Rise, Challenge and Response to Islamic Extremists in West Africa: The Case of Mali and Nigeria

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Abstract

The rise of Islamic extremism from East to West Africa by groups linked to Al-Qaeda has created chaos with unprecedented attacks and kidnappings. Such crimes have given rise to the fear that an arc of terror had emerged on the continent. Even though these groups are preoccupied with domestic issues, they share a common anti-Western rhetoric and often target foreigners and foreign elements. The situation poses a challenge not only to the region but the international community as a whole. The three main al-Qaeda-linked groups in Africa are Somalia's Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb which operates across the Sahel, and Boko Haram based in Nigeria and operates across neighbouring countries. There is growing evidence of ties between the three militant groups. Each claims to have links with al-Qaeda. This research investigates the challenges that the Islamic militants in Mali and Nigeria pose to West Africa, the cooperation between concerned and neighbouring countries in finding a lasting solution, and global cooperation

Keywords: *Al-Qaeda, Challenges, Islamic Extremists, Regional Responses, Terrorism, West Africa*

Introduction

The violence of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the ongoing religious-inspired insurgency in Mali are reminders of the presence of Islamic militancy in West Africa. Historically, conflicts and violence based on religious preferences have been limited in most of Africa. Acts of terror have been infrequent. Although there have been few cases of the so-called Islamic insurgency, connections between Muslims in Africa and larger Islamic militant networks seem dubious. There are, however, some noticeable current exceptions. For instance, Somalia has an increase in violence based on religious preferences, whereby several Islamic insurgency movements have engaged each other and involved other actors in the region in constant fighting. Nigeria, which has seen Christian-Muslim conflicts for a number of years, experienced a dramatic escalation when Boko Haram surprised the Nigerian security by bombing the UN-headquarters in Abuja, and a subsequent wave of violence that has since continued. This spurred suspicion about the group's links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM), the third zone of militant Islamic activity in the Saharan and Sahelian regions of Africa [8].

The action of Islamic militants for seizing more than half of Mali's land area, the growing violence of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, and the Somalian years of religious-inspired violence have heightened attention on Islamic militancy in Africa. In the

process, violent clashes between insurgent groups and governments in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa have increased, the armed capacity of militant organisations has expanded, terrorist attacks against civilians including suicide bombings have escalated, militants' strict moral codes enforced through stoning and amputation have been imposed, sacred historical sites have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of civilians have been displaced. Islamic militants' ability to seize and control vast territory for long periods has hindered the process of state-building in Somalia [11]. In Mali, it has severed the northern from the southern half of the country and as a result has affected a political impasse in Bamako [10].

Protracted instability in parts of the Sahara-Sahel has the potential to ripple throughout the region. The prospect of the emergence of Islamic militancy and the escalation of tensions elsewhere on the continent is likewise a cause for concern. While the risks of escalation are significant, the gains of these Islamic militant groups are not attributable to their military strength. Rather, their expanded influence is as much a symptom of fragile and complex political contexts. Moreover, Islamic militancy in Africa at present represents the intersection of broader trends in contemporary Islam and local circumstances. Responding to the challenge is all the more difficult in that very little is known about these often-secretive Islamic groups, some of which have only recently emerged [10]. Islamic militant groups are active across the northern half of Africa from Mauritania in the west to Somalia in the east, with Western countries, especially France and the US working with local security forces to counter them. The oldest of the Islamist militant groups operating in North Africa, later known Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was formed in 2005 from the old name the Algerian Salafi Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) and announced its allegiance to Osama Bin Laden. The GSPC was initially founded in 1998 following the dismantling of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) the militant group that fought the Algerian government during the 1990s. Abu Mus'ab Abdel-Wadood, a former GIA fighter, became the group's leader in 2003 and since then has led several operations in Algeria and Mali [8]. In August 2013, two jihadist groups, Belmokhtar's "Masked Men" Battalion and MUJAO, announced their merger under the new name of El-Mourabitoun. The Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa" (MUJAO) was formed in late 2011 and came to prominence in April 2012, when it joined two Tuareg groups, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Ansar al-Din, in seizing control of northern Mali. MUJAO controlled the town of Gao between April 2012 and January

2013. Based in northern Mali, this AQIM offshoot is made up mostly of Arabs from Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Its founding members hail mainly from AQIM's Mauritanian contingent. While its leader, Hammad Ould Mohammed al-Khayri, split from AQIM to form another organisation that promotes jihad and establishes the rule of Sharia (Islamic law) in West Africa.

