

## **[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president**

With the highest number of young STEM graduates per capita in the EU, Ireland has the people and skills your company needs to succeed here. IDA Ireland, the National Investment Development Agency, can help you find and nurture the people you need to internationalize and thrive. Our talent is just one of the extraordinary benefits Ireland has to offer. Learn more at [idarland.com](http://idarland.com).

Invest in extraordinary.

Hello and welcome to The Intelligence from The Economist.

I'm your host, Jason Palmer.

Every weekday, we provide a fresh perspective on the events shaping your world.

Many call Muhammad Daif the Phantom because he operates so effectively in the shadows.

He transformed Hamas from a cluster of terrorist cells into a force capable of invading Israel.

Our correspondent lays out what little more is known about him.

And there aren't many dinners more typically French than steak fruit, the meat and potatoes par excellence.

Problem is, jumping on steak in France is now all tied up with politics.

Perhaps on bistro menus soon, the stakes won't be high.

First up though.

Africa's Sahel region, a continent spanning

bands to the south of the Sahara Desert, has a large and growing problem with jihadist insurgencies.

But along with that threat, democracy itself has been under fire in the region in the past few years.

A string of coups has removed elected governments from power.

First it was Mali, which had two of them in nine months, the first in August 2020.

Then Guinea in September 2021.

Then Burkina Faso in January last year and again eight months later.

And in July this year it was Niger's turn.

Senegal at the Sahel's western tip has by contrast long been a bastion of democracy in the region.

But it too now faces rising instability, with violent street protests ahead of presidential elections that are due in February.

For the incumbent president, Mackie Saul, things look rocky both at home and across the wider Sahel region.

Our Africa correspondent, Kinley Salmon, went to meet him.

Mackie Saul has been president of Senegal since 2012.

He was democratically elected then, coming to power and imparting a movement to stop the third term of the then president.

And he's been a big figure in West Africa really ever since.

He's played a leading role, pushing back on a number of coups, including recent ones.

He was chair of the African Union as a whole in 2022.

And he's a big figure in the ECOS, the economic community of West African states, the regional bloc.

He speaks English, but he asked to do the interview in French.

## **[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president**

When I asked him how he was feeling about the coups in the region and what could be done to stop them, frankly, he was pretty despondent.

He told me, you know, sometimes we just get lost.

And at the mention of ECOS, which we've talked about a lot on the show and its efforts to undo recent coups, what did Mr. Saul have to say about that?

Well, he was quite critical of ECOS, despite being a leading member of it.

A decade ago, they had a better record in ECOS.

And in 2017, even in the Gambia, a country surrounded by Senegal, they intervened militarily, led in part by Mr. Saul Senegal to push out a dictator who wasn't accepting the electoral results in which he'd lost.

But recently, ECOS has really struggled.

Mr. Saul says the effectiveness of the organization has been found wanting.

He says it lacks capacity and that it's losing its leadership role in the region.

He acknowledged that in Niger, where there was a coup in July, and ECOS rather boldly threatened to intervene militarily.

If it wasn't reversed, that threat just proved to be completely hollow.

And he said that really is the cause for some profound thinking about what went wrong and why they could not and did not intervene in the end.

And he was also strikingly skeptical about the tendency that he himself and ECOS have pushed, which is to rush back towards elections when a coup happens.

He pointed out that when they've done that in the past, often those elected presidents just haven't lasted their full mandates or have been overthrown in coups themselves.

He really threw into question whether that push for elections and a quick return to democracy makes sense in the Sahel.

But I suppose one thing that links a lot of these coups together is the force of jihadism in the region, something we've talked about quite a lot on the show.

What did he have to say about that?

Well, that's right.

He pointed out just how enormous a threat that is not just in the Sahel, countries like Burkina Faso and Mali, but also the spread into Benin and Togo.

And he was worried also about the spread into Senegal, saying that this can easily cross borders, particularly in ECOS, where there's relatively free movement of people and goods.

And he went further than that.

He said, you know, frankly, all of West Africa, all of Africa in general, is going to pay a high price if this problem of terrorism in the Sahel isn't dealt with.

And of course, this insecurity that's been getting worse and worse in places like Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger is one of the reasons why those coups seem to have had quite a bit of public support, at least judging by those who come out onto the street to celebrate it and back the soldiers.

All this seems to have pushed President Sal into questioning.

Whether electoral democracy in the way we would normally want to do it is suitable for the Sahel at all.

