

Security Challenges in Libya and the Sahel

Workshop Report

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Photo credit line: Militiaman from the Ansar Dine Islamic group, who said they had come from Niger and Mauritania, ride on a vehicle at Kidal in northeastern Mali, June 16, 2012. REUTERS/Adama Diarra.

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Introduction

Over the past two years, the world has witnessed a redrawing of the geopolitical map of the Middle East and North Africa. The responsibility for regional security and stability – which Western governments once relied on the area’s authoritarian regimes to ensure – now falls to the transitional or newly elected governments that replaced the ousted old orders. Although in some countries the new leadership has succeeded in promoting a degree of stability during this transitional period, in Libya the turbulent social and economic forces that drove out the long-lived regime of Muammar Qaddafi have yet to settle. The rise of powerful militias that have filled the security void in Libya challenge the authority of the new government. Absent Qaddafi’s political and economic influence, Libya and its neighbors are at risk of a new wave of civil conflict and economic deterioration.

On October 16, CNA hosted a workshop to explore the repercussions of the Libyan Revolution—for Libya itself and for states in the broader Sahel region, particularly Mali. The workshop brought together noted academics and experts from the United States and abroad.

Key Findings

- The primary challenge for the newly elected Libyan government will be to confront the rapidly growing and powerful militias formed during the country’s revolution.
- The growing divide between Libya’s east and west will continue to pose a challenge for the country’s political stability.
- Despite the country’s deepening divide, Libyan civil society is developed, and the population is politically engaged, allowing some optimism for an eventual solution to the country’s current turmoil.
- The current crisis in Mali is widely regarded not only as a ramification of Libya’s postrevolutionary turbulence and consequent power vacuum, but also as a confluence of organized crime and corruption that has permeated the Malian government well before the March 2012 coup d’état.
- Profits garnered by kidnapping for ransom has been key to the rise of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and other terrorist groups operating in northern Mali.
- The success of an international intervention in Mali depends heavily on the nature and degree of involvement by Algeria, which favors a domestic political solution.
- Repairing the governance, authority, and legitimacy of the government in the Malian capital—even in the event that an international intervention is successful in expelling the Islamists from the north—will be a long-term challenge.

Libya's Revolution: One Year Later

On September 11, 2012, an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi—Libya's major eastern city—left U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans dead. Islamist militants, who have taken advantage of weak governmental authority since the fall of Muammar Qaddafi, are suspected to be the perpetrators of the attack. The assault on the consulate was a violent manifestation of what has been occurring in Libya over the past year. First, popular hostility toward the government and its partners—particularly in the east—has not dissipated, despite the election and establishment of the General National Congress (GNC), which formally replaced National Transitional Council (NTC) in a transfer of power on August 8, 2012. Second, militias have established themselves as the guarantors of local security in the absence of central authority, allowing for extremist elements to operate unabated; this situation has led to the degradation of the rule of law in the country. Third, Salafism and violent extremism appear to be gaining momentum, with the country's east as the movement's hub. It has become clear that the GNC and Libyan army are ill equipped to deal with these fast-moving developments.

“Eastern neglect” tests national unity

Historical memories of oppression, resistance, and rebellion run deep in Libya's east—a region that has played a role in Libya's political development since independence in 1951. One speaker remarked that Libyans he met with saw the September 11, 2012 consulate attack as another example of “the people of Benghazi taking things into their own hands.” Benghazi was not only the seat of the 2011 revolution, but was also the hub of resistance to Qaddafi's own Green Revolution, which brought him to power in 1969. (Benghazi was also the center of resistance to Italy's colonial rule in the 1920s.) The major tribes in the east felt marginalized and exploited by the Qaddafi regime's tribal policies and exploited, as the area had seen an unequal distribution of benefits from the development of oil resources located in that part of the country. Many in the east regard the GNC (and NTC before it) as continuing these discriminatory and unjust practices.