Boko Haram on the other hand, whose name can be translated as "Western education is forbidden", is led by Abubakar Shekau, a hard-line cleric who had been reported killed on a number of occasions. Most of the attacks attributed to the group have targeted police stations, churches, schools and other educational institutions. There was speculation that after the Islamist takeover of northern Mali in early 2012, Boko Haram sent militiamen to fight alongside MUJAO. However, there has never been any credible proof of this. A Nigerian jihadist group, Ansar al-Muslimin in the Lands of the Blacks (JAMBS), is thought to have been founded following a split from Boko Haram. Also referred to as Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa, or simply Ansaru, the group has claimed the taking and killing of a number of hostages [11].

1. Islamic Militancy in Mali

Mali is situated in the Sahel region, the geographical transition between the Sahara Desert to the north and the Sudanese Savanna to the south. Long blighted by the presence of militant groups, the area's enormous size and porous borders provide militants with the freedom to conduct violent attacks and trafficking of arms, drugs and people. In March 2012, government forces fought rebels and rival Islamist groups in an attempt to seize control of the country's northern regions. Amnesty International called the military coup d'état the worst humanitarian and most serious crisis since the landlocked west African country gained independence from France in 1960 when Mali gained independence from French colonial rule. To find a quick solution, the former colonial power deployed troops after an appeal from Mali's interim president. The five main Islamists groups in Mali are Ansar Dine, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (Mujao), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Signed-in-Blood Battalion and the Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA). Although each of them has divergent objectives, they all have one thing in common, namely to Islamize Mali, West Africa or even the world.

In fact, before the coup, Mali had been considered a role model of African democracy. Because the nation returned to civilian-led rule in August 2013 and the former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was voted as president in an election that international

observers EU, AU ECOWAS and others praised Malian government for its transparency. However, the sudden attack and fighting have devastated it further into poverty. Despite being among Africa's largest cotton producers, Mali is one of the world's poorest countries, due to the fact that it is heavily reliant on foreign aid and remittances from Malians working abroad. The tourism industry is its third-biggest source of revenue and has been destroyed in the crisis [12].

The human rights group Amnesty International raised concerns for the safety of people in Mali's northern territories in March 2012, after militant fighters bombarded and seized control of several areas. The Tuareg minority rebels launched a rebellion against the Mali government with the help of the Al-Qaeda-linked fighters targeting parts of the country's north. The military coup, on the other hand, isolated Mali's sub-region and forced tens of thousands of people to flee the area. As a result, it created a humanitarian crisis in southern Mali and neighbouring countries, such as Algeria and Niger.

In December 2012, the UN and Western authorities, especially France, were moved to respond to the increasingly dangerous situation in north Mali. The UN Security Council mandated a military peacekeeping mission called MINUSMA under resolution 2100 of the UN Security Council. A rebel advancement southward in January 2013 prompted Bamako to request immediate military assistance from its close ally, France and African forces. A French-led force gradually recaptured the northern territories in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu from militant control, as the southern government feared that the militants could reach Bamako. The Tuareg and Islamist groups continue to target areas in Mali where the military is still present, including approximately 1,000 French troops. One of the most recent attacks was a 24-hour siege of a hotel in the northeast of Bamako in August 2015 where not less than thirteen people lost their lives including five UN staff. Despite various gains made by the coalition forces, security threats remain such as continued terrorist activities and military operations in some areas [13].

2. Boko Haram Militant

Nigeria's Islamist militant group Boko Haram officially named as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, which means in Arabic "People Committed to the Propagation" has caused havoc in Africa's most populous country through a wave of bombings, assassinations and abductions. They are fighting to overthrow the government and create an Islamic state. Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam to where it is forbidden for Muslims

to engage in any political or social activity associated with Western society such as voting in elections, wearing shirts and trousers or receiving a secular education. Boko Haram regards the Nigerian state as being run by non-believers despite the country having a Muslim president due to their different understanding of religion. Furthermore, it has extended its military campaign by targeting neighbouring states [1].

