of about 15,000 troops, to which must be added 3,000 gendarmes and 2,000 National Guard policemen.
- Mali has a land area of 1,240,000 km<sup>2</sup>, with more than 16 million people. To guarantee their safety, it only has an armed forces of 7,350 troops, in addition to 1,800 gendarmes and 3,000 members of the Republican Guard and the National Police, bearing in mind militias with 3,000 troops.
- Niger, with an area of 1,267,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and over 16 million people, has an armed forces of 5,300 troops, to which we must add 1,400 of the Gendarmerie, 2,500 of the Republican Guard and 1,500 of the National Police.

### SAHEL: A FAILED REGION

Sahel: "shore or coast" delimiting the sand sea of the Sahara

## MILITARY AND POLICE FORCES IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE SAHEL

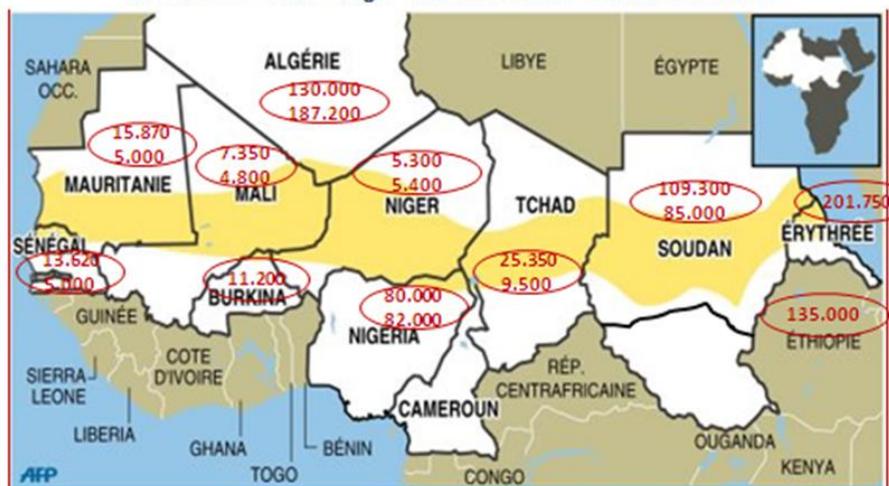
Mauritania + Mali + Niger = 3,547,900 Km<sup>2</sup> → 28,520 soldiers

### SAHEL: UNA REGIÓN FALLIDA

Sahel: "orilla o costa" que delimita el mar de arena del Sáhara

## FUERZAS MILITARES Y POLICIALES EN LOS PAÍSES DEL SAHEL

Mauritania + Mali + Niger = 3.547.900 Km<sup>2</sup> → 28.520 militares



If we add all these figures, the result is very poor: to control Mauritania, Mali and Niger, with a total area of 3.5 million km (seven times the one of Spain), they just have 28,500 troops, which are also poorly equipped and trained, poorly disciplined and they hardly have any air support assets. Although this vast territory has very low population density, it is also true that the population is grouped in large cities, whose effective control requires a large number of security forces, and the least populous desert territories will always require aircraft and intelligence agencies for surveillance and control.

Only Algeria, with an area of 2,381,740 km<sup>2</sup> and 36 million people mostly concentrated in the upper third of its territory, has means in accordance with its size and the threats it faces. The Army has 110,000 troops, the Air Force, 14,000; all well trained to battle an enemy in an asymmetric warfare who uses terrorism. It must be added to the Armed Forces, the police force, including the Gendarmerie with 20,000 troops and National Security Forces with 16,000.

Furthermore, Algeria has 1,200 Republican Guard troops, and 150,000 who are part of the Groups of Self Defense, militias armed by the government that collaborated with the army in the war against terrorism in the 90s. Creating a similar militia among the Tuareg, to fight terrorist groups in Azawad, could be a temporary short-term solution, once an agreement between the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the government of Bamako has been signed. Although to overcome mutual distrust, the supervision of a multinational force accepted by both parties will be necessary.

## THE THREAT

The greatest threat in the region is the jihadist terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), led by the Algerian Abdelmalek Droukdel; the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), headed by Oumar Ould Hamaha, or the Tuareg jihadist group Ansar Dine (“defenders of the faith”), created in late 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali. This is the group with the most number of troops, who come from a split of the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.

In 2010, the only terrorist group in the area was AQIM, with 400 fighters, and an important part of the organization was settled in Kabylia, in northern Algeria. In late 2011, after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, many Tuareg fighters who had supported the Libyan leader took refuge in Mali, and boosted the fourth Tuareg rebellion, which was used by jihadist groups to seize power in the major cities of Azawad displacing the MNLA. At such times, it is estimated that the number of jihadists in the area could reach 6,000.