Confronting Libya's powerful militias

The GNC must deal with the numerous regional militias formed during the 2011 revolution; the militias are heavily armed after raiding government arsenals. Immediately after Qaddafi's fall, the NTC and local governments did not have the resources to guarantee security at the local level or to protect the country's borders and oil infrastructure. To address the increasing lawlessness, local governments gave warrant to the local militias to enforce order. However, many Libyans feel that this early partnership of convenience conferred too much power to armed groups that ultimately do not answer to government authority. Efforts to demobilize and bring these militias under state control resulted in the

creation of the Libyan Shield Forces under the Ministry of Defense. These new paramilitary forces act in tandem to the army, while the Supreme Security Committee (or SSC, under the Ministry of Interior) acts in tandem with the police. The Warrior Affairs Commission was also established to provide educational opportunities and vocational training to revolutionary fighters in order to provide them with alternative economic options after their demobilization.

However, workshop participants agreed that these state-based efforts have not been successful in either breaking the power of the militias or making the SSC and Libyan Shield Forces accountable to governmental authority. There are reports of SSC branches in particular, abusing their positions and using their influence to carry out vendettas against their rivals. There is also the general concern that the Libyan Shield Forces and SSC branches are morphing into a shadow government. Workshop participants agreed that prolonging Libya's dependence on these alternative security bodies will undermine long-term stability initiatives and divert attention from the central goal of rebuilding the national armed forces.

One speaker at the CNA workshop outlined the three typical paths for Libya's militia members in the immediate postrevolutionary period: Some have leveraged their revolutionary prestige into political positions; some have become entrenched in local organized crime groups; and some have joined the jihadist/rejectionist movement. In the east, where Salafism and rejectionists appear to be based, many militia members are frustrated that they have not been able to translate their military success into political gains; they see themselves as the seat and soul of the revolution, and they believe that their success has been co-opted by those who did not sacrifice as much. Salafist militias in the east, notably the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade, have established themselves as major players who stand up for this "mistreated" part of the country. In Benghazi, Ansar al-Sharia has been able to provide protection and services to the population where the central government has been unable or unwilling to do so.

Some speakers cautioned that there is little incentive for these militia members to relinquish their prestigious positions to join the national armed forces. The financial aspects are particularly daunting: As one speaker remarked, the basic membership of the militias prior to the revolution consisted of those who had been unemployed or underemployed, students, or day laborers. The revolution transformed these disenfranchised men into national heroes, and it will be difficult to convince them to give up such status. Militias are also hesitant to disband because they see the political solution for the country as far from determined.

U.S. efforts to establish a counterterrorism unit or resuscitate the national army lack a strong government partner in Libya, given the weak status of the GNC and national army vis-à-vis the regional militias. Indeed, the GNC faces many challenges on the security front: It must demobilize these militias; secure their weapons; provide legitimate, alternative eco-

conomic opportunities for the fighters; break their popular influence over local populations; and create an option for national military or police service that will unify these disparate fighters. To address these challenges, the GNC must solidify its authority and become the viable, legitimate, and trusted representative of the Libyan people.

Trouble in the Neighborhood

The toppling of Muammar Qaddafi has had far-reaching, destabilizing effects for Libya's vulnerable neighbors, particularly those to the south. The power vacuum that accompanied Qaddafi's sudden end ignited latent, long-standing ethnic and tribal grievances across the region, compromised the already precarious economic and social conditions of the region, and unleashed a bevy of weapons as Libya's arms caches which were looted by militants, opportunists, and agents of organized criminal networks. There is evidence that weapons from Libya have made their way from the Sinai to the Sudan.

Security and political crisis in Mali

The reverberations of the Libyan revolution are being felt perhaps most acutely in Mali, where an influx of weapons and the return of Tuareg who had been living in Libya and, in many cases, fighting on the deposed leader's behalf rekindled a previously settled Tuareg rebellion against the Malian central government. In January 2012, the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) seized control of towns in northern Mali, reactivating the conflict over the longstanding Tuareg bid for autonomy. The uprising exposed the weakness of the Malian army as it failed to rout the Tuareg fighters. Fueled by anger over being under-funded and underequipped to defeat the Tuaregs, factions of the Malian army staged a military coup d'état in March that overthrew the government in Bamako.