Ideologically, Boko Haram opposes not only Western education but also Western culture and science a position Mohammed Yusuf revealed during his interview with the BBC, when he stated that the belief that the earth is spherical in shape is a sharp contradiction to Islamic thought and therefore should be rejected along with Darwinism and the theory that rain comes from water evaporated by the sun. Ironically, Nigerian academic Hussain Zakaria told BBC News that Yusuf is a graduate, in other words, he is an educated and very proficient in English" [4].

Looking at the damages the organisation has inflicted, violence linked to Boko Haram's activities is reported to have resulted in an estimated 10,000 deaths between 2001 and 2013. In 2012 alone, according to an Amnesty International report that details Boko Haram's activities in Nigeria, "at least 70 teachers and over 100 schoolchildren and students have been killed or wounded. At least 50 schools have either been burned or seriously damaged, and more than 60 others have been forced to close. Thousands of children have been forced out of schools across communities in Yobe, Kaduna, Adamawa and Borno states [2].

3. Factors Contributing to the Rise of Islamic Militancy in West Africa

Islam's fondness for equality in servitude has been awakened by neoliberalism's record of inequality. While neoliberalism is the driving doctrine of economic freedom, it is the reason why there are structural inequality and systematic poverty. Many Muslims who are experiencing the negative effects of neoliberalism are turning to Islam's equality under divine servitude. Current conflicts with Islamic militants manifest the dichotomy between the two values and have dramatized the encounter between the Western colonial legacy with its offshoot of globalised neoliberalism and the rise of Islamism and militant Islam. Inherent to the Islamist's discourse is a rejection of colonial hegemony of 'spreading freedom' as well as a current neoliberal freedom that expands global economic inequalities. Militant Islam draws on 'righting the wrong' to condemn normalised inequalities that characterise the current postcolonial world order, while the West, led by the US, brandishes the defence of freedom and its

neoliberal manifestations in marshalling its war on militant Islam [8].

The attacks on two US embassies in East Africa in 1998 shifted American concern about terrorism from the Middle East to violent extremism in Africa, but the 9/11 attacks that occurred which led to the war against Al-Qaida and the subsequent invasion of Iraq showed that Western policy pivoted back towards the Arab world and South Asia. The Pentagon's Africa Command (AFRICOM), new bases for Unmanned Arial Vehicles (drones) and the deployment of Special Forces to the continent have since made clear that the US will engage and seek to undermine radicalism in Nigeria, Mali, Somalia and the Sahel region. Many scholars rushed to analyse and often influence the nature of this engagement. Perhaps the most important overall contribution of *militancy and violence in West Africa* is its serious effort to problematise Africa's new strains of radical Islam, without becoming clouded by the Western gaze, including concerns that America or Europe will be targets of African Islamic militants [3].

The Western influence of British colonialists caused a division among the people of northern Nigeria, who were once united by Islam. This division saw the so-called "civilised" by Western standards elite that were used by the British as agents of colonisation, and on the other side, the commoners, who vehemently resisted Western influence in the region. Dissatisfaction with Western influence also led to an emergence of Islamist fundamentalists among people of the North-eastern region of Nigeria. The reason Mohammed Yusuf founded Boko Haram appears to be that he saw an opportunity to exploit public outrage at government corruption by linking it to Western influence in governance [5].

There are several reasons that this network of militancy has flourished. One significant factor is the perceived arrogance and corruption of urban elites. The marginalisation of poorer communities both in rural areas and smaller towns and villages and minority ethnic groups has further alienated them from the governing classes. Disgruntled young men have been happy to join radical groups that not only offer them an ideology but money. Further, it is the widespread drug trafficking in the region that is believed to have enriched militant groups. Details about the operations are sketchy, and large amounts of money are involved to ensure secrecy and loyalty. Drugs from South America are taken across Africa to Europe, where they are more profitable and marketable. A kilogramme of cocaine bought in Latin America for $3,000 (£1,990) can be sold in the capitals of West Africa for about $16,000; in North Africa, it sells for $25,000 and can fetch about $45,000 in Europe. Getting involved in the transit business as the conveyor or security agent provides

not only a good salary but also the social recognition that money brings. In the beginning, militants kidnapped Westerners as the profits in hostage activities were significant. It has been estimated by the Centre for Strategy and Security that in the Sahel Sahara militants have realised between 80m-100m euros ($103m-130m) in ransoms, despite both the United Nations and the African Union discouraging such payments. Information technology has been a great help to a hard core of between 350 and 450 experienced AQIM fighters estimated to work within the coalition of Islamist militant groups in the Sahel and Sahara region.

