6. Risk Scenarios for 2013

Based on the analysis of the different contexts of conflict and socio-political crisis in 2012, in this chapter the Escola de Cultura de Pau identifies 13 scenarios with circumstances that could deteriorate further and become even more serious sources of instability and violence in 2013. Areas of concern in 2013 refer to: the worsening situation in the Russian republic of Dagestan due to the mounting militarization of the regime and human rights violations; the uncertainties surrounding the political transition in Myanmar; the challenges that are pending fifteen years after the signing of the peace accord in Tajikistan; the possible resumption of armed conflict between the Government and the MNLF in the south of the Philippines; the self-immolations in Tibet as a sign of the desperation of the Tibetan community; the challenges posed by drones in conflicts where they are being used; the problems associated with the pending closing of Guantanamo; the period of growing instability that Kenya is approaching in 2013; the role of Rwanda and the FDLR in the instability that plagues the Great Lakes Region; the crisis of forced displacement of the Syrian population caused by violence; and the security challenges in the Sahel.

Map 6.1. Risk scenarios for 2013
6.1. Dagestan, between militarisation and an acute human rights crisis

Dagestan is the largest, most populated and most ethnically diverse Russian republic in the North Caucasus. It is a neighbour of Chechnya, a transit country for hydrocarbon resources and a gateway to the Caspian Sea. In recent years the republic has witnessed a serious increase in violence and instability. This trend may become more acute in the near future due to factors such as the extensive militarisation that took place in 2012, the increasing weight and popularity of the Salafist insurgency and its ideology, and the constant human rights violations perpetrated by the security forces. All of this is taking place in a complex scenario involving not only the armed conflict between the security forces (local and federal) and the insurgency, but also widespread criminal violence and a series of social, political and economic factors that fuel fracture and frustration, such as corruption, impunity, poverty and unemployment. Although the situation of each republic in the North Caucasus has its own dynamics, there are common threads. As such, the growing violence in Dagestan is in itself an alert factor for the population throughout the North Caucasus.

The risk of the violence in Dagestan spiralling in 2013 and beyond comes as no surprise; it would merely confirm the pattern that has emerged in recent years, as some analysts have signalled, due in part to the strengthening of the Islamist insurgency in Dagestan, the Shariya Jamaat. According to the figures of the independent organisation Caucasian Knot, 378 people were killed in 2010, including 78 civilians, while a further 307 were injured. 2011 proved even more lethal with 413 people killed and 411 injured, including 40% more civilian victims. Attacks against senior public officials were also stepped up. In the first three quarters of 2012 alone there were 365 fatalities, in a territory with just 2.9 million inhabitants. The intensification of the insurgent offensive (with more bombings and attacks and increasingly higher profile targets, including the assassination of the president’s spokesman in 2011) is taking place despite the successive assassinations of rebel leaders by the security forces. According to The Jamestown Foundation, since the death of the rebel leader Rapan Khalilov in 2007, very few insurgent leaders have survived longer than a year. The latest, Emir Salikh, died in February 2012 in a counterinsurgency operation. Due to the decentralised and autonomous structure of the insurgency, the death of the leader is followed by a process of succession but, as The Jamestown Foundation points out, the violent activity of the rebels remains uninterrupted. In this respect, human rights organisations such as Memorial have also warned of the growing insurgent violence that has taken place in recent years.

On top of the spiralling violence, 2012 also saw a greater militarisation of the territory. This process included the transfer to Dagestan of 30,000 troops of the federal interior ministry that had been deployed until then in Chechnya. Given the number of troops already stationed in the republic, The Jamestown Foundation calculated that there were now 60,000 Russian troops in Dagestan. Meanwhile, 30,000 police officers are deployed in the republic, more than 1,000 of whom have been transferred from other regions. Furthermore, in the second half of the year, the Dagestan president, Magomedsalam Magomedov, put forward a proposal for creating self-defence units to combat the insurgency, which, if it comes to fruition, may lead to an increase in violence and human rights violations, given the previous experience of the battalions created as personal security guard of the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, accused by local human rights activists of violating civilians’ human rights.

Meanwhile, the increase in violence is fuelled by growing public support for the Shariya Jamaat, and a greater willingness of young people to join its ranks. According to some analysts, this phenomenon is taking place in a scenario in which the Salafist current of Islam is gaining ground, despite the prevailing religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity that characterises the republic. Some attempts at rapprochement and dialogue between Sufi and Salafist sectors have shown the possibility of building bridges. However, they have not generated positive impacts on the insurgency, nor are there any prospects of this occurring in the short or medium term, especially in a scenario in which the authorities continue to persecute and criminalise civilians for their possible support of or sympathy with the Islamist insurgency.

On top of the conflict between the public authorities (local and federal) and the insurgency, the republic faces a serious human rights crisis, with members of the civilian population who do not participate in the armed struggle being accused of supporting the insurgency. Disappearances and kidnappings, extrajudicial executions and intimidation are some of the violent practices to which the population is subjected, aggravated by the chronic impunity, obstacles and abuse faced by independent organisations, including human rights defenders and journalists. At least some of the kidnappings are carried out by security forces. Moreover, the insurgent violence has continued to claim many civilian lives. In short, the worsening of the armed conflict and of the general human rights situation, with a serious impact on the civilian population, is the scenario envisaged.

6.2. An uncertain future in Myanmar?

The 2010 elections and the change of government in early 2011 signalled the start of the process of political transition in the country, which has generated some significant transformations during this period. Despite the positive nature of the series of changes that are taking place in the country, elements of risk remain in place that could hinder the process towards democracy that has been initiated. The key developments of the last two years have been the political reforms that have been implemented, paving the way towards greater freedom of expression and the release of political prisoners, together with the victory of the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in the partial parliamentary elections held at the start of 2012, in which the NLD obtained 43 of the 44 seats for which it put forward a candidate, out of the 45 seats under contention. Meanwhile, the government has reached agreements with almost all the ethnic armed groups that operate in the country, with the exception of the KIO. In parallel, contacts with the international community have intensified, which has led to a series of visits to the country by distinguished foreign leaders, including the recently re-elected US president, Barack Obama, along with a softening of the sanctions imposed as a consequence of the dictatorship and serious human rights violations. As such, many analysts coincide in taking a positive outlook on the country’s future and on the possibilities of representative democracy and respect for human rights being consolidated in the medium term. The next general elections, scheduled for 2015, constitute a significant milestone for evaluating the solidity of the process.