It's sort of an interesting take to have on the matter of democracy

## **[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president**

when elections are coming up in Senegal, even if Mr. Sal won't be running. Well, that's right. There are presidential elections due here in Senegal in February. And actually, the lead up to those has really been marked by quite violent protests at times. This is partly because the main opposition leader, a man by the name of Usman Sonko, who's a bit of a firebrand, a former tax inspector who really rails against alleged elite corruption, he has been clashing repeatedly with Mackie Sall, the president. The government has been accused of attempting to use the legal system to try to exclude Mr. Sonko from running. We should say very clearly they deny anything of the sort. But you know, Sonko has certainly been in a lot of legal trouble. Starting in 2021, he was accused of rape. He was this year acquitted of rape, but convicted instead of corruption of youth, defined as a moral acts with someone under the age of 21. He's also been convicted in a case brought by a government minister of defamation. And most recently, he was arrested for plotting insurrection. And the government has arrested other senior members of his party and dissolved the party as well. Obviously, Usman Sonko has denied any wrongdoing on all of this, while the government says they are just enforcing the laws on the books. This isn't politically motivated at all, according to them. But it leaves the country very tense. In fact, the protests in the course of these cases have killed dozens of people. And Mr. Sonko himself is now in jail on hunger strike. And I think it's fair to say the country is pretty on edge about where things go next. So you said that Mr. Saul questioned the very notion of democracy in the Sahel region. What does he have to say about democracy in Senegal itself, given all of that? Well, Saul really bristles at the suggestion that there's been any democratic backsliding on his watch in Senegal. He told me Senegal has no lessons to take in democracy from anyone. And to be fair, he did make clear in July that he would not be standing for a third term in these elections. There had been speculation that he might run for what would have been a pretty constitutionally dubious third term. But instead, he is stepping down. That doesn't always happen in the region. And he's backing his prime minister, Ahmadou Barrow. He sees this whole thing very differently. He accuses the opposition of wanting anarchy. He describes a syndrome of chaos threatening the country. And he claims the opposition are calling for violence to burn down the houses of ministers or to go and kill people. At one point, he even talked of people advocating to go and kill the president. It is true that at times, Osman Sankar has used extreme rhetoric. In one speech, he talked of the fight for power promising to be deadly. He insisted that the word is not too much. It is the price that must be paid. He's also predicted that Mr. Saul will leave the presidential palace like Samuel Doe, a former Liberian president who was killed by rebels. So that's pretty strong stuff. But it's not quite so clear cut. Amnesty here in Senegal also argues that the government itself is bending the law. They pointed out that, for example, Osman Sankar was essentially put under house arrest without any legal basis. Mr. Saul also claims that the country has no political prisoners. Not a single one. There are a number of people who are languishing in jail after some

## [Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president

of those protests. And according to Amnesty, some of them definitely are political prisoners. So how do you see this playing out? The situation you describe is a little bit powder keggy ahead of these elections in February. Well, that's right. Unfortunately, things are very on edge. Many Senegalese are worried about more violence one way or another. But I think the broader point here, which is pretty concerning given what's happening in the rest of the region as we've discussed, is that all of this rhetoric and these maneuvers against each other, if that's what they are, is quite damaging to Senegalese democracy. Everyone's fighting about the rules of the game. They're polarizing the country from both sides and rather ignoring the more real issues that many Senegalese face. Youth unemployment is a huge problem here. Poverty, illegal migration to the Canary Islands is a big, big issue, but not getting much airtime in the campaign. So these elections will really end up as a test of Senegalese democracy and its resilience against this kind of dispute. But it's also going to be closely watched across Africa with others, whether they be potential challenges to ruling parties or ruling parties themselves, watching to try and work out which are the best tactics to emulate. And perhaps also defenders of democracy, also watching to see how they can help their own systems through similar challenges. Kinley, thanks very much for your time. Thank you.

Okay, listen up. Time runs short for you to save some serious cash on, if I may say so, some of the best audio journalism in the business. To hear all of our weekly shows, the weekend intelligence and all the new stuff, you're going to need to sign up to Economist Podcasts Plus, that is, if you're not already a digital or print subscriber to the Economist. Just to entice you a bit, the latest episode of Boss Class, our new show on management, just dropped. It's about how to find the right people for a job right up to the chief executive. Oh, and what not to do on those psychometric recruitment tests.

So, like a good pitchman, I'm here to save you money. Today is the last day to get a subscription to Economist Podcasts Plus for half price, \$24.50 a year. Go to the show notes and click frantically while you can, or just search for Economist Podcasts. See you on the other side.

It's more than three weeks since Hamas militants slaughtered at least 1,400 civilians in Israel. Thousands more were injured. More than 220 are still being held hostage.

One of the objectives of Israel's ongoing ground invasion is to target the man that many believe must have ordered the attack. But he is someone about whom, despite his high position within Hamas,

very little is known. Just hours into Hamas' October 7 surprise attack on southern Israel, a video was released on the militant's official television channel.