4. Challenges of Malian andNigerian Islamic Militants

The year 2015 saw Boko Haram evolve from an ostensibly domestic rooted and globally unaffiliated militant group into a province in the Islamic State's global structure. This transition was formalised on March 7, 2015, when Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau pledged *baya'a*, or allegiance, to the Islamic State caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi [14]. In the ensuing weeks, al-Baghdadi's spokesman accepted Shekau's pledge. The Islamic State then publicised Shekau's pledge in its official magazine Dabiq and other Islamic State "Provinces" in Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq issued ten videos of congratulations for Shekau's pledge [14].

5. Governmental Responses to Malian and Nigerian Islamic Militants

The Nigerian military has shown its willingness to get involved in the propaganda war as well. Before that, the images from Boko Haram, including militants carrying out atrocities and their leader Abubakar Shekau taunting the government, instilled fear and hopelessness in the minds of many. The last broadcast from Shekau was his pledge of allegiance to Islamic State in an audio clip in March. However, as we have seen from his group in the past, silence does not always imply that they have been significantly weakened. Attacks credited to Boko Haram continue in both Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Army commanders say they do not often find many bodies of the insurgents after battle, suggesting that the jihadists carry away their dead with them as they retreat.

Gen Buhari lamented that the outgoing Nigerian government did not do enough to harness a suitable regional response. Frosty cross-border relations have affected the military operations, with resentment and mistrust between Nigeria and its neighbours. For a

long time, Boko Haram fighters were able to cross the border at will, to carry out attacks and to escape any army response but with the administration of Buhari, their movements have been limited by the joint regional forces. Few months after taking over the presidency, Buhari reshuffled the top brass of the military to bring in top officials who can add more zest or possibly a fresh strategy to the ongoing offensive, despite the recent successes on the frontline. The Nigerian military is keen to redeem its image in the international scene, having been accused by human rights organisations of carrying out abuses in its crackdown against Boko Haram. It promised to investigate these allegations, but it has not released the findings, although soldiers have been facing courts-martial as the force attempts to show it is tackling what it calls indiscipline within its ranks. This could be a way of winning back military support from the West, particularly the US, in the form of advanced training and supply of hardware. Nigeria says the lack of equipment slowed down its counter-insurgency operations, with the government taking up other options, including the controversial move to employ private security companies. Reports in March said that hundreds of these "military trainers" from South Africa and former Soviet Union countries were operating on the front lines in military operations against Boko Haram [11].

The Nigerian government has not specified whether these personnel have ever been involved in direct combat. The recent gains against Boko Haram are a boost for both the Nigerian military. Boko Haram is still active in Nigeria, across the border in Cameroon and with traces in Niger. The influence and support of the Islamic State implies that the insurgency is far from over and could get even more sophisticated.

In Mali, a November 2012 UN report estimated that the total number of "core combatants" of the armed groups in northern Mali was around 3,000 and said the insurgents had "relatively sophisticated equipment obtained from Libya" and from Malian stocks. It also noted that the militants were actively recruiting. Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traore declared a state of emergency nationwide and called for a general mobilisation to defend against the radical Islamists' advance [6]. Ironically, the militant factions in Mali have overwhelmed the capacity of the Malian government. As a result, it has no other option than request for assistance from the African Union as well as overseas help.