However, despite the progress made, there are also important alert factors that could hinder a process that is still fragile and insufficiently consolidated to be considered irreversible. Various human rights organisations view as overoptimistic the attitude of the international community, which has rushed to congratulate the regime for the progress made. The situation of violence experienced in Rakhine State over the course of 2012 has been identified by various analysts as one of the main signs of this fragility. Clashes between the Buddhist and Muslim communities that inhabit the state have killed 170 people and have left more than 200 injured. Riots occurred on various occasions throughout the year, highlighting the fact that these were not isolated and one-off events but rather that this inter-community violence was a sign of strong social tension. This tension is not exclusive to this state and could spring up in other areas of the country. The violence has been made more acute by the government’s inability to deal with the clashes, along with the biased attitude shown by the local authorities and the security forces.

Another important issue that brings home the difficulties involved in consolidating peace in the country is the failure to reach an agreement with the armed opposition group KIO, which remains active and which is fighting the armed forces for control of the Hpakant area. This is a strategic area for both sides since it contains the country’s main jade mines. Despite various attempts at rapprochement, it has proved impossible to instigate dialogue between the parties and the violence has continued unabated, claiming several hundred lives over the course of the year. This does not only underline the complications involved in bringing this armed conflict to an end but also indicates the fragility of the agreements reached with the other insurgent groups, since until 2011 the KIO itself maintained a ceasefire agreement with the government. If the peace agreements are not consolidated, leading to genuine political negotiation processes, there is a real risk of violence returning to other parts of the country where insurgent groups are present and where conflicts are currently inactive.

The important political, social and economic transformations taking place in the country, together with the greater openness shown by the regime are causing tensions that the dictatorship had managed to suppress for decades to flare up again. The international community is attempting to give the process a significant boost, not only in the interests of promoting democracy but also because Myanmar offers interesting economic prospects given the country’s rich natural resources, along with the availability of manpower. That is why it is important to ensure that the reform process is fully implemented, in such a way that the population’s human rights are assured in terms of citizenship but also from an economic and labour perspective. These rights must not be compromised at the expense of the interests of an international market economy in which the interests of foreign investments take precedence over those of the local population. The current problems involving the expropriation of land belonging to the local population, linked to the growing importance of Chinese companies in the country, are just one example of the real risk that exists in this respect.

Despite the fact that the process of democratic transformation in Myanmar seems to be making significant progress, it is necessary for the government to take decisive action in addressing some of the challenges that hinder this process, in particular inter-community tensions and the violence with the Kachin insurgency.

---

2. See chapter 2 (Socio-political Crises).
6.3. Complex challenges 15 years on from the Tajikistan peace agreement

Tajikistan, the former Soviet country in Central Asia with the lowest human development index and the only one to have been immersed in an armed conflict since its independence, faces multiple and growing challenges related to struggles with former opposition field commanders for control of the territory, local and regional insurgencies, a porous border with Afghanistan, the weight of criminality and illicit traffic, and shortfalls in food and energy security, among many others. Some of these elements have led to growing instability, which may spiral in the coming years.

The 1997 peace agreement that brought an end to the civil war paved the way for a unified army and political power sharing, with 30% of political posts on various levels being reserved for the forces of the United Tajik Opposition alliance (UTO), composed of Islamist and liberal anti-communist sectors, who in the civil war were pitted against the communist government block. A complex situation from an ideological perspective is compounded by divisions, including those of a regional nature. Although the agreement led to the incorporation of important opposition figures in the government, other opposition commanders and warlords opted to remain outside the agreement. Meanwhile, in the post-war period, the presidency, in the hands of Emomali Rakhmonov, forced out a large number of the figures belonging to the former UTO, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG). In some areas, informal power remained in the hands of former opposition commanders, whether they formed part of the regime or not. Recent years have seen an increase in violent clashes with many of these leaders, including in the Rasht valley (an extensive area of the Region of Republic Subordination), especially between 2008 and 2010.

In 2012 this violence flared up again in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), one of the regions in which grievances have built up historically against the political monopoly of other areas of the country and which after the war remained hostile in part to the predominance of the political class of the Khatlon region (south west). The GBAO is also a key area in drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Between July and August, the security forces launched a large-scale military operation against the former opposition commander Tolib Ayombekov and his loyal forces, which led to clashes considered the most violent since the end of the civil war, claiming about 70 lives according to some press outlets, and 20 according to the government. The government accused him and another three former opposition commanders of being behind the murder of Abdullo Nazarov, a regional security chief and general who was also a former opposition leader in the civil war. Some analysts linked the murder of Nazarov to struggles for the control of profits from illegal business. Meanwhile, for Ayombekov, the government’s operation was aimed at consolidating its power in the region, insisting that he offered no resistance and that the military offensive was unnecessary.

In this respect, soon after the offensive, Imomnazar Imomnazarov, another of the accused former rebel commanders and a well-known community leader, was assassinated, although the government denied any involvement. His murder led to protests in the regional capital, Khorog, which forced the withdrawal of troops through an agreement. Nevertheless, the government subsequently deployed some 100 officials of the state anti-drugs agency in the region.

Indeed, in 2011 the ICG referred to the allegedly strong connection between drug traffickers and officials in Tajikistan, making it a “narcos-state” on a level only surpassed by Afghanistan.5

The incidents that took place in 2012 in the GBAO, coming on top of the military operations and clashes that occurred in other areas in previous years, would seem to indicate that the struggles between various power factions in a country beset by fragility and divisions (regional and others), which until now have been contained by the omnipresence of the regime or by its inaction, are set to continue or possibly increase. Furthermore, the growing mistrust of international partners concerning the Rakhmonov regime’s ability to guarantee stability, along with the uncertainty surrounding the regional impact of Afghanistan’s future, with which it shares a 1,387 kilometre border and which will see the withdrawal of international troops in 2014, may also be influencing the government’s belligerent position in the GBAO.

Furthermore, in the short term it appears that the sources of protest of sectors demanding changes in the status quo (by means of a variety of strategies) are growing. These sectors include local and regional Islamist insurgencies, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has stepped up its attacks in Tajikistan since 2010 and which demands the setting up of an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia, sectors linked to political and social Islam (some of which are persecuted by the regime) or discontent population sectors that occasionally stage protests (e.g. periodical protests when food prices go up), among others. It remains to be seen whether the increasing pressure will have an impact on the holding of presidential elections in November 2013, given the regime’s ability to keep Rakhmonov in power. However, the mixture of created interests, alternative power factions, lack of human security, corruption, authoritarianism and regional conflict in the country represent fertile ground for growing instability in the coming years.

