



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Transcript

# US Perspectives on Instability in the Sahel

Dr Reuben Brigety

Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of African Affairs, US Department of State

Chair: Dr David Styan

Birkbeck College, University of London

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**David Styan:**

Welcome to Chatham House. My name is David Styan from Birkbeck College, the University of London. I've been asked to chair this meeting.

Dr Reuben Brigety is currently Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau for African Affairs. Prior to this posting, he was overseeing issues of population, refugees and migration. So he already was familiar with Sahelian issues. Because of that, he's also got a background in various think tanks: Center for American Progress as well as Human Rights Watch, and also has taught in George Mason University.

So without further ado, I very much welcome you to Chatham House. It's excellent to have you here to explain the US perspective on the Sahel.

**Reuben Brigety:**

Thank you very much. Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. It is a great pleasure for me to be back at Chatham House, a great institution not only for Great Britain but indeed for the entire global community of those following vital issues that affect us all.

As David mentioned, I am the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional and Security Affairs. And it is my pleasure to be here today to talk about developments, in particular the US perspective on recent developments, in the Sahel. What I will do today is first of all do my best to be relatively brief in explaining the nature of our position. And to do that so that we can have as much back and forth and question and answer as possible, so I can perhaps elucidate more of what I say in my opening remarks.

As we all know, events in the Sahel have taken on a quite dramatic turn since the beginning of the year, in a particular sense the coup in Bamako this spring. Not only have we seen the political crisis following the coup, but we clearly have also seen a series of other intertwining crises: the rebellion of the Tuareg and other disaffected populations in the north [of Mali], the taking advantage of that opening by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other Islamic extremists and then, as David mentioned, the profound and dramatic humanitarian consequences that have followed all three of those developments.

As we have watched these three trends come together, we have also similarly seen, as David noted, a concomitant strengthening of approach of the

international community. As David mentioned there was a meeting, as you all know, of the African Union in Bamako last week. My boss, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Ambassador Johnnie Carson, was in Paris this week having consultations with our French colleagues on how to address the situation. The Peace and Security Council at the African Union at Addis Ababa, where I was just two days ago, also took up the issue of Mali.

What is clear is that the international community – both our colleagues and friends on the African continent and those of us that are friends of Africa – are increasingly coming to a consensus that we must address this dramatic situation. With that said, the American approach to the situation in Mali is based on four pillars.

The first is there must be restored legitimate democratic government in Bamako. We are in line with our colleagues at the African Union that there should be democratic elections by April of next year. And we will continue to explore ways in which we can support both diplomatically and programmatically that development.

Secondly, there must be a diplomatic engagement with the Tuareg and other disaffected populations of the north. The reasons behind the coup, as we all know, had to do with disaffected members of the military feeling as if they were not being properly supported by their government in Bamako. And that obviously occurred in no small measure because of deployments of the Malian military in the north which of course was in part due to the extended unrest, in feelings of disenfranchisement by various populations in the north, the Tuareg chief among them.

As such, one will not see – it is difficult to imagine seeing a restoration of the territorial integrity and extension of government authority throughout all of Mali unless and until there is significant political engagement with those populations in the north that have historically felt disenfranchised economically, politically, etc.

So we believe it is very important for a government – both the current government, the interim government now, as well as ultimately the permanent restored democratic government which as I say, we hope happens next spring – that the government engages with its citizens in the north to ensure that their needs are met. And that they're met in a political, non-violent way.

Which leads me to the third point: notwithstanding the political engagement that has to happen in Bamako to re-establish a civilian government, and also with the north to address the issues of disaffection, we must also work collectively against those militant groups – militant extremists – who wish to

take advantage of the instability in northern Mali. And with whom one can likely not engage diplomatically. And in principle, we are talking about Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Al-Qaeda poses an increasing threat across the Sahel, by virtue of AQIM's affiliation with the larger Al-Qaeda network. We are gravely concerned about their setting up of training camps, of their finding other ways to engage with local populations and imposing their very, very harsh view of sharia law on populations in the north. Doing things like amputations for people who are accused of stealing, the very harsh treatment of women, etc. And clearly, we are also concerned about the security threat that giving AQIM a foothold in northern Mali means for all the other countries in the Sahel, and indeed, potentially for other countries farther afield.

And we look forward to working closely with our African colleagues, principally in the context of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) on thinking through a well-planned, well-managed, well-resourced and well-coordinated military effort to dislodge those forces at a time of our collective choosing.

The fourth matter that must be addressed is obviously addressing the profound humanitarian crisis in northern Mali, as well as the refugee crisis that has been created in countries throughout the region. There have been, as David noted, some half million people that have been displaced one way or another, either internally or across borders. The United States has committed substantial funds to help address this crisis, committing some almost \$400 million in humanitarian assistance to date to address this massive population displacement.

We will continue to support international organizations such as UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and others that are working tirelessly to address the humanitarian needs that have come out of this emergency. But we also know, as with most places, that the ultimate way to address this humanitarian emergency is to address and resolve the political situation which created the emergency in the first place.

Which then brings me back to our overall theme: these are four distinct lines of effort that, nonetheless, must be pursued all at the same time. So notwithstanding the fact that we are dealing with, as I said at the outset, a complex emergency – a political crisis in Bamako, a political crisis to the very territorial integrity of the entire country, with a complex and increasingly entrenched Islamic extremist insurgency in the north and the humanitarian

crisis across the borders – our collective response must similarly be integrated and it must move across all fronts at the same time.

Obviously, this will be a challenge politically and militarily to do. That is why, as David noted, we in the United States are working aggressively with a variety of diplomatic partners to help work with our African colleagues so that we see an African-led, African-owned approach to resolving this crisis in as expeditious a manner as possible.

So with those broad opening remarks, let me again thank you for having me. Let me thank Chatham House for focusing increasing attention on this important and emerging crisis. And I look forward to what I hope will be a robust back and forth over the next few minutes. Thank you very much.