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## Understanding the Malian Crisis from a Euro-Atlantic Perspective

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Weeks, if not months, of strategic indecision and diplomatic blindness culminating in direct military confrontation: this would not be an inappropriate summary of recent events in Mali, where the French military believed it had no choice but to intervene at the request of the country's (interim) President, Dioncounda Traoré. Many in the West feared that a jihadi raid might lead to the occupation of Bamako and turn the country into a future "Sahelistan" – "*a safe haven for terrorist fighters akin to pre-9/11 Afghanistan*"[2], offering extremists unlimited scope to train, impose hardline sharia law and plot terrorist attacks.

Thus, the French Government focused on pursuing four objectives through a swift response:

- Halt the progression of the terrorist groups;
- Support the Malian government and forces in reconquering northern Mali;
- Enable the deployment of the AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission to Mali);
- And prevent any further destabilization of the sub-Saharan region.

There are still a lot of unknowns and it is far too early to assess how the situation is going to evolve. Many challenging issues have to be tackled. For example, how much time is needed to restore the unity and the authority of the Malian government? How long is it going to take to reconquer areas occupied by the insurgents? Will the international support for France and its current allies last?

From a NATO perspective, what role should the Alliance play in this area, if any? While the African Union Chairman urged the Alliance to intervene, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen did not see a role for NATO, "*even though a number of individual NATO allies are assisting France in Mali*". However, the crisis there is of concern to NATO partners in the Mediterranean Dialogue: Algeria and Mauritania, in particular, are exposed to the threat of spillover[3].Will the problem remain primarily confined to Mali — especially if and when French, Malian, and African forces press deeper into northern Mali? Borders in this trackless area mean precious little to either AQIM (*Al-Qaida In the Islamic Maghreb*) or the Tuareg.

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2 François Heisbourg,"France to the Rescue", *New York Times*, January 15, 2013.

3 Niger too is concerned as its uranium sites are run by French state-owned Areva; seven workers, including five French nationals, were kidnapped in Arlit by AQIM in September 2010, and the threat of attacks on this part of the country has grown following the intervention in Mali.

Against this background, a focus on a number of key developments may contribute to a better understanding of the broader picture.

## Mali on the verge of becoming a failed state?

The crisis affecting Mali is only the latest phase in a long pattern of conflict. The country has been cut in two since March 2012, as a result of Islamist groups controlling the north while a military coup in Bamako created a power vacuum. Long considered as a stronghold against Islamic fundamentalism, Mali has been descending into chaos for almost ten years. In 2002, the US State Department warned that the country was a "*possible breeding ground*" for extremist groups.

Three main causes explain the ongoing crisis. First, it is rooted in the demands of the nomadic Saharan Tuareg, with populations spreading far beyond northern Mali, and which have never had a stable relationship with the settled populations to the south. Second, this area is a safe haven for terrorist groups – such as AQIM or the Boko Haram organisation[4] – which fund their criminal activities through the trafficking of illicit goods and drugs. Third, the weakness of the state presence has authorized an increased presence of (mainly South American) drug traffickers, who have successfully exploited the lack of institutional power to establish this area as a hub for all kinds of illegal trafficking.

The sub-Saharan States must face a threefold crisis: on a local basis, clans or different ethnic groups have their own agenda; on a regional level, the states concerned are competing for supremacy; on a transnational level, terrorist and criminal groups exploit these tensions. All these factors form a series of interrelated crises, each exacerbating the others.
The problems can be summed up under the following main headings:

- **Long-standing internal tensions, aggravated by the fall of the Gaddafi regime:** The rebellion of the Tuareg against the Malian government and their asserted right to establish an independent state of Azawad date back to independence from France in 1960, but the situation worsened in the wake of the Arab Spring and the NATO operation over Libya. Malian Tuareg soldiers who had been part of Gaddafi's army for years deserted after his fall and returned to the northern part of Mali, bringing large amounts of weapons and sophisticated military equipment, to set up the secular movement called MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad). In January 2012, they launched their first attacks on Malian garrisons and combat outposts. Islamist movements like Ansar al Din, AQIM and MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) have followed their example.