All of them have found in the Sahel the ideal territory for their activities. An area they know well, where these terrorists groups are finding founding sources by kidnapping Westerners, drug trafficking, tobacco smuggling, or income from giving “protection and guidance” to organized crime organizations which traffic in humans beings. They acquire weapons and they pay the recruited fighters with the money they earn.

In 2012, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, AQIM terrorist, set up an independent Katiba (brigade) called Al-Muthalimin (“Those who sign with blood”) with 200 or 300 terrorists. This group carried out the kidnapping of Tiguentourine gas plant on January 23, one of the majors in Algeria, as it provides 12% of production and 18% of domestic gas exports. During the eight-year war against the Armed Islamic Group (GSPC), the Army and the Argelian police forces prevented the oil and gas supply could be affected. For this reason, this attack highlights the vulnerability of the Algerian energy supply, which is key to the economic and energy security of Spain.

The terrorist cell that carried out the assault consisted of 32 terrorists from 8 different nationalities, of which only 3 were Algerians and, on the contrary, 11 were from Tunisia, a country far beyond the Sahel. This shows that the religion is becoming “Land of jihad”, where the Mujahideen from other countries come to fight. The attackers were headed by Abdul Rahman al Nigeri and, although Belmojtar group has its common sanctuary in Mali, the attack was made from Lybian territory, which gives an idea of porous borders and lack of control in the region.

Another regional threat is the massive illegal immigration, primarily caused by the great inequality between European and sub-Saharan countries. For years, organized crime organizations established in the area have been profiting from the transfer of these illegal immigrants crossing the Sahel towards Europe. Between 2010 and 2011, the number of illegal immigrants arriving in Ceuta and Melilla has increased by 1,778 people.

Nowadays, the number of immigrants arriving to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Lybia are disturbing, because they can lead to significant problems in these countries and neighboring countries, such as Spain. In addition, there are other equally important threats in the area: drug trafficking, which is increasingly more serious and generates big economic profits for organized crime groups and terrorist in the area.

Drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe takes three maritime routes: the “northern route”, originating in the Caribbean, which runs through the Azores towards Portugal and Spain; the “central route”, which starts in South America and reaches Europe through Cape Verde, Madeira and the Canary Islands; and the most recent, the “African route”, which ranges from South America to West Africa, where it cross the Sahel and, from there into Europe.

## COCAINE ROUTES

In the map we can see that the main land route for cocaine into Europe is the one which goes through the Sahel. According to Mr. Alain Antil, researcher from Institut Français de Relations Internationales (IFRI), more than 50 tons of cocaine pass every year through the Sahel. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that the value of drug trafficking in the Sahel in 2009 exceeded 900 million of dollars.

Therefore, the Sahel becomes an ideal territory for terrorist groups, where they also find the means of funding their activities. These territories are very large and cannot have permanent military presence, so that the objective of national governments should be to control the cities and have a good information system, which alerts to any suspicious activity. Major cities in Azawad have a population size between the 10,000 inhabitants in Kidal and the 50,000 in Gao, but there is a high percentage of rural population scattered over the barren desert. As a result, larger armies are necessary, and they must also have more weapons, and particularly command, control and intelligence capabilities.

## REQUIRED SECURITY SYSTEM IN THE AREA

The first conclusion we can draw from our analysis is that the Western Sahel countries, except Algeria, do not have the means to control their territory or, even less, to deal with jihadi groups. This threatens the stability of the country and the region. And the main consequence is that, at present, international support and cooperation is essential to develop an indigenous security system (military and police) in the shortest time possible.

Given this enormous challenge, we wonder how long these countries need to acquire self-contained security systems, which can prevent their territory from being organized crime and armed terrorist groups sanctuary?

Every security system involves a cost, which requires that the economy of the countries reach appropriate developmental levels.

Looking at the income per capita of the countries of the region, and bearing in mind the extent of the territories and characteristics of the threats they face, we can establish as a first reference, countries like Mali should have a minimum per capita income of 1,000 dollars to ensure its security autonomously. In 2011, Mali had an income of 756 dollars and a growth of 5.28% per year, so more than seven years will be necessary to reach the 1,000 dollars income, an amount below which it is established poverty in the Purchasing Power Standards, according to BBVA Research.

