



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Position Paper

French intervention in Mali: Causes and Consequences



Al Jazeera Center for Studies

20 January 2013

Although France and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member countries began beating the drums of war in Mali several months ago and the former acquired an international resolution from the United Nations Security Council with the warmongers' efforts, the early breakthrough sparking military action was a surprise to everyone, and came seven months earlier than the time earlier decided on for intervention –September 2013.

The beating of the drums of war was accompanied by regional and international calls for a political solution, regarding war as a final option. But it seems that the armed Islamist groups that negotiated through Ansar Dine became convinced, over the course of stumbling negotiations, that the Malian government and its French backers were keener to prepare for war than seek a political solution. With warnings of war and in anticipation of Franco-African plans for military intervention that had been placed on the backburner, these groups rushed to take the initiative. They thus decided to engage French and African forces prematurely, before the latter's plans had fully matured.

Attraction to unjustified conditions of war

Ansar Dine, which heads these groups in negotiations, withdrew an offer it had presented in Algeria that stipulated its cessation of hostilities against Mali. It also requested the African mediator, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Fasso, to postpone talks that had been scheduled for 14 January to discuss the road map proposed by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) based on the notion of granting autonomy to the region and allowing the application of shari'ah (Islamic law).

Ansar Dine – supported by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, *Jamaat at-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Afriqiya* (The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa – MOJWA), and *al-Mulathamini* (The Masked Ones, which split from al-Qaeda under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar) froze negotiations by sending its troops from Timbuktu towards the centre of Mali to attack the town of Mopti in an attempt to convince the French and Malians that the Islamist militants had resolved to move towards Bamako, thus forcing the French to make a hasty decision to enter war.

The French thus mobilised quickly, and the Islamist groups succeeded in throwing French plans into confusion. The new development forced France to abandon its first pledge that it would limit itself to logistical support and intelligence and would not use ground troops in the war. The government ultimately found itself forced to enter the war by mobilising ground troops, intelligence, and logistical and air support, and seek support from neighbouring countries and the international community as a whole.

With the arrival of the troops of the armed Islamist movements on the outskirts of Mopti, their invasion of the town of Konna and the collapse of the Malian army's defences against their strikes, France was forced to backtrack its former promise and hastened to send its troops to Mali to prevent the fall of Bamako. In order for the armed groups to realise the first of their goals, they dragged French troops into a ground war in the open desert. On the first day, two French helicopters were downed and two French soldiers killed. The French were forced to withdraw combat helicopters after the Islamists' ability to shoot them out of the sky became clear. It then focused on aerial strikes using Jaguar, Mirage and Rafale fighter jets.

Hundreds of French soldiers were sent to protect Bamako and 6,000 French nationals there. This played into one objective of the Salafi movements i.e. to attack the French at nearby locations. The direct participation of French troops gave a moral impetus to the Islamist fighters as they are now in open confrontation with what they call a 'French crusader invasion,' giving them a certain legitimacy in Muslim public opinion, with local residents and with supporters of jihadist currents.

ECOWAS: The path to the Azawad quagmire

The Islamists' movement in Azawad towards the south did not aim to lure the French to the battlefield alone. West African states have also begun to hastily send troops towards Mali to participate in the war. These forces are not yet fully equipped or prepared nor do they have a clear plan for fighting in the war. Their unplanned and unprepared arrival will ease the task of the Islamist militants facing them.

The armed Islamists have also, using their initiative and speed, been able to determine the field of battle and temporarily alter the goal of the war, which – from the French and Malian governments' perspective – is to return Azawad to the sovereignty of Mali after its 'liberation' and prevent the Islamists' procession to the south. Ground battles continue to take place in the centre of Mali (Mopti and Diabaly) outside of Azawad.

It is also clear that the Islamist groups rushed to war before the doors of dialogue had been closed. This destroyed any opportunities for a peaceful solution. They enjoyed the support of some neighbouring countries – particularly Algeria, Mauritania, and African mediator Burkina Faso. Above all, the armed groups may have much to lose through their imposition of war and attack on southern Mali. Countries that had refused to countenance war have changed their positions and have become active participants, especially Algeria and Mauritania, since many perceive the armed Salafi movement southwards as an unacceptable expansionist act of aggression that should be rejected firmly and determinedly.

Back to the politics of France-Africa

France has sought to legitimise its intervention by using the Mali government's request for assistance in the resistance against the Islamist militants. It also gained credibility through UNSC Resolution No. 2085 of 20 December 2012 which allows for the establishment of an international force to support Mali in its fight to restore the north. Other justifications include wanting to prevent the creation of a 'Salafi-terrorist' zone that would be a threat to the region and the world at large.

