

The Securitization of Mali

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PATRICK PITTS, FEB 19 2014

First, this essay will discuss securitization as theorized, noting its departure from traditional theories of security, by drawing from the seminal work of the Copenhagen School (CS). After accounting for this challenge to traditionalist thinking, the essay will then turn to changing notions within security literature that have arisen in the wake of 9/11, principally the establishment of a link between state failure and insecurity at the global level, and more specifically the concept of “failed states” serving as fertile soil for the rise of terrorism unhindered by national boundaries. Subsequently, the essay will use securitization as a critical lens to evaluate these recently developed notions in their relation to the crisis in Mali. Finally, the essay will utilize the case study of the French intervention to explain the process of securitization and its relevance today.

To begin with, we turn to securitization and its theoretical groundwork. Whereas traditional theories of security focus largely on the material means of states in achieving their security goals, chief among them maintaining sovereignty, “the Copenhagen School regards security as a socially constructed concept” (Emmers, 2013, p. 135). Tuarek elaborates on this position further, explaining that “the meaning of security” is “dependent on what is done with it” (Tuarek cited in Baylis et al., 2011, p. 240). Under the Copenhagen model, security is not an objective entity or condition that exists in the real world, rather, “the enunciation of security itself” creates shared understandings of dangers in relation to the discourse used to identify, pinpoint, and understand perceived threats (Balzacq, 2005, p. 171). This constructivist approach has allowed the CS “to reconceptualise the notion of security”, largely through securitization theory (Emmers, 2013, p. 132).

Specifically, securitization as posited by the CS contains several tenets in its operation. Firstly, the theory classifies two different agents: securitizing actors and the audience. Securitizing actors are “actors who securitize issues by declaring...a referent object, existentially threatened” (Buzan et al. cited in Emmers, 2013, p. 132). These securitizing actors are more often than not the political leaders or governments of states; in authoritarian regimes this elite directly controls “the dissemination of information”, and in democratic regimes this elite enjoys legitimacy and public faith (Collins, 2005, p. 570-571). Meanwhile, the referent object the securitizing actor claims to be threatened can be the state, national sovereignty, an ideology, national economies or even “collective identities” (Emmers, 2013, p. 132). The “audience”, on the other hand, is the agent who the securitizing actors attempt to convince: the general public, politicians, military officers, bureaucrats, or other leaders (Emmers, 2013, p. 134). How do securitizing actors convince their audience(s)? The CS defines the tool of persuasion as a “speech act”, or as Emmers writes, “the discursive representation of a certain issue” (Emmers, 2013, p. 134). Building from this, speech acts can be characterized as being either locutionary, illocutionary, or perlocutionary; respectively understood as statements that contain “a given sense and reference”, the very discursive act of making such statements, or the effects “aimed to evoke the feelings, beliefs, thoughts, or actions of the target audience” (Searle cited in Balzacq, 2012, p. 61).

Yet what exactly are securitizing actors attempting to achieve by convincing audience(s) that a referent object is existentially threatened? For CS scholars, the answer is the adoption of “extraordinary measures” outside the realm of the usual political sphere (Emmers, 2013, p. 133). Through such measures the threat can “be dealt with swiftly and without the normal rules and regulations of policy-making” (Tuarek, 2006). “By enabling...emergency measures”, the audience bestows securitizing actors with “extraordinary powers” that go well beyond their usual administrative framework (Collins, 2005, p. 570). In sum, under securitization a securitizing actor takes an issue and frames it “as an existential threat” to a specific referent object with speech acts, so that the actor can legitimately employ

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“extraordinary means” in dealing with the threat, particularly the mobilization of state power and resources in the name of defending the referent object (Emmers, 2013, p. 134).

Moreover, while changes to the ways in which we theorize security have been suggested, the CS serving as a prime example, notions of security even within traditionalist thinking have undergone variations in the post 9/11 world. Specifically, links between “failed states” and global insecurity have been elucidated by authors seeking to prove that such “states pose dangers not only to themselves and their neighbours but also to peoples around the globe” (Rotberg, 2002, p. 127). Notably, “failed states have come to be feared as exporters of terror”, the logic being that no state, however geographically isolated or separated from trouble, can be safe from the dangers internal failure poses externally (Rotberg, 2002, p. 128). Nowhere is this train of thought more evident than in relation to state failure in Africa. Edward Newman identifies this evolution from pre to post 9/11, writing

During the Cold War instability and conflict in Africa was generally seen...as an ‘external’ phenomenon in...faraway places...and the existence of weak states was generally not seen as a direct security threat” (2009, p. 67).

