



Viktor Marsai: Foreign Military Intervention in Mali – The Background of Opération Serval

The day after the Islamist group Ansar ad-Din and its allied militias occupied the key town of Konna in Mali on January 10, France launched air strikes against the rebels. These were soon to be followed by the engagement of ground troops. The Mali crisis casted light on the fact that 20 years after the armed conflict in the Balkans and 11 years of coalition presence in Afghanistan the crisis management capabilities of the international community – including its non-Western members – are still utilized based on ad hoc political constellations.

Tuaregs have been in conflict with Bamako since Mali's independence in 1960, but the collapse of the Gaddafi regime marked a turning point due to the return of thousands of heavily armed Tuareg ex-mercenaries from Libya to Mali. In 2011, the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad – National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) was founded and armed clashes between MNLA and the government became widespread. In March, 2012 the situation was further complicated by the coup d'état against General Amadou Toumani Touré led by Captain Amadou Sanogo. Sanogo's antidemocratic rebellion had been perceived with caution by the West and as such, was followed by sanctions from ECOWAS and the AU. This resulted in the compromise solution of installing the Head of Parliament, Dioncounda Traoré as civilian President, leaving tense relations and a degraded military behind.

The fragile political situation in Mali was soon taken advantage of by several Islamist groups. Ansar ad-Din is a Tuareg organization aiming at extending Sharia to the whole of Mali. Nevertheless, Ansar ad-Din is closely connected even by tribal ties to the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its splinter group, the

Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). These organizations pursue an internationalist jihadist agenda under foreign leadership, making a political agreement with them even more unlikely than with Ansar ad-Din that is more bound locally. These groups can build upon a stable financial background through their control of Trans-Saharan drug smuggling routes. With their resources they soon marginalized the MNLA in the insurgency, transforming the conflict from a Tuareg separatist struggle into a full-blown Islamist challenge against Mali's secular government and society. By April 2012, Ansar ad-Din was strong enough to openly reject the MNLA's declaration of independence and introduce Sharia law in occupied Timbuktu. By the end of July, MNLA forces were forced to withdraw from all major towns in the North. The Islamist takeover was triggered by several factors, including the available supply of weapons and trained manpower after the Arab Spring and the lack of major Western military or intelligence presence comparable to that in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Yemen. By the summer of 2012, the military advance of the Islamists halted and ECOWAS mediation succeeded in creating a ceasefire agreement in Ouagadougou in December between the government, MNLA and Ansar ad-Din. Nevertheless, there was serious doubt whether the Islamists would honour the agreement.

Despite popular protests calling for foreign intervention and the pressure of the media reporting on the harsh life of the civilian population under Islamist rule, the international community was deeply divided over the exact details of a possible intervention. While the UN would have preferred the deployment of ECOWAS forces, it was obvious that the African



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organization would need significant support in intelligence, aerial transport and combat aircrafts. Therefore, despite ECOWAS's quick reaction to set up a 3,300 strong intervention force, the UN Security Council was slow to authorize a mission. UNSC Resolution 2085 was only accepted on 20 December 2012, but the ECOWAS mission, AFISMA, was not expected to be fully deployed before the second half of 2013.

On 7 January 2013, the renewed Islamist offensive launched for the towns of Sevaré, Konna, and Mopti threatened with the occupation of one of the two airfields capable of receiving heavy cargo planes necessary to supply any foreign military force and with opening the way for rebels to the capital, Bamako. President Traoré asked for French intervention and President François Hollande authorized it. French air strikes were launched from the Chadian airport of N'Djamena while ground troops were transported from Chad and Cote d'Ivoire by allied transport planes from Canada, the UK, Belgium and Denmark. The first strikes conducted by the Gazelles 4th Special Forces Helicopter Regiment resulted in the first French combat casualty, showing that the Islamists were well-equipped, determined opponents. Although Islamist forces were withdrawn from several settlements, government troops encountered heavy resistance and their counter-offensives were unable to decisively turn the tide on the battlefield. French ground forces with armoured vehicles joined the offensive on 16 January and clashed with the rebels on the streets of Diabaly.

The French intervention sped up the deployment of AFISMA forces, beginning with the arrival 900 Nigerian soldiers. Nevertheless, while French air superiority guarantees military

success, Western public opinion expects self-constraint when it comes to ground forces. This fact was well-known to the rebels and the MNLA indicated that it might support the operation against Islamists for future autonomy and investments in Tuareg territory. Whether this option proves to be unrealistic or the MNLA supports a ground offensive with troops, the French will only have a three months window of opportunity since the rainy season will make military operations impossible from May. Therefore the impetus of the offensive should be maintained in the short term. For a longer term, the Malian army needs to be reorganized – the EU will support this by sending in a 200 strong training mission lead by France. Such presence might also help the civilian government, though it is questionable if President Traoré can rely on his recent popular support to re-establish civilian authority.

I do not agree with those who argue that Mali does not pose a regional threat to Europe. The examples of Afghanistan, Somalia, Chechnya or Iraq shows that once radical Islamists establish a foothold, it is hard to re-establish stability as irregular forces can be turned into terrorist cells even after a military defeat. The ambush upon the In Amenas gas production facilities in Algeria shows that the capabilities of local terrorist groups have been seriously underestimated. The region – home to about 30,000 French nationals and key facilities like the uranium mines in Niger – is also too important to Paris to simply withdraw. Therefore Mali will likely be another long term commitment for the West and the international community should do its best to reconcile Bamako and the Tuaregs, reorganize the army, reinforce state capacities and support good governance in the country.