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MALI: CONSEQUENCES OF A WAR

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Summary

The war in Mali and the recent attack in Algeria are being seen as the start of a new phase of the war on terror across North and West Africa, which is an existential threat that could last decades. This is a dangerous simplification of a much more complex problem and risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Context

With the transformative developments in Mali in the past three weeks, and the worrying attack in Algeria, this special briefing updates and synthesises previous analyses from Oxford Research Group during 2012, including briefings in April – *Nigeria*, May – *al-Qaida*, June – *Mali* and November – *al-Qaida*.

The briefing on Mali was written in June, when the expectations were of an intervention by ECOWAS troops, supported and trained by French and other western forces, but with direct western combat intervention, likely to be limited primarily to a few hundred Special Forces. Even with that limited western involvement the briefing argued that:

“From the point of view of the leadership of AQIM in North Africa, and Boko Haram in Nigeria, military intervention would actually be welcome as further evidence of external interference, especially if there was French and US involvement.”

and:

“there needs to be a far greater focus on negotiations... This is a matter of some urgency. Negotiations, though, must be undertaken while recognising that the relative underdevelopment of northern Mali and the marginalisation of the Tuareg people must be addressed.”

The briefing on al Qaida argued in November that:

“Radical Islamist movements do not yet have transcontinental coherence across northern Africa, yet they form part of a phenomenon that is essentially a post-9/11 development and is increasing in intensity and geographical distribution. There appear to be many informal linkages, made far easier by modern communications and new social media, and they therefore connect informally with developments across the Middle East and South West Asia.”

The concluding policy recommendation was that:

“Military intervention in Mali should be avoided. It will inevitably involve western military units, and this will enable Islamist propagandists to concentrate more on their message of repression of Islam by outside forces. **The old concept of “the far enemy” of the early 2000s could well get a new and unifying lease of life.**”

Key parts of the briefing on Nigeria (April) were:

- Boko Haram has some links with the al-Qaida movement, is increasing in its impact on Nigerian society and is facing tough suppression by the Nigerian security forces.
- This use of force may be counterproductive unless underlying issues of socio-economic and other disparities within Nigeria are addressed.

Developments in 2013

At the start of this year, the EU was slowly planning its training mission for the Malian Army with the expectation that this would be a 12- to 18-month endeavour. It was also recognised that contingents from Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and other ECOWAS states would have very limited capability for expeditionary land warfare and would serve primarily as garrison forces. Serious action to regain control of northern Mali was not possible before the end of the hot rainy season in September. What western and other intelligence missed, or at least seriously underestimated, were two key factors.

- Firstly, opposition to the Mali government and separatist aspirations in northern Mali are not solely rooted in Islamist ideology but have a far greater historical context stemming from an enduring sense of marginalisation that has led to many past rebellions, especially by the Tuareg. **To see what is now happening in purely Islamist/terrorist terms is a widespread yet dangerous simplification.**
- Secondly, between April and December last year the rebels in northern Mali greatly consolidated their control, including the development of underground bunkers and dispersed facilities. They were anticipating air strikes as soon as they started the advance in early January, **and it is possible that the recent advance was partly to incite an immediate French reaction, knowing that this would increase support for their cause, including greater potential for financial aid from private sources in western Gulf States.**

From a French perspective, though, intervention was essential, given the unexpected speed of the rebel advances in early January, which may have even surprised the rebels themselves. Moreover, France had broad international support, especially among western allies, as well as strong support from Malians in Bamako and elsewhere in the more populated south of the country. French military intervention developed rapidly, and by mid-February, there will be 2,500 French military personnel in Mali, quite possibly backed up by a similar number from ECOWAS states.

Even so, and whatever the strength of the arguments for intervention, it must be recognised that this will be hugely welcomed by the wider jihadi movement and its propagandists. **What should under no circumstances be underestimated is the impact of the air strikes, in particular.** Coverage is much greater in the Arab media than in the West and coverage by jihadist propagandists through the new social media will be far more graphic.

Images of Mirage and Rafael strike aircraft and of the casualties and damage will form part of a much wider narrative, joining a decade of innumerable air strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan, drone attacks in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Israeli strikes in Lebanon, Gaza and Sudan (widely seen as attacks by US aircraft in Israeli markings).

The Mali intervention may now be primarily French, but will be seen as more broadly western, with UK and Canadian logistics aid, UK provision of reconnaissance aircraft and reports of US offers of drone deployments supporting this.

Furthermore, clear linkages will be made between Mali and the consistent attempts of the Nigerian government to suppress the Boko Haram and Ansaru movements even as it contributes troops to the war in Mali. This element too should not be under-estimated.

Three developments are likely:

- For planning purposes the western intervention in Mali should be expected to last years rather than weeks. Recent military advances and the re-taking of northern towns are likely to lead on to a bitter guerrilla war, and reports of Malian Army atrocities against Tuareg communities will further fuel opposition.
- Just as with Syria, as the war develops, it should be expected to attract dedicated and fervent young paramilitaries, including young men with combat experience.
- As western forces become more committed, and especially as there is graphic footage of the impact of airstrikes, Mali will be seen in more radical circles across North Africa, the Middle East and parts of South Asia as yet one more example of a western assault on Islam.

Long term sustainable stability for Mali will not be possible without serious efforts to address the longstanding and deep grievances that stem from marginalisation of the northern territories and its peoples, especially the Tuareg. The French together with the Malian military and authorities will need to address this issue, because there will be no unified Mali, if no solution is found to accommodate the interests of the Tuaregs and other northern populations. Socio-economic and political marginalisation of the North has deep-seated roots, and the ethnic/cultural dimensions (Tuaregs historically enslaved black Africans) of this issue cannot be ignored. There is a significant and well-documented history of rebellion and resistance by Malian Tuaregs towards the colonisers (France) and later the central government.

The Malian government remained unwilling or unable to implement development projects necessary to alleviate Tuareg poverty and marginalisation, failing to adhere to the terms and conditions of peace agreements reached under the Tamanrasset Accords (1991) and National Pact (1992) and the Algiers Accords (2006). A new talks process facilitated by the President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, on behalf of ECOWAS, began in Ouagadougou on 4 December 2012 engaging the Malian Government, Ansar Dine and MNLA. The talks, which had been due to resume on 10 January, have been postponed. Further engagement is essential.

It is the population's resentment towards the central government over the marginalisation of the northern territories, which has helped Islamists gain support there. The chances of finding a solution to combatting Islamic extremism in northern Mali would have been significantly better had the Malian government looked at ways of collaborating with the Tuaregs. The only viable long-term solution is cooperation and economic development for the region.

Policy Options

There are three immediate policy implications:

- Counsel against the use of air power in attacking targets deep in rebel-held areas. The rebels are prepared for this, it will have minimal effect whatever the military claim, and it is the greatest single aspect of western action that incites wider support for the rebels.
- Recommend that the short-term function of French and other western forces should be defensive, ensuring solely that rebel forces make no further advances.
- Frame all policy in terms of a willingness to negotiate while recognising the underlying problem of long-term marginalisation. Islamists have latched on to deep and long-standing resentment and will best be undermined by fully recognising this.

There is no pretence that this will be easy, especially as it is clear that western political opinion has moved a long way towards a simplistic view of this as part of an anti-jihadi war. The more it sees Mali in this light, the more it will become just that, with dangerous long-term consequences. Indeed, if western leaders speak in terms of an existential and generational conflict across North and West Africa and act accordingly, that is precisely what they will get.

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Anna Alissa Hitzemann, Project Officer and Peacemaker on our Sustainable Security programme, contributed analysis of the Tuareg dimension to this briefing.

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