6.4. The possible resumption of the armed conflict between the government and the MNLF in the south of the Philippines

The signing in October 2012 of a preliminary peace agreement between the government and the MILF, the main armed group in Mindanao, was fiercely rejected by the MNLF (the armed group that led the insurgency of the Moro people from the 1970s until the signing of a peace agreement with the government in 1996), to such an extent that the MNLF founder, Nur Misuari, threatened to resume the armed struggle for the independence of Mindanao, turning this region in the south of the Philippines into a war zone once again. Although there are some factors that enable the threats made by Nur Misuari to be played down, the fact is that a real risk exists of the current prospects of peace in Mindanao being aborted due to the political and military action of the MNLF if it feels excluded from the construction of a new peace scenario in Mindanao and if it finally deems the 1996 peace agreement to have been eclipsed or invalidated by a possible agreement between the government and the MILF.

First of all, although the military strength of the MNLF remains an unknown quantity, this group (and in particular Nur Misuari) retains a certain amount of legitimacy and a significant capacity to engender support among large sectors of the Moro people. This is evident in the fact that Nur Misuari brought together thousands of people in October to declare his opposition to the peace agreement between the MILF and the government and to warn that the MNLF has hundreds of thousands of combatants at the ready, including 17,000 combatants who have switched allegiance from the MILF to the MNLF. It should be recalled that the MILF is a splinter group of the MNLF. Although the MILF and most analysts coincide in pointing out that these figures have been grossly inflated, other leaders of the MNLF have labelled the group a “sleeping giant”. It is noteworthy, for example, that in 2001, when Misuari was governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and began to feel political pressure from Manila to step down, he instigated a short-lived but intense spiral of violence that claimed dozens of lives.

Beyond the political and military strength of the MNLF itself, it is also necessary to take into account its capacity to forge alliances with other armed groups that operate in Mindanao. On several occasions, the government has accused the group of collaborating with Abu Sayyaf, with the MILF and with one of the MILF’s splinter groups, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BJFF). In this respect, the MNLF’s capacity to capitalise on the discontent that may exist within the MILF now or later on, in the event of a possible peace agreement not achieving the desired results, is not to be underestimated. Furthermore, the MNLF could also benefit from the huge number of arms circulating in Mindanao, from the culture of violence that is so deep-rooted in certain sectors after 40 years of armed conflict, and from local phenomena such as the rido (clashes between families or clans due to disputes over land, honour or other issues).

There are two other aspects that add uncertainty to the situation of political instability in Mindanao. The first is the announcement made by Nur Misuari concerning his intention to stand in the elections of the ARMM in May 2013. The periods leading up to an electoral process in Mindanao have been historically characterised by a substantial rise in violence. Many local politicians have armed militias at their service, despite the government’s announcement that during the term of office of Benigno Aquino about thirty of these private armies had been dismantled. The fact that Misuari could be elected governor of the ARMM (an institution that is scheduled to be replaced by another structure within a few years, under the terms and conditions of the peace agreement between the government and the MILF) heightens the risk of opposition to the dismantling of the ARMM and, therefore, of violence breaking out. The second factor of uncertainty is the possibility of Nur Misuari attempting to use the military reactivation of the MNLF to recover the political control of the organisation, currently split into three factions. Some years ago, 15 members of the MNLF’s leadership forced Misuari to stand down as president of the organisation. Since then, the Philippine government only recognises one of the three factions of the MNLF, the one led by Muslim-in Sema. Nevertheless, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) recognises Misuari as the representative of the MNLF and, as such, continues to invite him to its summits.

On a positive note, the OIC is making notable efforts to conciliate the positions of the MILF and the MNLF and to harmonise the two negotiation processes currently under way: the one between the MILF and the government to reach a peace agreement, and the one between the government and the MNLF to achieve the full implementation of the 1996 peace agreement. The OIC argues that since the demands of both groups refer to the same collective territory, they should be better coordinated. For this purpose it set up the Bangsamoro Coordinating Forum, although until now the MNLF has been reluctant to accept this proposal. Meanwhile, both the government and the MILF have expressed their willingness for the MNLF to form part of the Transitional Committee, the body entrusted with drafting the Bangsamoro Basic Law, the new structure scheduled to replace the ARMM. However, the MNLF considers that this option would imply the subordination of the 1996 peace agreement to the negotiations between the MILF and the government and, therefore, the annulment of its contents. The MNLF, on the other hand, proposes that the MILF join the three-way negotiations (MNLF, government, OIC) to achieve the full implementation of the 1996 agreement.

Therefore, if the parties involved in the peace process in Mindanao are incapable of finding a mechanism for harmonising the two ongoing negotiation processes or finding a way to ensure that the MNLF does not feel excluded from the new political prospects opening up in the region, there is a risk of violence becoming more acute in the south of the Philippines.
6.5. Self-immolations in Tibet, a symptom of desperation

2012 saw a significant increase in protests by the Tibetan community, especially in the form of self-immolation. Since 2009 some 90 people (most of whom have died) have used this form of protest to highlight the repression carried out by the Chinese authorities and to demand greater freedom for Tibet. Most of the self-immolations took place in 2012 and gathered pace over the course of year. In November, for example, coinciding with the congress of the Chinese Communist Party, more than 20 people set themselves on fire. This would seem to indicate that this form of protest is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Beyond the importance of gaining international attention for the unrest and oppression felt by most of the Tibetan community, there are several alert factors and causes for concern regarding the current political situation in Tibet.

First of all, the repercussion in the media of the self-immolations has led several governments (in particular the USA) and some international bodies (the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay) to lament these actions and urge Beijing to enter into dialogue with the leaders of the Tibetan community to address its unrest and find a negotiated outcome. These calls have been interpreted by the Chinese community as interference in its internal affairs and have probably led to a hardening of its political stance and greater forcefulness in its response to the protests. In this respect, several Tibetan organisations in exile have reported the militarisation of the regions in which the protests have been concentrated, the deployment of paramilitary forces and numerous human rights violations against those involved in the protest. In recent years (especially during 2012) the Chinese authorities have forced their way into several Buddhist monasteries and have conducted search and arrest operations in the neighbouring communities of monasteries. Furthermore, Beijing has attempted to criminalise the protests by declaring that, in line with current legislation, incitement to self-immolation constitutes intentional homicide.