The following spring and summer, the Tuareg rebels eventually lost their gains to Islamist militants. As a result, Islamist extremist groups, including Ansar Dine and Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), have been able to take control of the major northern cities: Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. These groups are aligned with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), and they have allowed the transnational terrorist organization a base of operation in Mali's north from which to launch attacks against Western targets.

Violent clashes persist between the Tuareg and Islamist groups over territory. As the Islamist militants have established their control of the north, fighters from other countries have poured into the area to join the conflict; there are reports that the extremist groups pay members of the local population to repel government and Tuareg forces. One speaker pointed out that the influx of weapons from Libya has facilitated the rise of additional militant groups, and as these groups jockey for control of the area, two trends appear to be emerging: first, a network of jihadists from Africa to Asia is forming; and, second, al-

Qaeda’s “center of gravity” has been relocated from the Middle East to North Africa, creating an “Arc of Instability” across the region.

Organized crime and its role in the Malian crisis

As one speaker noted, the impact of organized crime as a contributing factor to the Malian crisis has not been adequately taken into account: First, the credibility of the Malian government and state institutions was undermined by state complicity in organized crime in northern Mali prior to the Tuareg rebellion and subsequent military coup. High-level Malian officials—including former president Amadou Toumani Touré—were known to have profited from the activities of drug smugglers; they have also been known to allow their allies among the Malian elite to collude with organized crime groups; state-level complicity with organized crime extended to ransom kidnappings, as some officials were able to facilitate ransom payments for a fee. The more potentially destructive practices in state-level corruption include arms deals between intelligence officials and AQIM, and leaks from military and intelligence officers to AQIM. This confluence of criminal activity and state-level corruption not only emboldened the extremist groups, but also irreversibly tainted the government in the eyes of the public.

Second, AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO have been able to use the profits from their associations with organized crime to pay for their alliances with local elites and tribes, and to recruit new members by offering them compensation. With few comparable income opportunities for Malians, these high-income prospects change the politics and the balance of power at the national level in Mali, as Bamako is unable to extend similar financial benefits to the population. While the primary drug smuggling activity in the region consists of trafficking South American cocaine and Moroccan cannabis through the Sahel states on the way to Europe, one speaker asserted that ransom kidnapping has been among the more lucrative enterprises, creating financial fortunes for Islamist militants operating in northern Mali.¹

Participants agreed that even if a political solution to the current crisis in Mali is achieved, state corruption and complicity with organized criminal networks would continue to pose challenges for the legitimacy and stability of the government. Some participants were skeptical that the central government in Bamako would be able to reinstate its authority and expel the Islamists without forging temporary alliances with organized criminal networks. One speaker pointed out that the existing tactical alliances in the north are malleable and based largely on convenience. Once the strategic landscape of the region changes, these

1. According to one CNA workshop speaker, Mali’s experience with ransom kidnappings began in earnest in 2008, with 42 hostages taken and 24 released as of October 2012. The typical payoff for a released hostage—most of whom are from Western countries with a history of paying ransoms—was in the seven-figure range (in U.S. dollars or their exchange equivalent).

alliances can be expected to change as well. If the international effort is successful in resolving the current crisis, the Malian government will have to strike temporary coalitions with criminal organizations to ensure the economy does not collapse, a scenario that would make it difficult for the government to win back support in the north. Workshop participants agreed that the new government in Bamako will be hard pressed to balance such an effort, while also promoting the stability and legitimacy of state institutions.