Newman goes on to say that “after 9/11, situations of civil war and state failure in Africa...are seen as a...security threat...which enables the emergence or operation of terrorist organizations” that have the capacity to strike international targets (2009, p. 68). On the whole, the “war on terror” has left academics and analysts alike concluding that “Africa cannot be kept at the back of the queue forever...if security interests are to be advanced” (Lyman and Morrison, 2004, p. 76). The crisis in Mali illustrates this perspective.

However, securitization theory allows us to analyse these notions, and their relation to the Malian crisis, with a critical lens. The previously identified concept that state failure presents a security threat to all nations was adopted rather parsimoniously in regards to the Tuareg uprising in northern Mali in early 2012. The language in the initial news reports focused on the “humanitarian crisis” faced by the country, rarely if at all associating the internal destabilization with possible security threats to Western nations in particular, and noting that originally ECOWAS and the UN simply voiced “deep concern” about the situation (Al Jazeera, 2012). Yet a month later, after the military coup on March 22nd, reports began coming in that an increasing number of rebels in the north were linked to Ansar Dine or other al-Qaeda affiliated terror cells. As the BBC put it: “Western powers are more concerned by a growing Islamist threat throughout the region than a Tuareg issue which is considered a political internal problem”, illustrating a common securitizing theme throughout the “war on terror” (BBC News, 2012). State failure is thus of importance only when it augments perceived enemies of the West; Mali could tear itself apart from decades of Tuareg claims to self-autonomy, but the moment jihadists enter the scene the internal situation becomes a threat unconstrained by the borders of the West African nation.

This perception of internal developments in Mali as a threat to Western nations can again be examined using securitization theory as “a theoretical tool of analysis” relevant in challenging conceptualizations of security (Tuarek, 2006). Stage one of the process of securitization “concerns the portrayal of certain issues, persons, or entities as existential threats to referent objects” (Emmers, 2013, p. 134). In the case of Mali, the West, and in particular France, began to frame jihadists in northern Mali as a threat to not only the security of the West African region, but to both Western Europe and the world. Operating under the “war on terror”, this discourse centred around the preservation of Western democratic norms and values that were perceived to be under siege by radical Islam, reinforcing the “collective identity” referent object as proposed by Emmers. When it became apparent that Bamako might fall to jihadist elements

President Hollande stated that France had no alternative but to intervene and prevent the emergence of a terrorist state that would have serious security repercussions for France and the West (Francis, 2013, p. 5).

The French defence minister, Jean-Yves le Drian, put it: “the threat is that a terrorist state will be created near Europe and France...we had to react before it was too late” (le Drian cited in Francis, p. 5). This speech act of relating the fate of Mali to possible terrorist attacks on French and Western soil, primarily by focusing on geographical proximity, is thus a key example of the first stage of securitization in action. The second stage, wherein securitizing actors are successful in “convincing a relevant audience that a referent object is existentially threatened”,

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consequently allowing for the adoption of “extraordinary measures”, is again readily evident. Domestically, Hollande and his administration were able to convince the French public of the need to devote resources and blood to prevent the fall of Mali to jihadist groups. Internationally, France was able to convince the UN not only to support Resolution 2085, calling for an ECOWAS mission in Mali logistically reinforced by France, but also to back its rapid deployment of troops and aircraft in early 2013 after the fall of Konna in the north. The process of securitization was thus complete, as the intervention put Mali “at the top of the international political agenda” alongside her former colonial power (Francis, 2013, p. 1).

In conclusion, securitization is theoretically erected upon a social constructivist platform, wherein security is not a human condition but rather a shared understanding of perceived threats. Securitization theory, the brainchild of the CS, provides a challenge to traditional theories of security, as well as a useful analytical tool with which to examine issues in security today. The French intervention in Mali provides a key example of the process and relevance of securitization in contemporary times, a testament to securitization theory’s prowess in challenging, and more significantly, critiquing, modern conceptualizations of security.

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