Another aspect that causes concern is the impact that the current protests may have on the dialogue process between the Chinese government and the Tibetan government in exile on how best to accommodate Tibet within China. Beijing’s official stance is that the Dalai Lama and the political leaders in exile are fuelling the protests and that talks will not resume until they end their support for social protests and cease declarations considered secessionist by the Chinese government. The talks have been suspended since early 2010. Between 2002 and 2010 some ten rounds of negotiations have taken place, although no significant progress has been made. Meanwhile, both the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan prime minister in exile, Lobsang Sangay, have lamented and condemned the self-immolations, although they have expressed their understanding of the causes that lead to such protests. Furthermore, they have publicly discouraged protests on Chinese soil due to the harsh consequences to which protesters are exposed. At the same time, they have both insisted that their objective is not the independence of Tibet but rather genuine autonomy in aspects that are fundamental for the identity and survival of the Tibetan people. In this respect, both the Dalai Lama and Lobsang Sangay have stepped up their international activity in order to persuade Beijing to resume talks. Ahead of the Chinese Communist Party congress held in November, at which a new set of government and party leaders were set to be ushered in, the Dalai Lama had caused expectations about potential significant changes in the Chinese government’s policy on Tibet. However, most analysts coincide in considering that the official government stance in this respect has not varied.

Thirdly, as became clear during the protests and spiral of violence that took place in 2008 (coinciding with the Olympic Games held in Beijing), there is a possibility of large swathes of the Tibetan community, especially the generations born and raised in exile, viewing with increasing scepticism the official stance of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile. They are openly committed to non-violence and demands for autonomy. Faced with growing military repression and the political stalemate with the Chinese government, and given the lack of progress at the negotiating table, some organisations of Tibetans in exile may opt for implementing strategies that are not strictly peaceful and for voicing stronger political demands. This political friction within the Tibetan community has already led to several meetings being held between the Dalai Lama and some of the organisations in exile, along with the holding of elections and the subsequent election of Lobsang Sangay, somebody who grew up in exile and who supposedly understands and shares the frustration felt by large sections of the Tibetan community. However, this has not prevented protests both inside and outside Tibet from being staged since then, leading up to the current wave of self-immolations.

The restricted access imposed on independent media outlets in the areas where the self-immolations and other forms of protest are largely taking place make it difficult to verify information. Nonetheless, several analysts agree that the tension has increased significantly in Tibet and that it may become more acute in the future due to the combination of many factors such as the international pressure that Beijing may feel is being imposed for it to change its policy regarding Tibet; the stalemate reached at the negotiating table between the Chinese government and the Tibetan leaders and the lack of any signs of change at the recent congress to renew the leadership of the communist party; the frustration and potential shift towards a more radical stance of some sectors of Tibetan society; or Beijing’s response to the self-immolations, which largely involves police and military action and criminal proceedings.
6.6. The possible reconstitution of the army in Haiti

The incidents that took place in 2012 involving dozens of former soldiers (occupation of old military bases, demonstrations, public shows of strength or the illegal possession of weapons, among others) to demand the reconstitution of the armed forces and the restoration of back pay and pensions created a new focal point of tension in Haiti and brought to the fore the debate on the advisability of restoring an institution (the army) that was abolished in 1995 by the country’s former president, Jean Bertrand Aristide. The groups of former soldiers have been encouraged to act by the electoral promise made by the current president, Michel Martelly, who feels that it is necessary to have modern armed forces entrusted with keeping the peace, patrolling borders, coasts and forests, combating drug trafficking, alleviating the effects of natural disasters and safeguarding national sovereignty. Moreover, the current leader also considers that the reconstitution of the army will create jobs, will integrate hundreds of young people and will enable the future replacement of the MINUSTAH, the peacekeeping mission deployed by the UN in 2004 after the spiral of violence that preceded the former president Jean Bertrand Aristide’s flight from the country. Although the government has acknowledged that it would be a relatively small army (it is speculated that it would comprise some 1,500 troops), there is reluctance concerning its creation and several factors exist that may bring further instability to an already fragile socio-political situation in Haiti.

First of all, the creation of an army generates wariness among the international community and a large percentage of Haitian society due to the role played in the past by the armed forces in a series of coups d’état and in the repression of the mass of the people. Some of the most recent examples are the mass human rights violations committed by the armed forces during Duvalier’s dictatorship or following the coup d’état that ousted Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Later on, in the early years of the 21st century, several groups of soldiers (many of whom had come from the neighbouring Dominican Republic) played a decisive role in forming the armed group that triggered a brief but intense armed conflict and Aristide’s flight from the country in 2004. In this respect, the UN and many of the governments and international bodies with an active presence in Haiti have made public their preference for strengthening the Haitian national police. Meanwhile, in 2012 the MINUSTAH renewed its mandate until October 2013 although with a reduced military presence and transferring some of its functions to the police. The government itself has acknowledged that it is working on strengthening the police force, which in a few years may have 15,000 members. Furthermore, both the international community and some civil society organisations have voiced doubts about Haiti’s financial capacity to maintain two institutions (police and army) when the government’s difficulties in meeting the most basic needs of the population are well documented.

Secondly, there are fears about how sectors sympathetic to the former president Aristide might react to the reconstitution of the armed forces. Under Aristide’s presidency, in addition to the police force, the creation of para-police or paramilitary squads known as chimères was encouraged. These armed groups, mainly made up of sympathisers of the former president, over time gained control of shanty towns and significant areas of the territory, questioned the monopoly of force on the part of the state and became involved in many illicit and criminal activities. In fact, many of the activities carried out by the MINUSTAH and the police over the last decade have focused on combating groups of this kind in large shanty towns such as Cité Soleil.

Thirdly, the current political instability and delicate humanitarian situation in Haiti make the challenge posed to the government by the demands and actions of former soldiers all the more daunting. As regards the humanitarian situation, it should be recalled that, according to the UN, more than 400,000 people who were made homeless by the earthquake in January 2010 are still living in camps, joined by more than 200,000 people who were made homeless at the end of October by Hurricane Sandy, which claimed 51 lives. In respect of the political situation, at the end of the year Michel Martelly’s government faced the most significant protests that had occurred since he took office in 2011. Thousands of people demonstrated in cities across the country in the last quarter of the year to demand that Martelly step down and to test against the lack of action by the government, the worsening of the population’s living conditions and the perceived corruption taking place within the government. These protests, which triggered a series of riots and clashes, occurred at a time when the country’s institutions were somewhat discredited due, among other things, to the difficulties and delays that occurred over the course of 2012 in appointing the prime minister, the postponement of the elections that were to have renewed one third of the legislative power and a lack of confidence in the current electoral authority. Furthermore, there are growing protests against the MINUSTAH by large swathes of the population due to its involvement in cases of human rights violations and for its alleged responsibility in the outbreak of a cholera epidemic, which to date has claimed 7,000 lives.