Considering international intervention

The international response to the crisis in Mali has been slow to gain momentum. An international consensus on a multinational coalition to address the conflict is challenged by Algeria, which is widely considered the successor to Libya as the region's most powerful and influential state. Algeria has continued to argue against an international military intervention, insisting that a political solution is the only viable option for restoring order in Mali. In November 2012, despite limited Algerian participation, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed on a military intervention plan, which would consist of approximately 3,300 West African troops partnering with Mali's 5,000-strong forces, to "dismantle terrorist and transnational criminal networks" in northern Mali.² The United States and certain European Union member states have indicated their willingness to support intelligence gathering and other logistical efforts, but currently there is no plan to have non-African forces participate in ground or air operations. Algeria has offered its tacit support for this plan, and has accelerated efforts to seal its southern border with Mali. However, speakers questioned the viability of any military option in which Algeria is not more directly involved.

Algeria: The reticent regional power. The Algerian government can make a legitimate claim for its unwillingness to support international military intervention in Mali. Any rapidly conceived military intervention, in Algiers' view, without political dialogue and a stronger central government in Bamako will only further destabilize the region's fragile security. Algeria is concerned that a military campaign in northern Mali will drive the Islamists back into the Algerian desert or into other neighboring countries, where they will be able to regroup.

The country's own experience with terrorism informs decision makers in international and regional security organizations, and even the Algerian populace itself is not eager to involve itself in foreign interventions. In fact, Algeria's constitution states that its army will not be involved in conflicts abroad. Preserving the regime is a priority for Algeria's political leaders, and although Algeria has heretofore weathered the popular uprisings of the Arab

2. Quoting the ECOWAS chairman, Ivory Coast president Alassane Ouattara, in BBC News/Africa, "West Africa bloc ECOWAS agrees to deploy troops to Mali," November 11, 2012; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20292797>.

Spring by instituting cautious reforms and managing its oil wealth to address the economic needs of its population, stability for the current government is not assured. There is concern that if the government were to involve itself too heavily in an unpopular military escapade against Islamist militants outside the country's borders, it would risk provoking antigovernment demonstrations. As one speaker noted, Algeria already sees itself as susceptible to the turmoil in Libya, and the regime is unsettled by the political transition in Egypt and the rise of Islamists there.

Algeria's colonial history also makes its government dubious of any plan for Mali that would augment the presence of Western powers in its "backyard," as France has spearheaded EU advocacy for an international intervention. Algeria is inherently skeptical of any EU involvement in regional affairs, especially when France takes the lead. Some Algerian officials suspect that France is using ECOWAS as a tool to further the French agenda in the region, which discredits the group for the Algerians. One speaker also pointed out that Algeria sees any ECOWAS plan as favoring its longtime regional rival, Morocco, to the detriment of Algeria's interests.

Courting Algiers. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to Algeria in late October to enlist Algerian cooperation. While Algeria will contribute to intelligence gathering and sharing agreements—or possibly allow its airspace to be used by intervention forces—Algeria's well developed and technologically advanced military could contribute far more substantively to military operations. Algeria's defense budget was the largest in the region over the past year; the country has a fleet of aircraft and experience combatting terrorism. In addition to these resources, Algeria has, through its intelligence services, a relationship with Jeddah Iyad ag Ghali, a Malian Tuareg who formed Ansar Dine after being rebuffed in his attempt to assume leadership of the MNLA.

Yet Algeria will not be goaded into fighting terrorists outside its borders, as one speaker pointed out. Algiers is firm that it will not be the next Pakistan, or "subcontractor" for the Global War on Terrorism, which it believes would only make Algeria a prime target for AQIM and bring thousands of weapons and fighters into the Algerian desert. Workshop participants echoed the frustrations with Algeria's reticence which is shared by many West and North African countries—that while Algeria seeks to portray itself as a regional hegemon, its reluctance to involve and contribute to international efforts in Mali undermines its position as a major player.

Regional Prospects

Libya's "People Power"

Despite the troubling state of the region, CNA workshop participants referred to several signs for optimism. First, drawing from their recent experiences and interactions in Libya,

several speakers noted that despite perceptions of the country descending into chaos, Libyan citizens have the will and potential to stand up to extremist elements. One speaker referred to Libya's "counterweights"—including a thriving nongovernmental organization (NGO) climate and active women's groups—as bulwark against the conditions necessary for an Islamist insurgency to take hold in the country.