Nicholas Pelham is a Middle East correspondent for The Economist.

It carried a message from a silhouetted man.

He called on fellow Muslims in the so-called Islamic resistance to join the fight.

And that was it. The silhouette hasn't been seen or heard from since.

Muhammad Dave is called the Phantom. Nobody alive is more responsible for more Israeli deaths. Years of struggle against Israel has left him maimed. He's lost an eye, a leg, an arm, as well as a wife and two kids to Israeli attacks. And he's rarely seen or heard from, and that may add to his power.

You say he's called the Phantom. What is his sort of official title?

His official title is Commander-in-Chief of Hamas' military wing, the Al-Qasam Brigade.

## **[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president**

It's a position he's basically held for more than 30 years, say for a period when he was in Egypt recuperating from attack wounds. And that's kind of made him a rare constant in the upper ranks of Hamas because others have been killed and jailed.

And on his watch, he's basically taken Hamas from being a pretty kind of amateur bunch of terrorists and guerrilla fighters to a pretty sophisticated army. And now he's got artillery, which can pretty much reach anywhere in Israel.

Well, outside of the region, maybe even inside of the region, he's not a very well-known name. What's his backstory?

You know, when you ask Western intelligence officials about him, they admit they don't know his whole biography. And there are remarkably few photos of him, the ones that Israel is using, pretty much kind of 20 years old, if not more. And clearly, he and Hamas like it this way.

But what we do know is that he was born in the Hanyunist refugee camp inside Gaza in 1965.

At that point, it was still under Egyptian control. But two years later, Israel occupied Gaza along with the West Bank as part of the 1967 war. He's pretty much spent his whole life under Israeli occupation. His father worked as an upholsterer and like anybody in the refugee camp, at the time, they didn't have much. We know that his family had originally come from the hills near Jerusalem before the 1948 war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and also created Israel. Growing up in Hanyunist, that was a proving ground for his current role.

What do you mean by that?

Hanyunist refugee camp has been a breeding ground for many of Hamas and Fatah leaders.

They include the likes of Yahya Sinwa, who's the current leader of Hamas in Gaza.

They also include Mohammed Dahlan, who became the security chief for Fatah, which is a secular rival of Hamas and runs the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

So they were kind of living cheek by jowl. They would kind of kick balls around together.

They would chase each other around the camp. They went to the same schools. They went to the same universities. They played kind of mass games with Israeli jeeps and pretty much took part in the first Intifada together, where there was a kind of Intifada of stones. And then over the years evolved into a confrontation of guns and then rockets and intense violence until you get to the stage where we are today, where Hamas is pretty much acting like an army against an Israeli counterpart. So you say that Mohammed Dahf grew up then with who would become leaders of Hamas

and its secular rival, Fatah? It's interesting to see how his life turned out. Why did he end up in Hamas rather than Fatah? Is he a religious man? Yes, he is religious, but that doesn't seem to be his driving renovation. I just think you thought that Hamas was a better vehicle for delivery than Fatah. What everybody says about Mohammed Dahf is that he wasn't particularly interested in factions

or politics. He just had one focus, which was getting rid of the Israeli occupation and trying to live in a liberated land. And when he joined Hamas, it was the new game in turn. It wasn't marred in politics in the same way that Fatah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the umbrella group of Palestinian politics was. And at that point as well, kind of Fatah was going down the road of looking at how it could compromise with Israel, how it could share the same land. And I think Mohammed Dahf saw in Hamas a purity of vision, a kind of absolutist vision, which was fighting for the entire control of the land and not compromise. And that's really been a feature

## **[Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president**

of his whole career. He tried to avoid politics. He's tried to avoid negotiation. He doesn't trust either his own political factions or the Israelis or negotiations with outside mediators.

So you say that he saw in Hamas something that he could get behind. How did he go from sort of observing Hamas to being one of its most established leaders?

He was a student at Islamic University in Gaza at the time when Hamas first emerged. It wasn't really until a year after its creation that it carried out its first attack and killed two Israeli soldiers. In the roundup that followed, Dahf was arrested. He was held without trial for six months in an Israeli prison. And it's probably at that point that kind of debate emerged within a movement about what was going to deliver more. Was it going to be an attempt to Islamize society?

