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## Split into North and South – a Sahel war in the offing

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# The Current Column

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## Split into North and South – a Sahel war in the offing

Bonn, 16.07.2012. In the Sahel a war is spreading. Within three months it has overtaken the towns in an area of northern Mali larger than France. 365,000 people have taken flight within the country and across its borders into neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. But it is not the only disaster to strike northern Mali. The people are not only fleeing the violence, a reminder of the Tuareg war of 1990 to 1992, they are also trying to escape drought and famine. Little in the way of facts and developments is leaking out to the world's public. Journalists, foreigners and most western aid organisations have left. The situation is too dangerous. At best, information is being received by telephone from the border towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. Uninhabited desert areas are isolated from modern means of communication. And yet reports on the region paint a clear picture of good and evil. Images of defiled graves in Timbuktu show how Islamist fighters and Tuareg rebels are destroying a world cultural heritage dating back centuries. The inhabitants of Timbuktu appear to have no choice but to watch helplessly as the armed and masked men go about their heartless business. In Gao, a town on Mali's border with Niger, the 'Movement for Uniqueness and Jihad in West Africa' (MUJAO) is said to have taken the whole population hostage, a circle of land mines ensuring that no one escapes.

It seems to be a clear-cut case: extremist Islamists and Tuareg rebels versus the Malian state. And yet it is not quite so simple. The threatening Islamist gestures of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO and Ansar Eddine conceal a mixture of hard economic interests, disputes between old-established clans and struggles for an independent Tuareg state to be known as Azawad. Independence from the Malian state is demanded by the Tuareg Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which began by allying itself with Ansar Eddine to increase its strength. But the groups fell out over the question of religion: while the MNLA advocates a secular state, the other three are officially seeking to establish an Islamist regime in western Africa. Yet the lines separating the Tuareg and the Islamists seem clearer than they really are. Ansar Eddine is led by

the respected Tuareg Iyad Ag Ghali. He had hopes of becoming the leader of the MNLA. When they were dashed, he set up the Islamist Ansar Eddine, but retained links with his Tuareg clan. He is alleged to have the backing of AQIM. AQIM emerged from an Algerian Salafist movement, is said to be composed mostly of Algerians and Mauritians and operates across borders in the western Sahel.

Behind the religiously charged scenes, all the groups that are ready to use violence – whether Tuareg, AQIM, MUJAO or Ansar Eddine – have a number of things in common: First, they are linked to international smuggling: only in an un-governed area as the Sahel can the lucrative movement of drugs from Latin America to Europe flourish and other smuggled goods find their way to consumers in Africa, Asia and Europe. Second, their violence has no support in Mali's tolerant and consensus-oriented society. Nor does the introduction of a Wahabi and Salafist form of Islam find any approval in the Sufi tradition of the Malian faithful. Third, the groups with a propensity for violence are benefiting from the collapse of the Ghaddafi regime. Innumerable Tuareg who fought in the ranks of the Libyan army have returned, some of them heavily armed, to their desert homes in Mali, Niger and Chad. Trained as soldiers, they are easily recruited for the struggle in northern Mali. Their combat strength and fire power are alarming, even though the actual numbers involved remain unknown. Finally, the fighters in northern Mali are taking advantage of the power vacuum that has prevailed in the capital of the country since a military coup in March 2012.

Beside the pictures of war and famine, the coup that ousted the democratically elected President, Amadou Toumani Touré, fades into insignificance. Yet the absence of a workable government is currently preventing effective action against famine, poverty and war in the North of the country. In this former model democracy supporters of the old regime face sections of the military and young Malians pressing for radical political change. They recall the demands that the old political elite addressed to representatives of the

authoritarian regime in the early stages of Malian democracy in 1991. The state was to ensure the unity of the nation and put an end to the ominous Tuareg rebellion (1991-1995). The old elite also stood for an end to corrupt politics and the enrichment of individuals at the expense of the Malian people. Now the civil and military opposition are also accusing the government led by Touré, who has fled to Senegal, and the constitutional transitional government of being incapable of restoring peace in the North and ensuring sustainable development for all Malians. In this respect many observers are surprised to find that the military coup has proved very popular with the urban population. Nor has an agreement mediated by Burkina Faso and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) done much to improve the wrangling over the leadership of the country. ECOWAS, for example, has called on the Malian transitional government to form a government of national unity by 31 July 2012 and to take action to end the conflict in the North.

International support is needed if a further escalation of violence in the Sahel region is to be prevented. In Africa itself the African Union, ECOWAS and Mali's neighbours Algeria and Chad are discussing the form that engagement might take. ECOWAS has taken Algeria's place as the main negotiating power in conflicts with the Tuareg and AQIM. The problem with ECOWAS's new role is, however, that Algeria and Chad, being non-

members, are excluded. A split in political positions was also to be seen at the African Union summit in Addis Ababa last weekend. While ECOWAS is preparing to intervene with 3,000 troops, Algeria is pressing for a political dialogue with the warring parties. Chad would take military action, but not under ECOWAS's aegis. Sustained management of the conflict in northern Mali and of the regular catastrophic droughts in the Sahel is, however, achievable only with Algeria and Chad. The integration of these countries can succeed only if Mali, the African Union and the United Nations Security Council adopt clear positions. In the Security Council France has already declared its support for military intervention, while the USA is exercising restraint in view of the forthcoming presidential election. As the Malian military is also opposed to intervention, Mali's transitional government remains incapable of taking action for the time being. Neither the African Union and ECOWAS nor the United Nations will do anything before 31 July. In the meantime, they expect a government of national unity to be formed in Mali and an ECOWAS mission and the UN Secretary-General to present their reports on the situation in Mali. It is to be hoped that in this way a more accurate picture of the facts and developments in the war and the emergency in northern Mali will emerge. It is only on a sound basis of this kind that the advantages and risks associated with a military intervention can be assessed.



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