There is, however, another logical reading for the real causes of French intervention in Mali. It is more related to the protection of French interests in the region and is an attempt to promote France's presence in an area that was traditionally considered a centre of special influence due to its former colonial presence. The importance of the region to France increases when one considers the wealth in the country's interior: large oil, gas and mineral resources located close to the Algerian oil fields which are much coveted by the French and within walking distance of locations that have displayed positive exploration indicators in Mauritania.

From another angle, this war is considered the first real setback for the pledge of the Socialist French president to end the era described as the *France-Afrique* (France-Africa) alliance, which represented an extension of French dominance of Africa. Hollande asserted during his visit to Dakar last October that 'Its time is over,' and emphasised that the France-Africa relationship would be based on partnerships and the independence of each party. After such promises, Hollande sending his troops to Mali to wage war is considered a living embodiment of the France-Africa policy with a colonial dimension.

Even if the French declare that their intervention was in order to protect the capital and prevent the recurrence of the Somali experience in Mali, their drive towards a war of unsecured consequences paves the way for the Somali option in the region. The deployment of unprepared, ill-equipped and untrained African troops was the main reason for the prolonging and complexity of the Somali crisis where the African forces have failed to contain the battle against militants and which maintained the state of war until the present.

The possibility of African troops getting stuck in the Azawad quagmire, as was the case for the Somali quagmire, is likely if we take into account that most of these African troops have been trained and fought in bushes, jungles, beaches and shores. They have no experience of fighting in desert terrain, unlike the armed groups that have lived in the desert for many years and are familiar with its valleys and its mountains.

Even if the French tried to extend their direct support to those forces and participate in the ground war, the experiences of the United States and western forces in Afghanistan could be repeated in Azawad. Therefore, it is quite possible that the region could be drowned in a war that may not have an end in sight.

It is likely that the armed Islamists will leave the major cities and relocate around their strongholds in the mountain range of Tagargharat in north Azawad, which they refer to as the 'Tora Bora of the Islamic Maghreb' due to its ruggedness, in the fortifications provided by the forests of the region and in its deserts. They will then fight a guerrilla war to drain African and French troops, and will depend on their survival skills, the sophistication of their elusive tactics and field experience.

Ethnic confrontation

In addition, the size of the forces of the armed Islamist groups in Azawad and the nature of their weapons further complicate matters. This is compounded by its penetration into the Azawad community. It is well known that *Ansar Dine* consists mainly of Tuareg, MOJWA predominantly consists of Arab tribes from Gao and east Azawad and *Ansar al-Shari'ah* has members from the Arab tribes of Timbuktu and western Azawad while the Algerians and Mauritians police and control Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, many of whose members are armed Azawadis.

These movements may exploit the suffering of the natives of Azawad, especially the Tuareg and Arabs, which resulted from decades of oppression and marginalisation. Furthermore, there is a fear among these groups that the approaching war might take on racial and ethnic dimensions due to the nature of the opposing forces from West Africa and because France has been preparing and supporting militias with ethnic links to the Songhai. (The militias are currently being trained and armed in camps in central Mali.)

There is a fear among many that these militias will revisit the 1990s when the Malian army armed and launched them against the Tuareg and the Arabs. They perpetrated genocide and rape, burned villages and swept the cities. This is possibly the reason for the Islamists' desire for two non-Islamist movements to participate in the war when Malian troops enter Azawad. These movements are the MNLA and the Arab Azawadi Movement, both of which are hostile to the Salafi groups but have common cause in terms of rejecting the return of the Malian army to Azawad.

Rejection of foreign intervention in Bamako

In addition to this complexity, there is more than one centre of power in Bamako and their positions differ with regard to foreign intervention. While transitional president Dioncounda Traoré and his government welcome the intervention, there are those who generally view African troops and foreign intervention in Mali with suspicion and fear. This latter position is held by the leader of the putschists, Captain Amadou Sanogo, who has the largest influence in Bamako and who has, on numerous occasions, confirmed his rejection of the presence of foreigners on Malian territory. Sanogo, who is the head of the committee for the reformation and rehabilitation of the army, regards foreign troops as possible supporters of his political opponent Traoré, who has gained international recognition as the legitimate head of Mali.

The French task in Mali becomes more complicated with the increasing pressures Hollande's government is facing. The matter also relates to the fate of a number of its citizens who remain hostages held by armed groups. The militants may kill some hostages and declare that Hollande is responsible for their deaths in order to increase French pressure on Hollande, thus forcing him to end French involvement in the war. Such pressure would have a significant impact on French decision-making circles.

In conclusion, many obstacles challenge the military intervention driven by the intent to protect French interests in Azawad. However, it is an intervention that could, for the region and the French, open doors of a war whose ends are unknown. It is unknown where it might lead.

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