The reconstitution of the armed forces may channel or even meet the demands of a significant sector of the former army that has been staging political protests on and off since the mid-1990s. However, beyond the dilemmas of an ethical, economic and social nature involved in a decision of this magnitude, many doubts persist concerning how a challenge of this kind might be met by a government that has been so politically weakened by the economic and humanitarian situation of the country and placed under so much pressure by the frequent and numerous protests that have been staged in 2012.

The protests staged in Haiti by former soldiers who demand the reconstitution of the armed forces may generate new focal points of tension and represent a serious challenge for the government
6.7. Unmanned aerial vehicles: the challenges of remote-controlled warfare

Remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are sophisticated vehicles that are no longer used exclusively for surveillance tasks. UAVs or drones have become increasingly important as a military weapon due to a series of advantages attributed to them, including a unique capacity to cover large distances and enter otherwise inaccessible areas to eliminate enemy targets with supposedly surgical precision and effectiveness without exposing soldiers to danger. Their growing use in recent years, especially by the USA, has fuelled critical debates on the legality and legitimacy of this practice and its grave impact in terms of civilian victims. In parallel, the number of international actors with access to this technology is also growing. It is calculated that 40 states and other entities (including groups such as Hezbollah) also boast drones in their arsenals, increasing the challenges posed by this remote-controlled warfare.

Drone attacks have been particularly significant in the last decade in the US campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as in operations in Yemen, Somalia or Libya, where NATO also used these aircraft to attack Muammar Gaddafi’s troops. The secret nature of these operations makes it difficult to estimate the number of attacks with precision. However, according to several studies they have increased during the presidency of Barack Obama. More than 300 attacks are reported in the figures, claiming between 2,500 and over 3,500 lives since 2004, according to different counts. The USA implemented its drone attack policy after the attacks of 11th September 2001 and has attempted to confer legitimacy on the policy by citing internal regulations and international law, in the context of its “war on terror”. Washington has attempted to justify its stance by referring to international laws that guarantee its right to self-defence, as part of a strategy involving “preventive” or “pre-emptive” attacks that in practice are carried out with or without the consent of local governments when it considers that these governments are not capable of or not willing to act against targets identified as threats. As stated in The New York Times, this has made drones a provocative symbol of American power, running roughshod over national sovereignty.  

The legality and legitimacy of drone operations has been widely questioned by many specialists and by UN experts who have appealed to the principles of necessity and proportionality in the use of force, and to due respect for human rights (a suspect must be arrested and tried, not executed for his/her alleged involvement in illicit activities). Furthermore, doubts have been raised about the use of weapons in contexts not recognised as war scenarios by international law. In recent years, UN Special Rapporteurs on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions have warned that the US policy represents a challenge for the international system and sets a dangerous precedent since it may encourage other countries to use drones to carry out targeted assassinations using a similar logic, with no geographical limits. Critical voices have highlighted the dangers of the underlying “PlayStation mentality” in the use of this technology, which enables alleged enemies to be executed by remote control like in a video game.

Several reports have underlined the impact of attacks on the civilian population and the difficulties involved in carrying out independent investigations due to the secrecy surrounding these operations. According to some analyses, one civilian dies for every four or five suspects. A study by the University of Stanford found that in Pakistan alone from 2004 to mid-2012 between 478 and 881 civilians (including 176 minors) had died, while hundreds of others had been injured. Thousands of people live in terror as drones constantly fly overhead. The USA has developed a protocol known as the “Disposition Matrix” for identifying targets and deciding on attacks. When there is a risk of civilian victims it is the president who gives the green light for operations. Nevertheless, the American press has condemned the lack of transparency of these procedures, the widening of targets (not only Taliban or al-Qaeda leaders or groups linked to the 9/11 attacks), attacks on individuals with no clarity concerning their identity and the controversial method used to calculate the number of civilian victims, which classifies all men of a military age as combatants unless their “innocence” is determined after their death.

Several calls have been made for greater transparency and accountability in order to clarify the conditions under which these machines may be used, to explain the criteria employed for identifying targets and to guarantee compliance with international law. The UN has requested an investigation into reports of abuse. Despite the criticism and the fact that the expediency of using drones has also been questioned due to their counter-productive effects (they have fuelled violence and animosity towards the USA in countries such as Yemen or Pakistan), there is every sign that this policy will gain ground in the future since it is considered less costly in both economic and political terms, given the growing aversion to conventional warfare. This is clear to see in the growth forecasts for the UAV market. The US plans to double its military spending on UAVs over the next decade, taking the figure to over 11 billion dollars. Meanwhile, NATO plans to expand the purchasing programme for which it already pledged 1.7 billion dollars in 2012.

6.8. The pending closure of Guantanamo

In 2008, the recently elected US president, Barack Obama, announced his intention to close down Guantanamo prison, opened under the George Bush administration on 11th September 2002 to detain terror suspects. Four years later, president Obama has been re-elected and no substantial changes have taken place in the situation of Guantanamo’s detainees. Although it could be argued that the administration has not been capable of dealing with the refusal of the US Congress to allow the closure of the centre, human rights organisations consider that deeper causes lie behind this failure, including a lack of will on the part of Washington to apply international human rights standards and the war on terrorism that it has been waging since the attacks of 11th September 2001, which totally excludes the application of these rights. However, Guantanamo is no longer on the political agenda and no longer features in the media (the issue was barely referred to in the recent US presidential election campaign). Moreover, very little information on the real situation of this detention centre enters the public domain.

The American president has repeated the need to close Guantanamo, arguing that the centre “harms national security” but his discourse ignores the harm caused by the indefinite detention of individuals against whom no charges have been brought and who have not been tried in terms of the defence of the most basic principles of international human rights law. Meanwhile, despite the fact that torture and ill treatment remain a reality in Guantanamo, it is important to highlight the declarations made by president Obama in June 2011, according to which “generations of Americans have understood that torture is inconsistent with our values” and that the use of waterboarding (the controversial form of torture that causes the individual to experience the sensation of drowning, and to which many prisoners have been subjected) is “totally inadmissible”. Despite this, and despite the practice having been documented, those responsible have never been brought to justice.