- **Resentment among the Malian military:** "*The Libyan crisis didn't cause this coup but certainly revealed the malaise felt within the army*"[5]. The ill-equipped Malian army had neither the cohesion nor the discipline to hold or repulse the Islamist advance. The growing power of the rebel movements, added to the military ineffectiveness of the regular army, fuelled their frustration. Junior officers too became increasingly resentful, seeing themselves as faced with a permanent insurgency which threatened the state's very survival. More and more voices were raised to demand support for the army. Dissatisfied with what was seen as a lack of government involvement, on 22 March 2012 a military coup led by the renegade Captain Sanogo overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré. The results were far from what was expected: with the government forces in turmoil, the rebels took advantage of the political chaos to sweep across northern Mali. Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu fell.

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4 The militant group Boko Haram is a terrorist group fighting to create an Islamic state in Niger. It has alleged links with Islamist insurgents in northern Mali.

5 Malian newspaper columnist Adam Thiam, quoted by BBC correspondent Thomas Fessy, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17481114, 22 March 2012.

- **Towards a Jihadist state?** "*Signs of disunity*" began to appear between the MNLA and Ansar al Din, soon followed by reports of tensions between Islamists and secular insurgents. The MNLA's merger with Ansar al Din was rejected as a result of differences over their respective interpretations of sharia law. In the meantime, foreign jihadist fighters had been flocking to the region. In June 2012, the MNLA was forced to back down, leaving the way clear for a strong application of sharia law. Two of the rebel groups have a strong local and ethnic identity: Ansar al Din originates from the MNLA, whereas the MUJAO is based around Gao. AQIM, by contrast, originates from the Jihadist group which targeted the Algerian state during the decade of terror in the 1990s. These groups have also partly infiltrated the Polisario-run camps in southern Algeria, and fear of an Islamist contagion of Sahrawi displaced persons would make the situation throughout the region even more complicated[6].

## International initiatives

After the coup, a mediation process was implemented under the umbrella of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The main objective was to oust the junta and allow a transition to civilian rule. Meanwhile, ECOWAS entered into negotiations with the rebel movements, especially Ansar al Din and the MNLA. However, this round of negotiations seems to have reached a stalemate, partly because each group had its own agenda. For instance, before launching its rebellion, the MNLA was eager to find substantial support within the international community, promising to fight against Al-Qaida in exchange[7]. Some neighbouring countries, such as Mauritania and Algeria, may indirectly have given incentives to other groups – particularly Ansar al Din – to block this initiative and pursue their own private negotiation process with Bamako, pushing to avoid any international military intervention. However, ECOWAS had decided to deploy a military mission to the country, known as the AFISMA, first to ensure the transition process, and then to help Mali recover its territorial integrity.

After some discussion, the UN Security Council authorized this mission and adopted UN Resolution 2085 to "*bolster Mali's defence and security forces*", in coordination with the European Union and other partners, thus preparing the ground for the recovery of the northern regions. However, "*the Council emphasized the need to further refine planning before the start of an offensive military operation, requesting all stakeholders to support planning and preparation for deployment, and noting the need for the Council to review such planning before operations began*". The EU nations followed with the endorsement of a EU Training Mission, the commander of which – the French General François Lecointre – was named in mid-January 2013[8].

However, the terrorist groups were not keen to wait and did overreact, leading to an intervention that emphasizes both the failure of diplomatic deterrence and the necessary involvement of France with the support of the international community.

- **Failed deterrence?** Neither the AFISMA nor the EU personnel were expected to arrive for a matter of months – the AFISMA not before September 2013! Expecting the rebels to see this as a deadline for them to respect was a mistake, giving them time to prepare and reorganize. An official declaration that no Western combat troops would be committed to future military operations against Islamist militants in Mali may have been intended to convey the message that African countries had to solve the problem by themselves[9]; however, it had the unintended effect

6 The Polisario Front is a rebel political movement fighting against what it considers as the illegal occupation of the Western Sahara by Morocco. Recognized by the UN, it has still not put an end to armed struggle but also pursues peaceful means. While it has no official links with al-Qaida, some individuals from the Sahrawi refugee camps at Tindouf in southwest Algeria may be affiliated to the terrorist groups operating in the Sahel (http://courrierstrategique.com/2753-mali-de-hauts-responsables-daqmi-auraient-rejoint-les-camps-du-polisario.html, January 15, 2013)

7 It is still the case.

8 The EUTM is currently being deployed and will be operational by mid-February.

9 François Hollande interviewed by France 24, 12 October 2012, http://www.france24.com/en/20121011-france24-

of increasing the jihadists' will to act quickly. Giving the enemy time and underestimating them were mistakes, which precipitated events in early January.