The situation of Mali is no exception. Mauritania's income is 1,230 dollars, compared to 32,610 dollars in Spain: two countries separated by just 800 km. Much worse is the situation in Niger, with just 382 dollars. With these levels of poverty, and to deal with the problem of insecurity in the area, international aid seems inevitable to ensure sustainable development for at least a decade and to contribute to the maintenance of an effective armed forces and police for 7 years. In any case, it is always cheaper to attain that States do not lose control of their territory than to wage a war to recover the territory and then stabilize it. The lesson learned from recent conflicts is that it is better to manage crises than conflicts, and that the difficult part is not to win the war, but to build peace in post-conflict phases.

Although the growth of Mauritania (5.28%), Mali (5.28%) or Niger (5.82%) are relatively high, especially because they start from very low incomes, we must consider that they have to address multiple needs that are not covered. Niger ranks 186 in the Global Human Development Index 2012, in other words, the last place in the world rankings, surpassed only by the Democratic Republic of Congo. Meanwhile, Mali ranks 175 and Mauritania 159. Therefore, we face three countries that have to cover different basic needs of its citizens. Certainly, safety is one of the most important ones, but it becomes of secondary importance when the conflict is not active.

Development and security go hand in hand, as Kofi Annan stated "There can be development without security, no security without development, and no society can prosper without respect for human rights."

And to increase development, regional deposits of minerals, such as uranium and iron, whose main customer is China, are particularly important. To the extent that emerging countries, like India and China, increase their consumption, the demand of these resources will be greater, and therefore, producing countries will have more demand and will improve their economic growth.

In contrast, if the international community abandons these countries to their fate, it is highly probable that they will be compelled in a long-standing internal conflict, which will prevent them from developing their economy and, therefore, growth. But the problem is not just economic; they need security systems and organizational structures appropriated to their needs, capabilities, training and discipline, as well as subordination to legitimate political power, which has to put them away from any attempt to carry out a coup. This requires reforms in their current structures, and a new military and police culture, which can only be provided by developed countries.

With all the previous data, we ask ourselves whether the Sahelian countries will be able to improve their economic situation thanks to their natural resources and to their growth, allowing them to improve their security system to control the Sahel. As we have seen, a country like Mali would need 7 years to reach the 1,000 dollars of income per capita and 15

years to reach 1,500 dollars, but unfortunately, economic growth is hampered by the high birth rates.

Mali's birth rate in 2012 was 45 births per 1,000 inhabitants. As a reference point, Spain has a rate of 10 births and, therefore 4.5 times less. Mauritania birth rate was 33. Niger birth rate, with 50 births, is the world highest birth rate. According to these data, it is clear that an important part of the economic growth will be absorbed by the larger number of mouths to feed.

## CONCLUSION

After this quantitative and qualitative analysis, the main conclusion we can draw is the inability of these countries to achieve a basic stability, which allows them to continue growing economically, without, without external assistance. In addition, internal and regional support is imperative to give Mali a sustainable security system in the long-term that will help to resolve its internal conflict and thus to stabilize the region. However, it is necessary to establish measurable short-, medium- and long-term objectives to determine realistically the financial, material and human resources that the entire international community and the regional organizations should put on the ground to prevent a complication in the post-conflict after France's intervention. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a "final desired state" defined with measurable parameters.

On the other hand, it is also imperative to share responsibility with the MNLA Tuaregs and the government of Bamako to establish arrangements that provide political and social stability in northern Mali. Therefore it is necessary to convince the Tuaregs to break all the relations with jihadists, and to participate in their own security system by creating paramilitary forces to collaborate with international and government forces in the control of Azawad.

But the problem is not just security, it is also development. Operations should contemplate plans based on the concept of "Comprehensive approach" (holistic approach), that include security actions (military and police), development, and support for the implementation of a system based on good governance. Overall, a 3D strategy (Defense, Development and Diplomacy) with civilian and military actions coordinated from its planning and not just on the field, equipped with the necessary capabilities according to the objectives. It is necessary to apply cooperative security based on the preferential involvement of the regional organizations supported by the major global powers.

The contribution of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) is also essential; as the information provided about what is taking place in large spaces between populations is very important.

Military operations aim is the spread of terrorist groups, since it is difficult to finish militarily because of its large capacity to mingle with civilians and to make strategic withdrawals in the area of operations, following the strategies of Sun Tzu when a fight at a disadvantage arises. To confront this challenge, and taking into account the major role played by the leaders of each group, finding information to locate and act against them it is very useful. We find ourselves in an asymmetrical conflict where intelligence is the key factor and especially human intelligence, which preferably should be obtained from the Tuaregs.

In any case, time runs against the international community.

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