While there is a real sense in the U.S. that eastern Libya has fallen under the sway of Salafism, workshop participants insisted that there are built-in social and political "brakes" against this form of Islamism that were evident before the September 2012 attack in Benghazi. For example, in June 2012, Ansar al-Sharia demanded the institution of sharia law, and attempted a display of power, but Libyan citizens responded with a counterprotest. A second example is found in the results of the July elections, in which Libyans elected centrist officials and a coalition of parties that includes liberal and Islamist representatives. By and large, Libyans rejected the Salafist candidates, which one workshop speaker felt highlighted Libya's centrist inclinations. Libyans are not interested in turning into the next Afghanistan, ruled by religious extremists and a haven for international terrorist organizations. Other examples of defiance include towns evicting the Salafi militias and Libyan families forbidding their sons to join extremist organizations. The counterprotest and eviction of Ansar al-Sharia from Benghazi following the September consulate attack was another moving example of Libyans demonstrating en masse their rejection of violent extremism and their appeal to the government to bring the militias into the purview of governmental authority.

Workshop participants outlined three paths for Libya's future political solution: The first is a scenario in which jihadists and violent extremists are able to establish themselves as the de facto order—most likely through violence, which will have grave implications for national unity. The second is one in which "outsiders" from the international community (possibly with a UN mandate) are forced to intervene and take control of situation. The third is a solution that is brought about by Libyans taking the reins of responsibility for their country's future through peaceful and democratic means. The turnout of moderate, civic-minded Libyans during the July elections gave workshop participants cause for optimism that the last path would be the one most likely to prevail.

Preparing for intervention in Mali

The situation in Mali remains a veritable powder keg. One speaker cautioned that the infiltration by AQIM and the political destabilization of the country pose an acute threat to Mali's neighbors. One area of concern is in Western Sahara, where social and economic conditions—particularly among the young—are dire, and distrust of political leaders (government and tribal) is rampant. There is evidence that AQIM has infiltrated the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, as well as indications that Sahrawi from the camps have

joined terrorist groups based in Mali. These developments pose immediate concerns for the security of Western Sahara, Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria.

The African Union has indicated its support for ECOWAS's plan for intervention. However, the plan is still subject to the UN Security Council's approval, and is not likely to be acted on until 2013. While there is anxiety that the situation in Mali will deteriorate further and complicate any military intervention, the waiting time for a vote in the UN may allow for an opportunity for the government in Bamako to establish itself and for Algeria to make progress toward a political solution. Algeria has already taken measures such as a November meeting with representatives of Ansar Dine and the MNLA. It appears that Algeria has made progress in encouraging Ansar Dine to break with AQIM. A week after Secretary Clinton's visit to Algiers and meetings with President Bouteflika, Ansar Dine stated that it is not ideologically linked with al-Qaeda, and Algeria has since advocated for the movement to have a formal seat at the official negotiations with the Malian government. During the CNA workshop, participants were encouraged that Algeria appears to be recognizing the inevitability of Moroccan involvement. Algeria appears to understand, despite its suspicions of Morocco's interests, that opposition to Morocco's playing a role in the resolution of the conflict would be fruitless.

Considerations for U.S. Policymakers

The Arab Awakening has changed the way the United States approaches its security concerns in North Africa. In assisting the transitional governments with stabilizing the region and addressing current and potential crises, the United States should be mindful that any action it takes that appears heavy-handed will undermine the legitimacy of that government and will look like unwarranted meddling in an area notoriously suspicious of outside interference. Workshop participants were able to develop recommendations to guide the thinking of U.S. policymakers to address these challenges.