Furthermore, legal experts and civil rights activists have condemned the fact that Barack Obama ordered the resumption of military commissions in March 2011 to try terrorism suspects, having been critical of them during his 2008 presidential campaign. The death on 8th September 2012 of the Yemeni prisoner Adman Farhan Abd Al Latif, detained in Guantanamo Bay, highlighted the need for the US government to try detainees in a civil court or, alternatively, release them. Much of the campaign against the military commissions has focused on the case of Omar Khadr, who was held for ten years in Guantanamo despite having been detained when he was a minor, and having been subsequently transferred to Canada, with no formal recognition of his status as a minor at the time of his detention or of the associated legal obligations.

The official number of detainees in Guantanamo in November 2012 was 166. The prisoners are held in the various enclosures of the naval base, from barracks to maximum security cells. Most of them are waiting to be transferred to their countries of origin, when the USA signs diplomatic agreements with these countries. However, in November a US government report was made public stating that American prisons could house the prisoners detained in Guantanamo in the event of the base being closed down. It should be pointed out that this information did not refer to possible judicial processes to determine the situation of these prisoners, which means that their detention in American prisons would simply be a prolongation of the situation of legal limbo in which they find themselves. As such, one of the main underlying problems for these individuals, namely the lack of access to justice, will remain unresolved since they are detained without charge and with no prospects of gaining access to a trial in which compliance with international human rights standards is guaranteed.

In short, it is not only necessary for Obama to fulfil his pledge to close the Guantanamo base but also for the situation of legal limbo faced by detainees accused of terrorism to be resolved.
Kenya, the most dynamic economy in East Africa, has suffered several outbreaks of violence since the restoration of multi-party politics in the 1990s, particularly in the most recent legislative and presidential elections that took place in 2007. A period of post-electoral violence ensued that claimed more than 1,200 lives and triggered the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. There is real concern that the first elections to be held since then, scheduled for March 2013, could unleash a new cycle of instability. However, beyond the elections themselves, there are other factors that may contribute decisively to the worsening of the situation in 2013, such as the growing pressure exerted by the government on the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) secessionist movement and the intervention of the Kenyan armed forces in Somalia. The consequences of this intervention are, on the one hand, the stepping up of violent actions by al-Shabaab and its sympathisers in Kenya, as a punishment for participating in the intervention and, on the other hand, the growing pressure of anti-Somali sentiment in the country, particularly in the capital, Nairobi.

Kenya’s politics and economics were dominated by the KANU party from its independence in 1963 until 2002, when it lost power. KANU, which governed in a single-party system, instigated violence for political purposes. Widespread spirals of violence of varying degrees of severity occurred in almost every electoral process. Following the outbreak of post-electoral violence in 2007, a government of national unity was formed. Its poor handling of the political transition was compounded by a series of fraud cases, the exploitation of the population for political purposes and the breach of post-electoral agreements. The electoral commission is immersed in a serious crisis due to the decision to abandon the electronic registration of voters, which may lead to a new attempt to commit electoral fraud. In parallel, two political leaders and current candidates for the presidential elections, Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, former economy and education ministers, respectively, together with four other people, were accused of crimes against humanity and must appear before the International Criminal Court (ICC) in April 2013, after the elections. Many analysts feel that although they have for the moment agreed to appear before the court, if they are elected in March they may renege on this obligation.

This situation has been made more acute by the wave of arrests that were made in 2012 of members of the MRC movement, accused of inciting violence. This group, created in the 1990s, protests against the marginalisation to which the coastal region of the country (Coast Province) has been subjected by the government and calls for the secession of this territory. Following independence in 1963 the government took over certain areas of the country, this zone being a prime example, and distributed them among its supporters as part of a system of patronage that excluded the indigenous population. Around 80% of the coastal population does not possess the ownership deeds of the land on which it lives and the government has not implemented any policy to redress this situation. Moreover, the Kenyan coast holds significant resources for the country’s main economic activity, tourism, although the local population’s perception is that this source of resources leaves them with little in the way of profits. The MRC had remained inactive until 2008, when it won support through an awareness raising campaign with the message “the coast is not Kenya” (Pwani si Kenia, in Swahili). The MRC states that it enjoys the support of 1.5 million people and in addition to demanding secession has called for an election boycott. In 2010 the government declared the MRC illegal, although in June 2012 the movement succeeded in getting the Supreme Court to remove the prohibition. Following this, the government called on the MRC to register as a political party and abandon its secessionist stance. Four months later a local court, instigated by the government, declared the group illegal and ordered the police to arrest its leaders. There is speculation over whether this group possesses arms and is linked to the Somali Islamist armed group al-Shabaab, due to erroneously linking the Islam present in Kenya to the Somali Islamist insurgency. Several analysts have pointed out that these accusations show a lack of knowledge of the social reality and are aimed at causing confusion and justifying the repression of the movement, which leads to a vicious circle of violence.

Nonetheless, this accusation serves to introduce the final element of risk, arising from Kenya’s military intervention in Somalia in 2011. As a response to the intervention, there has been an increase in the number of violent actions and attacks in the north-east province (mostly populated by Somalis) and in Nairobi, for which al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility. Grenade explosions in shops and Christian places of worship, along with attacks on police stations, have proliferated in a spiral of violence that in turn has fuelled hostility towards the Somali community on the part of the population of other communities in Kenya. At the end of August the leader of the extremist group Muslim Youth Centre (MYC), Aboud Rogo Mohammed, was assassinated in Mombasa, triggering strong protests. Furthermore, the passing of a new anti-terrorism law in mid-August met with the opposition of Muslim groups and human rights groups, which considered it discriminatory. On top of this, in November a bus exploded as it travelled through the suburb of Eastleigh in Nairobi, dubbed Little Mogadishu, a predominantly Somali district, which sparked grave reprisals against this community, including the burning and sacking of shops, assaults and even the rape of nine women. Although the police intervened to put a stop to this xenophobic reaction, the incidents were condemned by the leader of the Muslim clergy in Eastleigh, Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim, relations in this district, in Nairobi and in the North Eastern Province have deteriorated severely. As a result, the country may face an escalation of the situation in the near future that may have disastrous consequences.
6.10. Rwanda and the FDLR, cause and consequence of the instability in the Great Lakes

Unresolved local dynamics and the breach of peace agreements, the destabilising role played by Rwanda in the Great Lakes and the laissez faire attitude of the international community have brought a new period of instability to the east of the DR Congo. Even if the latest episode of violence related to the M23 rebellion is tackled through dialogue between the Congolese government and the M23, and by exerting pressure on Rwanda and the M23, the instability will continue because the roots of this complex situation will remain unresolved.