6. Cooperation among Concerned Countries and International Assistance

Washington DC based analysts focused on the Sahel told AFP and argued that there is sufficient evidence of communication between Boko Haram and AQIM and affiliated groups. They believed that although Boko Haram and AQIM had claimed support or training from Shabaab, there is no clear indication to believe that such links exist. General Carter Ham, head of US African command AFRICOM, warned in September 2011 that the various Islamist groups had said they wanted closer collaboration to synchronise their efforts in training and operations. He warned that if such was left unattended, it could lead to a network that ranges from East Africa, through the centre and into the Sahel and Maghreb which would make it a greater danger. Although he downplayed the threat, he believed that when Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria last year, there were fears the deadly insurgency in northeast Nigeria would take on an international dimension. Speculation and concern mounted about a potential influx of foreign fighters to the countries surrounding Lake Chad and an escalation of a previously localised conflict. He argued that 12 months have passed and nothing has happened. If anything, Boko Haram appears a considerably weaker force and apparently in disarray after a year-long military counter-offensive. He supported his argument when Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau has only been heard from twice since his audio message published on early March 2015 pledging an oath to his IS counterpart Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Nigeria's army has since had increasingly claimed offensive operation, by crushing blows against the militants and their strongholds plus the liberation of thousands living under Boko Haram control. There is news of dozens of rebels reportedly surrendering because of hunger. Nigeria now wants many of the two million people internally displaced by the conflict to return home. While at the same time a Nigerian security source said IS was only a marketing label which Boko Haram wants to use to deceptively project itself as a formidable terrorist group. Some security consultants speculate Boko Haram in Nigeria could become weaker and be reduced to a largely criminal, both locally and regionally along the lines of the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa. However, the US and Western governments clearly still view Boko Haram as a serious threat. US military drones recently began operating from a base in northern Cameroon while the Pentagon is considering sending military trainers to northeast Nigeria. Nigeria's secret police meanwhile announced the arrest of seven members of Ansaru, the Boko Haram offshoot that kidnapped several Westerners and which is more aligned ideologically to Al-Qaeda. The Department of State Services said

it had also arrested an IS recruiter, two "ISIS agents operating in Nigeria and the West African sub-region" plus four others heading to join IS. Six of those detained were said to be heading or preparing to go to Libya, where Nigerians are said to be in the IS ranks in territory it controls. Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari, who has claimed Boko Haram is "technically" defeated, has increasingly pointed to lawless Libya as a potential security time bomb for Europe and Africa [9].

The seizures by the hard-line Islamists of northern Mali has also stoked fears abroad as a base for AQIM involved in drug trafficking and the kidnapping of Westerners for ransom. The region is now in the hands of Islamists intent on installing Sharia law, who have openly allied with the Al-Qaeda franchise. Former colonial power France has repeatedly raised concerns that the vast desert could become a new breeding ground for terrorism. AQIM grew out of the Algerian Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat which linked with Al-Qaeda in 2006. It has to be noted that prior to French intervention, according to a recent Congressional Research Service (CRS), regional and Western leaders had warned of a rising threat to international security associated with an expansion of the groups' influence and scope of operations in Mali, and cautioned that there could be a possible spread of violent extremist ideology and state fragmentation. In December 2012, before the French intervened, the UN Security Council authorised a one-year military peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as AFISMA, and a regional coalition of West African states (ECOWAS) pledged thousands of troops to retake the country's north from the insurgents. The US, for its part, has pledged logistical support, including the sharing of intelligence, and signing of an agreement with Niger, which borders Mali, allowing a permanent US military site, where it will reportedly build a base from which to fly drones for surveillance and potentially even missile strikes. While the French Foreign Minister Fabius said, his nation's troops will soon leave Mali and warned that things could now get more difficult as the offensive flushes out the militants [7].

African nations and members of the wider international community pledged more than $455 million on January 29, 2013, to assist an African-led military intervention in Mali. Donations pledged at the conference at African Union (AU) headquarters nearly meet the target of $460 million the AU says is needed for the African-led international support mission in Mali, known as AFISMA. The force will support Mali's army in its fight against al-Qaida-linked militants who seized control of northern Mali following a coup in March 2012. By 22 January 2013, UN officials said the African intervention force deploying in Mali could double from its envisioned 3,300 troops, as more soldiers were needed to help regain control from Islamist militants holding the country's north. Ivory Coast UN Ambassador Youssoufou Bamba, who represents the Economic Community of West African States at the United Nations, said nearly 1,000 troops were already in Mali. He urged the Security Council to provide emergency financial and logistical support for the operation. Initially, African nations have pledged to provide nearly 6,000 troops for the force, and Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso have already sent troops into Mali. France has also deployed more than 3,000 soldiers into the country, who were leading the offensive against the militants in the north. Among the biggest donors at the conference, the African Union has pledged $50 million; the European Union pledged $67 million and the United States said it intends to give $96 million by the end of 2013. ECOWAS, the West African regional block had authorised the immediate deployment of troops to Mali. Therefore, in December, the UN Security Council approved a plan for West African states to deploy at least 3,000 troops to Mali to help train the army and retake the north. However, originally, no troops had been expected in Mali until September 2013 [15].