- **French intervention and international support.** The French response was swift and efficient in breaking the backbone of the jihadist columns headed towards the crucial cities of Sevéré and Mopti. Meanwhile, international support has grown significantly, not only in the form of official pledges from the US and the UK but also in terms of backing from many other allies. However, France has been looking for enlarged partnership arrangements, including Gulf countries, while working to accelerate the deployment of AFISMA troops. At the time of writing, "*the crushing retaliation*" called for by the President of Mali has led to the re-conquest of the cities of Diabaly and Konna, while French and Malian forces are pushing north and aim to recover all areas still in rebel hands. Jihadist groups escaped Gao and Timbuktu, avoiding combat or disappearing among the population.

## Possible scenarios

While many scenarios may unfold in the coming days or weeks, France's involvement in the area should last as long as necessary, depending on the deployment of the AFISMA troops, the progress shown by the Malian military, and the strength of the jihadist resistance. Two pressing issues are to be tackled: how quick will the re-conquest of northern Mali be, and possible disruption of the jihadist unity by playing secularist Tuareg against fanatic groups.

- **Losing ground but gaining time?** To give a clear assessment of the threat is almost impossible, as these terrorist groups are capable of literally disappearing in a classic form of "war amongst the people". In addition, some of the movements may split and create other groups, with differing degrees of willingness to negotiate or to fight. Initially estimated at over 6,000 combatants, the real strength of the rebels is difficult to gauge. Many commentators argue that the insurgents "*have the advantages of familiarity with terrain, mobility, adaptability and relative ease of concealment in urban areas (...) Still, they do have the ability to inflict casualties on French forces in close combat and, as things stand, they have greater combat capability than the Malian army*"[10]. Harassing French and Malian troops, and trying to trade space for time in order to slow down the re-conquest of northern Mali, one of the rebels' favourite courses of action (CoA) could be to spread through small towns, forming terrorist cells able to hit logistic supply lines and strike particularly vulnerable contingents. Another CoA could be to build up strongholds that would be very difficult to seize, with the population seen as a human shield; it would be not only time-consuming but also politically difficult to fight "*one, two, three, many Fallujahs*"[11]. However, if the rebels are able to continue resisting strongly until May, they can expect the rainy season to put an end to ground operations. And once in the Saharan part of Mali, facing groups that know the terrain and the environment perfectly, the current French troops would have tremendous difficulties in controlling an area as big as France (and much more hostile).

- **Autonomy for the north in exchange for joining the fight against hardline al-Qaida-linked terrorists?** Mali is a country divided between a nomadic north and a sedentary south, the *bled es beidan* ("Land of the White People") and the *bled es sudan* ("Land of the Black people"). This racial divide is still strongly felt and limits the possible expectation of a Western-like nation-building process. That is why a diplomatic solution would require a renewed negotiation process between the Tuareg and the government in Bamako; no exit strategy is ultimately feasible without the MNLA, who are among the very few actors able to contribute to a settlement of the terrorist issue in the region[12].

exclusive-interview-france-president-francois-hollande-africa-dr-congo.

10 IISS, "France in Mali: rapid reaction", *Strategic comments*, Volume 19, Comment 2 – January 2013.

11 A reference to the massive fight for Fallujah in Irak (2004), where the US Marines had to commit a huge number of troops in order to regain an area of 3 miles by 3 miles.

12 However, caution is needed in dealing with the MNLA. For years, US Special Forces trained Malian Tuareg elite

## NATO partners in the region

Although NATO may not intervene directly in the region, it has an interest in its stability and should closely watch growing threats against its partners, particularly as already mentioned, Algeria and Mauritania. The recent In Amenas hostage crisis ended in bloodshed, and has plunged Algeria back into a war on terrorist groups. Meanwhile, the Mauritanian army is closing its borders with Mali.

- **Algeria:** officially, Algeria "*will not send one soldier to Mali*" and will concentrate on "*protecting its borders and its territory*". The Prime Minister states that Algiers "*encourages dialogue among the different parties*" in Mali. However, this is a signal that the country is facing the same all too familiar challenges as during the last twenty years. Whereas the neighbouring countries in ECOWAS agreed on deploying no more than 3,300 troops, Algeria will need no fewer than 50,000 soldiers to secure its southern border. This is a true operational challenge for the army, and it also means huge costs. To avoid any spillover, Algeria will have to maintain constant surveillance of this border so as to monitor any possible jihadist infiltration.