The rebellion initiated in May 2012 by the M23, whose name refers to the breach of the peace agreements signed on 23rd March 2009 between the government and the armed groups of the region, including the CNDP, followed the same pattern as the previous ones. First of all, the taking of Bukavu by the rebel leader Laurent Nkunda in 2004, which led to the subsequent creation of the CNDP political party and the integration of rebel troops in the FARDC in 2007. Secondly, the rebellion that culminated in the occupation of Goma in 2008, which ended with Nkunda being neutralised and replaced by Bosco Ntaganda as representative of the group, with the blessing of Rwanda, along with the signing of the agreements of 23rd March 2009. As in 2007, the failed agreements of 2009 aimed to achieve the integration of the FARDC in the institutions of the state. However, this integration has never been implemented in the military sphere, due to the existence of parallel command structures put in place by the CNDP, the non-payment of salaries, mistrust between integrated CNDP officers and the other officers of the FARDC, the superiority of the ranks of CNDP officers over the remaining officers, mistrust between the respective soldiers, the deployment of new military units linked to their place of origin, and the existence of “ghost” battalions at the service of Ntaganda. Neither did integration occur in the political sphere, due to the creation of parallel administrations in the territory of Masisi, the restriction of the participation of the CNDP to the presence of deputies in the provincial assembly, and the results of the fraud-plagued legislative elections of November 2011, declared null and void in the CNDP’s heartland, Masisi.

Last of all, the third proposal of the 2009 agreements demanded by Rwanda, was a failure. This part of the agreement involved exerting military pressure on the remaining armed groups with a presence in the area, in particular the FDLR armed group, perceived as a threat by Rwanda, in order to force its break-up. The military operations of the FARDC, which were supported by the MONUSCO and in which even the Rwandan special forces took part between February 2011 and September 2012 (triggering a new political crisis), did not succeed in breaking up the FDLR.

The lack of a strategy to eliminate the FDLR and the ambiguity of the relations between the FDLR and sectors of the FARDC, the two groups having coexisted and collaborated together on several occasions, contributed to the failure of the various military operations. Furthermore, the pillaging of natural resources by the FARDC and by Ntaganda’s officials in the army continued, the said resources being channelled through Rwanda in the case of the latter.

The warrant for Ntaganda’s arrest issued by the government in April to satisfy the international community, which was unhappy with the fraudulent elections of November 2011, triggered the desertion of soldiers loyal to Ntaganda and the start of the rebellion that once again seized control of Goma in mid-November 2012, unimpeded by the MONUSCO and the FARDC. Although there were clashes between the parties between May and November, the M23 was strengthened during this period, with the support of Rwanda, which is why it decided to force the situation in November. In mid-November the M23 stepped up the pressure and the FARDC ceded control of the area. Moreover, a large number of the latter’s members switched sides.

The present situation will not be resolved with the proposals currently on the table. Other measures that address the deep roots of the conflict should be implemented in order to tackle the situation. So far nobody has been prepared to propose such measures, which means that the instability is set to continue. First of all, on a local level, there is a clear need for a framework designed to resolve the national dispute over land ownership, since corruption, abuse and the exploitation of this issue by politicians is at the root of many local conflicts. Secondly, the military strategy to tackle the FDLR has proved inefficient. It is essential for Rwanda to act in the region in order to deal with the FDLR, and international pressure is crucial. The actions against the FDLR must be accompanied by an offer for political dialogue between Rwanda and the FDLR (and other Rwandan political actors) providing that the group ceases its armed struggle and its belligerent discourse against Paul Kagame’s regime, that it is offered guarantees of integration in Rwanda and that freedom of expression is promoted with the goal of ensuring full reconciliation between the various political actors and that of laying the foundations for overcoming the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Thirdly, as regards the exploitation of natural resources, the international community (the EU and China, mainly) must follow the path initiated by the USA in respect of promoting mechanisms of transparency and control on an international level in order to do away with the illicit funding mechanisms of the actors on a local level, which contribute decisively to prolonging the conflict.

9. See chapter 1 (Armed Conflicts).
6.11. Violence and the Syrian forced displacement crisis

The impact the war in Syria is having would make for a long list that is hard to come to terms with: more than 60,000 people killed since the conflict began in 2011, countless human rights abuses, a radicalization of the actors in the conflict giving rise to episodes of revenge and retaliation, an increase in regional instability due to the internationalization of the conflict, as well as many other elements. Undoubtedly, forced displacement is one of the most serious consequences. The only way to escape violence for hundreds of thousands of people has been to leave their homes. In late 2012 the numbers provided by different international organizations gave an idea of the scale of the tragedy: out of a total population of 22.5 million there were more than 600,000 Syrian refugees, mainly in neighbouring countries, and 2.5 million displaced persons within the country, in estimates that were considered “conservative”. Overall, the forced displacement numbers exceeded all of the forecasts made earlier in the year and jumped very rapidly near the end of 2012, which foretold a worsening of the humanitarian crisis in 2013.

The Syrian refugee population is mainly located in neighbouring countries. At the end of December 2012, UNHCR estimates that 162,050 people were registered as refugees in Lebanon, some 148,592 in Jordan, 141,240 in Turkey and 66,048 in Iraq. The number of Syrian men and women that have left the country because of the armed conflict is believed to be even greater, considering that not all of the people who have crossed the border have officially registered as refugees. Jordanian and Turkish authorities, for example, respectively estimated that between 100,000 and 70,000 Syrians were not officially recognized as refugees in these countries. Moreover, not all refugees were located in special areas, only 40% according to UNHCR, although the percentages varied depending on the host country. In Turkey most Syrian refugees were in camps on the Syrian border, while in other countries they were living with relatives or friends, were in a shelter, or had rented a house. After living through traumatic experiences in their places of origin or being exposed to violence –including attacks and bombings–, many refugees were living in precarious conditions after crossing the Syrian border.

Notably, many refugees interviewed in Lebanon and Jordan have admitted that sexual violence was the main reason for fleeing. According to a report by the International Rescue Committee, women and girls have reported being sexually assaulted by armed men in public and in their homes, as well as cases of kidnapping, rape, torture and murder. Resources to provide medical and psychological assistance to these victims are limited, plus many of them continue to be exposed to precarious and insecure situations in refugee camps and to episodes of domestic violence. Another facet of the forced displacement crisis caused by the armed conflict is the situation of thousands of people that had been living in the country as refugees in recent years and were forced, once again, to leave their homes because of violence. This drama affects communities such as the Palestinians—who sought refuge in Syria after the Arab-Israeli wars in previous decades—or the Iraqis, who had tried to escape the armed conflict in their own country after the 2003 U.S. invasion and, in some cases, have been forced to return to Iraq despite continuing high levels of violence.

