

“Research on radical Islamist activities and strife over natural resources in the Sahara region– from the perspective of Middle Eastern states vis-à-vis global actors”

For the purpose of this project, the North African region and the Sahel region – lying on opposite sides of the Sahara Desert – are categorized as one “Sahara Region.” In the former region are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt while in the latter region lie Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Although the two regions are divided by the Sahara Desert, they share historical and cultural ties. In addition, they face the common challenges of natural resource development and the growing influence of radical Islamist movements. This project (using the broad geographic categorization of the “Sahara Region”) seeks not only to analyze the current state of natural resource development and the presence of radical Islamists, but also examine their pertinence to the region’s security, as well as to the foreign policy strategies of the US and Europe.

In January 2013, an extremist group called “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)” attacked a natural gas plant in In-Aménas (in the southeastern part of the Sahara Desert) and, after a firefight with the Algerian army, took the lives of 39 foreign nationals (including 10 Japanese). Two trends illuminate the backdrop against which this incident known as the “In-Aménas Hostage Crisis” took place. First, the Sahara Region containing southern Algeria has drawn much attention as an area rich in such resources as petroleum, natural gas, uranium, and rare metals, and foreign enterprises from Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and China have begun to rapidly venture into the region. Second, many of the countries in the region have struggled to unify as states, leading to repeated civil wars that have added to the instability of the region. Amidst such instability, the presence of radical Islamists seeking to abolish “heretical rule” is growing in various parts of the region. The armed Islamist group noted above, too, operates from a base in Mali, and is believed to have carried out the attack against an Algerian plant with French vested rights to protest the French intervention in Mali.

The In-Aménas hostage crisis highlights the Sahara Region's position as a resource-rich region with much potential, while on the flipside it is an area that struggles with the risk posed by sociopolitical instability and the activities of radical Islamist groups. It must also be noted that the issues facing the Sahara Region are becoming a global challenge relevant also to nearby Europe as well as to the Middle East.

With the above issues in mind, this research, through the analysis of radical Islamist activities and competition over natural resources in the "Sahara Region" (consisting of both the North African region and the Sahel region), seeks to make policy recommendations with an emphasis on Japan's national interest in stabilizing the region and securing energy resources.

[Research Project Members]

Project Leader

KISAICHI Masatoshi (Professor, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Sophia University)

Research Member

SAKAI Shinzo (Professor, Nanzan University)

YOKOTA Takayukui (Associate Professor, College of International Relations, Nihon University)

YOSHIDA Atsushi (Assistant Professor, School of Commerce, Meiji University)

WAKAKUWA Ryo (Ph.D. Candidate in Area Studies, Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University)

Group Members and Secretaries

IJIMA Toshiro (Deputy Director-General and Senior Research Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

NUKII Mari (Research Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)