- **Mauritania:** Mauritania has deployed armed forces along its long border with Mali, to avoid any possible incursion of terrorist groups. The Mauritanian President, while not fully supporting the French intervention in Mali, has been cautious in his declarations; three of the ruling political parties have stated that they fully support the international and African intervention, which they see as striking a major blow against drug-traffickers and terrorists[13]. However, many Mauritanians are against what they consider a "*colonial intervention*", and local clerics have issued a fatwa stating that France's aim is to occupy Mali. There are growing concerns about the possibility of the Mauritanian military having to engage in combat against terrorists trying to escape from Mali.

## Summary

Supporting the Malian government seems to have been a reasonable choice; however, several challenging issues remain and it is difficult to draw conclusions in an ongoing operation.

- **The crisis could have been, if not avoided, at least contained.** The coup that occurred a year ago and the growing terrorist threat in northern Mali are partly linked to the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the attendant spillover effect.

- In this region, where much is at stake for Europe, the European Union has to sharpen its diplomatic instruments and be able to react faster and better to challenging issues. The question of sharing the burden on a equal basis is once again at stake, reinforcing the case for increasing partnership and pooling of effort.

- **The African Union**, despite its mantra of "African solutions to African problems", **has shown a change in attitude by making significant overtures to NATO**. It refers to the imperative to provide capacity building, not simply for Mali but also for the African Standby Force, which is not yet up to the task of continental crisis management.

- **This particular intervention advocates for standing forces or battlegroups able to react and maintain initial entry capability.** NATO possesses the NRF, which can still not be considered really combat-proven, and the EU Battlegroups are similarly untested in terms of providing an adequate response in such situations. However, this does not mean that a rotating model such as these would be of no use. If the African Union or ECOWAS had had such a tool, the French would arguably not have had to intervene.

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troops, only to find that they deserted and joined the MNLA in late January 2012 (for US military assistance in Mali, see Alexis Arief, *Crisis in Mali*, Congressional Research Service, 14 January 2013, p. 15-16).

13 *Mali Actualités*, 22 janvier 2013: http://maliactu.net/mauritanie-trois-partis-de-la-majorite-soutiennent-lintervention-au-mali.

- **Enhancing Malian military capability will be a long-term undertaking.** The EU training mission that has been launched also advocates for the standing training mission which NATO is willing to establish on a permanent basis[14]. But this is only a first step: northern Mali has been under hard-line sharia law for a year, meaning that reconstruction will have to encompass a broader perspective, including good governance and economic development. In this respect, the Comprehensive Approach may be considered a relevant and efficient response.

**However, the intervention in Mali raises the spectre of another Afghanistan**. Some commentators have already tried to draw comparisons between the situation in Mali and that in Afghanistan ten years ago. While the two interventions differ, the most challenging issue is public opinion in the Arab world, which once again tends to see the operation code-named *Serval* as a clash of civilisations. The past years have shown how the multiplication of counter-terrorism operations may sometimes act "as the recruiting sergeant to radical Islamism"[15]. One solution – and what makes the beginning of this operation look like a counterinsurgency campaign – lies within the Mali population, which differs from that of Afghanistan in that Mali has little history of popular extremism.

Finally, the question of a clear exit strategy is once again a major issue. If public opinion in France and the position of European governments are to remain in support of the intervention, this is subject to what Heisbourg calls "*a due date*"[16]. For others, the prospect of intervening in Mali with Afghanistan fatigue now lying heavy in Western countries makes a Mali campaign extremely unlikely. Once again, the solution lies in a swift handover to African countries, with strong support from the EU (and why not? from NATO) in terms of training, mentoring and monitoring. It is going to take time, but the security of the whole sub-Saharan region is at stake.

14 This is arguably a lesson learned from the build-up of Afghan security forces for the last five years.

15 Jean-François Bayart, « Le piège de la lutte antiterroriste en Afrique de l'Ouest », in *Sociétés politiques comparées,* n°26, août 2010, p. 4.

16 François Heisbourg,"France to the Rescue", *New York Times*, op.cit.