In Libya

While the United States may not be able to play a direct role in rebuilding the Libyan government, it can help address political instability and social unrest. The United States and its NATO partners contributed militarily to the revolution that led to the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime, but the responsibility for Libya's political transition rests with the Libyan people themselves. Overreach by the U.S. or the international community could alienate the population and create a climate for jihadist or rejectionist forces to thrive. The U.S. should be encouraged that the elections for the GNC produced a moderate coalition government, but extremist factions in the east and unruly militias threaten the ability of the government to assert its authority and legitimacy. The U.S. has the opportunity to encourage the new government in Tripoli to address the sources of "eastern neglect" that contrib-

ute to the region's animosity toward the central government. One way Tripoli can make up for this "neglect" would be to correct the inequitable distribution of Libya's oil wealth and invest in infrastructure development and education in the east. By providing an equitable share of public goods and services to all people, the central government weakens the appeal of militias and regional power brokers who would also seek to undermine the central government.

Be ready to assist the Libyan government in dissolving the militias and Supreme Security Committee (SSC), and in creating a legitimate national army. As workshop participants agreed, the militias and the SSC have begun to resemble a shadow government. As currently organized, these forces weaken the GNC and Ministry of Defense, and have lost the trust and support of a large portion of the population. The United States has expressed an interest in developing an elite counterterrorism unit in Libya, but such efforts will be hampered until the SSC and the militias have been eradicated or folded into the national armed forces and police. Until the Libyan national army is resuscitated and the country's weapons accounted for and secured, the U.S. may not have a strong partner in the Libyan Ministry of Defense. In its ongoing assessment of Libya's domestic security architecture, the U.S. must take into account the reasons the previous attempts to quell the militias and the SSC were unsuccessful.

Continue to be an advocate for Libyan civil society. The September 2012 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi were a major blow to U.S. diplomatic efforts in Libya. Despite this setback, the U.S. should be heartened by the counterprotests that followed and the subsequent expulsion of Ansar al-Sharia from Benghazi. Libya has the civil society institutions—such as NGOs and community organizations—that can counter the extremist elements. The U.S. should seek to support these civil society institutions when possible.

In Mali and the Sahel

Continue to court Algerian involvement, but be respectful and mindful of Algerian concerns. Algeria has the capacity to be a major player in any solution in Mali, and Algiers has so far continued to press for a diplomatic solution. As the plans for an international military intervention continue, the Algerian position has frustrated regional countries' ability to credibly threaten the Islamists. The U.S. should continue to advocate for Algerian participation, but it must be sensitive to and patient with Algiers' concerns. The Algerian government is unlikely to respond well to U.S. or Western pressure, and ignoring or appearing to ignore its concerns would only drive it further from the negotiating table. Algeria has already moved to secure its southern borders, which aids in limiting the amount of arms going through the country to Mali, and it is playing a role in garnering a political solution.

Address organized crime and kidnapping for ransom at the international level. The importance of ransom kidnapping as a contributor to AQIM's rise in Mali cannot be overstated.

ed. Indeed, the international community should have been addressing organized crime in the region long ago, but now there is a renewed urgency—and the opportunity—for U.S. involvement. Given the link to the crisis in Mali, there is the potential for the U.S. to diplomatically push an international approach against kidnapping for ransom in the Sahel. This diplomatic push could be in the form of a UN resolution that bans payments to groups in northern Mali. The EU could also be a strong partner for the U.S. in these efforts, given that Europeans have been the most widely targeted by kidnappers in the region.

Rebuild Bamako’s authority and protect Mali’s “neighborhood.” If resolving the immediate security crisis in Mali is the primary concern, repairing the central government in Bamako and preventing the spillover of terrorist and militants into the politically and economically vulnerable neighboring countries is the obvious secondary concern. This cannot be achieved by quashing the militants alone, but by creating the social and economic opportunities that can attract the fighters and those sympathetic to their cause to give up their weapons. The power and economic vacuum that has affected the region since the fall of Qaddafi has fostered an environment that puts several North African and Sahelian states at risk for financial and political collapse. Mali was the first to succumb to these forces, but more countries could follow. Few opportunities for economic development exist in the region, and the authorities’ complicity in organized crime and corruption has contributed to a crisis of governance that must be curbed in order for the goal of long-term stability to prevail. Doing so will require a developmental aid effort in which the U.S. could take the lead, but such an effort has lacked the requisite political will and interest—until now.

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