

BRIEFER

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Mali: Migration, Militias, Coups and Climate Change

Francesco Femia and Caitlin E. Werrell

The world is suddenly paying attention to the oft-ignored North African country of Mali, as it is racked by its most recent in a long string of crises: a *coup d'état*. This political and constitutional crisis sits atop an already extremely vulnerable situation – a volatile mix of climate change, drought, food shortages, migration and immobility, armed insurrection and heavy weapons proliferation that threaten to plunge the country into a state of instability not unlike Somalia. As the international community, including the UN Security Council, moves to act on this crisis, it will be important to consider all the identifiable sources of Mali's insecurity in order to get the solutions right.

From model to mayhem?

Mali has been [described by some](#) as a benchmark country in Africa, where democracy had put down healthy roots over the past two decades. Yet on March 21, a military junta seized control of the government in Bamako, ousting the democratically-elected President Amadou Toumani Toure from power. The rationale, according to military spokespersons, was that the government had [failed to put a lid on the separatist Tuareg rebellion in the](#)

[north](#) (a situation we covered in a previous [blog](#).) Soon after, on April 4, the UNSC [issued a strongly-worded Presidential statement](#) condemning the coup, and urging military leaders to restore power to civilian control. Since then, the coup leaders have committed to a [framework agreement](#) “for the restoration of constitutional order in Mali,” but a positive outcome remains uncertain.

Insecurities under the surface

Despite some previous descriptions of Mali as a success story, significant tensions were seething under the surface all along. The coup came amidst a backdrop of a series of old, perennial insecurities in Mali, and recent ones created by rapid political changes in North Africa.

The first is the aforementioned armed rebellion led by nomadic Tuareg tribesmen, which has been [calling for separation from the south for over two decades](#). In October of last year, these militants formed the the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), and proceeded to violently [wrest control](#) of a significant swathe of northeastern Mali, with no signs of slowing down.

A few weeks following the coup, the [Tuareg managed to seize the “major garrison towns city of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu,”](#) prompting a chastened Malian military leadership to promise a handover to civilian control once elections could be held. As of today, the [Tuareg control most of the country’s northern territory.](#)

The second is the [recent arrival of the Algerian Salafist offshoot, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\),](#) onto the Malian political scene. On April 4, the UN Security Council [expressed serious concern about this entity,](#) warning that Islamist extremists from AQIM and the Tuareg could take advantage of the instability caused by the coup to sow further chaos and advance sharia law.

The third is the result of the recent political instability and revolutionary changes in both Libya and Côte d’Ivoire. As [highlighted by the Economist,](#) these changes have led to both a [proliferation of heavy weapons](#) from Libya into Mali, and an exodus of Malians who once lived and worked in Libya and Côte d’Ivoire back to their home country. [According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\),](#) the latter phenomenon has led to a severance of remittances for the families of emigrants, who relied on that money to sustain themselves, thus creating an atmosphere of desperation for both returnees and their families. Furthermore, as Libya’s recently-deposed ruler Muammar Gaddafi had given refuge to Tuareg militants, [many of them have fled back to Mali,](#) adding fuel to the separatist fire.

A fourth insecurity is the extended drought in Mali and the broader Western Sahel, which looms over all of the above, threatening to multiply the security and humanitarian breakdown even further.

Drought, climate change and immobility

Though much of the world wasn’t paying attention to Mali before the coup, the humanitarian commu-

nity was. Late last year, organizations such as Oxfam [warned](#) of a drought in Mali, similar to the one that has plagued countries in the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. Concerns were raised over the lack of international support for the country because of [fatigue over massive humanitarian relief efforts in the Horn](#) – particularly Somalia. The drought has proceeded apace, driving hundreds of thousands of Malians away from drought-stricken villages between February and March, [according to the UN.](#) And though the humanitarian community did an outstanding job of preparing for the drought, through early-warning and well-coordination preparation, they could not have been prepared for the rapid deterioration of the country’s political condition.

Enter climate change. Security analysts often refer to climate change as a “threat multiplier” or “accelerant of instability” – a phenomenon that exacerbates a range of existing problems. Mali is a textbook case of this. As we mentioned recently in [another piece on the Sahel,](#) and as highlighted in a [recent report](#) by Michael Werz and Laura Conley at the Center for American Progress, climate change has been identified as a probable factor in the recent drought:

According to at least [six studies](#) of this phenomenon, highlighted by [UNEP](#) in 2006 (see page 3), “the second half of the 20th century has witnessed a dramatic reduction in mean annual rainfall throughout the region.” A [2005 NOAA report](#) attributed the low rainfall to changes in sea surface temperature (likely caused by a combination of natural variability and human-induced change), and both a [NOAA study in 2006,](#) and another by [Shanahan et al in 2009,](#) attributed drought in the West African Sahel to the Atlantic Multidecadal Oscillation, which is responsive to sea surface temperature changes.

And though influxes of migrants from nearby states are raising tensions, the drought also threat-

ens to worsen the less-explored phenomenon of “trapped populations” in Mali. Given that Mali is [one of the poorest countries in the world](#), many of its people neither have the money, nor the connections, to freely move either within, or out of, the country. [According to geographer Dave Thomas at Oxford University](#), “The people we should really be thinking about are...those who stay behind, who may wish to migrate but can’t...They are trapped, they are the most vulnerable.” Though it is of course important to address the concerns of both refugees and the immobile, this is an important and often overlooked problem in Mali and elsewhere, and drought can quickly lead to famine for these trapped populations (we [previously discussed](#) this phenomenon in an article titled: “No Way Out: Climate Change and Immobility”).

Focusing solutions on all identifiable drivers of unrest

Mali is an example of where the humanitarian community was prepared to deal with the predictable, but could not have prepared for the unpredictable – the rapid collapse of the country’s government and the subsequent advance of the Tuareg insurgents. This kind of uncertainty will probably never go away. However, a number of the drivers of instability in Mali, such as certain long-standing political grievances, the free flow of heavy weapons and international terrorist organizations, drought and the climatic changes that exacerbate that drought, can now be identified with a reasonably high degree of certainty. These should be the focus of national, regional and international efforts to resolve the conflict in Mali, reconstruct its institutions of government, and improve the security and resilience of its population.

Francesco Femia and Caitlin E. Werrell are Co-Founders and Directors of the Center for Climate and Security