Table 1   Military contributed to Mali Crises

Number	Contributing Country	Troops Contributed
1	Chad	2,000
2	Nigeria	1,200
3	Benin	650
4	Burkina Faso	500
5	Niger	500
6	Senegal	500
7	Togo	500
8	Guinea	144
9	Ghana	120

Retrieved on 24.March 2016 from:
https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/mali.htm

7. Similarities and Differences between Malian and Nigeria Militants

Both countries have militants that have grown from being a domestic threat to an international one. Both are operating from their West African bases and are influenced by Al-Qaida. The nature of their militant operations is similar such as killing both the military and civilians, kidnapping, hostages, rape, forced marriage, and indiscriminate bombing.

Nigeria is more in control of Boko Haram. The government remains effective and Boko Haram is finding it difficult to withstand the Nigerian forces. Boko Haram also concentrates on north eastern part of Nigeria, which can be estimated to be less than

20% of the country. In Mali, the militants are not less than seven different factions who occupy not less than two-thirds of Malian territory. Further, the lack of an effective government has resulted in a military coup, and its military size and capacity make it difficult for Mali to counter the threat.

Although Nigeria seeks neighbouring help and international assistance, it has clear that by the end of 2015 it yielded a very positive in its fight against the militants. The militant influence remains in Sambisa forest. In Mali, two-thirds of the Nation is controlled by various militant factions leaving Bamako with the only option of seeking assistance from the AU, ECOWAS, and UN.

The Nigerian government has shouldered the largest responsibility in neighbouring multilateral arrangement to combat Boko Haram. In Mali, besides military capacity, the government lacks the financial capacity to support operations, and as a result regional, and other international assistance has to address the shortcomings.

It has to be understood that the disparities between the nature of capacities and operation in both countries lie mainly on the effective government, in other words, the threat of Boko Haram did not diminish the capacity of Nigeria government in the country. The government is in full control of the country's management, while Boko Haram remains in the forest. In Mali, the government has been weakened due to several factors such as the capacity of the government compared to its size, political instability that weakened the government and led to various factions, and of its geographical location where neighbouring states like Libya, Algeria, Mauritania etc. share a network of militants.

Conclusion

With Islamist militant groups across the Sahara region still able to flex their muscles despite the French intervention in Mali, former UN diplomat and security expert Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah stated that the countries of North and West Africa have become embroiled in a new war waged by violent Islamist militants. He considered it a conflict that has no front line. The militants' ruthless tactics suicide attacks such as the assaults in Niger on a military base and French-run uranium mine and a siege of the gas plant in Algeria reveal the insurgents' broad capacities. The start of the withdrawal of French troops from Mali four months after recapturing northern cities from Islamist insurgents is being touted by the militants on internet forums as the beginning of their victory. Militants and armed radical groups have expanded and entrenched their positions throughout the Sahel and Sahara over the last decade under the umbrella of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They move from one country to another working in an area that covers parts of south-west and south Libya, southern Algeria, northern Niger, north-east Mauritania and most of northern Mali. Poorly administrated, these vast desert spaces provide the groups with an ideal terrain. In Nigeria, despite the effect of the threat of Boko Haram, the international community has been reluctant to get involved in the conflict, and despite having the largest army in West Africa, Nigeria's military has struggled to push back the militants. Security analysts pointed to a lack of investment and corruption in the army as key reasons. However, after more than five years of insurgency, the military appears to have turned a corner in the battle against Boko Haram. Troops have reclaimed swathes of territory in the north and rescued hundreds of captured women and girls in recent months. Much of this success has been attributed to the new leader President Buhari, a former army general, and his crackdown on corrupt military officials. The formation of a stronger regional coalition has also helped push back the militants.

As a result of the efforts of the coalition, the militants have realised that it will not be possible to continue to dominate the two-thirds of Malian territory. They agreed to enter into peace agreements with the Malian government on 19 February 2015. The agreement deal with six armed groups to cease hostilities as part of UN-sponsored peace talks aimed at ending the crisis in the country's north. Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra said the deal, which does not include Al-Qaeda-linked groups, aimed to create a climate and state of mind on the ground that would help further negotiations leading to a global peace agreement. The six groups that signed the ceasefire were mostly Tuareg but also included Arab organisations. Signatories included the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA).

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