The constant flow of refugees throughout 2012 has overwhelmed the capacity of the neighbouring countries—which in some cases has led to restrictions and/or political groups asking for the borders to be closed—and has also triggered some tense situations. Given the destabilizing effect the war in Syria was having on Lebanon and growing inter-communal tensions, it was a particularly sensitive issue in this country where Syrian refugees, mostly Sunnis, had reached almost 5% of the population. In the case of Jordan, Human Rights Watch reported cases of discrimination against Palestinian refugees from Syria.

The situation of the no less than 2.5 million people displaced within Syria’s borders is much more difficult to determine, since humanitarian organizations have been denied access. The available data suggest that many of them are trying to survive by taking shelter in schools, universities or public buildings, in precarious conditions and are constantly exposed to the dynamics of the conflict. According to reports, some of the humanitarian aid that organizations did manage to send, in an attempt to deal with these cases, was manipulated by the rebels and the Government to favour their respective supporters and to guarantee their fidelity.

With a view to 2013, therefore, it seems relevant that any international approach to the conflict must take into account the reality of forced displacement caused by the war in Syria, in particular the constant increase in the need for assistance due to the continuous flow of refugees –UNHCR had only received 62% of the 246 million USD requested to respond to the emergency in Syria--; the urgent need to find ways to help IDPs and the civilian population within the country—according to UN estimates a total of four million people will require humanitarian assistance in early 2013—and the importance of not ignoring the plight of refugees and IDPs in a possible post-conflict scenario to overcome the dynamics of violence and fragmentation in the country.

![The war in Syria prompted more than 600,000 people to flee the country and caused the internal displacement of another 2.5 million people who also left their homes due to violence.](image-url)
The armed conflict in northern Mali has plunged the country into the worst crisis since its independence. The roots of the instability can be found in many internal factors, but also in regional influences on Mali resulting from the war in Libya and the growing internationalization of armed groups that have expanded their area of action in the Sahel. Instability in the Sahel, a belt of semi-arid territory to the south of the Sahara desert that stretches from Mauritania to Sudan, became one of the main causes of concern for the international community in 2012 (especially for Europe due to its geographical proximity). It emerged as one of the great challenges of the future, especially considering the uncertain consequences of the military operation launched by France in Mali in early 2013.

The crisis in Mali has been called by many analysts the second chapter of the war in Libya, which in 2011 toppled Muammar Gaddafi’s regime. Although the conflict between Tuareg groups and the Bamako Government is long-standing, in fact, the reactivation of armed initiatives by Tuareg groups in early 2012 was related to the return of a large group of Tuareg fighters who had fought for Gaddafi. The armed conflict in Libya has made weapons widely available in the region. This has benefited the Tuareg, but it has also favoured multiple criminal organizations that control trafficking routes (weapons, drugs, tobacco, immigrants), and jihadists armed groups that have expanded their area of operations and now engage in criminal activity and have begun kidnapping Western nationals in several countries in the region as a source of funds.

The secular Tuareg armed group National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was increasingly displaced from the control of northern Mali—equivalent to France in size—by jihadist organizations with different origins and trajectories. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), was founded in Algeria, has had bases in northern Mali since 2007, and a strong presence in Timbuktu. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), an AQIM subsidiary formed mainly by Mauritanians and Malians, took control of the city of Gao after clashes with the MNLA. Led by the historic Tuareg leader Iyad ag Ghaly, the Ansar Dine group (Defenders of the Faith) consolidated its position in the northern town of Kidal. The total number of Islamist fighters is hard to determine, but estimates range from 2,000 to 3,000 militants, although some estimates go as high as 6,000. Despite the diversity of groups and interests, some analysts have highlighted the coordination ability of these groups during the offensive in Mali. However, others have suggested that the alliances are fragile and that their ability to recruit may be a question of opportunism or for economic reasons, more than because of a true ideological commitment to the jihadist cause, in a context of poverty, political and social marginalization, and institutional weakness.

In any case, concerns over AQIM cross-border incursions and the proliferation of radical Islamist groups in the Sahel existed before the crisis in Mali and have had an influence on security policies at the regional level. Since the 9-11 attacks, the U.S. has been developing a counter-terrorism strategy in the Sahel and has spent millions of dollars to train the Armed Forces in the area, often in coordination with France, which as a former colonial power remains the most influential foreign actor in the region. Given the increasing cross-border activity of AQIM and its subsidiaries, in recent years Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Mauritania have also tried to set up military cooperation mechanisms to fight terrorism. However, these structures have not led to effective coordination and have given rise to mutual recriminations. Criticism includes the Algeria’s alleged lack of commitment with regard to the impact AQIM is having on neighbouring countries, or the tolerance shown by President Amadou Toumani Touré (overthrown in 2012 by a military officer who had been trained in the U.S.) towards jihadist activity in northern Mali.

These regional initiatives were unable to stem the crisis in Mali. The transitional government that took office in the country after the withdrawal of the military Junta sought assistance from ECOWAS to restore its territorial integrity and force the rebels out of the north. Discussions over the mandate of the African mission and whether or not to give priority to political stabilization measures and the restructuring of the Armed Forces in Mali—which were included in UN Security Council resolution 2805 of December 2012 before any military intervention, were overtaken by the events. The French military launched an offensive in early January 2013 against the Islamist movements towards the south. The events in Mali led the West to begin seeing it as a “global threat” and comparing the Sahel to Afghanistan—“Sahelistan”—which set off alarms regarding the possible transformation of the area into a sanctuary for radical Islamist groups. The attack by an AQIM splinter group in January 2013 on an Algerian gas plant—with dozens of foreigners held hostage—reinforced these ideas. However, several analysts warned that there was a risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy if the methods used in Afghanistan were applied to this case.

With France leading a mission made up of troops from several African countries, this new scenario gives rise to many concerns. These include, the limits to the ability to confront the jihadist groups on their own ground, the difficulties in maintaining control over northern Mali once these organizations have been pushed out, the possible spread of radical Islamist cells in an area known for its porous borders, and the fears of people in the north of being subject to retaliatory actions, by both jihadists from the neighbouring countries and members of the Malian Armed Forces, for their alleged cooperation with the rebels. In addition, there is concern over a possible escalation of inter-communal tensions and the challenges posed by the humanitarian crisis prompted by the conflict.