Or was it going to be through picking up arms against the Israelis? And Dahf was really of that second school. And from that point on, he kind of went underground. He began organizing loose cells of militants. He seems to have been at an early stage convinced by the practices of Hezbollah, which is a Shia armed group in southern Lebanon. They had adopted the practice of suicide bombers. Dahf picked that up and used it against Israeli citizens in the 90s and 2000s killing scores. And as he became more involved in the fighting, his street cred grew, particularly since so many other leaders within Hamas had been killed. And perhaps his most important addition to military operations was his adoption and construction of the tunnel system under Gaza. There's pretty much a kind of city under a city, which is said to exist extending for hundreds of kilometers. That kind of gave him the ability to organize and plan and train away from the drones and the surveillance equipment of Israel. And I think that's kind of key to understanding why he was able to launch this October the 7th attack undetected by Israel. So you say that the sort of singular thing that marks Mr. Dahf out is his ability to survive. Do you think that will hold true now after all this? Part of the legend of Muhammad Dahf is that so little is known about what he's been up to in recent years. There haven't been clear sightings of him. And there are some who believe that he is already dead. That's a view that some in Israeli intelligence circles believe could be a possibility, but it seems very much a minority view. As far as we know, he's still underground. He's still undercover. And the key to his survival is going to be at what point does Israel find a way of getting into the tunnels. And until they do, I think the best guess is that he remains Commander-in-Chief of Hamas's military wing.

Nicholas, thanks very much for your time. Jason, it's always a pleasure.

With the highest number of young STEM graduates per capita in the EU, Ireland has the people and skills your company needs to succeed here. IDA Ireland, the National Investment Development Agency, can help you find and nurture the people you need to internationalize and thrive.

Our talent is just one of the extraordinary benefits Ireland has to offer. Learn more at [idarland.com](http://idarland.com). Invest in extraordinary.

In Europe today, meat is politics.

Sophie Better is the Economist's Paris bureau chief. The Conservative Party in Britain recently accused the Labour opposition of plans for a meat tax. So let me ask you about them. Where was this proposal for the government to put a tax on meat that you had to scrap with such a vampire? Now that turned out to be false, but meanwhile in Poland, the outgoing government claimed that its opponents would force people to eat worms instead of meat. And in France, where the consumption

## [Transcript] The Intelligence from The Economist / The Intelligence: meeting Senegal's president

of meat is twice the global average, there's a really pressing debate going on. Is it possible to be left-wing and still eat meat? So Sophie, first of all, how is meat viewed in France at the moment? Well, France is home to steak free. It's absolutely classic menu option. Now, red meat is more than just a source of protein. People think of it as part of the national identity and cattle farming is part of rural tradition in France. In fact, Roland Barthes, who was a French literary theorist, wrote that steak communicates its national glamour to its junior partner, that's the humble chip. But in the past decade, that has begun to change. What is it that's changing? Well, I think like everywhere, it's health worries, it's climate change, and that's pushing the French to eat less meat. And if you look at the figures last year, chicken consumption overtook beef for the very first time. And in the sort of green voting, left-leaning quarters of the big cities, veganism is also on the rise, even in France. So, wait a minute, how is it that the meat-eating figures in with the politics, though? Well, it all started when the Communist, a presidential candidate and the Communist party leader, Fabien Roussel, last year, confessed that he has an enduring taste for a good steak. Now, fellow left-wing leaders were horrified, and Green Party leader, Sandrine Rousseau, she spoke up against him again last month. Here she's telling Fabien Roussel he will not win with a steak. She also said last year that it was time that the French stopped treating steak as a quote, virility symbol. Fabien Roussel had quite a neat reply. He said, meat-eating has nothing to do with what you have in your underwear. Nor possibly what you have in your political heart, I suppose, but Roussel has something of a point that France and everywhere else maybe should start eating a little less meat. Well, I think the French are realizing this themselves. The government too, and the national auditor issued a recent report in which it said that if the country is going to respect its net zero commitments, it does need to raise fewer cattle. Cattle in France account for 12% of greenhouse gas emissions. That's an enormous share. And yet a third of the French still eat more than the recommended weekly helping of 500 grams of red meat. So I guess steak hasn't entirely lost its glamour, even though it's becoming increasingly rare. I'll always see what you did there. Sophie, thanks very much for your time. Thank you, Jason. Always a pleasure. That's all for this episode of The Intelligence. Last chance on that half-price deal for Economist Podcasts Plus. Do it today or kick yourself later. Spend the money you saved on a juicy steak or vegan equivalent. We'll see you back here tomorrow when it's full price. With the highest number of young STEM graduates per capita in the EU, Ireland has the people and skills your company needs to succeed here. IDA Ireland, the National Investment Development Agency, can help you find and nurture the people you need to internationalize and thrive. Our talent is just one of the extraordinary benefits Ireland has to offer. Learn more at [idaireland.com](http://idaireland.com). Invest in extraordinary.